

Let's Work Together - Integrating Community Engagement into the College Curriculum

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In an effort to better prepare our students for their careers in the workforce, we have focused on methods that encourage our students to become active participants in community service. This goal creates the challenge as to how to incorporate topics and methods to engage our students in this process. To meet this challenge, we have examined our curriculum and attempted to enhance several courses with a service learning component. This session will examine the different teaching tools and projects that have been successful at St. Louis Community College – Meramec, while incorporating community engagement into the curriculum.

Over the past several years, there has been a new emphasis on the teaching of ethics in business programs. This new approach suggests that an additional goal of service learning should be the development of students who are civic-minded and socially responsible. As more technical aspects of business are delineated in the course objectives, so too social responsibility should be listed as an objective in the syllabus and graded.

Many university and college accounting programs across the country have tried to identify ways to better prepare students for the accounting profession. John Dewey was an early pioneer in exploring and supporting the value of the experiential learning process. Dewey stressed that the goal of education is to set free and to develop the capacities of humans regardless of an individual's sex, race or class. Additionally, Dewey's philosophical pragmatism, concern with interaction, reflection and experience, and interest in community and democracy, collaboratively formed a highly suggestive educative form. Dewey also believed that learning should be student centered and conducted in a "learn by doing" environment.

In addition to providing an internship opportunity for the student, the college or university must strive to provide a quality learning experience. Dewey stresses that, "It is not enough to insist upon the necessity of experience, nor even of activity in experience. Everything depends upon the quality of the experience which is had. The quality of any experience has two aspects. There is an immediate aspect of agreeableness or disagreeableness, and there is its influence upon later experiences. The first is obvious and easy to judge. The effect of an experience is not borne on its face. It sets a problem to the educator. It is his business to arrange for the kind of experiences which, while they do not repel the student, but rather engage his activities are, nevertheless, more than immediately enjoyable since they promote having desirable future experiences. Just as no man

lives or dies to himself, so no experience lives and dies by itself. Wholly independent of desire or intent, every experience lives on in further experiences. Hence the central problem of an education based upon experience is to select the kind of present experiences that live fruitfully and creatively in subsequent experiences.”¹ One method in which to obtain a quality community service experience is through a student internship. The Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) Program provides an excellent internship opportunity for college students.

The Internal Revenue Service (IRS) sponsors the Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) program which in turn fosters a reciprocating partnership with higher education institutions. This program trains interns to understand the federal tax law, to prepare individual income tax returns, and to operate commercial income tax preparation software. Both participating partners benefit as the student interns and the higher education institutions gain knowledge and experience, whereas the IRS offers a free service to the public through a community channel.

The Volunteer Income Tax Assistance program positively enhances the student intern’s overall college educational experience. Usually, students graduate from college with a degree but without real working experience; and often after accepting and experiencing a job in a chosen field, these new graduates question their career choice as being correct. The internship experience, however, allows students to gain practical working knowledge of their course study; and therefore,

¹ Dewey, John, *Experience and Education*, (pp. 27-28), New York: Collier, 1938.

they grasp a better understanding of the field and ultimately pursue a career path with confidence.

In addition to the added value in the learning process, the VITA program also provides a meaningful service learning opportunity. After the interns pass an IRS certification exam, the individuals are able to prepare income tax returns free of charge for the community. Subsequently, this program provides a great service for other students, the low income and the elderly.

The Volunteer Income Tax Assistance Program (VITA) provides free tax preparation service for approximately 3 million taxpayers annually. Each year, the Internal Revenue Service partners with higher education institutions and community organizations to provide VITA services throughout the United States. The Volunteer Income Tax Assistance Program at St. Louis Community College – Meramec was initiated nine years ago and has had 158 student interns during the past nine tax seasons. Throughout the years, the interns at St. Louis Community College have prepared over 4,400 tax returns for students, staff, faculty, senior citizens and other members of the community. In addition, we have accumulated research from this internship program for the past nine years. This research shows that we have successfully enhanced our curriculum by increasing community engagement.