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A Gateway to Fostering Civic Responsibility:
Creating a Cyber-Bullying Prevention Program
In Our Community

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Introduction

Kingsborough Community College, the only community college in Brooklyn, New York, is the leading point of entry to higher education for many immigrant, low-income, minority and first-generation college students from New York's most populous borough. In the fall of 2008, the administration at Kingsborough made a commitment to provide opportunities that will encourage our students to take an active role in improving the quality of life within that community. In pursuit of this goal, Kingsborough Community College created the Center for Civic Engagement.

The Center for Civic Engagement at Kingsborough Community College (KCC) uses its Service-Learning program to facilitate the process of placing its students within community sites that are directly related to their coursework across multiple disciplines. These programs provide opportunities to practice learned skills, encouraging them to engage in out-of-class interactions that can ultimately lead to potential careers in the future. Integrating coursework into meaningful service within the community, Service-Learning students learn by applying classroom lessons towards real-life situations. The Service-Learning Model, believing that one of the responsibilities of higher education is to serve a pro-active role within the community, has been shown to enhance student learning. (Astin et al., 2000)

Project A.C.E.

The Mental Health program at KCC responded to the call for community outreach by creating a Domestic Violence Prevention Program under the acronym A.C.E. (Awareness, Courage and Empowerment). Project A.C.E. works to prevent violence, with a focus on dating and domestic violence, both on and off campus through peer-to-peer educational presentations. The students in Project A.C.E. write, design, and perform peer theater dramatizations that focus

on the early warning signs and escalation of domestic violence. The intention of the program is to raise awareness and educate potential victims and victims of domestic violence in the community. (Guigno, 2009)

Over the years since its formation, Project A.C.E. has enjoyed success throughout the college campus and within the immediate community it serves. Due to its positive impact, the Service-Learning Program at KCC invited Project A.C.E. to collaborate with them on another societal issue that has been prevalent in recent years. In 2010, Deirdre Keys, Principle of PS/IS 206 contacted Mandy Fraley, Service-Learning Coordinator, regarding the detrimental eruption of cyber-bullying going on in her school. Cyber-bullying, now recognized as a global issue (Campbell, 2005), needed to be addressed within our community and thus a new initiative began.

Cyber-bullying is a fairly new concept and has multiple definitions. According to Vandebosch & Van Cleemput (2008), the perception of cyber-bullying amongst students between the ages of 10-18 is that in order to qualify as cyber-bullying the perpetrator must use the Internet (email, instant message, web site or social network) with the intention of hurting another person or the victim must feel hurt by the perpetrator. Furthermore, most professionals would agree that the act of bullying is often repeated over time with a distinct power differential between the perpetrator and victim.

As they had done in the past, Project A.C.E. designed an informational dramatization presentation that illustrates the definition and emotional consequences of cyber-bullying on victims and their families. This dramatic scene was meant to be both captivating and informative. The students of Project A.C.E. hoped to educate children, teachers, and parents and make them more aware of the serious consequences of cyber-bullying. In addition, faculty, staff, and students agreed that during this presentation students would enact several of the main characters

(the victim, parents, teachers, the bully, and the computer). The purpose of the peer theater would be to illustrate the main issues of the cyber-bullying experience.

- Fear
- Helplessness
- Frustration
- Denial
- Rationalization

It was our hope that this message would resonate in two ways: first, it would make students aware of the consequences surrounding cyber bullying, and second, warn teachers and parents that the problem of cyber-bullying exists and encourage them to become more involved in monitoring their child's computer use, especially the use of social networking.

Fostering Civic Responsibility

As Project A.C.E. prepared to take on the daunting task of addressing such a complicated issue the faculty became aware of the student's sense of enthusiasm and passion towards their mission. During the initial orientation, some students expressed that they were victims and others shared that they knew friends and/or family members that were victims. All students agreed that they felt a personal attachment to this problem and were motivated and confident that they could have a positive impact on educating students, teachers and parents on how to effectively address this problem at home and in the community. As the training continued, students in Project A.C.E. reported feeling a deep connection within the community (civic responsibility) and a sense of empowerment while governing their own project. As the faculty and students worked together, faculty began to notice that students had taken this assignment to a new level. While the main focus was to educate people about cyber-bullying, students were now beginning to exhibit and

speak about this new sense of responsibility that they felt about the community and how they felt committed to taking a pro-active role in making their community safe for themselves, their families, and their friends.

According to Gotlieb and Robinson (2002), civic responsibility is defined as an “active participation in the public life of a community in an informed, committed and constructive manner, with a focus on the common good.” (Gotlieb and Robinson, 2002 p.16) In utilizing a model intended to foster civic responsibility we allowed the cyber-bullying project to be governed and run by the student participants of Project A.C.E. The decision to take this approach was based on two fundamental factors. First and foremost our intention was to increase active participation amongst its members. Second, the faculty also believed the only way to illustrate the cyber-bullying issue amongst pre-adolescent and adolescent students was to have the information come directly from the members of that distinct community.

The freedom that was afforded to Project A.C.E. motivated students to take on even more responsibilities than initially anticipated. Students were not content to simply write and perform a dramatization; they were determined to learn as much as they could about cyber-bullying. The students created their own research and development teams. At first, we believed that this research would be restricted towards library and Internet sources only. The students were allowed to use a portion of their class time to do so. However, students exceeded our expectations and came up with new original ideas. Some students for example asked two Mental Health professionals on campus for advice and suggestions. Other students invited professionals to speak to the group as a whole and all of the students of Project A.C.E. voluntarily attended cyber-bullying educational workshops. All of this occurred during the student’s free time. The

students expressed an overwhelming desire to familiarize themselves with the subject of cyber-bullying in order to be as professional and accurate as possible.

After weeks of preparation, our students presented their first dramatization to the students and teachers of PS/IS 206. The feedback from the audience was positive and favorable. Students and teachers expressed that they gained a unique insight and understanding of the dangers of cyber bullying. In the days that followed faculty, staff and Project A.C.E. students had an opportunity to discuss the Peer Theater experience. Project A C E students reported that they felt both confident and proud. All participants agreed that they were satisfied with their performance and that they had felt a unique connection with their audience. Students also shared that they enjoyed this experience and were motivated to learn more about how they can be productive and meaningful members of their community.

Brian Mitra, Director and Mandy Fraley, Service-learning Coordinator were so impressed with the results they had applied and ultimately received the prestigious 2011 CCNCCE Collaboration Award (k-12) for their dedication and collaboration.

Discussion

Civic responsibility is difficult to define. For some it means looking at governmental policies and for others it may refer to advocating for those who are not as fortunate as others. At Kingsborough, The Mental Health and Human Services and The Service-Learning Program defines civic responsibility as an individuals obligation and desire to become a meaningful and committed member of the community. Further, we agree with Judith Torney-Purta's research that clearly states "teachers are uniquely positioned to influence civic knowledge, attitudes, and behavior across socio-economic groups".

Members of the faculty strongly believe that in addition to teaching students skills and helping students develop knowledge that help them become informed professionals, it is also our responsibility to enhance and nurture a commitment to become pro-active and responsible members of the community that we work and live in. Further, we support the idea that it is our responsibility as educators to move our students from passive consumers of information to becoming an active, aware, responsible citizen focused not only on his/her personal development, but also on becoming an “agent of change” (Munter 2002).

At KCC we believe that we have successfully communicated to our students the importance of developing civic responsibility. Some examples of student reactions to developing and performing Peer Theater are:

- I feel so good about myself lately. I always thought that I was just supposed to get by. I thought that it was OK to cyber-bully other people I thought it was funny. I would get this feeling of power. Now I realize that I can make a difference. By telling my story I can help others see that this is not a cool thing to do. Now when I walk out of my apartment I feel like I make a difference.
- I never had direction. I was just taking classes and hoping that someday I would get a job. Now I've learned that I have a responsibility to my community. I like it.

We also have had several students who have graduated and returned to KCC to participate and continue the work they started when they were KCC students.

- I came back because I wanted ACE to perform at my new job. I knew that we could make a difference and that my clients would benefit from our “skits”
- I came back because I miss the interaction with people who want to really help others.

What we have done at KCC is not very difficult. In fact all things considered is relatively easy. All it takes is a little trust and respect for your students and some constructive direction from staff and faculty. Teachers and students can construct high quality Service-Learning projects that influence students to identify the school as a local institution concerned with social cultural and economic development of the community. Moss2009).

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