

Creative Partnerships: A Win-Win Situation for Meeting Course Objectives and Community Needs

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Introduction – the Value of Academic Service Learning

Course objectives can be met in a variety of ways, but doing hands-on service projects that benefit the community are an especially effective way of helping students connect outcomes to real world applications. One of the great rewards for students engaged in academic service learning (ASL) is the ability to make a difference! ASL “offer(s) new opportunities to think more consciously and creatively about relationships, including those of faculty and student, disciplinary and interdisciplinary, or multidisciplinary knowledge, campus and community ... and because service learning calls for a link between what goes on in the classroom and what goes on in the a community, it offers a vehicle to faculty, students, and community partners for thinking and responding in new collaborative ways to the critical issues that confront our local and global worlds” (Weigert, K. M. 1998).

Students in traditional classroom settings obtain information from content authorities through lecture, discussions, and inquiry-based activities. A weakness in these types of delivery systems is that they are entirely within the faculty member’s “knowledge and experience purview and ascribed and perceived jurisdiction” (Howard, 1998). Moore (1981) found that students working in the field gained a higher level of creativity and flexibility than in traditional classroom settings, not to mention learning about the context of the task at an organizational level. Students were found to have a higher level of ownership in the learning process in service-learning rather than a traditional classroom setting, as well as giving more weight to their

accomplishments on their own, whereas students in a traditional classroom setting were found to rely on feedback from classroom instructors to feel a sense of accomplishment. (Eyler, 1993).

Community partners - A Win-Win Situation

Community partner selection is critical when planning academic service learning. Post-secondary institutions that pair with community partners can help foster good relationships with the community. Schools and their partners can mutually benefit in a variety of ways including improved image and support, increased funding, and recruitment and retention of students. These pairings may include service-learning partnerships, internships and practica, and capstones; but could be expanded to applied research, technical assistance, evaluation, and participatory action research (Holland & Gelmon, 1998). “Partnerships should reflect academic strengths, and academic programs and scholarly agencies should reflect...regional characteristics and challenges. Campuses should develop selected arrays of partnerships and cultivate them well, rather than engage in random activities” (Holland & Gelmon, 1998). These partnerships need to be reciprocal with participants on both sides, community partners and faculty, and planning goals/outcomes of projects. Participants should learn from each other. This type of sustainable partnership has mutually agreed upon goals and success is defined. (Holland & Gelmon, 1998).

When selecting sites, students need placements where they can feel a sense of accomplishment; that they can make a difference! An organization that uses materials developed by a previous ASL student is a great example. Place students with partners that will engage students, take an active role in their learning, and grant them significant responsibility. Design meaningful service projects that meet both classroom needs and student needs; develop a contract before beginning projects making sure that service projects are relevant to course

outcomes. (Eyler & Giles, 1997). Share examples of community partnerships that help meet course objectives; this can serve as a springboard for brainstorming ideas for any course or discipline. Collaborate with others; this can also help in developing ideas for community partners and the process of establishing strong community relationships.

Conference Session

Presenters will facilitate a discussion sharing examples of service learning activities from a variety of courses and disciplines. Emphasis will be placed on developing community partnerships to mutually benefit both the school and partner while showcasing opportunities for utilizing academic service learning in various disciplines. Participants will form small groups to brainstorm ideas for meeting course objectives in a community setting and explore potential organizations that could provide these experiences. Whole group sharing and review will round out the session.

By the end of this session learners will be able to:

- Provide examples of service learning projects that can also meet course objectives and outcomes.
- Create a list of potential community agencies in their area for possible partnerships.
- Describe a process for establishing strong community relationships.
- Develop ideas for partnering with community agencies for specific courses.

Session materials will be made available to participants.

References

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