

REACHING OUT TO STUDENTS THROUGH ASSETS

Megan Johnson, Mesa Community College

BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION

Mesa Community College (MCC) is located in Mesa, Arizona, in the central part of the state, just east of Phoenix, the state's capital. Mesa is Arizona's third largest city after Phoenix and Tucson, with a population of over 500,000. Mesa Community College serves as a resource for students who wish to transfer to one of Arizona's four-year universities, or another area or regional institution. MCC has a variety of career development programs and continuous learning programs, service learning being among them. The mission of Mesa Community College is to promote excellence in teaching and learning, preparing individuals for active citizenship in a diverse global society. Our ultimate purpose is to improve the quality of life in the community we serve.

Student enrollment for all MCC campuses for fall 2006 was 27,179. The average age of MCC students is 26 years old, with 54% female enrollment, and 46% male. Students' ethnicity at MCC is approximately 63% White, 17% Hispanic, 5% Black, 5% Asian, 3% American Indian/Alaskan Native, and 7% Other, or not specified.

THE CENTER FOR SERVICE LEARNING

Mesa Community College has a department dedicated specifically to service learning that connects our students with community partners to complete service learning hours. The Center for Service Learning's mission statement is "to promote excellence in teaching and learning through the integration of academic study with active service. We collaborate with the community, encourage civic engagement, promote personal growth, and foster social responsibility." In the Center for Service Learning, we employ full-time and part-time staff members in addition to student workers who help to facilitate the process of enrolling students in service learning classes as an in-course module or independent service learning module class at MCC.

The REACH Program

Mesa Community College's REACH (Raising Expectations for Achievement and Community Service through Higher Education) program is a Maricopa County Community College District (MCCCD) ACE (Achieving a College Education) program that allows students to earn community college credits while still in high school. Students participating in the REACH program are high school juniors and seniors from eight East Valley high schools, including six Mesa high schools and two schools from the Tempe Unified High School District. REACH's goal is to support underrepresented or

underprivileged students in completing a college education by assisting them in their transition from high school to the community college setting. Upon being enrolled in the REACH program, 86% of students graduate high school having already completed up to 24 college credits with the option of a one credit stand alone service learning course. Through the Center for Service Learning, students have the opportunity to integrate their academic study with active community service.

The REACH program enrollment is currently over 240 students. The REACH program focuses on underrepresented students who meet various social at-risk factors such as:

- First generation students to attend college
- Students who work 10-30 hours per week
- Foster care, family member incarcerated, lives in temporary housing, teen parent, etc.
- Voluntarily identifies physical/mental disabilities
- Evidence of single parent home
- Underrepresented group

ASSETS Grant

MCC's Center for Service Learning is developing, implementing, and perpetuating a recruitment and enrollment plan with the help of a program coordinator in order to successfully engage REACH students within community based organizations. This assists the students in registering and completing a one credit service learning class in addition to getting them involved in various service activities offered on and around the campus. Through its participation in the *Accent on Student Success: Engaged Together in Service* (ASSETS) initiative, funded by the Community College National Center for Community Engagement (CCNCCE) through Learn and Serve America, this program will aid the collaboration of the REACH program to create a unique synergy of service and academics; this provides students an educational pathway that will lead them to higher education.

The "C" in REACH stands for community service which was a service goal unfulfilled prior to the funding of the ASSETS grant. The ASSETS grant enables the Center for Service Learning to work with the students to select community partners that will help them develop both academically and professionally.

MCC's Center for Service Learning has created several specific documents to help recruit and enroll at-risk youth:

- Saturday Hours
- Appointment Sheets
- Instruction Sheets

- Orientations
- PowerPoint Presentations
- Informational Handouts
- Program Coordinator Position
- One-on-one Meetings
- Website
- Community Partner Binders
- Informational Literature
- New Enrollment Packet

REACH SERVICE LEARNING PROJECTS

We have engaged our REACH service learning students alongside of other volunteers in the following socially relevant, service-oriented, school-community projects:

Martin Luther King Day

The focus of the Dr. Martin Luther King Day (MLK Day) was to present the meaning of MLK Day to students and then involve them in a service project. The focus on this event, in the spirit of Dr. Martin Luther King, was to reflect on how service to others impacts the everyday lives of people around the globe as well as in our local communities. Students were given the opportunity to reflect on how the service of Dr. Martin Luther King and other leaders like him have impacted the way they live their lives. The students spoke about their service learning experiences and how they had the opportunity to influence the lives of others. At the end of our time together, the students wrote letters to our soldiers overseas to thank them for their service to our country.

Independent Service Projects

- Guadalupe Yavapai AmeriCorps
- Aguilar Elementary School
- Dobson Academy
- Washington Activity Center
- Bridging Arizona Furniture Bank
- Mesa Arts Center
- The Arizona Museum for Youth

When reflecting on their service, the students in independent module classes anonymously stated the following:

Reflections from Aguilar Elementary School:

“By being a part of this classroom I am going to be able to gain experience in the field I am interested in. Hopefully, by this experience I will be able to choose if this career is right for me.”

“Every day is a fun experience when you are working with third graders. But if I had to choose one, it would be watching these kids grow with my help. Aguilar Elementary School is full of ESL children. The classroom I was in for their "reading switch" consisted of the lowest level of readers. These kids didn't care about being in school, reading, anything. At first it was really hard to get their attention and get them to read (or even to try). Then I brought in an American Idol portable karaoke machine. I had the kids take turns reading into the mike. They LOVED it! I had four children bump up to higher levels of reading and each one became a child who loves to read. It was so amazing to see these shy children turn into outgoing ones because of something I did. It feels really good and I am sure it does for them too!”

“This month I have learned that I am completely attached to these kids. This is the last month I get to be with them and it makes me so depressed. I have really fallen in love with every one of the kids in my class and I wish that I could stay with all of them and watch them grow. But I can't; I have some growing to do myself. I have learned that I just have to send them on their way so they can experience better, exciting things. I wish them all the joy in the world.”

Reflections from Dobson Academy

“One thing I learned this month was that you need to be able to stand your ground when in education. Some kids I work with will try to manipulate you in a sense by making you feel bad for punishing them. Then they go back and do what they did before, thinking it is okay. You need to be able to show them that what they are doing is wrong, but in an effective way.”

Reflections from the Washington Activity Center

“The Washington Activity Center runs after-school youth programs. This student chose to complete his service learning in recreation. He taught children how to play sports and being a friend and mentoring them.”

“One thing I've learned this month related to recreation is that children, especially teens, just want to have someone to hang with and play pool

or basketball with after school, and being that person means a lot to both them and me.”

Reflections from Bridging AZ Furniture Bank

“This student chose to do her service learning in business in order to help a furniture bank design brochures and implement a marketing program. The mission of this local non profit is that no child with in our reach shall sleep on the floor.”

“I would like to help a nonprofit agency by marketing its services and products, tracking orders, sales and how the success of the marketing implemented benefits the nonprofit organization. Marketing and tracking orders, sales and success of the marketing implemented are relevant to general business because it teaches the business skills of nonprofit organizations. It also teaches different marketing management skills and tasks. Volunteering time promotes time management and organizational skills that are important in everyday life, especially in business.”

The REACH students and faculty have made a measurable impact on their community by completing over 400 hours of service. The contributions of students and staff at Mesa Community College are made possible through the funding of the ASSETS grant. The Center for Service Learning is able to collaborate with the REACH program to help them attain the goal: that every student experiences service learning before graduating from high school. Although working with at-risk youth has been challenging, their service has impacted the students, their families, and their communities.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Megan Johnson is a part-time Program Coordinator for the Center for Service Learning at Mesa Community College. She was a full-time AmeriCorps member through Make a Difference and completed 1700 hours of service prior to her position at Mesa Community College. Megan is responsible for recruiting students of the REACH program to enroll in a one credit service learning class. The students in the REACH program are at-risk students dually enrolled in High School and Mesa Community College. Megan walks the students through the paperwork process and meets with them to help them attain their service learning goals. Megan will graduate in July 2007 from Charter Oak State College with a Bachelor of Arts in Spanish and Organizational Management.

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