

## THE ENVIRONMENTAL SUMMER CHALLENGE (ESC): A MILWAUKEE AREA SERVICE LEARNING PARTNERSHIP

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### INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 2008, a group of members of the Southeast Wisconsin Service Learning Consortium (SWSLC) met to discuss collaborative projects that would develop deeper connections among SWSLC members as well as the greater community, which would also create an ethnically, economically and socially diverse learning experience around a common community concern. The SWSLC is a group of K-16 administrators interested in advancing the use of service learning in their institutions. What emerged was a “thick” collaboration of partners that included K-12 administrators and teachers; higher education administration, teachers, and students; community-based organizations; and several AmeriCorps\*VISTAs who planned a three week summer service learning experience for middle school students in the greater Milwaukee area called *The Environmental Summer Challenge (ESC)*.

The curriculum developed for the various sites relied on the “3S” model of curriculum development wherein the student learns “self” and “social” understanding in conjunction with the “subject” (environmental stewardship and sustainability was the focus here). The mixed groups of students from urban, suburban and rural schools were ethnically, economically, and culturally diverse in the extreme (a total of three languages were spoken in one group). Analysis of quantitative data suggests that students were changed in three areas: civic responsibility, environmental responsibility, and respecting differences. Analysis of qualitative data suggests that the experience was transformative for all partners involved in the project.

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### COMMUNITY PARTNERS

The community organizations included the Urban Ecology Center, Keep Greater Milwaukee Beautiful, the Bicycle Federation of Milwaukee, Inland Seas Charter High School, and Waterford Waterways Management District. Following the program, three focus groups met to qualitatively measure the effectiveness of the K-12, higher education and community partner reciprocal relationships. Each group was a mix of K-16 educators, administrators, AmeriCorps\*VISTAs, and members of the community partner organizations. Each group was asked a series of questions and each person had the opportunity to respond.

The questions used in the focus groups were:

- What surprised you about this summer project?
- Did this experience change the kids at all? How?
- What did you learn about kids and the ways that they learn?
- If you were to briefly describe the curriculum of this project, what would you say, and second, what was unique about the curriculum to you?

In addition, responses to the following question were also gleaned from the focus groups:

- What are the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of partnering with a community college in a service learning project?

## **COMMUNITY FEEDBACK**

Much of what was observed and repeated throughout these focus group sessions was the surprising speed and ease in which the students from different backgrounds and different schools became friends. Throughout the three weeks, this quickly went from one of the aspects of the program that the adults were most apprehensive about to what they were most impressed by. The ESC empowered youth to be bold, to step out of their sphere of comfort, and to try new activities and interact with individuals who were not from their neighborhood. In a short time, the students found common ground and were able to discuss their differences rather than arguing and fighting over them.

The change in the level of student-engagement was also something discussed at length in the focus groups. Since the three weeks were all on-site sessions, the students experienced a great deal of hands-on learning. They took water samples, put on waders and went into the rivers, rode bikes around city trails, etc. At first many of the students were reluctant to participate. But, as they realized how much fun they were having at each activity, they were more and more excited. Group cohesion developed quickly and students reached out and took the chance to experience things for the first time.

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There were several students who had never been on a boat, never taken water samples, never rode a bike more than around their neighborhood, or never met someone who lived on a farm. These hands-on experiences clearly increased the level of engagement of the students and the positive group experiences. Students were empowered to

discover the environment on their own, and therefore also accept some personal responsibility for it.

Having MATC Teacher Education Preparation students as leaders of each of the groups, presented both opportunities and challenges for the other partners. Having leaders that were outside of each of the school systems (not teachers) meant that the middle-school students formed new groups and were less attached to their own classmates. Since one of the goals of this project was to create a greater understanding of other communities, this was extremely beneficial.

One of the biggest challenges identified by the educators was that they did not have as clearly a defined role as they had grown accustomed to in the safety of the classroom. The new “participant” role the teachers played in the ESC was a hard one for many of the educators. They were used to taking the lead and guiding the class with a very set curriculum. The service learning experience took everyone out of the classroom and into the community and made many of the teachers feel both excited and apprehensive; this was identified as a relatively positive experience for most of the participants.

## **WORKING WITH A COMMUNITY COLLEGE**

Milwaukee Area Technical College (MATC) was a key partner and played an essential role in the ESC Program. MATC not only took the lead in the development of the day-to-day events of the program, but also provided essential leadership by using Teacher Education Preparation (TEP) service learners as group leaders. The site projects were developed as a collaborative effort between all parties. This was a very unique experience and a noted strength for the community partners.

They indicated that they were not used to such collaborative efforts even in service learning experiences. “It was truly a reciprocal relationship between students, service-learners and community partners.” It was clear that the

inherent design of the ESC allowed for TEP students and student participants to fulfill the learning goals set for the academic part of the program while also addressing needs in the community. Other strengths identified in the focus groups included some of the common benefits of collaborating with colleges: high energy participants, fresh ideas, diversity, openness to new experiences, willingness to share personal experiences and the ability to offer more expansive programming.

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In addition to inherent strengths, there were identified weaknesses in the ESC program that were directly related to the college as a partner. At times, MATC service-learners

were not sure where or what to do next. It is important to have clear direction and a plan in place when the set plan is not working. Other issues had to do with managing college student schedules. There was no room for missing a day at this event even if there was an emergency. In general, scheduling conflicts (semester time-frame, student personal lives and agency program schedules) can be difficult for community agencies to accommodate.

Working with a community college also creates some potentially great opportunities. Community agencies are able to provide more programming to community members because of the people power created through working with colleges. When on-going, reciprocal relationships are created with a community college, the community learns to count on the college population as an asset. Through their agency involvement, students are able to hone skills essential to the larger community regardless of where they end up working. This win-win scenario was a common thread that came up in the focus groups.

Finally, there is always the potential of threats when working with any large organization: communication can break down, financial backing is not usually available, people may not follow-up on any side of the relationship, students and instructors change frequently (every semester), college schedules are not “normal” schedules, as they have times when there are no students to attend programs. The biggest issue is if there are no students, there is no program.

## CONCLUSION

Although weaknesses and threats are acknowledged above, the focus groups identified far more positive statements and discussion regarding work on the ESC. Some of the identified items needed for successful community/school partnerships include: agreement upon goals, similar values, measurable outcomes, accountability, mutual trust, respect, genuineness, commitment, identified strengths and assets, balance of power, clear and open communication, common language, and a general sharing of the benefits of the partnership's accomplishments.

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Given honest effort, by all parties involved, to achieve the above criteria creates a solid foundation upon which transformative experiences can grow.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHORS:**

**Courtney Marlaire**, Ph.D., has been involved with community engaged learning for over ten years. As Milwaukee Area Technical College's liaison to the Wisconsin Campus Compact, she has advanced the development of service learning at MATC through the leadership of the Service Learning Team. Dr. Marlaire has also played a large role in representing higher education in the Southeastern Wisconsin Service Learning Consortium (SEWSLC). She received a B.A. in Political Science from Northwestern University and a Ph.D. in Sociology and Educational Policy from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She is currently an Associate Dean of Liberal Arts and Sciences at Milwaukee Area Technical College.

**Suzanne Goodrich** is a Psychology Instructor at Milwaukee Area Technical College. Suzanne earned her undergraduate and graduate degrees at Marquette University and has completed all of her coursework for a Ph.D. in Psychology. Suzanne has been involved in service learning for the past 15 years. She brings a very unique perspective on service learning to the MATC SL-Team; for 10 years she worked in the non-profit sector, seeing first hand the many benefits service learning could potentially bring to a CBO. As a Psychology instructor, she has witnessed the transformation of young adults through the experience of serving and learning out in the "real world" and has seen confidence and knowledge expand by leaps and bounds for youth involved with service learning at the local K-8 school district where she serves on the service learning advisory board. She believes service learning will be the foundation upon which transformative experiences will begin to shape our local and global communities. No matter what the educational opportunity looks like, traditional or virtual, service learning is the bridge that will help to span the gaps in the cultural, social and psychological divide created in the places we call "home".