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Feature Interviewee | Gail Jessen

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Community College

American Association of Community Colleges *Horizons* Mentor

Bio

Gail began her work in the Thayne Center for Service & Learning at Salt Lake Community College in 2002. She has comprehensive experience creating and institutionalizing a formal service-learning program, including providing professional development opportunities for faculty, capacity-building opportunities for community partner organizations, and curricular service opportunities for students. Gail was selected to serve as one of four mentors in the American Association of Community Colleges' program Community Colleges Broadening Horizons through Service Learning (2006-2009). She successfully implemented the college-wide Service-Learning Grant & Designation Program at SLCC, a program that has designated 45 service-learning courses and one Engaged Department since fall 2004. Working with more than 225 community organizations in the Salt Lake Valley, she co-created Partners in Service & Learning with the University of Utah, Westminster College, and LDS Business College. Partners in Service & Learning was recognized with a Collaboration Award from the Community College National Center for Community Engagement. Gail also works closely with the Utah Campus Compact, consulting on faculty development issues and assessment practices. The Thayne Center for Service & Learning was awarded a Learn and Serve America grant from 2003-2006, is recognized in the 2006 and 2007 President's Higher Education Community Service Honor Roll, and is featured in the "First-Year Civic Engagement: Sound Foundations for College, Citizenship and Democracy," published by *The New York Times* and The National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience, and the "Guide to Service-Learning Colleges & Universities."

Interview Questions & Responses

1. Tell us about the American Association of Community Colleges *Horizons* program that you are involved in.

In 1994 AACC began the Community Colleges Broadening Horizons through Service Learning initiative. Every three years since then a national competition is held to select eight mentee institutions and four mentors. Each mentor is paired with two mentee schools based on the needs and the proposal of the mentees, as well as the mentor's own experience and the focus of their work. Even though as mentors we are paired specifically with mentee institutions, we work as a team to train, technically assist, and otherwise benefit all *Horizons* mentee institutions.

Horizons alumni, previous grantees both mentor and mentee, are also part of our training network.

I was selected as a mentor in 2006 and will serve in this position until July 2009. My mentee institutions include Rogue Community College in Medford, Oregon (2006-2007 only), Tacoma Community College in Tacoma, Washington, and Laramie County Community College in Cheyenne, Wyoming. My work with my mentee institutions includes site visits to meet with administrators, faculty, students, and community partners, conduct workshops, and assist program growth in any way possible, as well as working with AACC and the mentor team to plan training and evaluation conferences for all eight mentee institutions.

For information on the entire 2006-2009 *Horizons* team, visit:

http://www.aacc.nche.edu/Content/NavigationMenu/ResourceCenter/ProjectsPartnerships/Current/HorizonsServiceLearningProject/Publications/H4Y1_project_brief.pdf

2. How has serving as a mentor to other institutions in the AACC *Horizons* program influenced your work at your own institution?

In my opinion, both the term and the position of “mentor” is fluid. I am as much a mentee in this process as I am a mentor. To say it is invigorating to work with institutions who are just beginning this process is an understatement. Each college approaches the end goal of institutionalizing a service-learning program in such a unique way that it has inspired me to evaluate the program at SLCC with a fresh perspective. My mentoring experience has motivated me to review, improve, and fine tune our program.

The mentor team is also a rich resource. The mentor team (Jennifer Alkezweeny - Portland Community College, Sean Brumfield – Chattahoochee Technical College, Mary Ann Herlitzke – Western Technical College) connected immediately and we continue to work well together. We share program models with each other as much as we share them with our mentee institutions. Add the *Horizons* alumni in the mix and it’s easy to see how a strong network is created.

The opportunity to work with Learn and Serve America and subsequently with AACC has plugged the Thayne Center into a nationwide network of colleagues, both at two- and four-year institutions. Based on my own experience, I would say to those new to the service-learning field: take advantage of the communal energy of this movement. You never need to feel that you’re isolated or that you have to create a program from scratch. Service-learning is a young, accessible academic field full of respectful colleagues willing to share, network, and help you succeed. We’re still working to fully develop our body of academic literature and research, and the fact that you can sit down for coffee with the pioneers of the field to chat about critical reflection methods makes this an exciting time to be part of this movement.

3. As a service-learning program administrator, what can you tell us about how community colleges are tailoring their programs to meet the needs of the students they serve?

When Amy Cohen, Director of Learn and Serve America, was interviewed in this journal she stated clearly the unique role community colleges play in the national landscape of service-learning. “As institutions designed to meet the educational and workforce needs of their local communities, community colleges are ideally suited to offer service learning programs. [...] In addition, adult students who live and work in the community make outstanding service providers.”

Even with that important role to play, it has been my experience that the differences between service-learning programs at two-year institutions and four-year institutions are subtle. It is still important however that program administrators understand those subtle differences and honor their unique student demographics. To generalize, community colleges cater to non-traditional students who are typically older than traditional undergraduates, they're likely more ethnically diverse, working, managing a family, commuting on public transportation, and juggling similar concerns that may not impact traditional students at four-year universities. We should not use these statistics to deny our students the opportunity of engaging in our community. We should instead recognize that many community college students come to our classroom discussions and our community partner organizations with a wealth of life experience.

At SLCC we have adjusted our service-learning course designation requirements over the years to allow more flexibility in what we consider a service-learning course. It used to be that for a course to receive designation all students were required to participate in the service experience. We have now institutionalized a three-tiered designation that allows a per-section designation assigned to a specific faculty member within the department, a service-learning component designation that allows the service-learning experience to be optional for students, and we still honor the all-student service requirement. These adjustments to our program came from listening not only to our students, but also to our faculty and their needs for greater flexibility in creating their courses.

We have also sought out partnerships with community organizations that provide evening, weekend, and otherwise flexible service opportunities. SLCC has also chosen to liberally define “community” and bring into that circle programs and departments located on our campuses. One highly successful example is our English as a Second Language Conversation Lab. Many service-learning students serve their peers in the ESL Lab and have also been paired with ESL instructors and placed in ESL classrooms as tutors.

4. Salt Lake Community College is nationally recognized for its service-learning program. What are some highlights of your program and what models might other community college replicate?

When Gail Robinson, AACC Service Learning Manager, was interviewed in this journal she was asked what advice she would give to ensure growth and sustainability of service-learning programs. Part of her response was to say, “The most important thing you can do is train faculty how to teach with service learning, and then have veteran faculty teach newer faculty.” When I was charged with developing and institutionalizing a service-learning program at SLCC this is precisely the approach I took: Start with the faculty.

The Thayne Center is housed in Student Services and as a staff member I was keenly aware that building an academic program would require faculty ownership and faculty voice. I see myself, as my job title implies, as a coordinator, a conduit, and a liaison to faculty. My first initiative was to convene the four-member Faculty Research Cohort, in which each member researched a different topic central to service-learning pedagogy. Their research led to a set of cross-disciplinary practices which, approved by the Faculty Senate Curriculum Committee, became our college-wide course designation criteria. The Service-Learning Advisory Board was formed as a subcommittee of the Curriculum Committee and acts as a peer review committee for course designation proposals. In Fall 2004 we established the competitive Service-Learning Grant & Designation program and began offering \$1,000 grants to exemplary course designation proposals. Originally this money came from a Learn and Serve America grant (2003-2006) and is now supported institutionally with funds from Academic Affairs. As of Spring 2008 we have designated 45 courses, including an Engaged Department.

Creating this framework for reward and recognition of successful course development is not viable, however, if faculty are not trained in the theory and best practices of the pedagogy. Over the years, with a mix of Learn and Serve America money and institutional funds, we’ve created a number of workshops, hosted brown bag discussions, panels presentations, inter-disciplinary discussion groups, and many other events no doubt familiar to most program administrators. In terms of more intensive faculty development initiatives, creating our project-based three-member Service-Learning Faculty Cohort and establishing the Service-Learning Faculty Mentorship has had an incalculable impact on the institutionalization of our service-learning program.

The SL Faculty Cohort worked together for an academic year to create a promotional DVD and an extensive online faculty handbook, including discipline-specific toolkits, a troubleshooting guide, and FAQs. The SL Faculty Mentor serves for one academic year and is charged with further developing faculty-centered initiatives to further institutionalize the program. Our 2006-2007 Faculty Mentor, Marianne McKnight, created a three-tiered workshop series for beginning, intermediate, and advanced practitioners. Among other things, our 2007-2008 Faculty Mentor, Elisa Stone, created the Service-Learning Faculty Consulting Corps. The SLFCC is an inter-disciplinary corps of advanced practitioners who act as mentors to faculty new to the pedagogy.

In general it is true that community college faculty are less concerned with research and publishing when compared to their university counterparts. By focusing our faculty development initiatives on the skills necessary to design a service-learning learning course, to successfully teach that course and reflect with students, and to disseminate that knowledge to other instructors, the service-learning program has carved a respected niche into our institution's culture of teaching and learning.

5. Your Partners in Service & Learning program might serve as a model for other community colleges, encouraging them to partner with universities as SLCC has done. Tell us more about that initiative.

In 2004 Joani Shaver, then the Service-Learning Manager in the Bennion Center at the University of Utah, approached me with a proposition: Let's figure out a way to provide a unified message about service-learning to our shared community partners. SLCC has 14 campuses spread throughout the Salt Lake Valley, with many campuses in metropolitan Salt Lake City. The University of Utah is located downtown and we do, in fact, utilize many of the same organizations for our service-learning and volunteer partnerships. We each purchased the SL Pro online database and customized a function for community organizations to register in both our databases simultaneously. We then formed a steering committee of community partner representatives, called ourselves Partners in Service-Learning (later replacing the hyphen with the much-debated and semantically crucial "&"), and began to plan bi-annual valley-wide training events.

The purpose of Partners in Service & Learning is to provide our community partners with a common definition and framework for service-learning, and also to provide the knowledge and tools necessary to work successfully with faculty and service-learning students, as well as non-curricular volunteers. Over the years, and nine events later, we have experimented with a variety of training formats ranging from round tables to panel presentations, from guest lectures to interactive workshops. Our most important development, however, was the addition of Westminster College and LDS Business College. The Partners in Service & Learning venture now includes all four institutions of higher education in Salt Lake City and we have grown our collective network of community organizations to over 250 non-profits.

This coming May, at the annual conference of the Community College National Center for Community Engagement, SLCC will receive a Collaboration Award for Partners in Service & Learning. Though I will accept the award on behalf of SLCC, this honor is clearly shared with the University of Utah, Westminster College, LDS Business College, and our invaluable steering committee.

6. Is there anything else I haven't asked you that you would like to say?

In honor of the vibrant network I mentioned previously, please feel free to visit The Exchange (<http://thaynecenter.slpro.net>) and utilize the Thayne Center's program materials in any way that may work for your institution. I am also interested to learn about other models and program ideas from fellow coordinators and readers of this journal. Over the years I've come to respect that specific programs may take a different form at each institution, but the fundamental goal of reconnecting higher education to its civic purposes is shared by all of us. There is a tangible power in the goal of engaging our students and I look forward to future collaborations and the growth of this movement.