

Bringing *Absolutely Incredible Kid Day!* to the Classroom and Campus Community

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Introduction

Service learning provides college students with an opportunity to be involved in a project that impacts an identified need in the local community while developing a deeper sense of civic responsibility. Open opportunities for students on campus, regardless of courses in which they are enrolled, can be provided through volunteering. The benefits from service learning and volunteering are the same whether the project is conducted with a college course or not. These benefits include teaching students citizenship values and life skills, enhancing students' academic development, and contributing to an institution's outreach efforts (Astin and Sax, 1998).

Service learning projects are growing in popularity on college campuses and typically can be found in volunteer clearinghouses integrated with the curriculum (Jacoby, 1996). In fact, many institutions are going as far as to require a community service component as part of the undergraduate curriculum (Barber and Battistoni, 1993). More common in social science and humanities courses, few models exist for service learning in science and mathematics (Mogk and King, 1995; Duke, 1999; Francek, 2002) and environmental programs (Gray, Ondaatje, and Zakaras, 1999; Phillips, 1997; Bixby et al., 2003). However, a service learning opportunity does not need to be restricted solely to a particular course or discipline but can be expanded to include full campus participation.

Engaging faculty and students in teaching and learning is the area where colleges and universities have been least successful in practice (Cheng, 2004). Matthews (1997) characterized the modern campus culture as a world with three separate tribes: "those who learn, those who profess, and those who arrange." Service learning is one example of how the functions of teaching, research, and service can be combined to invigorate

undergraduate education. It also combines the qualities of student learning and student development to further integrate academic and student affairs (Payne and Bennett, 1999). If student affairs professionals accept the premise that involvement in volunteer service enhances the development of individual students and creates a healthier campus environment, then ways should be found to promote the quality and quantity of such involvement (Fitch, 1991).

This paper describes a unique service learning collaboration between academic affairs and student life personnel, demonstrating the joint sponsorship of student service work as part of a course and/or in connection with a collegiate organization such as student life (Astin and Sax, 1998). Students in general education geoscience courses were required to complete a service learning project under the guidance of a faculty member, while an open invitation was given to the campus community by the student life office to join the same project in a letter writing campaign for *Absolutely Incredible Kid Day!*

Absolutely Incredible Kid Day!

Absolutely Incredible Kid Day! (AIKD) is a national volunteer project headed by Camp Fire USA that occurs on the third Thursday of March every year. The goal of the project is for every child in America to receive a letter from an adult, whether the adult be a parent, relative, or complete stranger. A letter gives a child recognition by an adult, lets a child know that he/she is important, and the letter is “durable;” a child can reread and be reminded of the positive content in the letter communicated by an adult (Smith, 2000). Smith (2000) also reports that when a child receives a written letter, the letter has the power to build a child’s self-image, build a child’s sense of positive power, and build a child’s sense of power to contribute to the lives of others. It is these strong feelings of care and support that Camp Fire USA is trying to pass along to a child and has done so for the past nine years.

At Penn State Delaware County, our program for *Absolutely Incredible Kid Day!* was intended to help students who may fall within any of Kohlberg’s stages of moral

reasoning (described in the following section of this article). Our intent was to create a program that was easily accessible to students on the campus, as well as something that they would benefit from participating in. As Penn State Delaware County is a two-year commuter campus located twenty miles outside of Philadelphia, our students have many competing pressures from family and employment. According to Komives et al. (2003), student learning is enhanced when “the topic is personally meaningful, when they see connection to their lives.” Our goal was to make the letter writing experience as meaningful as possible for those who were involved, in order to foster growth in the area of moral reasoning.

Co-author Guertin, a faculty member of Earth Science, teaches general education geoscience courses for non-science majors. One of her overarching course goals is for students to communicate the geoscience content they have learned during the semester through a service learning project. In the past, she has incorporated projects relating to teaching geologic history while fundraising for pediatric cancer research (Guertin and Nguyen, 2003) and having students teach Junior Girl Scouts science (Guertin and Rufo, 2004; Guertin et al., 2004). She decided to adopt AIKD as the service learning project for her geoscience courses in spring 2004 to accommodate the busy schedules of the students, where the students could complete the service work on their own time. She wanted her students to write science-based letters that were educational and supportive for a group of children her students did not know. Unsure of which group of children her undergraduate students should target for their letter writing, she met with the campus student life office to discuss potential audiences. The student life office was excited about this project, and in discussions we decided that we could expand upon the in-class requirement and open the opportunity for service to the entire campus community. The campus decided to adopt an elementary school located in the nearby city of Chester, located 12 miles outside of Philadelphia. There are two alums from the campus that are now teachers at this school, and we felt this would be an advantage to work with them in setting up the delivery of letters for AIKD. We also felt that this project could make a big impact on the elementary school students, for the Chester School District is ranked last out of 501 school districts in the state of Pennsylvania.

The AIKD project in the geoscience courses was typical in that it placed students in contact with a group of people different from themselves – in this case, inner-city children. This type of service learning opportunity tends to encourage a self awareness and reflection of identity in undergraduates previously taken for granted (Jones and Abes, 2004) and accomplishes many goals for both the individual students and the institution. Service involvement of this type “... builds the capacity of the individual, it informs the institution through being involved in the community, and it expands the potential of the community to remedy its own problems” (Komives et al., 2003). Although our immediate goal was to impact the students and the campus community, it was evident after the program had been completed that we had affected the local community via the receiving elementary school.

Student Development and Service Learning

From their early inception, institutions of higher learning have been focused on developing citizens who would think and act morally (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991). Many college campuses today offer courses in ethics and values, continuing the tradition of the earliest institutions. From this desire to help students become more productive members of society comes a need for more socially-conscious programming, such as community service and service learning based initiatives.

Kohlberg’s theory of moral development is based upon stages. As students enter college, many are fairly egocentric in their thoughts and are most concerned about their own interests than the interests of others. Their way of thinking at this point in their life coincides well with Kohlberg’s Preconventional Stage of Moral Development (Gielen, 1991). The Conventional Stage in Kohlberg’s theory deals with students understanding the need to maintain social order; rules and expectations are meant to be followed and met (Kuhmerker, 1991). The final stage of Kohlberg’s theory deals with establishing a “principled” perspective on life accordingly titled the Postconventional or Principled Stage. At this point a student has developed a strong sense of morality, and perspective is

based on a general set of beliefs that define decisions that are made of an ethical nature (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991).

The goal of many student affairs professionals is to help students progress through the early stages of pre-conventional individualism towards a postconventional conscience, and ultimately aid them in becoming citizens who have a sufficient indication of where their values lie. In order for student affairs professionals to help these students move towards the goal of more socially conscious students, programs and activities need to be offered to help stimulate self-growth in this area.

The Required Service Learning

The students enrolled in both of co-author Guertin's introductory-level geoscience courses were required to handwrite a minimum three-page letter for AIKD. The students in the *Biodiversity and Earth History* course had to select an endangered species and write to a child about the species, the Endangered Species Act, what the threats are to the species and what is being done to protect it. *The Sea Around Us* students were allowed to choose a topic for their letter relating to current events and discoveries in oceanography. The undergraduate students were provided with a grading rubric ahead of time for this project. The project grade, worth 15% of their final semester grade, would be based more on the science content, accuracy and clarity rather than creativity. There were enough students enrolled in both geoscience courses (75 students total) to write letters to the entire 6th grade class at the elementary school. The geoscience students were required to get approval of their letter topic before beginning the project and were provided with tips on how to write their letter based on Camp Fire USA's Letters from the Heart book (Smith, 2000). The letters were due during the week of AIKD, and the students had to turn in a photocopy of the letter with the actual letter to be presented to the child. Guertin was able to do a quick look-through of the letters handed in before AIKD and had the photocopy to read in more detail while she was grading.

The letters that were submitted ranged in quality of content and presentation. The majority of the students successfully presented the required materials about their

endangered species or oceanographic topic with enough detail that were also at the appropriate level for a 6th grade reader. A few male students wrote the required information with only pen on notebook paper. However, many students went above-and-beyond with the design of their letters. Some students included word searches and coloring book pages for the child receiving the letter. Some included stickers, used lots of color, and even made cut-outs from construction paper related to the letter topic. One student commented that she was so proud of her coral reef collage that she had a difficult time turning in her letter because she wanted to keep it for herself!

The students were encouraged to include what they were studying in school and to share some of their interests to personalize the letter. It was impressive to see how open the undergraduates were and how willing they were to share information with children that are complete strangers to them. From a faculty viewpoint, it was also an unanticipated benefit to learn more about the students enrolled in the geoscience courses. For example, one student wrote about her job as a school-bus driver, one student wrote about her experience swimming with dolphins, and another student wrote about how he volunteers every week at a soup kitchen in Philadelphia.

Campus Letter-Writing Volunteers

We expanded the project by asking the campus community to write letters for the other grade levels at the elementary school. The elementary school provided us with the number of children enrolled in each grade level so we knew how many letters we would need to make sure every child received a letter. Faculty, staff, and students were invited to two letter writing sessions, one held during the lunch hour and one evening session to accommodate the campus night school students. The letter-writing events were advertised through campus email, posted flyers, and by table tents on tables in the campus cafeteria. Pizza and snacks were provided at the letter writing to encourage students to come and participate. We had approximately 45 people participate in the daytime letter writing session, with a third of the participants being faculty and staff. The evening session had ten students participate. Both sessions had an even distribution across gender and an excellent diversity of student participants.

Although not required for project participation, we purchased letterhead and envelopes from the AIKD website to emphasize to the children reading the letters that this was a special day. We provided stickers, crayons and markers for volunteers to decorate the letters. Templates were provided for letters targeted to each grade to assist everyone in writing their letters to the appropriate level. When volunteers handed in their letters, we reviewed and marked each one on the outside envelope for the grade level the letter would be delivered to.

During the one-time letter writing event, we were surprised at how much effort and personalization the campus community put into each letter. Faculty, staff, and students not only decorated the letters but the envelopes the letters were placed in as well. We were also pleased to see students stay and write more than one letter during the campus event. One faculty member that came to the letter writing decided to take letterhead and materials to her afternoon *Effective Speech* class and have her students write letters during class. Another faculty member offered extra credit points to his business class if his students wrote a letter.

The Day

We took the letters, a group of undergraduate students, and someone dressed as the Nittany Lion mascot to our adopted elementary school on *Absolutely Incredible Kid Day!* The school allowed us to enter each classroom to explain AIKD and deliver a stack of letters for each child in the class. It took us approximately one hour to deliver all the letters to each class. The elementary school students shouted with excitement upon seeing the Nittany Lion mascot and were surprised to learn that college students and teachers took the time to write them letters.

Post-Project Comments

Our college students responded positively to this project as well. The students enrolled in the geoscience courses were given a short survey about the project and its value. Only 27% of the students said they would have voluntarily written a letter before

this semester for AIKD. Now, after having experienced the letter writing, 53% of the students said they would write a letter in the future even if no grade or extra-credit would be given. This value is lower than found by Payne and Bennett (1999), who determined that over 90% of their students would participate in a future service project after volunteering with at least one in the past.

We even witnessed geoscience students coming to the open campus letter-writing events to write additional letters beyond the one required for the geoscience courses. Many students commented that the best part of the project was knowing that they were educating a child, that the project had a purpose, and that they were not “writing a paper for a teacher who already knows everything I’m talking about.” A strong impact was made by this project, for 88% of the students said that service projects such as AIKD belong in college-level courses.

One month later, we were surprised to receive letters in return from a fourth-grade class at the elementary school. The fourth graders used crayons and stickers to write their letters to the campus. The students in the geoscience courses wanted to read each and every letter to see what the kids had to say, and the letters were a hit with the entire campus.

There were a few items we noted that we think others will find helpful if there is an interest to bring this project to their campus. First, if a faculty member uses AIKD as a service learning project, or if a campus as a whole decides to write letters, it is a good idea to have someone read each letter before it goes to the children. One of the geoscience letters had to be pulled (a student was too preachy about not doing drugs) and some of the campus letters were not forwarded on also because of the content. For example, one student said he played for the Washington Redskins, another said “you’ll get more information soon,” one student ended a letter with “I love you” which we felt was inappropriate, and a few of the letters written by ESL students we felt would be difficult for an elementary school child to understand. Second, one point we will certainly follow up on for next year is that we will make an announcement at the

beginning of the spring semester to all the faculty on campus about AIKD. Since we had one faculty member have her class participate at the last-minute, and another give his students extra credit, we think there is interest on the part of the faculty to include a simple service activity such as this in their curriculum. Lastly, AIKD campus organizers want to be sure to tell the letter writers not to provide their contact information unless they are willing to take on the responsibility of being a pen-pal. We strongly discouraged our students from including their email addresses, but surprisingly, some of the fourth graders wrote their home addresses and telephone numbers in their return letters, looking for a pen pal.

Future Enhancements

Based on feedback from the college students as well as the fourth-grade letters, we are seriously considering expanding the letter writing so that the geoscience students write back-and-forth to the children a few times during the semester to share not only their geoscience knowledge but their friendship. The comments from the open letter-writing sessions also indicate a strong interest on the part of the undergraduates for some sort of mentoring program with the recipients of the letters. We are very pleased and encouraged that the simplicity of the AIKD project and collaboration between academics and student life resulted with such a strong impact on the letter writers and elementary school children being served. Clearly there is a place for service learning integrated with academics and student life on our campus.

Service learning is a concept that derived from student affairs practices and has migrated towards the academic arena as the recognition tied to an academic department is usually greater (Komives et al., 2003). In order to continue the concept of service learning within our schools, it is important for both academic and student affairs organizations to work together to create opportunities for students to develop both academically and personally. By using a program such as *Absolutely Incredible Kid Day!* and involving all areas of the Penn State Delaware County campus community, we were able to nurture an environment conducive to the development of all who participated.

Information about *Absolutely Incredible Kid Day!* can be found at the Camp Fire USA website: http://www.campfireusa.org/a_i_kid_day/

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