

About Our Feature Interviewee:

Gail Robinson is Manager of Service Learning for the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) in Washington, DC. Ms. Robinson has managed AACC's Learn and Serve America national grant project, Community Colleges Broadening Horizons through Service Learning, and coordinated AACC's Service Learning Clearinghouse since 1994. She works with faculty and staff at colleges across the country to develop service learning programs, coordinates training and technical assistance activities, and writes and speaks about service learning issues at local, regional, and national conferences. She served as co-editor of AACC's best-selling book, *A Practical Guide for Integrating Civic Responsibility into the Curriculum*, which has been reissued in a second edition. Ms. Robinson is the convener of Service Learning in Higher Education—a group comprising more than 50 Washington-area associations, organizations, and institutions—and served on the board of directors of the National Society for Experiential Education.

Questions for Our Feature Interviewee

**Gail Robinson, Manager of Service Learning,
American Association of Community Colleges**

1. **Gail, you've been the Director of AACC's service-learning program for over fifteen years. Over the years, how has your own perspective of service and community engagement been sharpened as you've worked with community college presidents, staff, and faculty?**

When I started working at AACC in 1994, I had heard of President Clinton's AmeriCorps program, but didn't know what service learning was. I learned about service learning from six community college faculty and staff who were mentors in our then-new grant program, Community Colleges Broadening Horizons through Service Learning, and I was as much a mentee as were our grantee colleges at the time.

With the advent of e-mail listservs and the Web came a lot more information that was readily available and replicable. It's much easier now for someone to start a service learning program because so many people have done it before, and no one has to reinvent the wheel.

I appreciate the input and advice of chief academic officers more now than I did in the first few years of the Horizons program. Initially we didn't include them in project planning or sustainability, and some of the colleges' efforts suffered as a result. Now we invite the CAOs of our grantee colleges to an annual summit on service learning institutionalization. Many of them come back year after year, because they relish the opportunity to talk about teaching and learning for a full day with their colleagues. Their assistance and direction has been invaluable in helping me help college programs grow and become sustained.

The concept of civic engagement has changed a lot. It used to be that the first thing people thought of was voting and political behavior. But civic engagement is so much more than that, and people in higher education have begun to see how far-reaching their efforts in communities can be. We haven't even glimpsed the long-term impact of service learning; I expect that community colleges are developing more students who will be lifelong volunteers and be more interested in nonprofit jobs as careers, thanks to their service learning experiences.

2. Gail, how does AACC see its role in supporting service-learning and civic engagement?

As the national association that represents all associate-degree-granting institutions, AACC has an important role in supporting teaching and learning strategies that work. We've seen the number of service learning programs double in the last decade, from 30 percent of all community colleges in 1995 to 60 percent today.

The support AACC has received from the Learn and Serve America program has given us the opportunity to provide individual college training, publications, Web-based information, workshops, and grants to community colleges around the country. This kind of support – and similar training and technical assistance that CCNCCE has been able to provide through its LSA grants – is critical to helping faculty understand how they can integrate service learning into their own courses.

AACC's primary constituents are community college presidents. While I work mostly with faculty and staff, the presidents and vice presidents are the ones with budget authority. So I can help faculty, staff, students, and partners tell their stories at the national level, where the audience is those key administrators.

3. Gail, what advice or recommendations do you have for faculty who are interested in participating in service learning?

First, find another instructor on your campus or at a nearby college who is using service learning. Piloting it in your own course is a lot easier when you can learn from someone who has been there. AACC and CCNCCE both offer referrals to faculty who are just starting out.

Don't think that your students are going to change the world in one year. Start small; pick one course objective or competency that a service component might meet; and then find a community partner whose organizational mission can relate to what you want your students to learn. Work with partners to see what their

needs are, and only then decide how your students can assist through service learning assignments.

Use the resources available on the Web and in printed publications to find reflective exercises and activities that can work best in your discipline and with your teaching style. Your students will learn best if you lead them in reflection throughout the course of the term, not just after their service projects are completed.

Identify an advocate on your campus – preferably an academic vice president or dean who can support service learning philosophically and financially. Then mentor a newer faculty member and start the cycle all over again!

4. **Gail, as an administrator of a national organization, what advice do you have for community college presidents and upper level administrators who are beginning to incorporate service learning and civic engagement into the missions and objectives of their college?**

One of the most important ways service learning can help the college is by meeting the mission of service to communities and by meeting accreditation criteria on engagement. NCA's Higher Learning Commission has led the way with its Criterion 5 on Engagement and Service. Many colleges that have gone through re-accreditation in the last six or seven years have positioned themselves successfully by trumpeting their work in service learning. Students are more engaged, community members see the colleges as more active in local issues, and faculty and administrators see the value in this type of experiential learning. All of these things benefit colleges in the accreditation process.

Administrators need to let their faculty explore the possibilities in service learning and let them fail a time or two. Piloting service learning is like trying anything for the first time – it takes a while to get it right. But the benefits are tremendous and well worth the effort.

5. **Gail, what advice would you give to service-learning administrators to ensure growth and sustainability of their programs?**

Focus on the civic and academic learning outcomes of your students. Positive outcomes in these areas, along with increased retention and persistence rates, will get the attention of the college CEO and CAO. We've had success in evaluating these outcomes among our Horizons grantee colleges and will be posting a research brief about them on our Web site (<http://www.aacc.nche.edu/servicelearning>) later this summer.

Ask students to talk to board members, community leaders, and college administrators to share their reflections on service learning. Students are the most effective advocates you can find.

The most important thing you can do is train faculty how to teach with service learning, and then have veteran faculty teach newer faculty. As long as you have one instructor, one student, and one partner, you can make the case for service learning.

6. **Gail, is there anything else that I haven't asked you that you would like to say about service learning and civic engagement and AACCC's support to service-learning, or in general about service learning or civic engagement?**

I'd just like to thank the folks from the 58 current and previous *Horizons* colleges. I learn so much from them every day; they are the reason I keep doing this work. And thanks of course to Lyvier Conss for being a great colleague over the years. All community colleges benefit from the work we do, because our combined impact is greater than if we did the work alone.