

In the Beginning: Learning to Walk

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The SAFE (*Supporting Actions for Engagement*) grant was the first significantly funded service learning related grant that was awarded to Northampton Community College (NCC). Although NCC had previously received funding through Pennsylvania Campus Compact that focused on service learning projects related to hunger, the SAFE grant provided higher profile activities and opportunities that allowed service learning projects to expand.

News of the receipt of the grant brought great excitement, pride and PANIC! Those first sub-grantee meetings remain a blur with the exception of one thought: how are we going to get through the next three years? Fiscal reports, project star, performance measures, reporting, and so on, all seemed overwhelming at the time. However, nothing compared to trying to convince faculty that disaster preparedness was a great topic for service projects!

The Community College National Center for Community Engagement (CCNCCE) was the only organization awarded a Learn and Serve grant that was dedicated to emergency preparedness. Even though the beginning of the grant (2004) was post 9/11, the country had already begun to settle into a pre 9/11 mentality, and just the subject of homeland security and disaster preparedness sent people running from the room. The climate was settling down and there were no more attacks in the United States. Why dredge up the past? Preparedness would force us to face an ugly reality – we felt vulnerable and unprepared. The SAFE grant would tackle these issues head on!

Generating interest in this topic began with faculty. Introducing them to the subject and allowing them and their students to be creative with their projects proved to be the starting point. Students and faculty also made critical connections with community partners to learn more about the subject. In the process, they found that they had many allies as they started their projects.

Getting There: Off and Running

The first discipline to come on board was the Veterinary Technician program. The Vet Tech faculty and students were the perfect group to introduce this topic to the college. Vet Tech students are passionate about their profession and eagerly embraced the notion of “pet preparedness.” Students created a resource guide for small animals that included emergency pet information in the event a disaster struck. The brochure included the owners’ and pets’ names and information about local vet hospitals, shelters, and kennels. Also included was information about the pets such as medications, chronic health problems, vaccines, license number, and an emergency guardian contact number. Two very industrious students designed and built a mobile kiosk to showcase this information.

Students attended local events, set up the kiosk, and proceeded to educate the public about pet preparedness. They displayed evacuation plans for the home that included pets,

and created a pet emergency kit. Their passion and commitment was contagious and the concept of emergency preparedness began to take root at NCC. The vet tech students and their program were the initial “stars” of the SAFE grant. NCC became known as the school that does the “pet preparedness thing.” At service learning conferences nationwide, their reputation preceded them.

At this point, service learning began to attract more faculty members interested in incorporating service into their coursework and many were intrigued by the focus of disaster preparedness. Biology, journalism, nursing, political science, marketing, sociology, psychology and communication disciplines all participated in SAFE grant projects over the three year grant period (and a one year extension). Faculty members were included in CCNCCE’s national conferences as presenters. Networking with colleagues sharing the same passion for service learning, faculty returned to campus re-energized and armed with new approaches to their traditional teaching methodologies.

Some of the project highlights over the three plus years included:

- Biology students designed a “safety bingo” game for elderly residents of a nursing home in order to familiarize them with the facility’s emergency signage.
- Journalism students interviewed local emergency services personnel and submitted articles to the college newspaper in order to heighten awareness of disaster preparedness in the area.
- Nursing students researched the preparedness for and effects of natural disasters and forms of terrorism and displayed their findings at local schools.
- Marketing students created marketing plans that addressed local disaster preparedness issues.
- Political Science students participated in CERT (Community Emergency Response Team) trainings.
- Psychology students are working with the local Red Cross personnel on a program that empowers senior citizens and children with disaster/emergency preparedness skills/information.
- Speech Communication students are researching emergency preparedness issues and carrying that message to local organizations through prepared speeches/information sessions.

Still Running

The SAFE grant has contributed to the growth and popularity of service learning among faculty members. The following chart illustrates this point:

Semester	SP 00	FA 00	SP 01	FA 01	SP 02	FA 02	SP 03	FA 03	SP 04	FA 04	SP 05	FA 05	SP 06	FA 06
students	4	16	30	34	30	40	38	61	94	126	196	126	209	209
faculty	3	3	2	5	5	9	8	6	7	7	15	12	19	18
courses	2	2	2	5	5	7	7	5	6	7	14	11	19	21

SAFE grant activities began in spring 2004, and grew consistently within the service learning program (with the exception of fall 2005, which saw a lower total number of participants and courses). Participation of faculty increased as well as the number of courses offering service learning and the number of students engaged in service learning activities. Percentage of increase during SAFE grant years is as follows:

- Students: SP 04 – FA 06 = 12%
- Faculty: SP 04 – FA 06 = 15%
- Courses: SP 04 – FA 06 = 25%

Overall percentage of increase is as follows:

- Students: SP 00 – FA 06 = 512%
- Faculty: SP 00 – FA 06 = 50%
- Courses: SP 00 – FA 06 = 95%

SAFE grant activities have also contributed to an increased awareness of emergency procedures within the college, as well as the need for more information dissemination regarding policies and practices. Presentations have been made at professional staff meetings addressing these issues. In addition, NCC was recently awarded funding from the State Farm Youth Advisory Board. This award will address the disastrous flooding along the Delaware River. The expertise that the SAFE grant provided in disaster preparedness issues has provided the foundation for NCC to seek other grant opportunities directly relating to this public concern.

There are many aspects of the college culture other than service learning and emergency preparedness that have been affected by the SAFE grant. Civic engagement has been a key point (one of three) in NCC's strategic plan for the past three years. President Scott has consistently reinforced the importance of service and engagement in the community through his "State of the College" addresses and his continued support for service learning activities, projects, and grant opportunities. Prospective employees are asked in their interviews whether they serve their communities and in what capacity. Prospective faculty members are questioned about service learning. A Civic Engagement Advisory Board was created to monitor, support, and encourage increased engagement within the college and the community. For five years, the college has been hosting an AmeriCorps/VISTA position. The VISTA's have focused on student engagement, disaster preparedness, parent education programs, and financial aid concerns.

The success of the SAFE grant has been an eye-opening experience for students, faculty, and staff. They have had the opportunity to interface with community partners not typically associated with service learning activities (at least at NCC) prior to the inception of the grant. One Vet Tech student, now in a four-year college, who will be pursuing a career as a veterinarian, has continued to be a champion for pet preparedness. She is currently organizing a CART (Community Animal Response Team) team in her area. One student carrying the banner for emergency preparedness beyond college requirements...this is the true legacy of the SAFE grant's impact at Northampton Community College.

About the Author:

Debra Bohr is beginning her 9th year at Northampton Community College. She has served as an academic advisor, NCC liaison to St. Luke's School of Nursing, and now works full-time as NCC's first service learning administrator. As service learning administrator, Debra collaborates with administration, faculty, and students to institutionalize service learning at the college. In addition, service learning course integration grants and grants from the United States Election Commission, Pennsylvania Campus Compact, United States Department of Homeland Security, AmeriCorps, and the Community College National Center for Community Engagement (CCNCCE) have all contributed to the expansion and growth of service learning on campus. Debra has presented at the League for Innovation in the Community College's Disaster Summit in 2005 on SAFE projects, and also at CCNCCE's 2004 national conference, the 2006 National Service Learning Conference in Philadelphia, and regionally at Montgomery Community College. She is also on the Editorial Review Board for The Journal for Civic Commitment. Most recently, Ms. Bohr has been selected to serve on a committee for the US Election Assistance Commission, which is charged to create a handbook for the recruitment of college poll workers. You can reach Ms. Bohr at: Service Learning Administrator, Northampton Community College, 3835 Green Pond Rd., Bethlehem, PA 18020. **Phone:** 610-861-5061; **Email:** dbohr@northampton.edu