

Lessons Learned from the SAFE Grant Project at Raritan Valley Community College

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Following the sobering events of September 11, 2001, administrators and faculty at Raritan Valley Community College (RVCC) looked for ways to help their community. In fall 2003, the College submitted a proposal to the Community College National Center for Community Engagement (CCNCCE) seeking funds to develop a domestic and emergency preparedness initiative in service learning. In January 2004, we were awarded a \$45,000 three-year renewable grant to participate in the *Supporting Actions for Engagement* (SAFE) grant project being funded by the Corporation for National and Community Service, Learn and Serve America. (Editor's note: a one-year extension grant was awarded to five of the original 3-year SAFE sub-grantees.)

The intent of RVCC's SAFE project is to create opportunities that bring together students, faculty, and community members to study the impacts and problems associated with domestic and emergency preparedness. The project is also intended to develop final products and services that meet community needs in these areas through service learning activities.

Based on experiences from the SAFE project, citizens have demonstrated that they have the capacity for profound civic engagement. Many also have realized that our safety is inextricably connected to the communities of which we are members. The lessons learned provide a guide for those interested in creating a service learning program that focuses on domestic and emergency preparedness. Students, faculty members, administrators and community organization staff can gain insight into the project and the benefits that can be received.

Program Design

The SAFE project commenced in January 2004 with RVCC's Service Learning Program Manager, and the Executive Director of the Somerset County Police Academy serving as project director and coordinator respectively, and providing a strong in-kind contribution to the grant. From the outset, recruiting faculty was essential to the development of the project. Implementation began by identifying a core group of faculty members who would participate as project team leaders, embracing the concept and supporting its long-term development. The faculty members were selected from disciplines that were a good fit with domestic and emergency preparedness matters, and faculty who had previously been involved in service learning. To create a unified vision of the project, planning with project team members began with clear goals and objectives that established ways in which service learning could develop and expand the SAFE initiative.

The primary course outcomes of this project were the involvement of faculty from at least six disciplines each year who were responsible for the following:

- 1) Requiring all students enrolled in their course to perform approximately twenty hours of service learning focused on domestic and emergency preparedness issues for various community organizations.
- 2) Developing model syllabi that demonstrated the importance of understanding these issues and the connection between service learning and good citizenship practices.

As part of the service learning assignment, students enrolled in project courses were required to research various topics related to domestic and emergency preparedness and then to independently develop a product or service from their findings that could be widely disseminated to the community. These projects included, but were not limited to, informational brochures, videotapes, websites, community resource directories, presentations of reports to special groups, and workshops.

Curriculum Development

An important intended outcome was curriculum development to increase the quantity and quality of student learning. Because service learning is compatible with academic and educational outcomes, it is part of the classroom experience at Raritan Valley Community College, and efforts were made to support new faculty initiatives for curriculum development. Through funding from this grant, several small faculty stipends have assisted with incorporating domestic and emergency preparedness thematic issues into academic courses.

Drawing on the interest and expertise of faculty from diverse disciplines was part of an on-going recruitment effort, and developing a critical mass of faculty involvement was part of the SAFE planning process. These efforts have engaged faculty from a great cross-section of disciplines who revised their course syllabi to include projects focused on domestic and emergency preparedness. Following are some examples of course projects:

Trends in Nursing

Students worked in groups of five to research a domestic or emergency preparedness topic related to health care targeted at specific populations such as the elderly, pregnant women, and young children. Students then matched their findings with particular community organizations that needed assistance, and collaborated with organization staff to develop a service project. The final products and services students developed were disseminated to the larger community through workshops, information brochures, fact sheets, and training sessions.

Foundations of Early Childhood Education

Students observed pre-school and kindergarten classes, reviewed literature on the social and emotional needs of young children during a crisis, and interviewed school staff to discuss existing emergency plans and needs of childcare centers. Based on their findings, students developed unit plans for the schools to help children face emergencies. They also shared the plans with staff and parents.

Event Planning and Management

Students organized and hosted the public forum, *Emergency/Disaster Preparedness and Response for Special Events*. The students worked in groups to develop the budget, logo, fund raising, recruitment, invitations, thank you letters, press releases, room set-up, agenda, speakers, door prizes, and clean-up. The event helped planners understand the need for emergency preparedness in large venues. Topics discussed were security issues and disaster and emergency preparedness, human disasters due to terrorism or negligence, natural disasters, and health emergencies.

Community Involvement

Another important goal in the SAFE project's development is its work with the local community, and a major effort has been focused on creating new service learning opportunities, identifying new partnerships, and deepening existing relationships with community organizations. A number of strategies have been used, and one successful technique includes the dissemination of work performed by service learning students from project classes. The achievement of this goal is best illustrated by the many students enrolled in the project class, Trends in Nursing, who have chosen to offer assistance to community organizations and their clients by providing advocacy, research, direct service, and indirect service. Their student-initiated projects are varied and include the following examples. Students worked collaboratively with the American Red Cross to develop pamphlets and brochures in both English and Spanish, explaining what biological weapons are and how they impact the local community. Students created a CHAT program (Communicating Honestly about Terrorism) to increase awareness of the mental health component of terrorism, to empower seniors with information, and to lessen anxiety by talking. The program format encompassed an initial presentation of information followed by a discussion group centered on employing therapeutic communication for the elderly. Students served at local schools to learn what plans were in place for dealing with the threat of biological weapons, and based on their needs assessment, the students created a 24-Hour Medication Record for students.

The partnerships developed through the SAFE service learning projects resulted in notable contributions to many community organizations, and provided students with a vast array of opportunities. For community organizations, the student point of view presented by service learners provided a fresh perspective. Additionally, service learning students shared their professional expertise learned in the classroom, which enabled organizations to be more efficient and effective in serving their constituents. Similarly, the community organizations and clients were given exposure to community college students and gained a new perspective and understanding of their skills and talents. Importantly, many students received encouragement and support from their service site supervisors, as agency directors looked to the students for assistance in meeting their organizational goals.

Building on existing service learning partnerships was another successful strategy for involving community organizations. Because RVCC's Service-Learning Program had

established relationships with community organizations, it provided a basis upon which to develop and strengthen service learning activities with a domestic and emergency preparedness emphasis. College funds have assisted with service learning coordination to do community outreach, explore service ideas, explain the nature and needs of the project, and develop relationships with community agencies.

Additionally, as part of the SAFE grant initiative, the current RVCC Service-Learning Community Advisory Board expanded its membership to include an emphasis on domestic and emergency preparedness issues. The Advisory Board was composed of members from the nonprofit, business and educational sectors as well as RVCC students, faculty, and administrators. The Board offered advice and a perspective on service learning regarding these topics which provided many advantages in the development of the project. Numerous stakeholders with a wide range of backgrounds were represented on the Board, and their advice and assistance provided a varied perspective and improved the utilization of campus and community resources. A diverse and involved Board also enabled further discussions among educational, community, and business leaders, which in turn presented opportunities for additional domestic and emergency preparedness initiatives.

Unique Collaborating Partner

To further expand domestic and emergency preparedness on the campus and in the community, as well as the growing base of campus-community partners within law enforcement, we involved the *Somerset Police Academy*, located on the RVCC campus, as a collaborating partner for this project.

For purposes of the SAFE grant, the Executive Director of the Police Academy (who also served as the project coordinator for the SAFE grant) has integrated domestic and emergency preparedness topics into the Academy's capstone course in a distinctive way. Each fall and spring semester, a number of community organizations that need to address a domestic or emergency preparedness issue are identified. The directors of these organizations are asked to serve as community facilitators for police recruits who are completing their capstone projects. Final projects are demonstrated by written work meeting the minimum standards of a college term paper. The community facilitators represent many organizations that serve numerous populations such as youth, elderly, disabled and animals, to name just a few. Through their capstone projects, the police recruits have provided many services to these organizations from assessing security and safety needs of schools, to creating emergency plans for nursing homes and animal shelters, to teaching businesses how to prepare for and respond to emergencies that could happen in the workplace.

Challenges and Rewards

An initial and valid concern of many students in project classes was their ability to identify ways to help community organizations understand domestic and emergency preparedness issues in view of their perceived lack of knowledge on the topic.

Early in program development, discussions with student participants by project faculty and administrators offered several guidelines that helped students enter a new learning sphere, and addressed their concerns. Identifying appropriate kinds of community service for the learning goals of the course and the organizations to serve with were part of the collaborative effort of project faculty and administrators to assist students. Inviting leaders of several of the community organizations to be guest lecturers in the classroom also helped students gain more knowledge about current issues. Reflective exercises such as writing, group discussions, and class presentations allowed students to explore their interpretations of the classroom theory and service, as well as share with others, which heightened their experiences. Silverman and Wetley (1995) suggest that while the main goal of reflection is to enhance student learning from the service experience, it also offers feedback that both assesses student learning and improves teaching. Through critical reflection, students have the opportunity to connect the theory learned in the classroom to the world outside and to increase their understanding of the course material.

Despite the perceived challenges, the most exciting and rewarding part of the process was watching students employ problem-solving and critical-thinking skills to address the task, learning from the experience, and ultimately creating valuable final service products for the community.

Students have reported that being involved in the SAFE project offered them an opportunity to learn first-hand about the subject matter, and discover their own safety concerns as well as certain areas of community need. Students have looked upon their time spent with their project as a valuable opportunity to carefully examine important issues facing their community and themselves on issues related to domestic and emergency preparedness.

Numerous students noted having a better understanding about the problems faced by the clients of particular community-based organizations, such as the fear of young children or seniors being unprepared physically during an emergency, and how service could help tackle these issues. Equally important, the projects taught students both personal and group responsibility, along with mutual appreciation and application of academic and service work.

Summary

Many lessons were learned through participation in the SAFE project. The project activities required development of civic values and skills that were taught and practiced. The projects have helped students achieve a greater understanding of the course content, and students learned how to make connections between course theory and its practical application in a community setting. The experiences helped to confirm RVCC's commitment to providing a learning environment that reflects its value as a community college and responsiveness to educational and community outreach efforts. Examples of engagement are evident by the many SAFE courses that have been developed by faculty and the inclusion of numerous students and community members involved in the project.

The increasing collaborative efforts between internal departments, external community groups, and the nonprofit sectors are indicative of the project's commitment to enhancing the quality of life for all students and the community.

Looking Beyond

Because community involvement and partnership are important to RVCC, the models developed and lessons learned from this grant will be disseminated to the community-at-large. Many opportunities exist to promote and continue the work of this project. Annually, more than 1,000 service learning students serve in over 250 community organizations through RVCC's Service-Learning Program, which involves more than 65 faculty members who offer service learning in courses from all academic disciplines. Additionally, each year RVCC's Service-Learning Program organizes campus-community programs that include conferences, faculty development workshops, and forum discussions on special topics. These events enable RVCC to serve as a model for other community colleges, as well as schools from the kindergarten-through-high school levels, helping these institutions to develop similar programs and practices.

It is anticipated that because of this project, the service learning curriculum at RVCC will move forward by instilling a high level of understanding and advocacy for service learning and domestic and emergency preparedness initiatives on campus and in the community. Intended outcomes are to: 1) develop model strategies that integrate information and current practices about the topic into many different courses; 2) promote partnerships between schools and the community that will help sustain the effort; and 3) encourage the development of good citizenship practices. The process of involving students, faculty, and community members over the four-year project period helped to establish an important awareness on campus and in the community about domestic and emergency preparedness issues and encouraged greater participation in civic activities.

Service learning offers a way of teaching students how to become active, caring citizens. It validates the positive ways students can contribute to their communities by becoming leaders in solving public problems with community partners. Community involvement through service learning can have profound and positive effects in many ways. Moreover, service learning adds meaning and relevance to a student's education; schools have the opportunity to develop educational programs to promote civic responsibility and raise awareness of domestic and emergency preparedness issues through service learning. Service learning's impact on communities helps create a safer place to live, and it has a vital role to play in empowering students to be part of the solution.

Work Cited:

Silverman, R., and W.M. Wetley. 1995. "Assessment, Cases, and Reflective Practice," in *Assessment Update*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 7(1):7.

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