

Integrating Service-Learning into a College-Level Nutrition Course

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INTRODUCTION

Service-learning (SL) is an instructional method in which students learn and develop through active participation in thoughtfully organized service experiences that meet actual community needs. Experiences are integrated into the academic curriculum by providing structured time for thinking, talking, and/or writing about what they did and saw during the service activity.¹ Many college students participate in service activities. However, the failure to link these activities to course content and give students the chance to reflect on them in a structured setting misses a potentially powerful opportunity not only to maximize academic learning but also to promote personal growth and instill a commitment to lifelong civic engagement.

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

Students in an upper-division life-cycle nutrition course for both majors and nonmajors were allowed to choose an SL experience in place of writing a term paper. Eighteen of the 45 chose to do so, the maximum who could be accommodated in this pilot program. Each student was assigned to 1 of 3 service sites. Discussions between the site coordinators and the instructor, and later with the students themselves, laid the groundwork for the specific team projects that would be completed by the end of the term. Students were required to be at their site for at least 2 hours every week for 10 weeks, in addition to the time spent on project development. The 20 hours of service were not always directly related to nutrition. For example, students at a site for schoolchildren run by the local food bank helped with tutoring, and those at an assisted living facility participated in social activities. These interactions were key to giving students a better understanding of the needs, limitations, and characteristics of their

target population, as well as the workings of the organization itself.

Another critical component was biweekly structured reflection, facilitated by a trained student leader in small groups outside class. The framework for reflection, developed by a group of faculty and students at North Carolina State University, is a series of questions that guide students through a rigorous, systematic process of thinking about their service experiences from a personal and civic, as well as an academic, perspective. For example, students considered how their experiences and/or reactions to them revealed personal strengths and weaknesses, attitudes or biases, and assumptions or expectations of others. Students examined the relationship between the service organization's mission and actual operation and between individual choices and the common good. They asked how the experiences enhanced, challenged, and/or reinforced readings, theories, or concepts from class.

At the end of each reflection session, students wrote a set of articulated learnings in which they described what they learned and how they learned it in each of 3 dimensions: personal, civic, and academic. They then set goals based on what they learned. Students also kept journals that included both an objective listing of their activities during each visit and answers to specific course content-based questions from the instructor.

EVALUATION

A preliminary assessment of the SL component of the course was done at the end of the semester. Students were asked if they would take the same course again with SL and if they would recommend an SL-enhanced course to someone else. On a 5-point scale, with 5 being "strongly agree," the average responses were 4.5 and 4.6, respectively. This level of satisfaction seems particularly significant in light of the additional time commitment associated with the service, reflection, project, and presentation components.

Forty-seven percent cited personal growth as the area in which they experienced the greatest learning, 33% cited civic engagement, and 17% cited academic enhancement. Student re-

sponses to more general questions confirm this, as exemplified by the comment, "I found this experience to be a true eye-opener; not only did I find out about myself but also about the community in which I live."

SL also gave many students their first meaningful experience with diversity and helped to break down stereotypes. As one student said, "The most challenging part of this experience has been the diversity between the children and myself. The majority of my interactions with children have been with those very much like myself." Another noted, "At first I was challenged by the thought that the (assisted living) residents would be sad that they had to be there. But through conversations and interactions with them, I have found that many residents have an extraordinary outlook on life that I admire very much."

Although there was no formal evaluation for this course from the service sites themselves, one site coordinator said, "This project was extremely successful. It multiplied our ability to live out our mission."

FUTURE PLANS

Qualitative and quantitative assessment strategies are being developed for all SL courses on campus. These will include common journal-embedded questions and rubrics for evaluating the responses to them, as well as ways to assess the articulated learnings across disciplines. The reflection leader (RL) training is being developed into a 3-credit hour course, which includes discussions regarding pedagogical principles and program objectives, several service activities, and practice in guiding the reflection sessions using the framework described above. Students can also receive credit for independent study during the semester in which they work as RLs, in part because they are required to attend class and complete all readings. Faculty training is also being enhanced by actual service and reflection experience.

The service component for this particular course will be moved to a separate section. It is hoped that a smaller class size, with all students participating, will allow for more meaningful in-class discussion of service site activities as they relate to course content.

CONCLUSION

SL provides students with the opportunity not only to put the theory learned in the classroom into practice but also to bring the lessons learned from that experience back to the classroom, thus enriching the learning environment for others. In addition, the structured reflection sessions deepened students' understanding of what they know, who they are, how the world around them works, and their place in, and responsibility to, both the

local and the global community. SL activities could also be included in community nutrition, cultural nutrition, and even moderately sized sections of introductory nutrition classes. These could be for more than nutrition or dietetics students as the goals and objectives transcend professional training.

NOTE

For more information on the reflection framework, contact Dr. Patti Clayton, Coordinator, NC State Ser-

vice-Learning Program and Visiting Lecturer, Multidisciplinary Studies, at patti_clayton@ncsu.edu.

REFERENCE

1. The National Campus Compact. What is service-learning? (Adapted from the National and Community Service Trust Act of 1993). Available at: <http://www.compact.org/faqs/s-ldefinitions.html>. Accessed December 2002.

