Strengthening Service-Learning Through Faculty and Student Affairs Partnerships

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The link between experience and learning is a powerful one (Dewey 1938; Kolb 1984; Piaget 1952). The work of these and other educators and theorists demonstrates how the process of learning can be facilitated through intentionally designed learning experiences such as internships and community service. Both forms of experiential learning provide venues for putting thought and theory into action. When an institution of higher education operationalizes its mission of preparing graduates to be contributing members of society, it does so by encouraging the development of campus and community partnerships. The pedagogical tool of service-learning can then be employed to sustain these partnerships. Service-learning is the experience of serving the community and reflecting on the learning that occurs. The result is enhanced student learning, strengthened institutional purpose, and community change. Learning through service provides a venue for faculty and student affairs professionals to work together to teach students to think critically, facilitate change, better understand human differences and commonalities, develop leadership, and become active community participants. Student affairs professionals committed to service-learning serve as valuable advocates, liaisons, facilitators and resources to faculty, students and to the community who wish to link service and learning.

The profession of student affairs supports research findings that learning through experience enriches a college education and better prepares graduates for lives as participatory citizens. The purpose of higher education according to the American College Personnel Association (1994) is to "facilitate and promote student learning and personal development" (p. 1). Student affairs professionals recognize that student learning occurs both inside and outside the classroom, and that this learning must be intentionally constructed. Service-learning provides a pedagogical method for synthesizing learning that occurs both inside and outside the classroom.

Service-learning is a collaborative process. Many partners are needed to create valuable learning experiences that effectively serve the community, the institution, and students. Campuses across the country have successfully connected student affairs staff with faculty in order to enhance the quality of the serving and learning experience. Four key elements in the service-learning process--preparation, action, reflection, and evaluation--offer a framework for exploring these connections.
PREPARATION

Before engaging in a service-learning activity, students, faculty, and participating community agencies or organizations must be prepared for the experience.

Student Preparation

Before approaching an agency, students need to have a clear understanding of: how their service links to the learning objectives of the course; expectations of the assignment in terms of quantity and type of service; deadlines for completing the service; and resources available to assist them in selecting an appropriate service opportunity. Students need to know how they will be evaluated and in what form they will bring their service experience to the classroom: will they share their experiences verbally in class, will they be writing a paper, keeping a journal or developing some kind of presentation or project?

Once the expectations of the service-learning component are clear to the students, the service-learning office on your campus can provide assistance in identifying appropriate sites for service. If the student will be responsible for identifying their own service site, you may want to invite a representative from the department to make a class presentation on available service opportunities, how to identify and select an appropriate agency, the benefits and challenges of engaging in service-learning and information on how they can get started.

Many campus service-learning offices act as clearinghouses for available volunteer opportunities in the area. This clearinghouse may be available through a self-contained computer database, the Internet, a telephone recorded message system, or a notebook or notecard system. Such a system can help faculty or students identify service opportunities that match the interests of the student, address the goals of the course, and serve the community.

Students also need to be prepared for the specific service activity itself. They will want to know what kind of on-the-job training the agency provides, whether they will receive an orientation before engaging in service and what the agency expects of its volunteers.

In addition to on-going service opportunities, service-learning offices may have information on one-time service, opportunities for service during university breaks, international opportunities and summer opportunities, all of which can be linked to academic study.

Other services that may assist students in your class in finding appropriate service-learner opportunities include newsletters that promote current projects for individuals or groups, consultation or advising to groups of students who want to engage in service together, and information on particular community issues.
In addition to the clearinghouse function, many service-learning offices have developed partnerships with specific agencies or communities. For example, the institution might sponsor a tutoring and mentoring program where youth from the local community come to campus once a week for academic support and recreational opportunities aimed at enhancing academic achievement and conflict resolution skills. Or a student group may have developed a partnership with a senior center where service-learners work with the seniors to plan weekly educational activities. Faculty can adopt the partnership and make it an integral part of their curriculum. The faculty member then works with the same agency or community each year and is able to develop a long-term relationship which can build trust between the institution and other parts of the community. This type of partnership provides continuity over time which can provide faculty and the community with a valuable venue for research. Research and assessment conducted with the involvement of faculty, students and members of the community is then used by the community to develop or modify appropriate and desired interventions to address community concerns.

If your college or university does not have a service-learning office, inquire with campus activities to learn about student organizations or campus ministries that might organize service projects that are open to non-members. There may also be a volunteer clearinghouse in your city or town that can assist people in selecting appropriate opportunities.

In addition to logistical information needed for engaging in service, students will have broader, more philosophical and personally challenging questions regarding the service experience. It is likely any stereotypes they have of people they are different from will impact their level of anxiety or enthusiasm for the service activity. Student affairs professionals can assist in facilitating discussion (or "pre-flection") where students express their assumptions, goals, anxieties, fears, and enthusiasm for the service project. Verbalizing these conflicting feelings and ideas may help the student recognize her or his own assumptions and be better prepared to enter into a relationship with community members based on respect. Service-learning staff can also help identify readings that can help prepare students for service. Readings that are particularly helpful include stories of service experiences from the perspectives of all involved including community members and service-learners.

**Faculty Preparation**

Service-learning staff with a background in student development can provide faculty with valuable information regarding some of the developmental issues facing students of various backgrounds, ages, and experiences. Understanding the moral, cognitive, psychosocial, learning styles, and identity development of college students can assist faculty in designing appropriate and meaningful service-learning activities and in assisting students in appropriate service site placement.
Delve, Mintz, and Stewart (1990) provided a model for understanding how students view the service experience. Those with no or little experience working in the community need different challenges and supports than those for whom service has been an integral part of life. For example, some students will be very uncomfortable working one-on-one with an elderly person because they do not have much experience being around people who are elderly, but would feel more comfortable leading a fitness session or providing entertainment with other students. At the same time, a student who has been working directly with elderly people for years may be ready for a new challenge such as being involved as a political advocate for concerns of elderly people, or working with a new population to broaden their understanding of social issues. Group projects often provide a diversity of tasks, thus allowing students to choose roles that are appropriate for them.

Supports must also be in place to ensure quality service is provided and learning occurs. Support may come in the form of adequately training service-learners for their specific roles, making sure staff is available to address any questions or concerns that may arise, and ensuring service-learners understand how their service contributes to the organization as a whole.

Student affairs professionals are skilled at assessing student skills, strengths, discomfort, experience, and fears. This information is valuable in making appropriate service site placements. Too much challenge can cause students to retreat; too much support can make a person stagnant in her or his learning (Sanford, 1967).

Additionally, student affairs staff have information on the current demographic data of students at the institution. This information can be helpful in designing successful service-learning opportunities. For example, on every campus, there are students who commute. Commuter students may prefer to choose an agency in the community where they live to make the service more accessible and more meaningful. Additionally, students who live on campus may need information about public transportation to agency sites, or information on places to volunteer on or near campus. Nationally, 62% of all college students work (American Council of Education, 1990), and approximately half are over 25 and attend classes part time (U.S. Department of Education, 1990). Because financial and time constraints may make it difficult for people to serve, agencies may pay a stipend to regular volunteers or offer reimbursement for transportation costs. Some need volunteers in the evenings and weekends, thus providing more flexibility for students with many time constraints. Students who have children may be interested in volunteering as a family. Some agencies provide opportunities for families to serve together, or offer child care while parents serve. Knowledge of the experiences and life styles of students on a particular campus can assist faculty in designing service-learning opportunities appropriate for that institution.

Student affairs professionals are aware of the racial diversity of the institution and can provide information on agencies that are looking for service-learners of specific racial or ethnic backgrounds. Some agencies are in need of service-learners who speak languages other than
English; can support gay, lesbian or bisexual youth through the coming out process; or are trained in American Sign Language. Service-learning staff will also know what kinds of service opportunities have successfully involved students in the past. This may be helpful information for identifying projects that will relate to students' goals, experiences, needs, skills, and interests.

The service-learning office on your campus may also have sample syllabi from various courses that have integrated service. It is likely that they have learned from the experiences of other faculty and can provide insight into what has been effective or what have been some of the challenges they have encountered. Some service-learning offices coordinate brown bag lunches or forums for bringing together faculty who have integrated service-learning into their courses.

Community Preparation

In addition to preparing faculty and students for the service-learning process, members of the community can also benefit from being prepared to work with students. Information on how college students develop, the realities and demographics of today's college students, and how service is linked to academic courses can help them match students with appropriate tasks.

ACTION

If students, faculty, and the community are adequately prepared for student involvement in service-learning, the action aspect of the process will provide valuable results to all three partners. When student development theory has been used to assist in the appropriate placement of service-learners, effective service and meaningful learning are more likely to occur.

Student affairs professionals are particularly skilled in all aspects of program development, implementation, and evaluation. Their skills can be utilized in planning various aspects of the service activity, such as transportation and educating students on what it means to make a commitment to volunteer at an agency. It is important that service-learners understand how failing to follow through on this commitment will impact the agency and the people that the agency serves.

For the service-learners, the reflection process often begins as the action phase begins. They make mental notes of all that they do, think, observe, feel, question, and experience during the activity. These mental notes provide valuable information as students engage in more formal reflection of their experience after the action phase has been completed.

REFLECTION

Reflection occurs throughout the entire service-learning process. As students prepare for
service they reflect on past experiences as a way to make meaning of what is to come. Throughout the action phase of the process questions will arise and information will be stored mentally for future analysis. After the service experience, intentional opportunities for reflection allow students to process and share their experience with others. It is through this reflection that learning occurs.

An institution's service-learning office can also assist faculty in developing reflection tools such as discussion or journaling questions that guide students through the process of relating their service experience to their own values, stereotypes and perspectives on the world. There are many ways of journaling. Journals can be written in multiple parts, one part includes reflections, thoughts, and questions related to course readings; another asks students to describe their service experience; and a third asks them to link their experience and the readings. A journal dialogue can be created when a classmate or a faculty member reads a student's journal and responds with questions and reflections. The service-learner can then respond to those comments as well.

**EVALUATION**

Many student affairs staff have experience in conducting formal and informal evaluation. They can assist faculty in designing both quantitative and qualitative methods of assessing student, institution and community impact. Additionally, institutions that have graduate preparation programs in higher education administration or college student personnel, may have graduate students who are interested and skilled in this type of assessment project.

Student affairs staff can also serve as valuable resources in evaluating the quality of the service in the community or in obtaining feedback from community agencies, specifically from people for or with whom the service is designed. Quantitative instruments, focus groups, interviews, content analysis of journals and reflection discussions, and attitude and opinion surveys are all methods of gathering information that can be used to improve the service-learning experience for the community, students and the institution. Campus service learning offices also may have information on research that has been conducted to determine how service-learning benefits students, the community and the institution.

**SUMMARY**

Student affairs professionals committed to assisting students in linking service and learning can be valuable resources to faculty and to the community. Their roles as campus-community liaisons and as student development experts can be particularly helpful for faculty integrating service into the curriculum.
References


