

Serving and Learning: Professionalizing Community Engagement in the Liberal Arts

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Abstract

Traditionally, liberal arts curricula were designed to educate the whole person, refining students' abilities to think critically and solve problems across a wide range of disciplines. In the face of criticism that the liberal arts are elitist, archaic, and fail to prepare students for particular careers, many liberal education institutions invested significant resources in the development of more pragmatic or applied curricula, with a particular emphasis on experiential learning through community-engagement efforts. These service learning experiences not only improve the institutions' connections with the local community, but also foster students' abilities to apply their knowledge and abilities to address important social issues in a real world laboratory while also developing their civic engagement. Moreover, project-based service learning allows students to develop portfolios of experiences demonstrating the utility of their liberal arts education to the professional world. As a professor at a liberal arts institution whose mission is to "prepare students for global citizenship and responsible leadership, empowering graduates to pursue meaningful lives and productive careers,"¹ I have taught 15 undergraduate community engagement courses, connecting more than 300 students with 14 local nonprofit organizations over the past five years. This presentation explores the students' and community partners' perspectives to develop a set of best practice principles designed to achieve mutually beneficial, transformative learning experiences for undergraduate students. These best practice principles focus on the achievement of five particular outcomes: (1) the alignment of course learning goals with organizational needs; (2) community partner benefits, and the development of the students' (3) service perspective, (4) civic engagement, and (5) abilities to articulate the value of these experiences in professional terms. This presentation is appropriate for conference participants interested in learning more about the effective development and execution of service learning and community engagement experiences in post-secondary, liberal education.

Keywords: *Community Engagement, Service Learning, Experiential Learning, Liberal Arts.*

1. Introduction

Based on my experience teaching 15 undergraduate community engagement courses, interviews with the 14 community partners, and a survey of the 281 students from those courses, I developed a set of best practice principles designed to achieve mutually beneficial, transformative service learning experiences. These community engagement classes were designed to achieve twenty-first century learning outcomes², develop the students' personal and professional skills, and directly benefit the community. Specifically, these best practice principles focus on: (1) the alignment of course learning goals with the partner's needs; (2) community partner benefits; and the development of the students' (3) service perspective, (4) civic engagement, and (5) abilities to articulate the value of these experiences in professional terms.

2. Serving the community partner

The first, and prerequisite best practice principle requires the instructor to determine how service learning activities that help the community partner achieve its goals may enhance students' achievement of course learning objectives. To make this determination, it is important to consider that students will need to devote at least 20 hours to community engagement activities to provide meaningful service to a community partner and to achieve service learning outcomes. Thus, not every course is appropriate for community engagement collaborations. However, if service learning projects can be incorporated into a course, they should be used as strategic tools requiring students to apply their knowledge and abilities to serve an organization.

Once an instructor determines that service learning activities may add educational value to a course, the primary concern must be ensuring those experiences address the community partner's needs. Therefore, the service learning activities must be intentional in their purpose and design, not simply imposed on the community partner or on the students. This first best practice principle requires the instructor to locate a community partner whose mission and needs are closely related to the



content and purpose of the course. Then, the instructor must discuss the scope and details of the community engagement work with the partner to ensure the project is feasible. In some cases, the extent of the community engagement work may need to be restricted to smaller projects and fewer activities to meet course learning goals. In other cases, the course may be appropriate for the infusion of service learning throughout the curriculum so that it includes student reflections on their expectations and experiences as well as assignments requiring the students to help the community partner achieve its mission.

Closely related to the requirement that community engagement courses should help the partner meet its needs, the second principle specifies that the service learning activities should also directly benefit the organization. This requirement focuses on the guiding principle underlying all the best practices in community engagement: the philosophy of service. That is, service learning activities in a community engagement course should actually serve the partner organization. Although the instructor may use the community engagement partner to apply course content to a real-world situation, they should also ensure the outcome will benefit the partner. This principle requires the instructor and community partner to make decisions about the purposes and goals of the collaboration, specifying a set of mutually beneficial and measurable outcomes. For example, when my first-year college students prepared the autistic high school students for the state civics competition, the community partner and I agreed that the overarching goal was for my students to serve as near-peers, modeling appropriate social and communication behavior while developing the autistic students' confidence in their ability to articulate correct answers during our bi-weekly competition rehearsals. Alternately, when my public relations students developed and executed promotional campaigns for Kids Beating Cancer, the goals were to increase awareness of pediatric cancer issues and the partner organization while also raising funds for the local pediatric cancer transplant center. The objectives used to measure achievement of these goals included: a 30% increase in the frequency and cogency of the autistic students' correct responses, and engaging 3,000 people in conversations about pediatric cancer while also raising \$2,000 for Kids Beating Cancer's transplant center, respectively.

3. Serving the students

The final three best practice principles focus on the development of the students' service perspective, civic engagement, and abilities to articulate the professional value of their experiences. To achieve these outcomes, the students must first understand that their service learning projects are designed to serve, not fix or help, the community partner. This distinction is clarified in readings and class discussions based on the work of Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen³. Dr. Remen argues that fixing requires a judgment that something is broken and that helping is based on inequality. Further, she suggests that fixing and helping are the work of the ego, and that: "Fixing and helping create a distance between people, but we cannot serve at a distance. We can only serve that to which we are profoundly connected." ³ Further, she contends that fixing and helping create a sense of debt or obligation in the recipient, and they are draining, depleting activities. Serving, on the other hand, is based on a relationship among equals, requiring each party to engage in a mutually beneficial experience of mystery and surrender that instills gratitude and energy in both parties. More specifically, this principle requires that service learning projects are not approached from a perspective of power or privilege, where we impose our fixing or helping behaviors on a partner, which may leave them more damaged than before the collaboration. Instead, the community engagement activities should stem from our sincere desire to serve a cause greater than ourselves. For example, I work to ensure my students do not view their service learning projects as attempts to fix autistic children or to help children battling cancer. Rather, we examine the nature of our privileges or unearned advantages in depth, striving to put our egos and preconceived notions aside so that we can use these experiences to learn and grow, to understand that we are all connected, and to appreciate that all life is sacred.

In addition to instilling the students with a service perspective, the community engagement courses should also develop their civic engagement. This best practice principle requires the students to develop their civic identity and commitment, and their appreciation for diversity⁴. To achieve these goals, the students' growth in civic engagement should be assessed in discussions and assignments throughout the course as well as a survey at the end of the course. For example, civic identity and commitment may be measured by evaluating the students' perceptions of their roles in their communities, requiring them to articulate what they learned about themselves through their collaborations with a community partner and their commitment to continued civic engagement. To enhance the students' commitment to future community engagement, the instructor should allow the



students to take ownership of the service learning projects while also making them rewarding and enjoyable. Further, this principle requires the students to reflect on their own attitudes and beliefs, their expectations and experiences with the community partners, and their appreciation for the diversity of communities and cultures. For instance, before my students began their collaboration with their autistic partners, they discussed their pre-existing knowledge of and experiences with individuals on the autism spectrum. During the course, my students also reflected on the ways in which their experiences influenced their beliefs and attitudes, and what they learned about themselves in the process. Moreover, the concept of privilege should be addressed throughout the course, developing the students' appreciation for their unearned advantages and exploring what they learned from people who are different from themselves or undergoing experiences that they have not had to endure.

The final best practice principle requires the community engagement course to provide the students with experiences that develop their professional skills and marketability. In order to achieve these goals, community engagement courses should include service learning activities that help students understand their strengths and weaknesses, and help them make decisions about their college studies, potential careers, and other professional goals. To do so, it is important to consider that employers in today's increasingly automated society primarily seek applicants who can analyze and solve problems, work collaboratively, communicate effectively, and adapt to new situations with ease. Indeed, many employers are seeking these abilities even more than technical skills that can be learned on-the-job. Moreover, the community engagement course should include service learning projects that the students may use as portfolio pieces or discussion topics for their cover letters and job interviews. For example, my community engagement students must articulate narratives about their service learning experiences as though they were talking to a potential employer. In doing so, some students may explain how they worked as a team to prepare autistic secondary students for the state civics competition at which they won first place. Alternately, the public relations students may describe their work to collaboratively develop and execute a promotional campaign that engaged more than 3000 people in conversations about pediatric cancer while also raising \$2000 to provide support services for these children and their families. Regardless of their specific community engagement and service learning projects, however, the students need to practice explaining how their experiences developed their critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creative problem-solving skills to potential employers.

Overall, these five best practice principles foster students' abilities to connect their learning to service learning experiences; develop their service perspective, civic identity and engagement; and enhance their appreciation for diverse communities and culture. Moreover, these best practices ensure that the service learning projects in a community engagement course will also help the community partner achieve its mission by providing direct and measurable benefits meeting its needs. Finally, these community engagement courses also provide the students with experiences that may serve as narratives explaining the professional value of their liberal arts education to potential employers.

References

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