

# ED405913 1997-02-00 Civic Literacy, Service Learning, and Community Renewal. ERIC Digest.

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## Civic Literacy, Service Learning, and Community Renewal. ERIC Digest.

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Coping with escalating costs, responding to greater diversity among students, and

keeping pace with changing technology are all high priorities for today's educators. In the midst of these demands, however, colleges are striving to reconnect with the communities they serve. At a time of widespread public cynicism about social institutions, America's community colleges can function as catalysts for community renewal, at the same time reasserting the relevance and value of postsecondary education in preparing students for productive citizenship.

Nearly 10 years ago, the Commission on the Future of the Community College called for a new commitment to community-building, and urged further development of service learning curricula. This Digest reviews some of the empirical models of civic renewal and experiential curricula in use at community colleges around the country.

Lynn Barnett cites a surge in service learning programs at community colleges, as evidenced in a national survey reported in the "Community College Times" in 1995. Service learning is classroom based, but involves an experiential component, usually volunteer work, that ties in with the in-class curriculum. About a third of the colleges surveyed had formalized service learning in their course work; nearly half provided an office or campus center to coordinate and communicate community service opportunities to students. Only a handful of the colleges specified a service requirement for graduation; nonetheless there is growing recognition, according to Barnett, of the natural fit between service learning and the mission of community colleges as teaching and community-serving institutions.

## FIRST STEPS

Faculty support is key to the successful implementation of service learning programs. If students are to accept an institutional commitment to civic engagement, they must see that commitment reflected in the faculty (O'Hara). College faculty can demonstrate the ideas behind good citizenship by:

1. Balancing course materials to reflect the seemingly conflicting values of individual rights and community responsibility.
2. Being prepared to confront the ethical issues raised.
3. Incorporating more opportunities for experiential learning into their course work.

Similarly, community college trustees and administrators can model good citizenship by:

1. Acting as the conveners for partnerships involving education, business, and the community.
2. Sharing and publicizing "best practices" in community service.
3. Using faculty and staff performance evaluations to recognize and reward community

involvement (Mathias).

For civic literacy and service learning programs to thrive, however, they must inspire the authentic enthusiasm of students. How do educators help develop in their students the lifelong habit of community involvement? Fundamental to the task is stimulating a discussion about civic responsibility and the nature of democracy (McCarty; Mathias). The study of philosophy, according to McCarty, provides a foundation for social action, and is therefore intimately connected to the notion of service. Drawing from such authors as Sophocles, Plato, Machiavelli, and Locke, students prepare to make the leap from theoretical texts to exploration of real-world dilemmas in a course on "Society and the Individual" at Anne Arundel Community College in Maryland (Mathias). Similarly, in an applied leadership theory class at Miami-Dade Community College (M-DCC), students use writing assignments to reflect on ways to reconcile individual and collective goals in a democratic society (Exley).

## REAL-WORLD EXPERIENCES

Moving students from theory to reality via service learning is the logical next step. McCarty points to several successful outreach efforts involving community college students at Piedmont Virginia Community College: helping local high school art students prepare a summer exhibit at the PVCC gallery; offering advanced accounting students as tax consultants for members of the community; creating a nature trail on campus as part of a biology class project; having philosophy students introduce the concept of critical thinking to local third-graders through a series of summer workshops. Miami-Dade Community College is a forerunner in the development of experiential learning through community service. Service learning, according to M-DCC, must first be defined by a sound partnership between the college and a community agency. The service learning curricula is designed to respond to an important need in the community. It must include an academic component, usually faculty-led reflections connecting students' volunteer experience to other course requirements (Exley). The Partners in Action and Learning project at M-DCC, implemented in 1993, began with workshops that introduced faculty to service learning, and the establishment of two pilot centers within this large, five-campus community college. Faculty minigrants were used to fund the initial outreach efforts, involving more than 800 students at 145 agencies throughout Dade County; academic credit was awarded on the basis of demonstrated learning. Student satisfaction surveys indicated that service learning experiences helped students connect their effort to a broader concern with social problems.

Understanding the workplace within that broader context is increasingly important to employers, who are seeking a new level of civic literacy in their employees. At the very least, it must encompass skills in handling complex interrelationships among diverse groups and in working toward collective goals in a fast-paced, changing world. Students being prepared to enter the workforce must also be encouraged to embrace the values and ethics that form the foundation of good citizenship (Lisman).

## A MODEL FOR ACTION

"Community-based programming" models help leaders address the most critical issues facing a community. The model is characterized by cooperation and collaboration, and a careful environmental scan to identify the external factors that contribute to the most critical problems in a particular service area. The scan would look at the root causes, for example, of rising adult illiteracy or a persistently low-wage economy. (Gillett-Karam). Community colleges can then serve as pivotal leaders in solving problems and restoring civic health, but a fundamental shift in orientation may be required.

From 1986-96 Hagerstown Junior College (HJC) in Maryland sought to make that shift, moving from a "passive, reactive institution to a proactive agent for community renewal" (Ottenritter and Parsons, p 62). Community leaders, other educators, citizen stakeholders, politicians, and public service agency staff were invited to devise an "action plan" for this transformation of HJC. One of the first steps was to appoint a leadership council of people from the college's service area who collaborate to provide direction for the institution. One clear goal that emerged as HJC began reassessing its mission was the need to prepare students for professional lives of challenge and change. Discussions of ethics and principles of good leadership have been incorporated in a variety of classrooms at HJC, and a new leadership development course emphasizing civic responsibility has been initiated. In addition, the college has infused a service learning approach throughout the curriculum; a service learning advisory board provides in-service training for faculty and helps evaluate the impact of service learning programs on students (Ottenritter and Parsons).

## CONCLUSION

Since their inception, two-year colleges have helped meet the needs and solve the problems of the local community. As our communities have diversified, the role of the community college has expanded and become more complex. Advocates of a service focus of community college education must be prepared to face the skeptics who ask how that focus can be retained despite broadening of mission. They must be creative, for example, in finding ways to bring the values of service learning and civic literacy into courses emphasizing job training and vocational skills. Through new curricular models, reassessments of their mission, and models of community-based programming, however, educators are continuing to place "democracy's colleges" at the heart of efforts for community renewal.

## REFERENCES

This Digest is drawn from "New Directions for Community Colleges," Number 93, edited by Michael H. Parsons and C. David Lisman, published in Spring 1996: "Promoting Community Renewal Through Civic Literacy and Service Learning." The cited articles include: "Service Learning: Why Community Colleges?" by Lynn Barnett; "Commitment to Community: Service Learning at Miami-Dade Community College," by Robert J.

Exley; "Community College-Community Relationships and Civic Accountability," by Rosemary Gillett-Karam; "The Engaged Campus," by C. David Lisman; "Love Yourself Enough," by Marietta McCarty; "Incorporating Civic Literacy into Technician Education: Why? How?" by Elizabeth A. Mathias; "Understanding Faculty Needs: An Institutional Imperative," by Leonard F. O'Hara; and "In Good Company: A Ten-Year Odyssey in Pursuit of Civic Purpose," by Nan Ottenritter and Michael H. Parsons. The ERIC Clearinghouse operates under OERI Contract No. RR93002003. The opinions expressed in this Digest do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of OERI and no official endorsement by OERI should be inferred.

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