

Student Affairs and Service Learning: Promoting Student Engagement

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Why should service learning be placed within student affairs? What special skills can student affairs professionals bring to service-learning program implementation? How can administrators use this program to promote strong student affairs-academic affairs collaboration? This article discusses a "best practices" model that is working well at a regional public institution.

In a recent national conference presentation, Knott (2005) traced the evolution of student affairs through several discrete stages. These stages are (a) a responsibility for and a preoccupation with student discipline; (b) a focus on student services; (c) an emphasis on rising above the routine provision of services to address student development; and (d) a new appreciation of the importance of learning and engagement. Knott's final stage sets the foundation for much of the student affairs practice and research that has emerged in the area of student learning and, more specifically, service learning. *Learning Reconsidered: A Campus-Wide Focus on the Student Experience* (American College Personnel Association/National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 2004) and *Greater Expectations* (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2002), two recent publications of national significance, affirm the importance of connecting the co-curriculum and the curriculum to help achieve the so-called "seamless" learning environment. In the purpose statement for *Learning Reconsidered*, the authors state that it is "an argument for the integrated use of all of higher education's resources in the education and preparation of the whole student" (ACPA/NASPA, 2004, p. 3). Service learning is a strong mechanism useful in this important integration.

Service Learning Defined

Most definitions of service learning refer to it as an educational experience or a teaching method that links community service to credit-bearing course content (Brindle & Hatcher, 1995; Eyer & Giles, 1999; Jacoby, 1996). Further, definitions emphasize the importance of structured reflection as the primary means to ensure student learning. According to Bowen (2005), service learning is a special form of experiential education that intertwines community service with classroom instruction, simultaneously engaging students in academic study and reflection. It has two complementary goals of service to the community and student learning.

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He further indicated that through service learning, students enhance their intellectual, social, and ethical development as they pursue academic excellence, accept civic responsibility, and develop skills in leadership, moral decision making, and critical thinking.

Service learning is congruent with the goals and foundations of student affairs and, as a functional area, can provide extraordinary opportunities for professionals to help influence students' lives. What makes it unique is its capacity not only to contribute to student development along a variety of learning outcome dimensions but also to encourage active student engagement in academic life through the curriculum-community service continuum.

There are a number of basic assumptions about student learning that student affairs professionals return to consistently. Each of these assumptions links in some meaningful way to service learning.

1. Learning consists of both cognitive and affective components. Both psychosocial and cognitive-structural theories of student development can be specifically related to service learning. Several of Chickering and Reisser's (1993) vectors of development, which are purported to contribute to the development of student identity, are directly applicable. Developing competence, developing purpose, and developing integrity are especially salient and useful in describing some of the student affairs learning outcomes associated with service learning.

Baxter Magolda's (2001) theory of epistemological reflection provided another context. Embedded in the four phases in the journey toward "self-authorship" that she identifies are some critical questions: How do I know? Who am I? And what relationships do I want to construct with others? Ignelzi (2000, p. 8) described self-authorship almost as a form of empowerment in which individuals "internalize multiple points of view, reflect on them, and construct them into one's own theory about oneself and one's experience." Through active learning and reflection, service learning can support the "meaning making" that is central to the concepts explained by Baxter Magolda (2001) and Ignelzi (2000).

2. Students bring to higher education institutions a variety of learning styles, instructional delivery preferences, and social-emotional needs. Further, students learn best when a variety of individual and group learning experiences are available to them.

Recent research by Terenzini and Pascarella (2005) affirmed what student affairs educators have championed for a long time, namely that active, experiential learning can lead to a variety of positive student outcomes, both psychosocial and cognitive. In discussing within-college effects of the academic experience, they stated, "The most effective service-learning approaches appear to be those that integrate service experiences with course content and provide for reflection about the service experience through discussion or writing" (p. 611). Given the range of learning styles that students bring to college and university campuses, service

learning adds to the array of pedagogical experiences that can accommodate those styles. Opportunities for individual and group reflection about service learning, peer education on service-learning themes, and even direct involvement in planning service-learning events on campus are a few examples of the range of possible individual and group learning experiences for students.

3. The worth, dignity, and uniqueness of each student should be respected and supported within the learning environment, which includes on-campus housing for many students. Faculty members, student affairs professionals, and, specifically, service learning directors, have the opportunity to match the unique skills and interests of students with the explicit needs of various community organizations and agencies. Through challenging and supporting students, these individuals can reinforce in them the dignity of leadership associated with service to others.

4. Learning is a lifelong process, and student affairs professionals must help students cultivate “skills for living”. Service learning activities have great potential to affect students as they move into their careers after graduation. Among the key questions that service learning prompts are these: Will service-learning experience in college contribute to a thirst for similar community service experiences as students become citizens within their new communities? Will alumni in a position to incorporate students into community service roles within their organizations encourage them to make direct connections to their academic program?

To address these questions, the important work of Delve, Mintz, and Stewart (1990) on values development through community service has relevance. The authors stated “Through college- and university-supported service-learning opportunities, students will develop a better understanding of and care for their fellow human beings and thereby become more accepting of our global interdependency” (p. 27). Clearly, moral and ethical values developed and reinforced through service learning during the college years have the potential to affect individual behavior throughout the life cycle.

The Social Change Model of Leadership Development (Astin & Astin, 1996) is another framework that, when used as a foundation for service learning activities, can inspire students to develop a passion for change and civic involvement. The “seven C’s,” representing the values that drive this process model, are consciousness of self, congruence, commitment, collaboration, common purpose, controversy with civility, and citizenship. Rooted in the notion that leadership functions can and should be shared by many rather than vested solely in a designated leader, the Social Change Model underscores the positive impact that change agents who connect meaningfully with their communities can successfully make. Student change agents may create collaborative processes and promote partnerships to help build community capacity to overcome educational, economic, social, and environmental challenges.

Service Learning at Western Carolina University

The Service Learning Department at Western Carolina University (WCU) operates as the institution's community service and service-learning clearinghouse. Its mission is to promote service learning as a special form of experiential education that engages students in organized activities designed to enhance their intellectual, social, and personal development and, at the same time, meet community needs. The department emphasizes the importance of infusing civic values into academic programs at WCU, resulting in increased intellectual rigor and heightened community awareness. One of 15 units of the Division of Student Affairs, the Service Learning Department organizes and manages a comprehensive program in collaboration with faculty, administrators, staff, students, and community partners to encourage academic excellence and, at the same time, foster civic responsibility and the scholarship of engagement.

Collaborating with approximately 90 nonprofit agencies and community-based organizations in western North Carolina, the department is a comprehensive source for matching volunteer resources with community needs. Volunteer opportunities range from one-time service projects to long-term commitments, and placements are usually based on the specific interests of prospective volunteers. Students participate in service projects at a variety of sites such as child care centers, church halls, community centers, emergency shelters, family support service centers, food banks, hospitals and health centers, human service offices, nursing homes, parks and recreation centers, schools, soup kitchens, thrift shops, and city halls. To assist students, the Service Learning Department produces several publications including a quarterly newsletter, faculty resource manual, brochures and fact sheets. The following section provides an overview of the program at Western Carolina University.

Service Learning in the Curriculum

The Service Learning Department encourages, recruits, and assists faculty members in revising syllabi, developing projects and integrating service learning into their courses. The department provides teaching and research support to faculty through workshops, consultation, and library resources. Faculty members also attend an annual symposium, hosted by Western Carolina University, which attracts service-learning practitioners from higher education institutions throughout the southeast. At WCU, faculty members typically take one of four approaches to service learning:

1. **Required Service Learning:** Each student in the class is required to engage in the service-learning activity. The activity may be weekly throughout the semester, typically at a non-profit agency in the community, or an immersion experience, once or twice during the semester. The immersion approach requires that students spend a day or two in a community activity (e.g., building a Habitat for Humanity house, helping an agency to renovate its office, or organizing a fund-raising activity for a community-based organization).

2. **Optional Service Learning:** Students have the option of engaging in the service activities or completing an alternate requirement such as writing a paper about service. Students choosing the alternative requirement are expected to participate in ongoing reflection with those choosing service.
3. **Problem-Based Service Learning:** Students work with community partners on a particular problem or need of the agency. They may make visits to the site but do not have a regular weekly schedule as in required service learning (e.g., students design databases or create an Internet site for a social service agency).
4. **Community-Based Research:** Students and faculty collaborate with community members on research projects designed to address a pressing community problem or create social change. They may undertake a study to evaluate the effectiveness of an agency as reflected in a survey or through feedback from agency clients. The results are used to make changes in agency programs.

At WCU, a growing number of courses include a service-learning component. The Physical Therapy Department, for example, has incorporated service learning into its curriculum. The department head emphasizes, "Service learning just works! Students have the opportunity to apply knowledge and skills gained in the classroom, the community benefits in tangible ways, and meaningful partnerships are formed that enrich all involved" (WCU Service Learning Department, 2005). Other disciplines that currently employ a service-learning methodology include anthropology, biology, business administration, communication, computer science, human services, modern foreign languages, natural resource management, nursing, parks and recreation management, philosophy, psychology, social work, sociology, political science, and teacher education. A sociology student noted that the service-learning experience "has given me an up-close perspective on how resources reach and target individuals. It has also urged me to analyze our own surrounding communities and the effect that poverty has on our lives" (WCU Service Learning Department, 2005). A sample of courses in which service learning is fully integrated is seen in Table 1.

Reflection, Assessment, and Evaluation

Reflection is what distinguishes service learning from volunteerism and makes it more than community service. Therefore, reflection is a critical component of every course in which service learning is incorporated. Effective reflection fosters values development, citizenship, and vocation. Reflection questions focus on the application of knowledge and allow students to examine attitudes toward community concerns, underserved populations, and issues of social justice and active citizenship.

Table 1

A Sampling of WCU Courses with a Service-Learning Component

Course	Purpose	Components
ENGL 102.4S – Composition II	To further develop students' college writing and improve their communication skills. This course focuses specifically on research and argumentation in order to prepare students for reading and research in upper-level courses.	Each student performs a minimum of five hours of service to the Jackson County Public Library during the semester. In the process, students familiarize themselves with library systems and help the County Library serve the community better.
PA 493 – Special Topics: Civic Engagement (Service Learning Course)	Many commentators believe that civic engagement is in decline in America. Is this true? Are Americans truly less engaged than they have been in the past? What about our corner of the world? What is the state of civic engagement at WCU? What can be done to increase civic engagement? In this course students tackle these questions and a few more.	The course (taught for the first time in Spring 2005) is divided into three sections. In the first third of the course, students discuss the scholarly literature on civic engagement. In the second third, they determine the level of civic engagement on campus or in a local community, using the tools of social science. In the final portion of the course, they apply their knowledge of the subject to propose ways to increase civic engagement on the campus or in the community.
PRM 433 – Outdoor Recreation	This Parks and Recreation Management (PRM) course provides an overview of professional aspects of outdoor recreation, including classification systems, policies of management agencies, and the perspectives of individuals, nonprofit groups, and commercial organizations.	Community-based research on outdoor recreation facilities, services, and management.

The reflection process engages individual learners and addresses interactions with peers, community members, and staff of community agencies. Furthermore, at WCU, the process adheres to the "four Cs" (Eyler, Giles, & Schmiede, 1996); of continuous, connected to course content, challenging, and contextualized. In this regard, reflection is an ongoing part of the student's service involvement and connects real-life experiences with classroom instruction. Also, reflection challenges prevailing assumptions and perceptions, provoking critical thought as students are exposed to a deeper level of problem solving, which provides more realistic and effective solutions. A contextualized experience creates a linkage between thinking about course content and actually applying it.

Reflection contributes to assessment and evaluation. Students' comments and responses to questions can provide evidence of the impact or effectiveness of the service-learning experience and pinpoint program areas that need to be improved. In addition to students, faculty and community partners play an important role in program evaluation. Following the completion of specific projects or at the end of a semester, they submit evaluations using prescribed forms. Surveys of students, for example, address issues involving social institutions, interpersonal and group dynamics, human development and behavior, and cultural diversity. Such surveys generate data on learning outcomes that are linked to students' cognitive and affective development and indicate the extent to which students recognize behaviors and define choices that may affect their lifelong well-being. Data gathered through the evaluation process are used also to determine the overall effectiveness of the service-learning program.

Faculty Fellowships

A Service Learning Faculty Fellows Program was established in 2004. The purpose of the program is to develop a cadre of scholars who will assist in integrating the philosophy, pedagogy, and process of service learning into the academic program at Western Carolina University. Faculty Fellows assist the Service Learning Department in providing resources and support to their faculty colleagues as they make service learning an integral part of their teaching, research, and professional service. They (a) assist faculty in designing or revising courses and syllabi to include service learning as a component, and (b) make a conference presentation or write a journal or newspaper article on a service learning-related topic.

Scholarship Program

Scholarship support is essential to the development of an outstanding network of student peers who understand the value of service learning and are interested in promoting activities among other students. At WCU, the Jacob Medford scholarship program is an endowed scholarship of \$126,000, which generates approximately five \$1,000 scholarships each year to deserving students who have demonstrated a commitment to community service and academic achievement. Scholarship recipients are required to serve as peer educators in the service-learning program, making presentations and engaging students in discussions about

community service and civic responsibility. In particular, they assist with orientation and reflection sessions at class meetings and in student organizations.

Department Administration

The Director of Service Learning is responsible for the day-to-day administration of the program, including establishing and maintaining relationships with community partners, working closely with faculty in syllabus development, coordinating community service assignments, and producing publications in support of the program. An Advisory Committee plays a supporting role in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of policies, procedures, and the overall service-learning program.

Computerized Databank, Listserv, and Chat Room

The department maintains a computerized databank, which was created through student-faculty collaboration as part of a Computer Information Systems course project. The databank contains a comprehensive list, descriptions, and contact information for community agencies to which students may be referred or assigned. In addition, a Listserv has been created for the benefit of all service-learning stakeholders on campus and in the wider community.

Connections with Judicial Affairs

Community service is sometimes mandated as part of the resolution of student judicial cases. The Student Judicial Affairs Director stresses the importance of community service when imposing sanctions, and the Service Learning Department coordinates community service placements for students under judicial mandates. Students are assigned to campus and community sites where they do a variety of work projects. Students often regard community service as a positive learning experience. As Rue (1996, p. 264) reported, "Anecdotal evidence of students who continue to engage in service learning after completing their sanction and go on to become campus leaders of service projects attests to the potential impact of judicially mandated service."

Kohlberg (1969) believed that moral development can be promoted through formal education and that most moral development occurs through social interaction. He stated that "there are universal structures of the social environment which are basic to moral development. All societies have many of the same basic institutions, institutions of family, economy, social stratification, law, and government" (p. 397). Kohlberg added that "the more the social stimulation, the faster the rate of moral development" (p. 402). If today's college graduates are to be positive forces in the world, they need not only possess knowledge but also see themselves as members of a community, with a responsibility to contribute to their communities (Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont, & Stephens, 2003). Students need to have a diverse set of experiences within various communities. Moral and civic education can be effective once values have been defined.

Living Learning Community

Civic Place is a recent collaboration between the Service Learning Department and the Department of Residential Living. It is a living learning community of students committed to making a difference through sustained community service/volunteer activities and civic engagement. The yearlong program includes seminars, workshops, discussions with civic and political leaders, experiential exercises, academic support, a film series, community service projects, alternative break trips and participation in the annual community service-learning fair. The Social Change Model of Leadership Development (Astin & Astin, 1996) provides a framework for the Civic Place program.

Impact of Service Learning on the Future of Student Affairs

Why should service learning be placed in a student affairs division? We believe that successful student affairs professionals are those who are not only skilled in their specialty areas but also willing to become generalists. As generalists, they are resourceful, flexible, amenable to cross-training, comfortable with boundary crossing into the faculty domain, and able to move with the strategic demands of the institution. These qualities make student affairs professionals unique and capable of combining the sometimes disparate elements necessary to the success of a service learning-program. It must be a program with a philosophy of outreach, synergy between faculty and administrators, understanding of student leadership development, and opportunities for reflection, to name a few.

Service-learning programs have the potential to influence the future of the student affairs profession in several ways:

1. Service-learning programs can position student affairs professionals as educators who promote active student involvement in academic life. Service-learning programs should join the list of student academic experiences, including internships, cooperative education, collaborative research with faculty, academic honoraries, and honors programs. While student affairs administrators have historically encouraged and supported volunteer service programs, such initiatives have typically been disconnected from the curriculum, and, thus, not central to the student academic experience. By connecting community service and curriculum, student affairs administrators can become intimately involved in the learning process.
2. Service-learning programs can help elevate to a new level the visibility and credibility of learning communities, theme housing, and first-year experience courses. The development and refinement of learning communities is one of the most significant student affairs-academic affairs collaborations over the past twenty years. Formats are varied and include residential learning communities combining coursework and living arrangements, courses in common, and affinity housing around specific themes such as academic, social, spiritual, and service.

3. Service learning can help student affairs professionals affect pedagogy significantly in the future. Service learning is a teaching methodology, and student affairs administrators can have a profound impact on this methodology through assisting with curriculum development, delineating various forms of reflection as part of student learning as previously described, and encouraging the formal recognition of teaching excellence reflected through the use of service learning.

4. Service learning can be a platform for continuing student affairs collaboration with academic affairs and integration of the curriculum and co-curriculum. Although such collaboration is not new, service learning is an example that is clear and substantive. Involving deans and department heads as participants on service-learning advisory committees, identification of service-learning opportunities in the community, and promoting academic program enhancement through faculty analysis of theory-to-practice-to-theory applications are some of the ways in which service-learning programs can promote continuing cooperation within academia.

5. Service learning can provide another creative vehicle for the promotion of diversity. Exposing students to the needs and clientele of various community agencies can help students understand and appreciate differences of socioeconomic, racial, and ethnicity. Community service involvement and attendance at campus multicultural programs can be a powerful combination to raise student awareness of diversity issues.

Finally, service learning lends itself to many research opportunities that can help student affairs administrators shape the future of the profession.

Student affairs and service-learning professionals can take the lead in addressing such inquiries as the following: How does student involvement in service learning affect the learning outcomes that an institution hopes to instill in its students? To what extent do students actively engaged in service-learning activities at the college or university level continue their involvement as citizens and employees after they graduate? What changes in pedagogy occur as the result of a service-learning program on a college campus? How does the presence of and participation in service learning affect the tenure, promotion, and reappointment process?

Answers to such inquiries may also help strengthen administrators' institutions as they prepare for accreditation. In the specific case of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools' (SACS) Quality Enhancement Plan requirement, reviewers direct some attention toward institutional activities that support the professional endeavors of students. These activities include efforts to prepare students for post-baccalaureate experiences and prestigious scholarships as well as to place them in professions as they build from engagement and service opportunities. Service learning has the potential to propel the student affairs profession further into the mainstream of institutional thinking and behavior through its impact on the three institutional pillars of teaching, research, and service.

Applications for Practitioners

Based on our experiences in conceptualizing and implementing a service-learning program housed within student affairs at a regional comprehensive university, we conclude with several suggestions for student affairs professionals who may be interested in developing a similar program.

1. Tie the program to the institutional mission, especially to its statements on and commitments to engagement, experiential learning, active involvement in the community, and regional economic development. These areas represent natural fits for such a program and could make it easier for securing institutional funding as the program develops.
2. Start small. If the program begins with a part-time coordinator and a limited budget, let that be the basis for starting the program and creating the foundation for growth .
3. Engage faculty in developing the program. Determine whether it is possible to secure a faculty fellow from a key academic college or division who can work with the Service Learning Department for a few hours each week. Work with the provost, chancellor/president, or vice president for academic affairs to encourage support of a pilot program. Be ready to demonstrate results once the pilot is completed.
4. Do not overlook community assets. Accept the implications of true collaboration and work closely with community-based organizations and social service agencies to plan and shape the service-learning program. Community representatives should be engaged in regular discussions with campus-based service-learning stakeholders and should participate in student learning assessment and program evaluation.
5. Assist community organizations in developing assessment measures to address student satisfaction, student learning, and overall program performance.
6. Establish a broad-based advisory committee to help the director or coordinator shape the service-learning program. Be sure to include faculty, student affairs administrators, community representatives, and students.
7. Seek scholarship support as a way to develop a distinguished peer group of students who will not only market the program but also be involved in specific service-learning initiatives. This effort can have a positive impact on program visibility and interest among other students.
8. Consider a residential component for the program. Service learning can form the basis for an outstanding learning community or theme house. Consider, too, whether your Service Learning Department should be administratively located in the residential setting. Work closely with your Residential Life Department.

9. Develop resources. Build a library of print and other resources for your students, faculty, and community partners.
10. Seek membership in a national service-learning organization such as Campus Compact. Networking with local and regional organizations can also be beneficial.

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