The Case for Service-Learning: Overcoming the Obstacles

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The ultimate goal in educating students is to produce competent new professionals. A well-planned service-learning project with the appropriate community partner allows students to become more engaged in the process of learning as they meet course objectives and gain a greater sense of self-efficacy upon completion of the project. With a successful experience, students are more prepared to be a competent member of their future profession. The purpose of this article is to define successful service-learning and address solutions to the perceived obstacles for implementing successful experiences at colleges and universities.

The National Service-Learning Clearinghouse (2013, p. 1) defines service-learning as a "teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities." Service-learning projects have been implemented across many disciplines at a variety of colleges and universities. A number of studies have demonstrated that service-learning, as part of a course curriculum, has contributed to academic, civic, and personal development of students (Chupp & Joseph, 2010; Keen & Hall, 2009; McClam, Diambra, Burton, Fuss, & Fudge, 2008).

Unlike extracurricular service projects, service-learning incorporates community service into

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academic assignments to meet course objectives (Ash, Clayton, & Atkinson, 2003; Fontenot & O'Neill, 2005; Roofe, 2012). According to Schaber (2010), students must engage in preplanning, assessing the needs of the target population, setting goals and objectives, creating a management plan, carrying out the project, evaluating the outcome, and sharing the results. Students then reflect on their experiences as they relate to the academic objectives through journaling, peer discussions, faculty-guided discussions, and formative and summative evaluations and presentations. Students receive a grade based on the quality of their performance on assignments and the degree to which course objectives are met (Schaber, 2010). In general, students report an increased sense of competence, self-efficacy, and achievement of job skills required for their future professions. These skills include but are not limited to nutrition education and counseling (Ash et al., 2003; Roofe, 2012), problem-solving (Hernandez, 2008; Levesque-Bristol, Knapp, & Fisher, 2010; Schaber, 2010), leadership (Hernandez, 2008), and social justice (Chupp & Joseph, 2010).

According to Hernandez (2008), in the traditional lecture method of learning, the professor imparts knowledge and students are expected to absorb it. There is little interaction between professor and students, and the range of information presented is perceived by students to be more theoretical than practical. The lack of practical experience is a major obstacle for graduates seeking employment because many positions require several years of experience. Incorporating a service-learning

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component as a course requirement provides students with a venue to integrate both textbook information and practical experience (Grady, Croxall, & Gubler, 2006). Research data indicate that students involved in service-learning projects exhibit more compassion and gain greater insight and ability to solve the social problems that they encounter during the service-learning experience (Chupp & Joseph, 2010; Fontenot & O'Neill, 2005; Roofe, 2012; Schaber, 2010).

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Despite the potential for positive outcomes, many faculty are hesitant to implement service-learning as a teaching strategy for a variety of reasons. Service-learning is viewed by some as creating an extra workload, impractical to monitor and grade, and not essential for meeting course objectives (Levesque-Bristol et al., Knapp & Fisher, 2010). Other perceived obstacles include, lack of administrative support, lack of relationships with community partners, and legal/liability issues (Chupp & Joseph, 2010).

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Although it can be argued that service-learning projects are more work than traditional lecture-based classes (Fritz, 2002; Papamarcos, 2005), much of the research in the area focuses on the intrinsic value of enhanced student learning as well as satisfaction for both students and faculty (Kenworthy-U'Ren, 2008). In addition, examples of

successful projects and guidelines are in abundance, alleviating the need for faculty to create the service-learning projects (Seifer & Connors, 2007). There are many documented benefits that accrue to faculty who engage in service-learning projects, such as job satisfaction, leadership, and scholarship opportunities (Chupp & Joseph, 2010).

With regard to administrative support, service-learning projects represent an important component of universities' mission statements (Couto, 2011; Furco, 2002) and many provide faculty training to encourage the implementation of service-learning projects in course assignments. As for concerns regarding legal liability, most universities have liability insurance for any organized student activities that take place outside of the university (Kenworthy-U'Ren, 2008), and faculty should review these policies prior to implementation. Strong community–university reciprocal relationships are essential for implementing service-learning projects with perceived benefits for the community, the university, and students. As a result, there are opportunities for students to complete needed projects using skills acquired in the classroom (Enos & Morton, 2003) while also benefitting the community.

Effective service-learning requires proper selection of courses, well-structured guidelines, and a clear understanding by students of what is expected (Chupp & Joseph, 2010). Service-learning projects can be incorporated into a wide variety of courses and disciplines such as preparing and serving a refreshment buffet at an annual event (Grady et al., 2006), providing diabetes education to diverse community populations (Fontenot & O'Neill, 2005), and creating lesson plans on nutrition for kindergarteners (Roofe, 2012).

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numerous learning benefits for students. Service-learning projects expand students' learning experiences beyond the classroom, provide opportunities to interact with a wide range of community organizations, and present opportunities for problem solving in a myriad of complex settings with diverse populations; these experiences will better prepare them to enter the workplace as professionals in their fields of study.

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Service-Learning Resources Provided by Universities to Their Faculty and Students

Texas A&M: *http://studentactivities.tamu.edu/leadandserve/resources/servicelearning*

Concordia University: *http://www.concordia.edu/page.cfm?page_ID=1337*

Syracuse University: *http://shawcenter.syr.edu/student/community-based-service-learning/*

University of Minnesota: *http://www.servicelearning.umn.edu/info/*

Cornell: *http://www.psc.cornell.edu/template-01-657.php*

University of Michigan: *http://ns.umich.edu/new/releases/2988*

University of Georgia: *http://servicelearning.uga.edu/service-learning-fellows-program/*