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Developing Community Partnerships Through Service Learning Programs

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Developing Community Partnerships



Through Service Learning Programs

By Jay Cooper

*"Ain't nothing to it but
to do it."*

— Maya Angelou

Community service programs have existed on college campuses for years but did not fully emerge as they have during the past 10 years. More than 700 volunteer programs exist at colleges and universities throughout the country (Floerchinger, 1991). National organizations such as the Campus Outreach Opportunity League (COOL), the Campus Compact, and the National Society for Experiential Education (NSEE) have served to stimulate and firmly establish service learning as a movement and an educational priority in this country. In addition to the emergence of college service programs and national organizations, programs such as the National Student Clean-up for Hunger, Into the Streets, alternative spring breaks, and the Urban Plunge have exposed many students and institutions to the benefits of service learning programs.

Community service learning has been well documented as a viable alternative to traditional campus activities. Author Deborah Craig, in her

article "Student Service Learning and Student Activities — A Perfect Fit" (1990), asserts that service learning can be a valuable learning experience for students, faculty and members of the community. Craig also suggests that community service programs can be successfully incorporated into the mission of a student activities center or department.

For the purposes of this article, service learning programs are defined as those programs that incorporate a practical volunteer community service experience with traditional academic study. Community partnerships shall be defined as educational relationships between colleges or universities and community agencies for the purpose of service learning experiences.

At a time when resources for student activities are declining, entertainment costs have skyrocketed, the values of today's students have been repeatedly questioned by the media, and our communities have felt the crunch of reduced government support, institutions of higher education need to re-examine their priorities and determine the most effective ways in which to educate students outside the classroom. All of these factors call for a response from institutions of higher education and, specifically, student personnel professionals. We need to find cost-effective and meaningful alternatives to campus

activities programming.

With our knowledge of the benefits of service learning and with the current growth of volunteer programs on college campuses, community service programs need to be more firmly established and partnerships need to be created and developed within communities.

One major area of concern for student personnel professionals is the declining funding base and budget crunch of the past 15 years. The increased costs of traditional student activities, most notably concerts, lectures, and films, has limited institutions in the number of "major events" that can be organized on campus each year. Service learning programs, as an alternative to traditional student activities, can be coordinated and organized at considerably lower costs, have a greater impact on students, and have more immediate benefits for the community.

In a recent article in *Programming*, "The Money Crunch: Is It Killing Campus Activities?" authors Debra Floerchinger and Kevin E. Young (1992) speak to the problem of reduced financial resources directly. They suggest that "one priority for those of us in this field is to justify entertainment, leadership development and other intangibles . . ." With the benefits of service learning well documented, and the opportunity to develop service learning programs at consider-

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ably less cost than traditional campus activities, it becomes evident that professionals in the field of campus activities must begin to explore this new area of student activities. It also becomes essential for us to seek out and develop meaningful partnerships in the community.

Benefits of Service Learning Programs

The benefits reaped from service learning programs are equal to, if not greater than, those gained from traditional student activities. The developmental outcomes of service learning programs have the potential for realizing a much greater impact on today's students. While social and leadership development remains the thrust of traditional student activities, service learning programs can provide a more holistic and total student development approach. Through service learning programs, students' moral and ethical, emotional, intellectual, spiritual and physical growth can be impacted.

Service learning programs that incorporate orientation, training, action, and reflection can become powerful learning experiences for stu-

dents. In 1989, The Johnson Foundation published a report that outlined the principles of good practice for community service programs.

To ensure that service learning programs were maximizing their impact on students, the report identified the following principles:

An effective program ...
 1. ... engages people in responsible and challenging actions for the common good.
 2. ... provides structured opportunities for people to reflect critically on their ser-

Community service learning has been well documented as a viable alternative to traditional campus activities.

vice experience.

3. ... articulates clear service goals for everyone involved.
4. ... allows for those with needs to define those needs.
5. ... clarifies the responsibilities of each person and organization involved.
6. ... matches service providers and service needs through a process that recognizes changing circumstances.
7. ... expects genuine, active, and sustained organizational commitment.
8. ... includes training, supervision, monitoring, support, recognition, and evaluation to meet

service learning goals.

9. ... ensures that the time commitment for service and learning is flexible, appropriate, and in the best interests of all involved.

10. ... is committed to program participation by and with diverse populations.

The Campus Outreach Opportunity League (COOL) has identified the five critical elements of a community service program: community voice, orientation and training, meaningful action, and evaluation and reflection. All of these elements are essential for a successful community service program and are especially important in developing partnerships within a community.

Service learning has also been invoked as a new focus for institutions of higher education. Swift, in his monograph on service learning, suggests that colleges and universities remain committed to teaching youths about civic responsibility and recommends the following steps for further incorporating service learning into the college experience:

"1. Curriculum changes should be considered to teach youths the skills and knowledge needed to be participatory citizens.

"2. Youths need opportunities to put classroom learning into practice. Students need service programming so they can volunteer and be exposed to social problems.

"3. Higher education should support altering the federal work study program to provide opportunities for students to earn while serving others.

"4. Programming needs to be developed on campus and/or with non-profit agencies so students can participate in community service." (Swift, v.)

Swift also suggests that the benefits of service learning programs are numerous. "Students who participate in volunteer programs report that the experience provides a variety of positive rewards. These include: knowledge, self-confidence, information about specific careers or academic majors, appreciation for being participatory citizens, and the opportunity to give back to society some of what society has given them." (Swift, iv.)

Ernest Boyer, in a 1987 report, recommended that service learning become an integral part of an undergraduate experience. Boyer also suggested that service learning programs can help students relate their classroom learning to the realities of life.

Benefits of Developing Partnerships

Developing partnerships within a community is necessary in order for a service learning program to remain effective. The benefits of community partnerships include an increased potential for student learning that is both practical and experiential, an improved sense of understand-

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ing and belonging in their community among students at an institution, and a more economically sound way in which to use the resources of an institution.

The public relations benefits of partnerships with a community can also be tremendous. The traditional "town and gown" relationship can be positively altered through students demonstrating a genuine interest and active participation in the community's affairs. Service learning programs also allow an institution and its students to reach a vast number of agencies and individuals who were not reached through traditional on-campus programs.

Partnerships can also be created within an institution that involve faculty and academic units in service learning programs. Service learning programs are simply more likely to attract faculty interest and participation within the institution; departments of social work, health sciences, public administration, education, psychology and sociology are a few examples of academic disciplines that should have a vested interest in service learning. Other disciplines such as art, hospitality and tourism management, and economics could also have a direct interest in these programs. As an additional benefit, faculty involvement in service learning programs tends to give "credibility" within an institution to a student activities department.

Partnerships with other campus groups and departments have also proven successful on many campuses. Student organizations that have traditionally been competitors can come together through service projects with amazing results. Fraternities and sororities, various ethnic and cultural groups, and religious and political groups can all find common ground through service learning programs. This concept has been successfully developed through the COOL Into the Streets program. Campuses are encouraged to develop a coalition of student organizations that represent the diversity of campus groups, such as the student senate, the residence halls association, the Greek council, the black student union, and the traditional student programming board. These partnerships encourage campus-wide discussions about important issues and force students from a variety of backgrounds to actively solve problems, resolve conflict, and develop strategies.

Service learning programs also tend to attract a wider variety of students than do traditional campus activities. Older and more ethnically and culturally diverse students are more likely to

participate and play a leadership role in service learning programs than they would in traditional campus activities. As Craig (1990) suggested, service learning programs connect non-traditional students with the community in ways that are not possible in traditional student activities.

The multicultural outcomes of service learning programs have also been highlighted and discussed in numerous articles. As was suggested in Meisel and Hackett's book (1986), "a strong outreach program should involve students from all different backgrounds and interests. Blacks and whites, athletes and artists, scientists and poets, republicans and democrats, radicals and conservatives, seniors and freshmen, short people and tall people. Service is one area where groups from all over campus can work together to break down the negative stereotypes that they often have about one another." (Page 2.3) As has been suggested in a number of news articles, service learning programs are creating a bridge to bring students of a variety of backgrounds together with positive results.

Types of Community Partnerships

Many types of community partnerships can be created to strengthen a campus community service program and maximize student experiences. The most obvious partnerships are those that link a student's interest in an issue with an agency in the community that works directly with that issue.

Historically, the American Red Cross has maintained a strong partnership with colleges and universities across the country. Many campuses host blood drives in conjunction with the American Red Cross and the benefits of this partnership are obvious. The American Red Cross covers the costs of set-up, supplies and promotion, while the campus recruits volunteers and promotes the drive. With some time built into the program for reflection activities for participants about why they volunteer and donate, and some discussion about the need for blood across the country, blood drives can be both social and educational programs in addition to their cost-effectiveness.

Literacy programs can also provide a natural partnership between college students, community agencies and those individuals in the community who want to improve their reading ability. One approach to this type of partnership that has been successful on the campus of Grand Valley State University (MI) involved developing a relationship with area community education centers. In southwest Michigan, community education centers throughout the area provide literacy training. The agencies were experiencing difficulties in recruiting volunteers and were willing to create a partnership and to orient and train

college students. Training and supplies were provided by the community education center and the costs for the program were minimal. Within a year's time, GVSU's literacy program involves more than 60 students working in five communities to improve reading education throughout the area.

The whole issue of youth and education can provide many opportunities for creating partnerships in the community that are far-reaching and long-lasting. Whether students are matched with local schools as tutors or mentors, a partnership program of this nature can be highly rewarding. Both college and secondary school students benefit from the skills and experiences they gain, the secondary schools benefit from the assistance and relief for teachers provided by the college volunteers, and the community gains through the resulting interaction and support for education.

Specific partnerships can also be developed with agencies dealing with specific issues, such as AIDS. In southwest Michigan, two local agencies provided Grand Valley State University with the opportunity for a community partnership that dealt with health and AIDS. The first was through a series of AIDS Educator Training experiences, facilitated by the American Red Cross. College students were recruited for a six-hour training experience that instructed them in speaking to community groups about the transmission of the HIV virus. The second part of the

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The benefits of community partnerships include an increased potential for student learning that is both practical and experiential ...

project involved the Grand Rapids AIDS Resource Center and took students "into the streets" to educate the AIDS-at-risk population, and to distribute condoms and literature. This partnership increased our students' knowledge about HIV and AIDS, sensitized them towards alternative lifestyles and, we hope, had an impact on the spread of the deadly AIDS virus. The agencies have benefitted from the support of their programs, from an increase in volunteers for the program and the interaction among their staff and the students involved.

Alternative spring break programs can create partnerships with communities that are located in different regions of the country. These programs are service projects that occur during the week of spring break and involve taking students out of their communities and into neighboring communities to spend a week in service. Many alternative spring break programs are coordinated in Appalachia and other rural areas, while other sites might focus on urban areas, such as the Cabrini Green housing developments in Chicago. Through continued visits to these sites and an annual relationship, these partnerships can have a long-lasting effect on students and the community members with whom they become involved.

Nearly every issue associated with service learning programs can be linked with a community agency. The Campus Compact annually publishes a resource directory that identifies model programs across the country and partnerships that have been successful. All that is required is for institutions to be creative and to use their resources on campus wisely.

Resources

The resources for creating community service learning programs and partnerships in your community are numerous. A few of the

national resource organizations are listed below. You may also want to check with your local United Way or regional volunteer management association for additional listings.

Action

1100 Vermont Ave. NW
Washington, DC 20525
202-634-9108

Breakaway

Box 18
Peabody College
Nashville, TN 37203
615-343-0385

Campus Compact

P.O. Box 1975
Brown University
Providence, RI 02912
401-863-1119

Campus Outreach Opportunity League

386 McNeal Hall
University of Minnesota
St. Paul, MN 55108
612-624-3018

Habitat for Humanity

Habitat and Church Sts.
Americus, GA 31709
912-924-6935

Independent Sector

1828 L. St. NW
Washington, DC 20036
202-223-8100

National Society for Experiential Education (NSEE)

3509 Haworth Dr., Suite 207
Raleigh, NC 27609-7229
919-787-3263

National Student Campaign Against Hunger and Homelessness

29 Temple Pl.
Boston, MA 02111

Partnership for Service Learning

815 Second Ave., Suite 315
New York, NY 10017
212-986-0989

Student Coalition for Action in Literacy

CB #5115, Rm. 102 YMCA
University of North Carolina
Chapel Hill, NC 27599-5115
919-962-2333

Volunteer — The National Center

1111 N. 19th St., Suite 500
Arlington, VA 22209
703-276-0542

Youth Service America

1319 F St. NW, Suite 900
Washington, DC 20004
202-783-8855

Conclusions

During the past 10 years, service learning programs on college campuses and national organizations devoted to service learning have been blossoming throughout the country. This movement is especially significant to student personnel professionals because of the enormous benefits that students and communities can realize as a result of it.

With a declining fund base from the federal government and the knowledge of the benefits that service learning programs can provide, institutions of higher education should actively seek opportunities to develop partnerships in their communities. The types of partnerships that can be created are numerous. Partnerships with secondary schools, retirement communities, community education centers, area agencies, and partnerships on campus are beneficial to everyone involved. The increased developmental outcomes, the collaborations in the community, and the cost-effectiveness of these programs all combine to support the notion that partnership programs in service learning comprise the next major focus for the field of campus activities.

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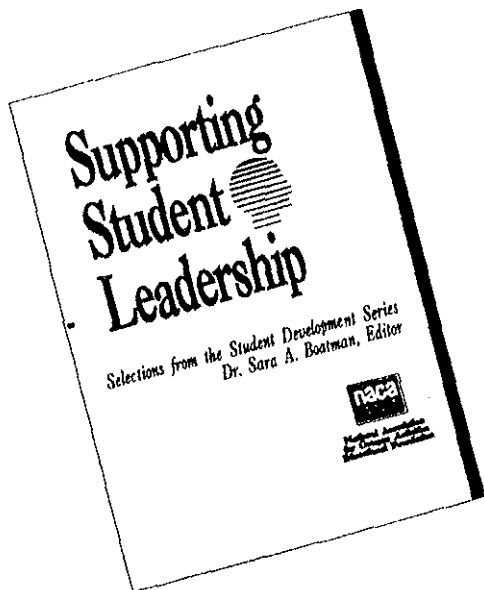


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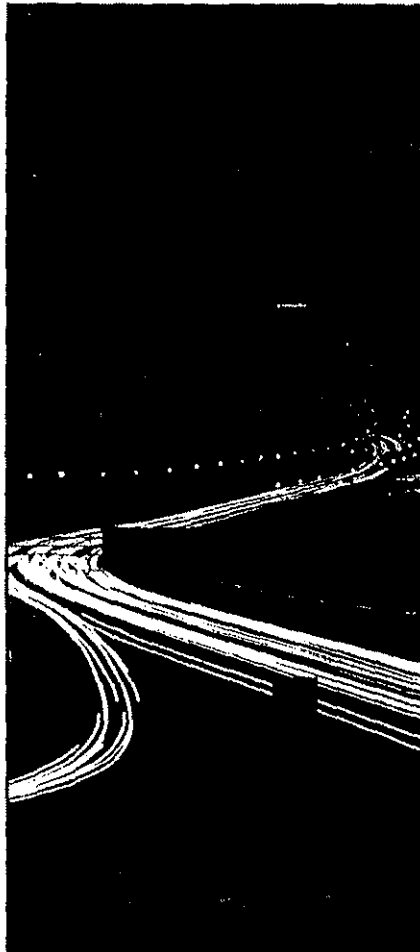
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