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College credit for community service:  
A “win-win” situation

Janet Patterson Fleischauer & John F. Fleischauer

We need only look at the newspapers today to know that insufficient numbers of college and high school graduates are seriously considering social service careers to meet community needs. Job applications are down at human service agencies. Twenty-first century slogans have not helped charitable fund drives meet goals of past years. Education is being challenged to respond to a social deficit in preparing citizens for community service.

In College: The Undergraduate Experience in America (1987), Ernest Boyer and the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching call for community service requirements in America's secondary schools. They also suggest the appropriateness of awarding credit for service in higher education under controlled conditions: "If students make written and oral presentations about their service experience, the colleges would, we believe, be fully justified in granting academic credit for the project" (Boyer, 219).

The social challenge for colleges and universities entering the last decade of the twentieth century is clear: the burden to preserve America's traditions of community strength has fallen to public and private schools.

Jonathon Kozol in Illiterate America (1985) called for "an army of college students" who would, in the tradition of the Peace Corps, address America's growing illiteracy problem. Kozol believed that while they were working for literacy, these students could also establish a new model for the restoration of social commitment among America's youth.

At Edinboro University of Pennsylvania, a professor of reading methods and a former elementary-reading teacher proposed to establish a new course to answer the need for community service by bringing both tutoring skills and civic awareness to qualified college students from any discipline. She received administrative support for the pioneering project, even though some colleagues believe that credit for service is little more than a bribe, like the credit they may give students for leading their discussion groups or monitoring their experiments; that is, the activity seems related to learning but not part of the traditional instructional process. Having trained, mentored, and observed one hundred undergraduate tutors in the past eight semesters, the University has lost the skepticism it might have had about the academic value of structured community service. The experiential education project has demonstrated that students deserve academic credit for what they learn and for the skills they gain.

Guidelines for the service-learning course are stringent: students are required to engage in tutoring activities over an academic term for an average of five hours per week (60 hours per semester) in addition to their regular academic program. Tutoring is conducted in conjunction with an established community action agency, and it must be performed on site. Therefore, students essentially become a part of the agency's operation. They are forced into a commitment to the program, including not only the satisfaction and rewards of program goals, but also the distractions and inconvenience of service that "real world" volunteers face as they try to fit unpaid time into their schedules and unplanned growth into their curricula.

Edinboro's students tutor at two separate inner-city agencies. Each agency has a different educational program in place. Each uses different materials to prepare adult students for GED testing, industrial or state agency literacy standards, or other civic grant program objectives under which they are operating. In this real-life scenario, the instructor must adjust academic goals to agency operations, even though they don't necessarily match the approach espoused by educational theory.

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So that the tutors can adjust to their respective agencies and have some educational basis for comparison of their experience with other options, they are introduced during the initial seminar sessions to a wide variety of literacy tutoring techniques and philosophies. They are guided toward an eclectic understanding of different methods adaptable to their own particular assignments. The seminars are designed to instill a review of established pedagogical principles, a basic understanding of tutorial methodology, and training in techniques of reading instruction.

To put the local literacy problem into perspective, Edinboro tutors must understand the dimensions of illiteracy on the national level so this broader knowledge base has become a second component of the training sessions. The students read and discuss works describing the roots and possible remedies of America’s literacy problems. With these beginnings, they begin to make connections between their academic life and the community needs answered by their tutoring service.

But the “big picture” is not enough, and before students are exposed to real clients in the community action agencies, they must understand the clients themselves, who are, by and large, older and significantly more experienced in many ways than the student tutors. To help our students deal with differences of culture, and also usually of age, we offer instruction emphasizing real-life confrontations of diversity. Video-taped presentations, guest speakers from community agencies, experienced tutors, and open discussion have become the “texts.” Students interested in helping others are not always aware of the broad diversity of the characteristics and life experiences of those they will work with or of the motivations of those from different social strata than their own. Tutors must understand before they start that their clients may be understandably skeptical about whether university students can help them achieve their goals.

The learning curve of the students in the literacy program begins to skyrocket as our first seminars of the semester begin. Ideas from their sociology and history courses are introduced during the initial seminar sessions to a commonality of a general education program, students are encouraged to draw upon their educational experience and apply it for the benefit of the community and their clients. Professional standards of punctuality, deportment, and interpersonal relationships are necessary for students tutoring adults, just as they are for students in teacher education field experiences. In the same way, goal-setting, performance objectives, and progress records for clients are important for literacy tutors, just as they are for interns in teaching or social work. And, perhaps most relevant, the service-learning students must depend upon their human relations skills and developing respect for the individuality and experience of their clients if they are to succeed in their assignments.

This last challenge to human relations skills provides perhaps the most dramatic and enlightening educational experience for most of the students during each semester of service. Even though the university now includes many “non-traditional” students, generally college students have survived in a more protected environment than their clients have. While that protection encourages students a sense of confidence, of safety, and of economic stability, it also tends to shelter them from some of the harsher realities of their own community. In the face of some of these realities—the 23-year-old trying to kick a drug habit, or the too-young mother who appeared sometimes with unexplained bruises—the students are led through stages toward a mature level of self-awareness and self-confidence. In her journal, Tammy wrote, “I think I am getting through to Jane. What a change! I didn’t realize I was talking down to her until she stopped me tonight. We had it out, I guess. But then we both settled down and she finished a whole chapter. I can’t wait until our next session.”

An important principle, derived from the lessons of the Peace Corps days, is the need to understand the mutual benefits of volunteer service. They learn experientially that each person in a “charitable” action is involved in it for personal benefit. This principle of mutual gain may be seen by separating the viewpoints of the various participants. The clients in an adult reading program obviously seek to gain reading skills and to enhance their social and economic situation. However, from the perspective of the professor, these adults also contribute in sometimes undefined and unexpected ways to the learning partnership. By teaching their clients, tutors gain increased social aware-
ness, a clearer understanding and acceptance of human diversity, and a virtual elimination of stereotypes. The clients instruct their tutors in human relationships and even in such traditional academic areas as the transmission of oral history; both kinds of lessons are invaluable to college students in their own development and in their career orientation.

Looking at the dynamics of the relationship from the tutors’ perspective, one can see that the partnership is both complex and direct in its benefits. On the receiving end, the tutors’ most important benefit is the development of skills which they can apply repeatedly throughout their lives in productive and fulfilling community service. Relevant to their educational progress, these undergraduate students also receive rewards in academic credits for an enlightening and ultimately satisfying experience. Less tangibly, students are helped to recognize applications of theoretical learning for future career use, and in some cases the experience assists students in final decisions about career choice. Seen this way, the benefit to the student outweighs the student’s own novice service to the client.

Nevertheless, college tutors do indeed contribute: they are able to claim a role in the enhancement of the civic economy; they add to the advancement and sometimes the fulfillment of a client’s career or life goals; they become a part of the successful operation of the community action agency where they serve; and they help to nurture and support the growing social maturity of their fellow classmates. The mutuality of benefit in participation is perhaps the most important reward for all concerned, because it contributes directly and demonstrably to the breakdown of social stereotyping and classification.

The journals serve to crystallize student experience and become textbooks of their progress. Reviewing them at the end of the semester’s experience in order to write their papers, students invariably comment with amazement about how far they have come from the beginning. In the recap sessions they show that they have lost self-consciousness and patronizing attitudes. They talk about what they have learned, not what they have done; about how they have grown, not whom they have helped; about how their experience has equipped them for future careers and future life, not about how limited are the lives of those they have touched.

This sense of community and the benefits of shared service discovered by the college tutors is not an aberration. It meets an identified need in higher education today. “Amidst diversity, the claims of community must be vigorously affirmed. By community we mean an undergraduate experience that helps students go beyond their own private interests, learn about the world around them, develop a sense of civic and social responsibility, and discover how they, as individuals, can contribute to the larger society of which they are a part” (Boyer, 67). Boyer and Kozol and the national commissions are correct in their assertions of the need for a stronger sense of community in America. They are right to assert that colleges and universities must accept responsibility to promote and encourage future citizens to become involved in the welfare of others rather than depend on government or corporations to pick up the tab.

Restoring a sense of social responsibility to the curriculum is in fact no more than reapplying the traditional academic goal of preserving a heritage. That heritage continues to be the perpetuation of a social con-
tract, a mutual awareness that without mutual help and support there can be no dependable social structure for even the individual to enjoy. "To be literate as a citizen requires more than knowledge and information; it includes the exercise of personal responsibility, active participation, and personal commitment to a set of values. Democratic literacy is a literacy of doing, not simply of knowing" (Morrill, 365).

Students in the literacy course must grapple with these philosophical principles of the nature of a democratic culture. Faculty members unused to the merit of applying theory in social situations may continue to resist the awarding of academic credit for the learning experience provided by structured and monitored community service; but the experience at Edinboro University says that they are wrong. Culled from a tutor's journal is a statement that explains the value of service learning in words beyond the educator's: "I knew I'd learn about me through this experience and I was right. I'm being given as much or more than I'm giving. I'm learning that my instincts are good and I can generally trust them. I'm learning that I am very patient, I'm a good teacher and that I really love people. I'm learning that mistakes are O.K., that I don't have to know everything, and tutoring is fun. I'm really grateful for the opportunity to be part of your class and to see the power and goodness in these tutoring sessions."

References

