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SERVICE-LEARNING

By Donald J. Eberly

Service-learning integrates the accomplishment of a needed task with educational growth.

Criteria for Service-Learning Programs

Experience with service-learning programs suggests a set of criteria that may be useful to persons considering the introduction of service-learning programs. The suggested criteria follow:

Whatever may be the action part of a service-learning experience, it must be a meaningful activity for the agency involved and must be seen to be a meaningful activity by the participant.

This means that the service-learning participant must usually play some role in project definition and always in project assignment. Perhaps he will carry it out from conception to execution. More likely he will come in at a stage where the agency has a variety of briefly described positions, and the participant, in discussion with the agency officials, adds shape and substance to the activity he will undertake.

The service-learning experience must be designed so as to offer promise of a successful experience by the service-learning participant.

Success is important in building the participants' self-confidence. The main factors to watch for here are level of competence and duration of assignment. In order to grow, the participant should be asked to perform at a somewhat higher level than he has in the past, but the assignment must not be so difficult as to be impossible of accomplishment by the participant. Likewise with duration. A one-to-one assignment should not be ended just as the service-learning participant gets to know the person he is working with. While some projects are never finished, there should be expectation of reasonable closure within the assigned period of time.

Academic credit, when given for a service-learning experience, must be awarded only on the basis of the learning acquired.

This is not said from any sense of credit as something sacred. Intrinsically, it is as worthless as a dollar bill. But, like the dollar bill, credit is a form of academic currency; if we try to re-value it, we will probably end up spending more time discussing credit than service-learning.

The evidence that learning has been acquired may be given in many forms; behavioristically, verbally, on paper, film, tape, graphically, artistically. The persons responsible for judging the award of credit should be associated with educational institutions.

Payment, when given, must be made for services rendered.

Both the origin of the funds and the decision on payment should be identified with the recipient of services. If someone is serving in a hospital, for example, he should be paid by the hospital from money received by patients or the health department. He should not be paid with education money, for if he is, the service part of service-learning would be in danger of degenerating into make-work efforts. Payment should not be considered essential. One study suggests that unpaid students gained more in terms of job training and work experience than paid students.

In the service-learning program, service-learning options must be open to all high school age persons.

This criterion carries a number of implications. For the unemployed high school dropout, it means that some form of payment be given in return for services rendered; that someone, probably a high school teacher, must help the dropout translate his experience into learning; and that some institution, most likely the high school, must make provision for recognition of this service-learning experience.

For college-bound young people, it means the provision of part-time positions, probably unpaid, in which participants can gain maturity.

The middle group may demand the widest array of service-learning options. Some will require full-time positions, others part-time; some will need stipends, others not; some will require academic recognition; some will need specially designed academic programs.

Also, there will have to be adequate training, supervision, transportation and coordination among the several parties. Also, service-learning experiences must be graded, not so much by age as by previous experience. Operating the xerox machine is OK for one's first service-learning office experience but not for subsequent ones.

"High school age" may be defined as the community wishes. It will probably vary from 15-18 to 13-19. To identify the high school age group does not mean to restrict it to this group. Hopefully, service-learning opportunities will exist for persons at both sides of the age spectrum.

The following sectors of a community should be involved in the development and operation of a service-learning program:

1. Formal education
2. Local government
3. Business and labor
4. Students and non-student youth
5. Community service

It is premature, and likely always will be, to ascribe to the several sectors particular roles, apart from the obvious ones. The focal point for a service-learning program could be in a high school, city hall, the chamber of commerce, the student association or the voluntary action center. Wherever it may be, the program will fail to serve all interested young people unless properly articulated. This articulation will be much easier to achieve if all parties are involved in the formulation and development of a service-learning program, instead of waiting until the program is launched.

A survey of community needs should be undertaken before the program is launched. It can be conducted by young people under proper supervision. As well as assessing community needs, such a survey will also acquaint young people with potential service assignments, and potential supervisors with youthful volunteers. Those involved will acquire a fairly realistic sense of what to expect from the service-learning program.