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A WAY WITH WORDS: A Unique Approach to Literacy and Career Development

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This article describes a unique collaboration between the Career Center at the University of Missouri–Columbia, Columbia Public Schools and the community. A WAY WITH WORDS is an “America Reads” community literacy program that has enriched the educational experience of graduate, undergraduate and K–5 students since 1996. Teams of undergraduate volunteers led by graduate students in Counseling Psychology and Educational Leadership (ELPA) tutor local children in an effort to increase literacy. The teams interact and communicate with children, parents, teachers and principals as they serve during school and in after-school programs that they co create with school administrators and community members. Tremendous opportunities exist for learning about socio-economically and increasing ethnically diverse communities. During a biweekly seminar, team leaders lead career exploration activities that focus on mentoring, multicultural issues and team building. The program seeks to cultivate civic responsibility as an aspect of career development through communication, relatedness and reflection.

KEY WORDS: service learning; career development.

In 1996, several administrators of the Career Center at the University of Missouri responded to President Clinton’s “America Reads Challenge” by creating a community-based literacy program called “A WAY WITH WORDS”. Teams of undergraduate students, led by graduate students from the Departments of Educational and Counseling Psychology (E&CP) and Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis

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(ELPA) provide reading tutoring for local children in an effort to increase literacy in the Columbia community. Currently, 15 elementary schools have tutor teams of 8 to 36 tutors. They spend at least three hours weekly with one or a small group of K-5 children who demonstrate a need for literacy tutoring based on remedial reading scores. In addition, three community organizations also utilize tutor teams for homework help and other mentoring activities in after school and Saturday programs. In the academic year 2000-2001, 224 tutors served approximately 1,600 students. Of these tutors, 63% were volunteers and 37% received work-study funding. Volunteer tutor recruitment tripled during that year and the number of students who returned for a second year of volunteering neared 20%.

Master's level graduate students hired on a quarter-time assistantship, serve as site coordinators for the tutor teams. In addition to coordinating schedules and managing the team, site coordinators facilitated a biweekly seminar in which tutors reflected and dialogued about their experiences. The work settings in the Columbia Public Schools exposed the teams to racial, ethnic, and class diversity as well as children who have been exposed to environmental stressors such as poverty, transience, and parental neglect. Tutors learned to build relationships with the children, the teachers, and the site coordinators and also with other team members. Through participation in service and team activities, tutors learned about civic responsibility and community participation.

Program Goals

A WAY WITH WORDS (A3W) serves the community, provides learning opportunities for students and focuses on enhancing the career development of tutors by linking service learning to career exploration. This program is a conduit for the services of the career center to the campus community, reaching students who may never visit the center on their own. A3W gives students the opportunity to increase cultural literacy, build relationships and learn about self-reflection. The site coordinator role combines service-learning, leadership and civic responsibility. The Graduate students who participate in the program are the future of the profession and society, as they will become tomorrow's leaders. In their biweekly seminar, they share information, issues, and concerns that arise in their work. The program seeks

to cultivate civic responsibility as an aspect of career development through communication, relatedness, and reflection.

Communication

The attainment of reading and literacy skills are fundamental to success in all major life roles. Through one-on-one tutoring, elementary school children have the opportunity to enhance their skills, and increase their chances of achieving academic success. The tutors and team leaders also improve their communication skills as they gather on a biweekly basis to dialogue about their experiences and its relevance to their lives and career aspirations. In the words of one site coordinator:

It is heartwarming to see such a change come over a child as they read a book to you. When they understand what they are reading about, their eyes light up, and you can see the learning take place.

For many of the site coordinators, leading a group for the first time was an overwhelming experience. They talked about learning to communicate as a leader and learning to confront difficult issues like attendance and absence. Team meetings also gave the participants an opportunity to communicate and dialogue about social problems that may be impacting the lives of children at their site.

Relatedness

Tutors provide one-on-one support to a child or a small group of children by reading to or with them. Apart from the mentoring bonds that form between tutor and child, there is an opportunity to build peer relationships with tutors on the team and professional relationships with the site coordinator, site contact, and teachers. The bi-weekly team meetings bring undergraduates together to talk about their common experiences of serving the community. Seventy-five percent of the tutors ($n = 138$) who responded to the end of term evaluation said that they felt part of a team effort. Eighty-five percent responded that they felt connected to the children at their site and 62% felt connected to their team leader.

The site coordinators reflected on the experience of building teams

in their final papers. One coordinator said "I have learned that little gestures go a long way in building relationships." The ability to build relationships is central to success in adulthood. Work is a social activity and careers are built on networks of people who influence and support one's goals and dreams. Through team building and career exploration activities such as values auctions and the Holland Party Game, tutors discover their career interests and the interests of fellow members. Through feedback and rapport-building with the team leader, and teachers at the school, tutors begin to learn about their work ethic and to build confidence in their skills.

Reflection

According to Paulo Friere (1970), "men [human beings] are not built in silence, but in word, in action, in reflection" (p. 76). During biweekly meetings, teams engage in guided reflection about the tutoring experience. Structured questions such as "How would you define your community?" prompts discussion among members and facilitates the integration of the service experience into a larger context of the individual's life experience and worldview. Challenging and uncomfortable issues are often raised and addressed in the groups. As one team leader expressed in her final essay,

Perhaps, one of the most important issues that I have had to grapple with has been ethnicity. Several of the meetings that I attended forced me to examine several uncomfortable life issues. Issues that impact our everyday lives, issues that we would sometimes rather turn a blind eye towards, and issues that make us examine who we are as people, as citizens, as leaders, friends, colleagues and teachers. Several of my previous perspectives regarding ethnicity, diversity and socio-economic status have been challenged. . . . These topics evoked some initial discomfort. However, as I came to know myself and those differing individuals around me better, this discomfort eventually led to understanding.

According to Gronski and Pigg (2000), "success in professional life is enhanced by solidarity in public life with others who share a common vision of societal growth" (p. 789). Team meetings are also a chance for the site coordinators to reflect on their graduate training and their role as change agents in the community, addressing social problems and building networks with other professionals.

Future Goals

As the program moves into its sixth year, one of the major areas for growth is the recruiting and retention of work-study students to work as tutors, thereby linking the benefits of their monetary award to career development and community service. Communication, relationship-building, and reflection are key areas in adult development that lead to personal and professional success; therefore, fine-tuning team meeting content and finding creative ways to integrate service learning and career exploration are critical goals for the future. Lastly, developing a research agenda that addresses the career outcomes of participants and their participation in civic life will enhance the program's direction.

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