

# Service Learning Belongs

By Allen Wutzdorff

**T**he field of service learning is rapidly coming in from the margins of education as we move into the 1990s. Across the country, students and faculty alike are examining the learning potential of what is already a socially positive force. This growth is not unlike the growth of college internship programs in the 1970s and '80s, where increasing numbers of college students majoring in disciplines not traditionally associated with "experiential learning" were given the opportunity to test out and apply their knowledge and abilities in work settings. An important result of this move into the "real world" was, of course, the formulation and clarification of career goals.

Service learning is really a specialized form of internship, where students work in settings established primarily to meet some social and community need. But the opportunity to learn skills and gain new knowledge is as present in a service setting as it is in an internship. With appropriate goal setting, guided reflection, and challenge, students can gain important skills in problem solving, ethical decision-making, and communication, to name a few. Students can also learn to exercise their critical thinking about more-universal content-related areas (e.g., social problems, economic systems, cultural patterns) as they perform needed work in the service arena.

In addition, service learning adds an important dimension to a student's education. To be acquainted with community needs and to learn how to work in partnership with others to address those needs seems to me to be a necessary skill in today's society. Service learning is not equated with *giving* only, or with *learning* only. The practice includes reciprocity between all the parties involved (student, community members, agencies, colleges), and teaches students important skills in collaboration, leadership, planning, negotiating, and evaluating. If all of these skills happen to lead to career enhancement, whether in the profit or nonprofit sector, so much the better. More and more employers are looking more and more positively at applicants' community service records as they make hiring decisions.

## A Meaningful Contribution

Service learning, then, can play an important and necessary role within any curriculum, both from a societal and pedagogical standpoint. A key question is

the extent to which the students' work in the field is related to their own career and personal goals and to those that the institution has established for its experiential-learning program. No singular model has yet been developed for connecting service with learning, nor is there a particular discipline that is always associated with service experiences. But we at the National Society for Experiential Education (NSEE) are continually struck by the variety of subject areas where faculty are making creative connections to the students' off-campus work. Many colleges, in fact, are setting up interdisciplinary programs that draw upon the rich potential of field experiences for assisting students to break down the barriers between disciplines. Such programs can actually do what college catalogues typically promise: prepare students for meaningful professional and personal lives upon graduation.

Research on the effects of service learning, while not yet comprehensive, indicates that students do emerge from these experiences with qualities that do enhance major aspects of their lives. Students who have engaged in experiential and service-learning programs often show increases in self-esteem and confidence; they become better acquainted with careers and therefore of career options; and they show positive changes in the depth of their commitment to society and to the process of career selection. NSEE has plans to research more deeply into this subject [see "More Information" sidebar to accompanying article. Ed.].

## Win With Service

The field of service learning has grown rapidly in the past few years and shows every sign of continuing to expand its role as an accepted and established part of higher education. NSEE itself is in the midst of an explosion in the number of inquiries we receive daily for information on the subject and about NSEE membership. As we manage and celebrate this growth, let's all of us as educators stay mindful of the many and rich possibilities inherent in service learning. There are many quality programs across the nation, each serving to bind a community, college, and students together in a win circle. Such circles belong.

*Allen Wutzdorff is executive director of the National Society for Experiential Education (NSEE).*

more efficiently, to assist low-income persons with tax returns, and to assist in fundraising for community projects. Computer science majors are needed to help nonprofits set up manageable and user-friendly data bases and to conduct seminars on new technology. Students of foreign languages and those with bilingual skills are needed to teach ESL (English as a second language) to minorities and immigrants. Art and music students are needed to teach classes in housing projects and at low-income community centers. These are only some of the possibilities that Wood has come up with. He knows that the demand for service exceeds his supply of students, but he is counting on the growth of the program to accommodate most of the requests for assistance in the long term.

Wood now has a commitment from 15 faculty members of various disciplines to establish a service-learning component into their curricula. Psychology and sociology professors will establish class requirements of actual field experience, which may include volunteer hours at various shelters, drug rehabilitation centers, homes for the elderly, and schools for disabled children. Biology teachers agree to allow students the option of designing volunteer projects such as health awareness for low-income families or the use of environmental activities as class projects. English and journalism teachers will offer an option for students to work in literacy programs, to develop community newsletters, or to assist nonprofits with public relations. The students will submit a journal documenting their activities in lieu of a term paper. Other faculty members have drafted proposals for service-learning classes that will carry elective sociology credit.

### Outcome

By the end of the first year, Wood has met his goal of placing 100 students in volunteer agencies through classroom opportunities, scholarship opportunities, and internships. Through the success of Campus Outreach and the publicity it has generated, Wood has increased his roster of available student volunteers to nearly 300. The success of the program has led to increased funding from within the school's economic structure and from outside sources.

Wood has networked his program with national service-learning organizations,

which helps with resource development, brings new solutions to community problems, and generates national publicity and support for the fledgling program. He and many of his student volunteers have been able to attend regional conferences sponsored by these national organizations.

Student response was the most encouraging outcome for Wood. Most students reported personal and professional growth from the experience. Many said that the experience helped them make a career choice. Some students had made contacts that resulted in employment opportunities after graduation. Others said they simply enjoyed the opportunity to make a difference and would continue to volunteer after college.

### Real Programs

While Campus Reachout is a hypothetical program, it is a composite of several successful programs including *Volunteers in Action* (VIA), a service-learning program at Broward Community College (BCC), an urban institution based in Fort Lauderdale. Before developing VIA, Broward had a successful track record with a number of smaller student volunteer programs that are still in operation. Some of these:

- The *Challenge to Youth* program trained college students to mentor juvenile offenders.
- *Transitional Insights* was a program that paired academically successful BCC students with learning-disabled high school students who wanted to go to college. The program ran for two years, and more than half of the mentored students enrolled in college after high school.

• The *HIV/AIDS Education and Prevention* program used persons with AIDS and BCC student peer counselors to educate the college's students on AIDS-related issues.

BCC obtained funding for *Challenge to Youth* and *Transitional Insights* from the U.S. Department of Education Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education (FIPSE). When the Student Affairs staff conceived and proposed its most innovative program to date, *Volunteers in Action*, the previous successes resulted in a third FIPSE grant.

*Volunteers in Action*, like the imaginary Campus Reachout, serves as a

clearinghouse for social service agencies located in the community. In its first year, VIA placed more than 100 students in volunteer positions serving 34 community agencies. And like the imaginary Wood, BCC Student Affairs staff carefully researched the needs of the community, the students, and the college before planning its own service-learning program.

### Nearby Role Model

Broward didn't have to look far for a role model. Brevard Community College, in Cocoa, Florida, is home to one of the most successful service-learning programs in the nation. Established in 1988, Brevard's Service Learning Center currently has 1,200 student volunteers, 75 courses with service-learning options, and 75 faculty participating in the program. Before planning their own program, Brevard administrators joined Campus Compact, a national organization for service-learning programs and administrators.

Campus Compact now has more than 260 members. It provides its members with up-to-date legislative information, leads for developmental resources, regional and national workshops and conferences, and philosophical and professional guidance through its newsletter and numerous informative publications. There are many other support groups and agencies for fledgling programs (see sidebar: More Information on Service-Learning Programs).

### A Case History

A new member of Campus Compact, Rollins College in Winter Park, Florida, has initiated its Center for Public Service which serves nearly 150 students each year. The center follows up on the student volunteers and reports that several of the students have gained permanent employment with the service agencies after graduation.

As noted by Kristin Zimmerman, the center's programs coordinator: "We had some students enrolled in a course called 'Politics of Abortion.' Students volunteered at the BETA agency (Birth, Education, Training, and Acceptance) where they helped single mothers learn about caring for their children, provide of

birth control, and family-planning issues. Four of the students are now employed there."

Zimmerman said that the students have had great success with projects such as one on environmental studies that will be used by the Division of Parks and Recreation. The city is giving an award to the student volunteers for their service to the community.

Zimmerman attributes the success of the program to the efforts of the Wendy Brandon, director of the Academic Resource Center and project director of the center, noting "her skill in galvanizing the faculty to action" in particular.

## Win/Win/Win

*The benefits to the community* are the most visible. Overburdened social service agencies are able to enhance services, and clientele receive more personal contact through the student volunteers. Early intervention has been highly successful all over the country, and young children who desperately need encouragement, scholastic assistance, and role models are given a chance to attain higher goals. Publicized community involvement raises the awareness and morale of the community involved.

*The benefits to the college* are enormous. A successful service-learning program—if properly publicized—can greatly enhance the image of the institution in the eyes of the community. The program also allows the college wider opportunities for resource development and often leads to greater fundraising success.

*The benefits to students*, beyond the gratification of helping those in need, are both immediate and long term. Schools and potential employers are working together to reward student volunteers. Potential employers have always valued actual on-the-job experience, often more than academic credentials. They are now placing value on community-service experience as well. And schools are making it easier for employers to identify students who have participated in service-learning areas.

In an effort to document the community involvement of students, some colleges and universities have instituted student development transcripts as addenda to the academic transcripts, thus providing students with a documented

record of their experience outside the classroom. These records of co-curricular activities can be presented to indicate additional job skills acquired while performing community service. As public service gains in popularity, more employers will be asking job applicants about their social service and volunteer experience and requesting copies of community-service transcripts along with the academic records.

An integral aspect that differentiates service learning from traditional classroom education is the reflection process. Students keep their own journals detailing their service activities and their own reactions to their working relationship with the agency and the clients they are serving. The students must also evaluate their own performances to measure their progress against goals they have set for themselves. In many programs, small-group reflective sessions are common, and planned recreational activities allow students and leaders the opportunity to share their experiences in a group setting.

In addition to the value of the experience itself, student participants often receive service scholarships to reduce their need to borrow for tuition. Many private foundations and corporations are more inclined to contribute funds if there is a community-service commitment from the student. Government funding from agencies such as FIPSE and ACTION, which provide schools with seed money to establish service-learning programs, look favorably at proposals that include scholarship incentives for student volunteers. Perhaps the most exciting boost to student volunteerism will come with the new Clinton Administration. The president has expressed his desire for the establishment of a program that would allow students to work off college loans through community service.

*It's a win/win/win situation.* The community gains, the college gains, the students gain. Funding opportunities exist for the development and implementation of service-learning programs. Several support systems are available to assist in the start-up process and to provide guidance throughout the duration of the program. With so many positive factors on the side of service learning, the real question is why every college and university doesn't institutionalize a service-learning program. 

## More Information On Service-Learning Programs

**ACTION Agency**, the federal-domestic volunteer agency that provides help for volunteer activities and community projects through grants and technical assistance. 1100 Vermont Avenue NW, Suite 8100, Washington, DC 20525. 202/606-5108.

**Campus Compact: The Project for Public Community Service**, a coalition of college and university presidents. Member services: technical assistance, internships, awards, resource materials, legislative advocacy. Brown University, 25 George Street, Providence, RI 02912. 401/863-1119.

**Campus Outreach Opportunity League (COOL)**, a student organization to support and promote student involvement in community service. Member services: site visits, training workshops, conferences, resource materials. 386 McNeal Hall, St. Paul, MN 55108-1011. 612/624-3018.

**National Society for Experiential Education (NSEE)**, an association of individuals, institutions, and organizations that promotes service experience as an integral part of education. Member services: newsletter, publications, conferences, information clearinghouse. Special publications:

- *Combining Service and Learning: A Resource Book for Community and Public Service.*
- *Research Agenda for Combining Service and Learning in the 1990s.* NSEE, 3509 Haworth Drive, Suite 207, Raleigh, NC 27609-7229. 919/787-3263.

**Partnership for Service-Learning**, a consortium of colleges, universities, service agencies, and religious organizations committed to developing service learning in American higher education. Offers technical assistance to colleges and service-learning programs for students and recent graduates. Holds an annual international conference. 815 Second Avenue, Suite 315, New York, NY 10017-4594. 212/986-0989.