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## Service Learning: The Past, the Present, and the Promise

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# *Service Learning:*

## **The Past, the Present, and the Promise**

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In addition to reading the textbook, listening to lectures, and taking tests examining the challenges that families with a child with a disability face, special education majors at the University of Nebraska at Kearney, as part of their course requirements, adopt a family for a semester by spending time with them, providing respite care, listening to their concerns and joys, and assisting with routine tasks. Similarly, in addition to traditional course work, students throughout the nation are tutoring, mentoring, working with the homeless, assisting those with disabling or life-threatening conditions, helping the elderly, and improving the environment. All of these ventures might be considered a part of a renewed look at service learning, defined here as learning that combines public service with planned, related educational outcomes through corresponding academic work (Cohen and Kinsey 1994; Olszewski and Bussler 1993).

Service learning—with its focus on providing goodwill toward an individual, group, or community—is certainly not new to the field of education. In fact, higher education's concern for volunteerism and community service can be traced to the middle of the 19th century (Burrus-Bammel, Bammel, and Newhouse 1993). During World War I, William Kilpatrick urged adoption of the project method as a central tool for education—an approach based on the tenets that learning should take place in settings outside the school and involve efforts to meet real community needs. In the 1930s

the Progressives, who again advocated the service-learning approach, believed that schools should inculcate the values of social reform. In the 1950s the Citizen Education Project stressed community participation and citizenship, and in the 1970s a new wave of reports stressed the importance of young people being involved in real and meaningful tasks and direct experiences in their community (Conrad and Hedin 1991).

Service learning again captured the attention of politicians and educators when former President George Bush signed into law the National and Community Service Act of 1990, which provides funding for community-service programs in schools and colleges and support for full-time service corps that students can enter after high school (Conrad and Hedin 1991). The original act, also referred to as Public Law 101-610, had seven major purposes: to renew the ethic of civic responsibility in the United States; to ask citizens to engage in service; to call young people into programs that will benefit the nation and improve the life chances of the young; to remove existing barriers, so citizens can make a substantial commitment to service; to build on the existing organizational framework of federal, state, and local programs and agencies to expand service opportunities; to involve participants in activities that would not otherwise be performed by employed workers; and to generate additional service hours each year to help meet human, educational, environmental, and public safety needs, particularly those relating to

poverty. Subsequent amendments to the act were approved by Congress in 1992, through the National and Community Service Technical Amendment Act (Public Law 102-384), which improved the administrative provisions and initiated technical corrections in the original act. The National and Community Service Trust Act of 1993 (Public Law 103-82) established a corporation for national service, enhanced opportunities for national service, and provided national service educational awards.

Of special interest to educators is that this law encourages community members to volunteer in schools, permits the Department of Education to make grants to states for elementary and secondary student community service programs, and allows partial loan cancellation in Perkins and Stafford Loan Programs for those performing full-time community service (American Association of Community and Junior Colleges [AACJC] 1989). Additionally, schools and universities are responding to the themes of volunteerism and service learning by developing collaborative service partnerships with businesses and other community service providers (Wheeler and Fanning 1989), initiating extensive field experiences early in students' educational careers (Peek 1985), developing intern programs for beginning teachers (Simmons and Jarchow 1988), increasing the number of field experiences (Yellin, Bull, Warner, Neuberger, and Robinson 1988), and requiring students to document service learning through a portfolio upon application to their program of study (University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire 1994). These initiatives indicate that college instruction seems to be changing to encompass student opportunities for intrinsic motivation, self-fulfillment, authentic assessment, and increased community involvement (McDaniel 1994). In short, many believe that the current closed-classroom system of educating youth is insufficient for preparing students for life in the real world (Kraft 1992).

The National and Community Service Act, however, impacts more than just schools and volunteers in the schools. According to

the AACJC (1989), the act also encourages institutions to make service a priority in daily life and work; heads of businesses and professional firms to include community service among the factors considered in making hiring, compensation, and promotion decisions; the media to identify service opportunities, spotlight successful



Hoover (Alabama) City Schools elementary students carry donated food and gifts.

service initiatives, and profile outstanding community leaders; state and local education boards to uphold the value of service and encourage students, faculty, and personnel to serve others; college and university presidents to recognize the value of community service; and not-for-profit service organizations to build the capacity to absorb increasing numbers of volunteers in purposeful roles.

Part of this move toward service learning is due to its many and varied benefits. Perhaps most importantly, service learning opportunities can lead to social change as participants learn to balance their individual rights and self-interest with their collective responsibility to the community and society at large (Pomata 1994). In short, when effectively structured and related to discipline-based knowledge, service learning links social responsibility to the improvement of undergraduate education (Stanton 1991). Service learning experiences help college students see relationships among and between their academic course work and real-life situations. Additionally, education majors learn early in their educational careers whether teaching is the right choice for them. Service learning programs provide meaningful alternatives to college programming, increase options for students, attract a wider variety of students than traditional programs (Cooper 1993), and result in improved public



Students prepare packages for AIDS and HIV-positive patients.

relations for the college (Berson 1993). Further, research has shown that students involved in service-learning programs show significant positive attitudinal changes toward others and toward themselves (Bringle and Kremer 1993), as well as significant gains on certain cognitive dimensions in pro-social thinking and reasoning (Batchelder and Root 1994).

In order for these benefits to materialize, however, students must view service learning as more than just documenting the minimum number of required volunteer hours, helping an individual or family in need, or completing a service project for a specific class. Instead of viewing it as a one-time activity, educators and students must view service learning as an integral part of institutional thinking while providing opportunities to apply decision-making, problem-solving, cooperation, critical-thinking, interpersonal, and value-prioritizing skills (Burrus-Bammel et al. 1993). All parties—including the student, university personnel, and members of the community—must develop, share, communicate, and agree to these and other specific objectives so that appropriate and meaningful experiences can be built into the service-learning component. Developed goals might correspond with university mission or vision statements, specific department or course objectives, or standards developed by professional organizations.

An efficient system also must be in place to provide appropriate and consistent feedback and evaluation of service-learning outcomes. Evaluating service-learning activities might be difficult because service is not a single, easily definable

activity and because service-learning activities have a wide range of plausible outcomes. However, researchers can employ both quantitative and qualitative research approaches (Conrad and Hedin 1991). To date, both of these research techniques indicate the positive impact of community service.

A review of the literature indicates that reflective student journals are the most frequent method of evaluating service-learning experiences, but portfolios, self-assessments, checklists or rating scales, criterion-referenced measures, and specific objectives tied to an academic course are additional ways of assessing effectiveness of the service-learning component. In addition to clearly defining the objectives of the service-learning activity and designing and implementing an appropriate ongoing method of evaluation, Porter and Schwartz (1993) emphasize these five guidelines for establishing community service programs:

1. the professor must be committed to spending time with students;
2. service-learning activities might be most appropriate with upper-level elective courses with limited enrollments;
3. a research project should be integral with the service-learning component;
4. student transportation and other logistical concerns must be addressed during the early planning phases; and
5. the course should be linked with only one or two agencies, for ease of communication and familiarity with various resources and personnel.

Besides these suggestions, we offer the following questions to help guide the development of any service-learning component:

- What specifically will the service learning component uniquely add to the course?
- Can those objectives be met in any other manner?
- What measures are in place to help students make the connections between the course work and the community work?
- Are all necessary supports in place?
- Are all interested parties well aware of

the expectations, objectives, and methods of evaluation?

Service learning allows thousands of students across the country to assist families, help the homeless, support the elderly and disabled, and volunteer for community and

environmental improvement projects while learning more about themselves and their chosen areas of study. With proper support, such opportunities—strategically planned in a student's educational career—can provide invaluable lifelong, life-

changing learning experiences that extend well beyond any textbook or any classroom wall. These lasting learning experiences seem to be the challenge and the promise of service learning for students today.

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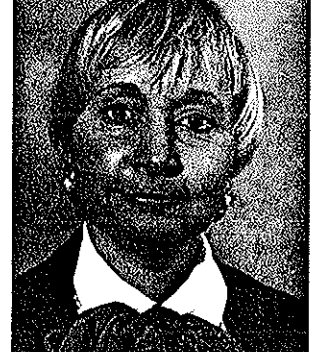
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