

1-1-2005

Service Learning at CSUMB: Civic Learning Across the Curriculum

Diane Cordero de Noriega
California State University at Monterey Bay, CA

Seth Pollack

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/slceslgen>

Recommended Citation

Cordero de Noriega, Diane and Pollack, Seth, "Service Learning at CSUMB: Civic Learning Across the Curriculum" (2005). *Service Learning, General*. 210.

<https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/slceslgen/210>

This Report is brought to you for free and open access by the Service Learning at DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Service Learning, General by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu.



Service Learning at CSUMB: Civic Learning Across the Curriculum

By Diane Cordero de Noriega and Seth Pollack

The campus will be distinctive in serving the diverse people of California, **especially the working class and historically undereducated and low-income populations...** The identity of the university will be framed by a substantive commitment to **multilingual, multicultural, gender-equitable learning...** Our graduates will have an understanding of **interdependence and global competence**, distinctive technical and educational skills, the experience and abilities to contribute to California's high quality work force, the critical thinking abilities to be productive citizens, and the **social responsibility and skills to be community builders**. *CSU Monterey Bay Vision Statement (1994, emphasis added)*

Introduction: Service Learning as a Graduation Requirement

Created in 1995 on the site of the former Fort Ord, California State University Monterey Bay (CSUMB) was designed to offer its students a model, 21st century education. While many aspects of CSUMB's innovative educational program have flourished (such as CSUMB's outcomes-based educational program, its focus on interdisciplinarity, and the integration of wireless technology in learning), CSUMB has been most recognized nationally for its innovative service learning requirement and its commitment to developing students' capacity and commitment to leading socially and civically engaged lives. This commitment to civic engagement is a central component of the CSUMB Vision Statement, which emphasizes that students will develop the "critical thinking abilities to be productive citizens, and the social responsibility and skills to be community builders" (CSUMB, 1994).

Unlike many higher education institutions that seek to promote an ethic of service through extra-curricular student programs and work-study efforts, CSUMB has made its commitment to service and civic engagement a core educational goal, placing service learning squarely at the heart of its academic program. All CSUMB undergraduates are required to complete two service learning courses: a required lower division course called "Introduction to Service in Multicultural Communities;" and an upper division service learning course in their major. The lower division course gives students a foundation in issues of service, social justice and social responsibility; and the upper-division course exposes students to social issues that are pertinent to their career or field of study. In both cases, students have the opportunity to work with community organizations that are working to address our most complex social issues. Through this two-semester service learning requirement, 50% of CSUMB students are enrolled in service learning courses each academic year, contributing tens of thousands of hours of work to local schools, agencies and non-profit organizations in the Monterey Bay region.

The goal of CSUMB's service learning program is to have students develop the capacity and will to be *multicultural community builders*: "students who have the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to work effectively in a diverse society to create more just and equitable workplaces, communities and social institutions" (Service Learning Institute, 2003). While the scope of the CSUMB service learning program is indeed impressive, and the hours of service truly significant, the most important contribution of the CSUMB service learning program is its success in integrating concepts of diversity, compassion, justice and social responsibility at the heart of all undergraduate degree programs. Through the service learning requirement, CSUMB students come to know intimately the rewards of active community involvement, and become more confident and committed to their role as community builders in our diverse, multicultural world.

Implementing such a broad vision for the integration of civic engagement throughout the curriculum has required CSUMB to reinterpret the conventional understanding of service learning. In essence, this has meant moving beyond an understanding of service learning as pedagogy, and emphasizing civic learning outcomes as a core component of all service learning courses.

The Conventional Paradigm: Service Learning as Pedagogy

As it has spread throughout higher education over the past two decades, service learning has largely been introduced to faculty as a pedagogy, a more effective, engaging and rewarding (though also more time consuming) approach to teaching. Faculty development programs have focused on introducing a variety of experiential learning techniques to harness the learning derived from the service experience in a way that is relevant to the academic goals of the course.

While there has been a lot of enthusiasm about forging community partnerships and the positive impact that students can have in the community (number of hours of service, monetary value added, etc.), the driving force for the integration of service learning in higher education has been service learning's effectiveness as a powerful, engaging pedagogy in helping students meet their course learning outcomes.

Service learning has found a comfortable home in higher education as a pedagogical strategy. In many cases, service learning offices are located within or connected to centers for faculty development. In this context, service learning (along with technology-mediated instruction, project-based learning, and outcomes-based learning, among others) is seen as one of a variety of potential strategies to help faculty members become more effective facilitators of student learning.

Appropriately for this pedagogical orientation, the word most closely associated with the field of service learning over the past two decades has been "reflection." Reflection is commonly understood to be the collection of strategies that help students mindfully turn their service experiences into relevant academic learning. Reflection is the hyphen in service-learning; the glue that holds these two disparate pieces of the enterprise together. As the emphasis over the past two decades has been on service learning as pedagogy, the field has done an excellent job of popularizing a variety of approaches to reflection. Most significantly, it has helped to legitimate "journaling" as a rigorous academic endeavor. Now ten years old, one of the seminal publications in the field, representing the first decade of learning about the "how to" of service learning, was "A Practitioner's Guide to Reflection in Service-Learning," by Janet Eyler, Dwight Giles and Angela Schmiede (1996). This was one of the first technical assistance projects funded by the Corporation for National Service, and was an answer to higher education's thirst for concrete insights into the pedagogical process of converting experience into learning. In the decade since the publication of "A Practitioner's Guide to Reflection in Service Learning," our approaches to reflection have become even more sophisticated as higher education has developed a greater comfort level with learner-center, experiential approaches to teaching and learning.

As has become evident over the past two decades, service learning is a powerful, engaging approach to teaching and learning (Eyler and Giles, 1999). Service learning involves students in real life work in real communities in real time. As a result, learning itself becomes real, and mastering technical, conceptual, and theoretical knowledge matters. When students don't show up for a tutoring session with elementary school children, or if their newly-developed web-site is not functional, there are real consequences that have a human face. This is very different from the

anonymity associated with missing a class or not handing in an assignment. But, as effective as service learning might be in making learning real and helping students to become engaged with the subject matter, we need to be careful not to conflate "engaged learning" with the development of a students' sense of and commitment to "civic engagement." Engaged learning is powerful learning, but it is not necessarily tapping into the social, civic or moral realm of student learning and of students' lives (Ehrlich, Colby, et. al., 2003). While engaged learning is a key characteristic of a service learning course, it is not its defining characteristic at CSUMB. Rather, service learning courses must also include explicit civic learning outcomes.

A Focus on Civic Learning: Moving from the "How To" to the "What" of Service Learning

While it is true that service learning is a powerful, engaged pedagogy, this only represents part of its essence. Over the past two decades the field has spent significant energy developing the "how to" of service learning (the pedagogy piece); but we have overlooked and under-discussed the "what" of service learning (the content piece related to "civic engagement"). What do we want students to learn from their experiences with service and civic engagement? And, how does this learning about service and civic engagement relate to the rest of the academic agenda to which students are exposed in their undergraduate programs?

At CSUMB, service learning is more than just a pedagogy or approach to teaching. It is also a knowledge-base that examines the complex intersection of issues of justice, compassion, diversity and social responsibility with the technical, conceptual and theoretical world of the academic disciplines (Service Learning Institute, 1999). This fundamental re-conceptualization has required a new organizational framework, one that places service learning squarely in the academic main tent as a full partner in the development and implementation of CSUMB's academic program. At CSUMB, service learning is not housed in a faculty development office. Nor is it a unit of student affairs. Service learning is an academic department, and a legitimate member of the academic community, participating in all aspects of academic program planning and implementation. The Service Learning Institute has tenured and tenure-track faculty, offers courses, and even offers a minor in Service Learning Leadership (a major is currently in development). Like other departments, it has a recognized expertise in a distinctive area of knowledge: in this case, knowledge related to issues of service, social justice and civic engagement.

As part of the founding Vision for the campus, all CSUMB majors devote curricular space to the development of the social, civic and moral capacities and commitments of their students. CSUMB's goal is to not just educate technically competent professionals, but to educate technically competent, socially responsible, and civically engaged professionals. As a legitimate member of the academic community at CSUMB, the Service Learning Institute has been well-placed to help each major develop this civic dimension of its academic program. Building on CSUMB's outcomes-based educational framework, service learning courses in each major have integrated explicit learning outcomes related to service and social justice into their courses. Students in CSUMB service learning courses don't just "do service," but they spend significant amount of class time "learning about service." For example, computer science students not only design web-sites and build networks for community organizations, but they examine the phenomenon known as the "digital divide" as a core component of their service learning course. They are wrestling with the question: has the digital revolution lessened or increased inequality in our society? Art students work with museums to collect, preserve and display historical objects. But they also actively debate what a museum's role in representing a diverse society's history and culture is. These students struggle with the question: who decides what is worth collecting, preserving and displaying? These are just two examples of how issues of service, social

responsibility and social justice have become embedded in the core of CSUMB's academic programs

With its explicit focus on civic learning outcomes, service learning is one way that civic engagement has become a legitimate and essential component of all academic programs, helping CSUMB fulfill the expectations of its Vision Statement that students will develop the "social responsibility and skills to be community builders."

Intentionality: Making Civic Learning a Core Responsibility of Higher Education

At CSUMB we challenge ourselves to be intentional in what we do. This purposefulness came out of our first WASC accreditation experience when the chair of our team, Dr. Judith Ramalay, constantly challenged us with the question, "to what end?" We had to reflect on what we were doing and to articulate the reasons why we thought it was important and what it meant to our students. We asked ourselves what we wanted our graduates to "look like" when they left us as a result of the CSUMB learning experience. We answered that question in a number of ways. Our mission statement says that we are committed to building a multicultural learning community, from which our graduates emerge prepared to contribute productively, responsibly and ethically to California and the global community. Our Vision Statement establishes "service learning" as a vehicle to enable students to develop the "critical thinking abilities to be productive citizens, and the social responsibility and skills to be community builders." Our intention is to educate the future generation of multicultural community builders, so that our graduates will leave with knowledge, skills, and abilities to be productive members of their future communities. They will understand what it means to be part of a community, how to contribute positively to the creation of more just and equitable communities, and to participate in the democratic process.

For students to be well prepared for our increasingly diverse and global society, students must develop the skills to work collaboratively across the differences that have traditionally separated the diverse segments of our society. Because we teach the concept of civic responsibility as a serious academic subject, rather than a voluntary topic explored according to self-interest, CSUMB's service learning program gives value to these issues and creates a clear expectation that our graduates will participate actively in the communities of their future.

Higher education must make this goal a core academic priority: to make civic learning a serious, legitimate and rigorous academic endeavor. For colleges and universities to truly take their place as engaged institutions, they must boldly adopt a more robust definition of service learning, and make social, moral, and civic learning a core component of their academic programs. Students should not just be "doing service," but they should be debating approaches to service, and digging deep into the meaning of terms such as "the commons," "the public," "social justice," and "participatory democracy." If we are to truly have an impact, these terms must become as commonly heard in the halls of our science, humanities and art buildings as in our political science departments. For this to occur faculty across the disciplines need to become immersed in this conversation, and themselves deepen their understanding of their own civic responsibility as professionals in their fields. Higher education must embrace civic learning as a core academic topic, which like "writing across the curriculum," manifests itself in every corner of the academy.

Building a vibrant democracy requires that each new generation of citizens become inspired to and capable of embracing their civic responsibilities and building our national commons. The challenges which globalization brings to this task in the twenty-first century requires that higher education play an even more central role in fulfilling this civic mission. If we want to live in a

society where people are able to move beyond difference and actively care about each other and work to build a new multicultural commons, then civic learning must become a central part of service learning, and a central part of higher education. Our future depends on our capacity to educate *multicultural community builders*.

Sources:

California State University Monterey Bay (1994). *Vision Statement*. [CSU Monterey Bay Web-site](#)

Ehrlich, Colby, Beaumont, and Stephens (2003). *Educating Citizens: Preparing America's Undergraduates for Lives of Moral and Civic Responsibility*. Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Eyler, Janet and Dwight E. Giles Jr. (1999). *Where's the Learning in Service-Learning?*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Eyler, J., Giles, D., Schmiede, A. (1996). *A practitioner's guide to reflection in service learning: Student voices and reflections*. Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University and the Corporation for National Service.

titute, "What is a Multicultural Community Builder?" *California State University Monterey Bay, Service Learning Institute Web-site*, 2003, 27 April 2005 [Service Learning Ins.](#)

Service Learning Institute , "CSUMB's Service Learning Prism," [California State University Monterey Bay Service Learning Institute Website](#), 1999, 27 April 2005.