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Student Service Learning and Student Activities -- A Perfect Fit

By Deborah Craig

"A thousand points of light ... Lifetime national service ... Be part of the solution ... The volunteer initiative ... Corporate volunteerism ..." These and other slogans have become popularized during the past few years as the "Me Generation" is being replaced by the "We Generation." Yes, volunteerism is once more in vogue, but the issues of the '80s and '90s are different from those of the '60s - .越南 and civil rights versus illiteracy and homelessness. Today's issues are less personal for today's typical college students. Very few of them have personally experienced illiteracy or having been homeless. But by engaging in service-learning, many students are touching and living with these and other important issues they study in class.

From small liberal arts colleges to community colleges to large four-year universities, many educational institutions have become committed to student service learning. In fact, campus volunteer centers exist on more than 450 college campuses throughout the nation. Each of these centers may well have evolved in a different way - under student direction, faculty direction, administrative direction, or any combination thereof. And student service learning programs are housed in many different departments. At Appalachian State University in Boone, NC, for example, the program is sponsored through the sociology department. At Berea College in Berea, KY, the campus ministry offices coordinate the program. At Northwestern University in Chicago, IL, it is considered a separate independent student organization, while at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, TN, the program consists of a dozen student organizations with coordination assistance provided by a professional student affairs staff person. At East Tennessee State University (the author's employer) in Johnson City, TN, the student activities center is an active supporter of its student service learning program through staffing and budgetary commitments. The university governing bodies in several states, such as California, Virginia and Florida, have made a commitment to support student service learning on each campus. Because each campus is different, recommending a specific model for all campuses to follow would be inappropriate.

But the student activities model appears to be successful on many campuses and has specific components that should be incorporated into all models.

Student Service Learning Defined

As we explore the possibilities of incorporating a student service learning program into student activities, let's define student service learning. According to the Partnership for Service Learning (a professional association committed to fostering the effective use of experience as an integral part of education), student service learning is defined as the "joining together of academic study and volunteer service so that the service makes relevant the academic study, and the study enhances and strengthens the work."

Incorporating Student Service Learning Into the Mission of the Student Activities Center

The coordination and purpose of a student service learning program fits appropriately within the mission of a student activities center. At East Tennessee State University, for example, the student activities center is comprehensive in nature. Its mission, which includes responsibility for union programming, student organizations, leadership development, Greek life and the campus volunteer center, is six-fold:

1. To provide support and services for all student organizations.
2. To provide leadership development opportunities for all segments of the student body.
3. To provide experiences to encourage all factions of the student body to interact and learn from each other.
4. To advocate for and provide experiences connecting classroom with out-of-classroom learning.
5. To be the communications link among all campus groups, thereby allowing for more cooperative programming.
6. To become the point of contact in building links between the students and the university community.

The coordination and purpose of a student service learning program fits appropriately within the mission of a student activities center. Listed below are examples of how a campus volunteer center (student service learning program) can work hand-in-hand with the mission of a student activities center like the one at ETSU:

1. Centralizing the volunteer opportunities in the student activities center gives all students and student organizations access to the program, training and volunteer placements that are available. Frequently, the community agency seeking volunteers (i.e. hospitals, United Way agencies, etc.) thinks only of sororities and fraternities when considering student organization volunteers. Small student groups aren't able to maintain contacts between their officers and community agencies to develop any kind of service program. Therefore, a student activities center can serve as a central clearinghouse.

2. Student service learning programs give student leaders and community leaders opportunities to work together on common goals. Community leaders come to campus regularly to speak and provide workshops for students. Community agencies offer excellent training programs to their volunteers. Community service opportunities are printed in the activities newsletter that is sent to all student groups and campus leaders. Leadership workshops incorporate community service projects and issues as discussion content. Student leadership development is a major outcome of service learning programs.

3. Student service learning programs give students experiences working with people of all racial, social, economic, religious and educational backgrounds. A college education, because of its cost and educational admission requirements, creates an environment that isolates students from the daily problems of most people on this planet. Studying about them in class, reading newspapers and watching television do not personalize these problems for today's students. Touching the lives of real people living with these problems through service learning programs is the key to breaking down barriers to understanding.

4. Service learning gives students opportunities to work in various community agencies as volunteers gaining work experience directly related to their major fields of study. On many campuses, this is known as experiential learning. Programs like these are invaluable in the career exploration and decision making process.

5. The student activities center has established...
lished itself as a communications link on campus. As such, it also links volunteer projects with students and student organizations. This centralized communications center for volunteerism helps not only the student but the community agencies connect faster and more effectively.

6. Being a mostly commuter campus with many non-traditional aged students, building links with the community is important for ETSU. For traditional aged students, it's a necessary part of their educational experience. Through the student service learning program, links have developed not only with the community agencies, but also with the chamber of commerce, city and county governments, the public schools and other area colleges.

The viability of using the student activities model for establishing a service learning program will depend largely on the following:

- the design and comprehensiveness of your student activities program;
- the amount of budget funds available for student activities;
- the political clout of the student affairs division on your campus;
- the staffing level of the activities office; and
- the commitment of the entire chain-of-command at your school to student service learning.

Getting Started

"Volunteerism is like fire — it only needs a spark to get it started, but it needs elements working together to keep it burning." — George Moody, national chairperson and acting president of the American Red Cross.

So now you want to get started or evaluate where you are in the development of your student service learning project. The following list of helpful hints was developed by Volunteer Action Leadership and shared by the Tennessee ACTION office. I offer the list with additional embellishments evolving from my own experience in this area:

- Although this is a student service learning project, a commitment of staff time and priorities is vital to the program's continuity. Written documentation as to its fit into the student activities center's mission and goals, as well as into the mission and goals of the student affairs division and university as a whole, are crucial to the budgetary survival of the program.
- Seek the support of your co-workers, supervisors and even the president's office. Present the mission and goals statement for your project, explaining their relationship to the mission and goals of the university. Keep all concerned parties informed as the project evolves. Memos, telephone calls, press releases, status reports and formal presentations are all appropriate ways to initiate and continue support. Successful programs do not survive in a vacuum.

- Keep students involved in all steps of the program, from initial ideals and discussions to the ongoing business of managing the program. Don't let it become labeled as a program for only certain types of students (i.e. greeks, student government, or social work majors). Maintain diversity among the students involved.

- Don't reinvent the wheel. Work with the agencies in your community. From community-based volunteer centers to United Way agencies to directors of hospital volunteer services, all of them can provide your center with helpful advice, community connections and basic information about the needs of your
community. Instead of duplicating their services, build on the foundations they have already established.

- Write down the parameters of what in your program will be defined as volunteer work. With what kinds of agencies and projects will you work? When do you draw the line on political issues? What kinds of records and documentation will you require of students, student groups and the agencies? Does fund raising for agencies count as volunteer service; and if so, how does the amount of money raised translate into volunteer hours? These and other questions will need to be answered, policies set and definitions (of the program) established.

- While community ties are important to a service learning project, so is the location of the campus volunteer center. Keep it on campus.

- Create a recognition/reward system for your volunteers and build it into your program from the very beginning. Inject a little competition into the process (ETSU's recognition system is detailed later in this article). We all work for some kind of recognition and seek to be the best. Volunteers are no different. Monies spent on this part of your program will pay off in many ways.

- Consult national associations that focus on and/or support community volunteerism and attend their conferences. Help your students feel they are part of a national effort. Students today want to make a difference in their communities and in their world. Here are some groups that might be helpful:

  - Campus Outreach Opportunity League (COOL)
    386 McNeal Hall
    University of Minnesota
    St. Paul, MN 55106
    Telephone: 612-624-3018
  
   - Youth Service America (YSA)
    1319 F St. NW, Suite 900
    Washington, DC 20004
    Telephone: 202-783-8853

- Campus Contact
  P.O. Box 1975
  Brown University
  Providence, RI 02912
  Telephone: 401-863-1119

- Volunteer, the National Center
  1111 N. 19th St., Suite 500
  Arlington, VA 22209
  Telephone: 703-276-0572.

- ACTION
  1100 Vermont Ave. NW
  Washington, DC 20525
  Telephone: 202-634-9108

The Partnership for Service Learning
815 Second Ave., Suite 315
New York, NY 10007
Telephone: 212-986-0989

- Believe in your students. Some of the worst fears we all have pertaining to a program like this involves whether or not the students show up, do a good job, project a good image, etc. Four years of experience in this area has taught me that students want to please. They care and are committed, too. If you do your job of keeping them involved in all parts of the process and in providing some recognition, they'll be there every step of the way. Expect the best and your students will expect the best from the program and from themselves, too.

- Accept your students "where they are" with respect to their personal motivations and goals for becoming volunteers. Their motives for signing up for volunteer work may not always be as altruistic as we'd like. We must remember we are educators, and that in time, students participating in a student service learning program will learn about community needs.

- Spend time educating community agencies about how to appropriately utilize the services of student volunteers. The agencies need to know that: student volunteers have schedules of their own and can't be demanded at a moment's notice; a student's first priority is to go to class; summer, spring, Christmas breaks and exam weeks are all times when student may not be available; and students new to volunteerism feel "safer" participating in group projects first. Quite honestly, it has been my experience that this is the one area that causes the most problems. Some agencies have not treated volunteers with respect, and this experience has taught us at ETSU to say "no" to these agencies. The last thing you want is to have an agency "turn off" a student volunteer.

How It All Began for ETSU

The Volunteer ETSU program idea at East Tennessee State University began when student leaders, after hearing the director of a community volunteer center speak, identified the following immediate needs:

1. They wanted an on-campus clearinghouse for volunteer opportunities.

2. They wanted recognition from the campus and community for the volunteer work they do.

3. The Greek organizations were being asked to do everything by the community and felt awkward in refusing requests. The other student groups wanted to participate in projects, but didn't know how to make necessary connections.

4. Individual students wanted volunteer placements related to their academic majors. An eight-person student steering committee was formed and began meeting to lay the groundwork, define parameters, determine location and seek support for the program. By the end of the semester (February-April), the following had been accomplished:

- Commitment had been received from the student affairs division to house the program in the student activities center.

- Commitment had been received from the president's office to begin such a program.

- Commitment had been received from the student steering committee to proceed.

A working relationship had been developed between the local community volunteer center and the student activities center.

- A student organization called Volunteer ETSU had registered on campus complete with constitution, etc.

- Letters had been sent to community agencies announcing our program kick-off in September and how to contact us.

- Grant monies available from ACTION (see below) had been identified and applied for.

- Office space had been secured in the student activities center.

- A recognition system for volunteers had been defined.

The anticipation and excitement of what was to begin that next fall could hardly be contained. We were about to embark on a program that could have such a positive impact! But one nagging question remained -- could we make it work?

However, September arrived and the program seemed to "take off" faster than we ever thought possible. We received grant monies from ACTION that allowed us to hire a graduate student to assist in coordinating the program. Requests from agencies for volunteers came in quickly. The city newspaper responded very positively with several articles and editorials about the new program. We began working with more agencies than I ever knew existed. The eight-member student steering committee grew to 12. We began assigning steering committee members to be liaisons to specific agencies/programs with whom we seemed to be working most frequently. New resource materials were developed. In addition to the usual student activities center fare, such as "How to Run a Meeting" etc., we now offer such packets as "How to Do a Food Drive" and "How to Organize a Blood Drive." Student groups began appointing volunteer coordinators to their roster of officers and committee chairs.

Our recognition program has worked extremely well. Individual volunteers are nominated for Volunteer Spotlight Awards sponsored through the local community volunteer center. We have recently been added to the list of communities now offering the J.C. Penney Golden Rule Awards, another recognition system for individual volunteers. For group volunteers, we offer the Volunteer Group of the Month and Volunteer Group of the Year awards. These are presented according to category of
student organization -- Greeks, residence halls and independent groups. We believe this allows all groups to feel they can compete.

We also issue numerous press releases about our volunteers and keep a glass display case in the university center devoted to volunteer recognition and opportunities. We host a volunteer recognition reception on campus in the fall and co-sponsor National Volunteer Week activities in the spring in conjunction with several community agencies. The Campus Activities Board programs one concert each spring as a student volunteer appreciation night and our food service serves cake and punch. This year, the students have begun recognizing a faculty/staff community volunteer of the month with an article in the faculty/staff newsletter, a donated dinner for two and a certificate. The recipient will also be invited to the student volunteer reception in the fall.

Where is Volunteer ETSU today? We are now totally budgeted through the student activities center and have a 22-member student steering committee. We average more than 500 student volunteers per year in our program who generate more than 10,000 service hours per year (for the first three years; service hours jumped to 17,142 this past year).

This campus has a student body count of 11,000, 65 percent of whom commute. Student service learning is the perfect "student activity" in which commuter and adult students like to participate. The activities are community-based and the experiences gained through these activities are very practical in nature. Also, the faculty and administration view Volunteer ETSU in a very positive light because they actually see student groups do more than party. Faculty are not only starting to stipulate more volunteer work as part of their class requirements, but they are referring students to us to make the volunteer placements. The beginnings of an experiential learning program have come about because of this and the students' original need to have volunteer placements made related to their academic major. These ties with the academic side of campus have served to strengthen the position of the student activities center and strongly support our mission to provide out-of-classroom education.

Specific Projects
Volunteer ETSU began by specializing in placing groups of volunteers into short-term placements. (Placing groups of volunteers turned out to be a need the Johnson City community volunteer center could not meet.) This proved to be a way to allow everyone to "get their feet wet." The students learned about the agency and the project, and the agencies learned how to work with college students. As the students explored various agencies and volunteer projects, they were soon able to make decisions as to which program they'd like to work for on a long term, individual basis. Volunteer ETSU now makes many individual student placements, but rarely do we place anyone individually without first having placed them in a group volunteer situation.

Volunteer ETSU has established a new pool of volunteers and fostered better relations between the campus and community. The program has trained large numbers of volunteers who have learned how they can make a difference, who will be in our community for many years, and who have learned to enjoy getting involved. Through the program, ETSU students have been involved in a wide range of volunteer experiences, including:

- Project: three campus blood drives -- spring, summer and fall 1988; Involvement: 250 student volunteers involved in publicity, set-up, check-in, unpacking blood collection bags, serving as escorts, load-up and donating blood, too; Outcome: 511 units of blood collected for the American Red Cross.
- Project: National Student Clean-up for Hunger, May 1990; Involvement: 150 students solicited funds and beautified seven areas of Johnson City by collecting trash and recycling; Outcome: $1,164 raised for local and national hunger projects, plus $300 worth of donated trash bags, gloves, a newspaper advertisement and free food coupons for volunteers.
- Project: National Volunteer Week Breakfast, April 1990; Involvement: sponsored in conjunction with McDonald's, the Junior League and Volunteer Johnson City; Outcome: provided free breakfast, certificates of appreciation and recognition for more than 500 volunteers from the Johnson City/Washington County area.
- Project: Toys for Tots, December 1989; Involvement: 17 student organizations collected toys; Outcome: 536 toys were collected.
- Project: Special Olympics, April 20, 1990, and Oct. 10-21, 1989; Involvement: 800 students assisted in all aspects of competitions; Outcome: more successful games with 900 participants.
- Project: canned food drive, November-December 1989; Involvement: 11 student organizations collected foods; Outcome: 481 items were donated to the Salvation Army.
- Project: United Way fundraising campaign; Involvement: hundreds of students raised money by sponsoring a charity carnival, road race, dance and selling "presidential pardons" (from dorm room checks); Outcome: $3,740.50 was raised by students for the United Way.
- Project: placement in various community service agencies; Involvement: Many students have been placed in a variety of agencies, including the American Diabetes Association, American Heart Association, March of Dimes, Veterans Administration Hospital, American Cancer Society, Ronald McDonald House, Big Brother/Big Sister, Association for Abused and Exploited Children and Veterans Administration; Outcome: improved relations between the student population and the community and an increase of 7,000 volunteer service hours during the past year.

Dollars and Cents
What kind of price tag is attached to such a program? Staffing costs are comparatively small. The student activities center director's and secretary's time (20 percent and 15 percent, respectively) are donated to the program. The volunteer coordinator works 20 hours per week and is paid at a graduate student's rate. Other items the budget should allow for are office supplies, copying charges, telephone, printing, postage, professional memberships, travel, plaques, trophies and food for an awards reception. Office space and furnishings may be a consideration on some campuses. It is considered part of the university's support here. A basic operating budget of $4,000-$5,000 (excluding salaries and office rent) will buy a basic quality program.

Alternate funding sources for your program should be considered as well. Some campuses, the alumni have donated start-up funds for service learning projects. Other centers have received corporate donations. Grant monies are available from some foundations and state or federal government. Suggested organizations to contact for grant money include ACTION, FISP, Fund for the Improvement of Secondary Education, and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. Also, keep your eye on the Kennedy-Hatch compromise substitute bill, the National Service Act of 1990 (S.1430). At this writing it had passed the Senate and was being discussed in the House. There could be some funding sources to come out of this measure.

Liability
Liability, of course, is a concern in establishing a campus volunteer center. If your school is a state institution you are essentially self-insured and any precautions taken with student organizations would be taken here. Some grant funded programs require a specific liability insurance policy be purchased to cover students traveling to volunteer sites and their actions at the site.

In general, steps can be taken to reduce any liability involved in student service learning programs with training for volunteers and a little common sense:

- Be sure to take adequate information about the volunteer opportunity: time, place, job to do, skills required. It's acceptable to say "no" if you feel uncomfortable about referring students there.
- Responsibility for transportation to the volunteer site is the student's. Involvement in transporting volunteers and/or those they serve is one area where you are more at risk when it comes to liability.
- Follow-up should be done with volunteers.
as well as agencies. Identifying any problems and correcting them helps minimize liability.

- If the volunteer’s work is done directly with a client, try to limit clients to those referred by a community agency. The agency is better equipped to handle any pre-screening of clients.

- Encourage volunteers to attend agency training sessions. Mandatory training may be required for some placements.

Some agencies carry insurance for their volunteers, but many do not. In Tennessee, the Volunteer Protection Act extends partial immunity to volunteers. If someone chose to sue, they would have have to prove gross negligence, that the act in question was willful, reckless and intentional. (Many other states have similar protective legislation.) With good planning and training, however, the risk of such acts will be minimal.

Evaluation

The Volunteer ETSU program has had few difficulties, and suggestions offered throughout this article should help you prevent most problems with your student service learning program. Our program’s benefits have become visible everywhere. The relationship between student volunteers and the community is very positive, and local residents, businesses, the chamber of commerce members, etc. have all offered me favorable comments about the program. This has been very helpful in breaking down a perceived wall between ETSU and the community at large. Also, the number of “youthful” volunteers returning to community agencies on an individual basis, and in groups, has greatly increased; and the agencies speak very highly of our volunteers.

Marian Wright Edelman, the first black woman admitted to the Mississippi bar and founder of the Children’s Defense Fund, said in a convocation address at ETSU that “I hope that you will be the leaders of the next generation who are not afraid to lose for things that matter; who will understand that nonparticipation in the outside world or total devotion to one’s job or one’s children is in the long run not in one’s own or in the nation’s self-interest... Do not give up, or ever cease believing that each of us -- as individuals -- can make a critical difference if we simply care enough and bring to that caring skill, targeted action and persistence.

“Action precedes commitment,” she added. “Our actions -- which persistently challenge our students to take a stand, get involved, hope, risk, dream -- make all the difference.”

Isn’t it what student activities is all about -- making a difference in our students’ lives, teaching them participation, caring for others, how to take action, how to be leaders? I hope you’ll make community service a part of your activities program.

References


Deborah Craig

Deborah Craig is assistant director of the University Center for Student Activities at East Tennessee State University in Johnson City. She holds a master’s degree in guidance and counseling and a bachelor’s degree in secondary math education, both from the University of South Florida. She is a member of NACA’s 1991 National Convention Committee, serving as educational session coordinator for student service learning. Her previous involvement in NACA includes service on the 1990 National Convention Committee and as chairperson of the Student Organizations Task Force of the Campus Organizations Committee. She is a member of the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators and of the Association of College Unions-International. She also serves on the board of directors of Volunteer Johnson City and is president of the Leadership Alumni Association for the Johnson City/Washington County Chamber of Commerce. Although she is a first-time author for Programming, she has written articles dealing with commuter student orientation and collaborative programming for The Commuter, a publication of the National Clearinghouse for Commuter Programs.
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