

The community service trust act

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With the passing of the National and Community Service Trust Act of 1993, there is increased focus on integrating student community service, volunteerism and service learning into the curriculum. Service learning can be a key to unlock our nation's potential. Promising that national service will "strengthen the cords that bind us together as a people," President Clinton signed legislation creating AmeriCorps.

The new program, scheduled for late 1994, will in its first year provide 20,000 young people with 7,425 in annual wages plus health benefits and child care benefits if needed and \$4,725 in educational benefits in exchange for a full year of grassroots community service work. In a MacArthur Foundation publication on youth service, Judy Karasik reported that America is "experiencing an explosion of youth idealism, activism, and commitment to engaged citizenship". In record numbers, Americans are reaching out. It is no longer a matter of noblesse oblige, in which the rich reach down to help the poor.

Today's volunteers are people of every socioeconomic level helping each other. There are still wealthy philanthropists who serve those less privileged, but the women who would have served in previous generations are now working for pay at demanding jobs. They are often too exhausted to add community service to their other responsibilities. From Miami to Seattle, the United States of the 1990s is ripe for answers to the seemingly insurmountable social problems plaguing large cities and small towns.

While we have almost become indifferent to the familiar litany of social ills--crime, drugs, teen pregnancy, homelessness, juvenile delinquency--the

response to many of our community problems has been a new student activism burgeoning on our college campuses. Programs range from student organizations assisting the US Marines with their annual Toys for Tots program to full-time internships in social service agencies. A week after Hurricane Andrew struck southern Dade County, Florida, Broward Community College students had "adopted" Florida City and mobilized to help survivors rebuild their community.

Teams of students, along with faculty and staff, traveled to Florida City on weekends to assist in the cleanup. Back in Broward County, some of these same students mentor at-risk youngsters, tutor high school students with specific learning disabilities, act as student ambassadors to the community, and serve as peer educators providing vital HIV/AIDS prevention information to their classmates. Interior design students in Texas redesigned the Alzheimer care unit of a local hospital while classmates renovated a homeless shelter.

In Colorado, architectural students redesigned a town hall. At Miami-Dade Community College, Florida, students received academic credit for producing a play performed by students, faculty and residents of a homeless center. "I learned more from them than I have all my life" said David, a student, referring to the homeless people he worked with in the play. Student community service and service learning are powerful learning experiences for students, providing a way to effect change and address our nation's pressing social problems.

Students who volunteer receive more than just the satisfaction of helping those in need: they learn responsibility, build character, solve problems, and gain a better understanding of their Community colleges have a unique opportunity to be on the cutting edge of this new paradigm. Speaking at a Florida Council of Student Affairs meeting, Chris Gilmore, director of the Florida Governor's Commission on National and Community Service, urged deans and vice presidents to remember that one-third of the community college mission is service.

Citing a study in which 100 percent of the students reported that their service experience was more important than their academic studies, Gilmore noted, " There is no better way to learn leadership than by leading, and no better way to learn the value of service than by serving". The term " community service" often conjures up visions of forced restitution, of convicted criminals sentenced to pay off their debts to society for infractions ranging from speeding tickets to felonies.

For our students, the accepted definition of community service is unpaid work that everyone can do to improve the quality of life of those being served, of those serving, and ultimately of the community as a whole. The primary goal lies in attacking civic apathy while participating in activities that serve community needs. Out-of-classroom learning programs have gained in popularity since emerging in the mid 1960s when President Kennedy urged the nation to " ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country.

He called upon the nation's young to serve society in the military, community service, the international Peace Corps, or domestic VISTA programs for two-years of national service. Since that time many colleges and universities have been actively integrating student volunteerism, internships, and community service into their programs. Thousands of college students are currently working in literacy programs, day care centers, soup kitchens, and facilities for the elderly. Very often the difference between someone failing and making it is just one person who cares about them.

Student volunteers can change the course of history by touching the lives of many while gaining valuable life experience. What sets service learning apart from other types of non-traditional education programs, according to Neil Merrell, director of the Center for Public Policy and Service at Mesa Community College, is that " service learning is the blending of academic study and community service. " At Mesa, says Merrell, " our goal is to encourage students to become lifelong, active participants in the community. "

Service can be integrated into a class in several ways, an extra credit option; as a substitute for a requirement, such as a paper, exam, or project; or an integral part of the course, if the class is on a related topic, like social problems. Service learning is the integration of community service into an organized setting where the servers also reflect on the meaning of their service. By combining service with a reflective educational framework, the benefits far exceed those of service or learning separately. Reflection can

take place in groups or individually, in a written or oral format, by using journals or essays.

In service learning the volunteer work is related to the course. The process of reflection is an essential part of integrating the service experience into course work. Through structured reflection activities, individuals develop an appreciation for the connection between their community service activities and the underlying issues of the social problem being addressed. Trish Joyce, a Broward Community College English professor, offered a service option to students in her Introduction to the Short Story course.

After some reluctance, David Manko, a computersciencemajor, volunteered to read stories to children at the campus child care center. Joyce points to the following excerpts of David's reflective journal as " a shining example of what " I told him no, that it only looked that way because the ants are so small. The children were all wondering about the crystals the ants were so interested in so I decided to show them, using a grain of sand. I told the kids that to an ant this looks like a giant rock and they are strong enough to carry them. They understood and wanted to look at the pictures in the book again...

If I were to write a children's story those are some of the characteristics I would include... Each experience I have with the children, I feel I have shown them a little of the enormous and very diverse world of literature. " . A student's collegecareeris a time of training, not only for a career, but for life. Service learning programs are designed to make social service an integral part of students' lives during and after college. The training gained through

service could provide new career opportunities, or simply an experience to benefit everyone involved.

Research by Arthur Levine of Harvard University shows an estimated 64 percent of college and university students participate in public service activities in addition to their course work. Mark Cooper, a Broward Community College alumnus, heads the student-initiated Volunteer Action Center at Florida International University (FIU). Cooper, who began the FIU program two years ago while a student, believes that "service learning works because it is based on one simple principle: you don't learn the basics by memorizing the basics, but by doing projects in which you utilize the basics.

Surely if education is supposed to prepare the next generation, we should be teaching active citizenship rather than rote memorization. The real value, though, lies in enhanced learning. Research by Judith Boss on her University of Rhode Island ethics classes showed that a service learning component improves learning. Solving community problems is a bonus. The nation is looking toward its colleges to stem the torrent of violence and civic apathy by instilling such core values as honesty and respect for life.

The Wingspread Group, a blue ribbon panel on higher education, developed a 42-point college checklist to improve educational offerings. The panel urged administrators to ensure that "next year's entering students will graduate as individuals of character, more sensitive to the needs of community, more competent to contribute to society, and more civil in habits of thought, speech and action." Service learning experiences build

new relationships between students and instructors, between the community and the college or university, and between the people being served, and the students, benefiting all involved.

Properly prepared students augment service delivery for overburdened community agencies, allowing closer contact with clientele, and providing extra staff support. The college gains an improved public relations image. More than any other educational institution, the community college's very mission is enmeshed with a commitment to improve the communities that surround its campuses. The existence of both mandatory and voluntary community service programs is nothing new for many private liberal arts institutions and public universities.

Even high schools in many states are adding service hours to their graduation requirements. However, while service learning is a nice enhancement to these educational offerings, service is integral to the very essence of the community college mission. Karen Bojar, an English Professor at the Community College of Philadelphia, includes service learning activities in her literature classes. She states " Community college students have deep roots in the community; thus, community service sets the stage for lifelong commitment.

She views formal volunteering through a structured experience as a career skill and teaches her students how to incorporate their volunteer work into their resumes. In the most successful service learning programs, colleges and universities work together in a partnership with community-based organizations and civic leaders in identifying needs, planning and

establishing the service projects. Community awareness is essential to the success of any service learning program.

For years, colleges and universities have sought creative methods of providing on-the-job training to augment classroom learning. The value of such a goal is demonstrated by student participation in extracurricular and student life activities, where self esteem is strengthened and the roles of commitment and responsibility are reinforced through employment. Potential employers have always valued on-the-job experience, often more so than academic credentials. Employers are placing a high value on community service experience as well.

An increasing number of corporations are establishing corporate foundations and community giving programs. Many encourage employee volunteerism through matching programs, match employee monetary gifts, and lend their executives to assist non-profit organizations. It is always desirable for students to become more focused as they explore career choices. Student employment provides non-threatening opportunities to experience job options without a full-time commitment. Working for the common good, however, adds a sense of urgency as the needs for increased levels of civic responsibility become more and more critical.

Since 1954 there has been a 15 percent increase in the number of college graduates entering the field of social work. We may soon be able to witness a marked increase as more college students have a chance to learn through service to others. . In addition to the value of the experience itself, most of the student participants at Broward Community College receive service

scholarships to reduce their need to borrow to pay for college. Although many of the participants reluctantly admit they signed up initially for the money, they stayed involved even when the scholarships were exhausted.

When asked, they said they feel they got more out of the experience than the recipient of their services. The following steps will enable administrators to create a successful service learning program: Begin with a small core of interested faculty, preferably individuals who are activists themselves and already participate in community service endeavors. Form an advisory committee with membership including representatives from faculty, staff, students, corporations, and local community agencies.

This committee can provide useful feedback, encourage faculty to buy into service learning for their classes, and win needed support from students and the community. Include students and faculty in the planning. Students must be involved in every aspect of developing the service learning program, from planning through implementation, though the institution should serve as administrative support to coordinate the program. Establish an office to provide service support and coordinate the program with faculty, develop agency contacts, place students, monitor service hours, and maintain co-curricular transcript data.

Find a lightning rod with clout and provide incentives to reward faculty involvement. Elizabeth Ann Gilver, director of the Haverford College, Pennsylvania, Career and Community Service Program, recommends reassuring teachers that their students' course work will not suffer and using

concessions to defuse opposition from the faculty In an effort to document the community involvement of students, student development transcripts are becoming popular as addenda to academic transcripts.

They provide students with a documented record of their out-of-classroom experiences. These records of co-curricular activities can be presented to potential employers to indicate additional job skills acquired while performing community work. As public service gains popularity and jobs become more scarce, volunteering for community service will be viewed as yet another way for job applicants to enhance their resumes. Maintaining records of service also provide an excellent method to recognize student involvement.

Several institutions use graduation and other ceremonies to present awards or plaques to students based on number of hours of service performed. A brightly colored cord or tassel on students' mortarboards can also be used to honor service achievements. At some institutions, a single instructor or group of faculty members have developed ways to creatively integrate service experiences into specific courses with no institutional support. Many four-year institutions have programs that are initiated and run by students, either through student clubs and organizations or by individual students.

However, because of the abbreviated programs and short tenure of typical community college students, community colleges wishing to sustain a viable service learning program must make the commitment of a full-time faculty or staff member to coordinate their program. There are numerous departments that can assume overall responsibility for a service learning

program--Student affairs, academic affairs, cooperative education, student employment, financial aid, student activities, student life, placement, or career services offices can all play a role.

There is no one answer that will satisfy the individual needs of all institutions, each with very different organizational structures. The common denominator in successful service learning programs is enthusiastic program personnel coupled with a strong institutional commitment, as long term sustain ability is largely dependent on a commitment from top administration. When searching for funding, don't leave any stone unturned. Grants are available to cover startup costs from such sources as the Corporation on National and Community Service, the U. S.

Department of Education Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education (FIPSE), state agencies, etc. Some institutions have earmarked student activity fees to cover program operating costs. Others have successfully negotiated institutional budgetary support. Work closely with your counterparts in resource development, financial aid, and grants, to seek out operating funds. If your institution provides staff and program development support or mini-grants to pilot new programs, apply for start-up funds. Appeal to local private and public foundations, corporations and individual donors.

Seek out program funds or scholarships for the students. Donors are often more willing to provide tuition assistance for students who also give something back to their community. By focusing on the needs of others, students gain a sense of compassion and social awareness that develops

when people help each other. A national survey conducted by Allan Luks revealed that people who do regular volunteer work report that good feelings keep them generally healthier and happier. In his book, *The Healing Power of Doing Good*, he suggests that working through an organization makes volunteers more likely to continue regular volunteer activities.

By providing college students with an organized means to experience service learning, colleges can foster a lifelong commitment to altruism. There are those who see the world's ills as insurmountable and make no effort to address them. There are others who believe that each of us can make a difference through individual acts of civic responsibility.

Toward that end, every community college in the nation should provide its students with a variety of volunteer, community service, public service and service learning experiences to prepare them for a role of active citizenship and participation in improving the quality of life in their communities. Think what a legacy we could leave our children and their children if we could imbue each of the nearly 9 million students that annually pass through our doors each year with such a notion. The ripple effect would certainly go a long way toward making our world a better place.