

Service Learning for Success – Three Cases at The University of Akron

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Abstract

Service Learning is a form of education where students are assigned to participate in a variety of activities that combines what was learned in the classroom with community service projects. It requires knowledge, skills and passion from the faculty, students and community members that all work together in the real world. In recent years, service learning has been included in many academic disciplines throughout the United States. This paper examines three case studies to explain how service learning was designed for student success at The University of Akron.

The significance of service learning

The significance of service learning can be viewed in the literature. Here are outstanding five perspectives: Firstly, service learning has been in existence long before the term was used. Students have been used actively by schools to contribute to the betterment of society, but it is a growing construct that is beginning to be used widely across the nation. Institutions that use service learning can measure the overall productivity of their academic programs by viewing how well their students apply the knowledge they learned in the class out in the community. Service learning uses the experiences that the students have to advance current curriculum and show results for their program [1].

Secondly, research on service learning indicates that it increases student attendance, promotes the academic knowledge and skills, fosters personal development among students, promotes civic responsibility, increases community-school linkages and yields valuable benefits to the community [6]. Service learning takes what students learn in the classroom and applies it to real life situations, creating avenues for students to express what they have learned, which allow evaluators to monitor progress of the students and to determine the competence of those students.

Thirdly, by designing service learning projects, faculties are equipping the students with the necessary tools to actively contribute to the community and prepare them for a future as professionals. Service learning is important because it provides a hands-on experience. Sitting in a class is important, but how students learn to truly utilize that information in real life is even more important. Service learning also teaches faculty and staff how to best present information and curriculum in schools. By learning how students conduct themselves in the community, faculties can shape their curriculum to better attend to the needs of the students and the community [1].

Fourthly, service learning acts as the gateway between school and a future career. By having a hand-on experience, students learn what is needed for real life. Through service learning students may find a particular field of interest that they would want to pursue in the future. Service learning is essential because it shows students how to prepare for a career after school. Through their service in the community, they can learn from mistakes early on and adjust to practice effectively. Service learning helps to teach students the expectations and demands of the professional world. Through the effective use of service learning, students learn effective skills and strategies that will benefit them after school and in their future careers [4].

Lastly, the community gains an institution to rely on and go to when issues or problems arise [6]. The community-university partnership is a crucial component in maintaining proper service learning practices.

Service learning cases

At The University of Akron, service learning is one of the strategic means to reach the five above-mentioned goals. As shown in Table 1, in the 2012-2013 Academic Year, 7,723 students were enrolled in service learning courses at The University of Akron. This shows that service learning is of growing importance for the academic curriculum of The University of Akron. Service learning can be crucial in maintaining retention and enhancing career development. Bringle, Hatcher and Muthiah [4]. conducted a study to determine if service learning in fact, had an impact on the retention of first year to second year college students.

Table 1. Service-learning data of 2012-2013 academic-year at The University of Akron:

Number of service learning courses	371
Number of departments represented by service learning courses	46
Number of faculty who taught service learning courses	136
Number of students participating in service learning courses	7,723

(Data from Institute of Teaching and Learning, The University of Akron)

Service learning case 1 – whole university involvement

Service learning gives The University of Akron the great opportunity to develop and build relationships in the community. Service learning can be crucial in helping to link and create new resources for students and for the community as a whole. The university can work to create and form new partnerships in the community. With the university working in partnership with the community, it can create new opportunities for everyone.

Eight hundred University of Akron students and staff participated in Make a Difference Day [3] in Summit County, Ohio on October 25th, 2014. Make a Difference Day is a university-wide volunteer service day that occurs on the last Saturday of October. The University of Akron is in its tenth year of participation in the event. During the day, participants go into the community and engage in community service at agencies and places throughout Summit County. Make a Difference Day gives student the opportunity to give back to the community. Mitchell Hall, a nursing major at the University Akron, said “I love this event because it makes it so easy for individuals to complete community service and really shows students the importance of giving back to the community.” By creating opportunities for students to get involved in the community, the university is helping to create careers. By being offered opportunities like service learning, students stay in school and cite community service as a factor in them choosing a major and future career. Megan Vermillion, a social work major at the university said “getting to meet students who are volunteering is always delightful because they all have stories to tell as to why they are participating in Make a Difference Day.” This university-wide community service created opportunities for students and faculty to be involved in activities outside of the classroom [3]. This service learning opportunity can be a great experience for students, who are the future educators, social workers, nurses and other professionals. Through this large-scale partnership, individuals can better access resources in the community. The community and the university can work together to combat current issues in the community.

Service learning case 2—service learning for the first year students

Service learning has gained recognition as a curricular strategy that yields multiple positive outcomes for students. Students in service learning courses have educationally meaningful community service experiences that enhance their undergraduate education and beyond [2]. Service learning can contribute to overall satisfaction with college by injecting student involvement in the learning process itself. Service learning is related to retention for students.

Service learning engages the students, provides frequent feedback, fosters collaboration with the community, and promotes real life tasks. For first-year students in service learning, their academic experiences are enhanced by the curriculum and foster those students pursuance of furthering education.

Service learning was used to help the first-year students become familiar with the campus and the community. Dr. B. Zhao designed service learning for the first-year students of Student Success Seminar. Table 2 showed the semesters and year that each class was offered, student number registered for the class, percentage of students reported positive experience with Service Learning, and percentage of participants who expressed intention to return to do service after the class.

The Fall 2011 class was the first class designed for Service Learning by the author. The number of students registered for the classes was 23. Service Learning was required for four hours. 87% of students expressed positive experiences with Service Learning, and over 57% students expressed intention to return to do service after the class and more hours should be planned (See Table 2).

The Fall 2012 class was designed once again for Service Learning by the author. The number of students registered for the classes was 21. Service Learning was required for four hours. 90% of students expressed positive experiences with Service Learning, and 71% students expressed intention to return to do service after the class (See Table 2).

The Fall 2013 class was designed for Service Learning by the author. The number of students registered for the classes was 24. Service Learning was required for four hours. 87% of students expressed positive experiences with Service Learning, and over 57% students expressed intention to return to do service after the class (See Table 2).

Table 2: Service-learning data for three classes of student success seminar at The University of Akron

Semester /year	# in class	% reported positive experiences	% expressed return to service after class
Fall/2011	23	87	57
Fall/2012	21	90	71
Fall/2013	24	91	58

Service learning case 3 —social work area

Field education in Social Work, The University of Akron is considered as service learning, and is required in the social work discipline. The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), the accrediting body for most Schools of Social Work in the United States and some countries outside the United States, states “Signature pedagogy represents the central form of instruction and learning in which a profession socializes its students to perform the role of practitioner.” “In social work, the signature pedagogy is field education.” [5]. The goal of field education is to connect the theoretical and conceptual influence of the classroom with the practical world of the practice setting. Classroom and field service are viewed as having equal importance within the curriculum. Naomi White, a senior instructor and the field coordinator at The University of Akron School of Social Work coined the term “a classroom without walls” when referring to field education. White stated: “Students take the concept of service learning and complement it with two components: a professional helping relationships with a professional helper. The goal of service learning as an application is expanded to include a specific client system (individual, family, group, agency/organization, and/or community) and the student is now expected to learn a specific set of competencies to effectively help that system.” All social work students are required to be in the field serving a client system for a predetermined amount of hours per semester or per year. Students completing their baccalaureate degree require 225 hours per semester / 450 hours year. There are two different field requirements for graduate students in the social work program depending upon where they are in the program. First-year graduate students, known as foundation students, require 200 hours

per semester or 400 hours per academic year. Second year graduate students or advanced standing students, known as concentration students, require 250 hours per semester or 500 hours per semester.

Field education is a structured process that includes structured educational supervision by a bachelor or master-level social worker and specifically designed developmental opportunities to promote the growth of the student while systemically honoring the purpose of the social work profession: promote human and community well-being.

The University Of Akron School Of Social Work ensures field opportunities for students each semester as part of their graduation requirements. Several hundred agencies are available for students to use as they secure field practicums/placements. Students are not allowed to graduate with a social work degree without successfully completing the field hours required for the program they are in and demonstrating effectiveness in being a professional helper.

From Fall 2008 to Fall 2014, social work students entered their field education experience in preparation to complete their professional degree. Attached Table 3 is a detailed student numbers of each semester from 2008 to 2014.

Table 3: Student number in field study from 2008 to 2014

Year	Spring, Student #	Summer, Student #	Fall, Student #	Subtotal
2008	-	-	121	121
2009	119	39	126	284
2010	118	35	143	296
2011	144	50	157	351
2012	157	51	182	390
2013	183	71	173	427
2014	184	65	177	426
Total	2295			

Discussion and conclusion

The three cases of service learning showed the absolute positive effects to the University, the students, the faculty, and the community. They also revealed the key factors for service learning to be successful.

Case 1 -- In order to get the whole university to be involved, strong commitments from university faculty, administration and community are needed with funding resources. Careful and detailed planning is also crucial.

Case 2 – The Faculty’s passion for community involvement is crucial, as close communication between faculty and service site trainer is important, which involves detailed syllabus and service project design to arouse students’ interests to learn in the real world.

Case 3 – Long terms of close relationships between faculty and community sites are very important. Clear guidance of field trainers and students’ readiness to go to the field also played the key factors for success.

In conclusion, service learning has been well established at The University of Akron, as showed in the above three cases, there are positive effects to the students, the university and the community. The triple effects also bring chain effects for more populations in the society. The service learning teaching model proved to be an effective one in higher education.

References

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