

SERVICE LEARNING: AN INNOVATIVE STRATEGY FOR EXCEPTIONAL LEARNING

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Service learning provides a method to combine teaching, learning, service, and research while addressing community needs. It provides a means for the faculty member to impart to the student values that go beyond the curriculum. These values include, but are not limited to, global and multicultural perspectives, effective communication and interpersonal skills, leadership development, social responsibility, and lifelong learning. Preliminary research findings on the benefits of service participation indicate that community-based learning can provide a powerful vehicle for colleges and universities to enhance their commitment to prepare students for responsible citizenship. Three such projects, funded by a grant from Atlanta University Center Service Learning Collaborative, involve students who will be awarded credit while simultaneously providing faculty scholarship and addressing critical needs in the community.

One of the projects is conducted at Girls Incorporated, which offers a variety of after-school, summer, and community outreach programs to girls of ages 6 to 18 primarily from low-income homes and ethnic minorities. Student nurses implement health-teaching programs and mentor the girls in the center over a period of 20 weeks. The programs planned by the students involve such activities as weekly meetings, health and nutrition teaching, implementing established programs, and gathering data for evaluative research. Some students are also involved in the Girls Incorporated sponsored Preventing Adolescent Pregnancy program that has been approved by the Cobb County School Board for implementation in the elementary, middle and high schools. They complete 16 hours of training for presenting the information and meet weekly to present the program to children in the schools. Course credit is awarded based on reflection through journals and group discussion as well as preparation for teaching programs implemented. The educational benefits from the unique opportunities in this program are limitless. Students participate in research, teaching, and care of community individuals, and simultaneously develop sensitivity to community needs and a sense of obligation and commitment to community concerns.

Another service learning project conducted in the nursing discipline engages nursing students in a blood pressure screening program at a volunteer-run, community based, not-for-profit medical clinic that serves the working poor and homeless. The clinic delivers free medical care to approximately 280 persons a month. Many suffer from chronic illnesses such as heart disease, lung disease, diabetes, and high

blood pressure that require long term medical care and follow-up. However the clinic is unable to provide these follow-up services. The students address the need for follow-up care for hypertensive patients through the screening program. Using the American Heart Association Screening Program, students screen patients at the clinic for hypertension and submit data for follow-up care. In a population that has no other source of healthcare, detection and treatment is imperative. The result will be that working poor and homeless will be screened for hypertension and receive follow-up care. Additionally, students meet course objectives by applying psychomotor and communication skills in a real world setting.

The third project was a collaborative endeavor between Kennesaw State University students in the HPS 385- Health Promotion and Program Planning course and the Northwest Home Healthcare Agency located in Jasper, Georgia. A team of students from the course designed, implemented, and evaluated a conference on health and aging called "Older and Wiser." One hundred and fifty-five community members attended the daylong conference.

The Northwest Home Healthcare Agency (NHHCA) is located in a mountainous community that has little access to medical care. The NHHCA's mission includes improving the overall quality of health and quality of the aging and disabled population of this community. NHHCA had expressed two major concerns: 1) very little health education programming had been delivered to the community due to limited resources and expertise; and 2) the majority of NHHCA volunteers have been older adults thereby reducing the contact between the generations. The project met the needs of the NHHCA and the community members by bringing needed health educational programming to the community, as well as creating intergenerational ties between the students and the older community members. The students gained the advantage of putting academic theory into practical experience through working with a community agency and community members when creating a program such as "Older and Wiser."

Service Learning is a teaching strategy that incorporates real world, practical experience with the academic theory from the classroom. Students and community members both benefit from this unique pedagogy. The three projects discussed here demonstrate several service learning opportunities related to health and wellness issues. Service Learning can be applied to a wide variety of content areas that can benefit students in any course. *