

Implementing Service-Learning: Best Practices from Agricultural Leadership Education

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To view the poster: <http://www.engagementscholarship.org/upload/PosterAwards/2013/LemonsImplementingServiceLearning2013.pdf>

Abstract

Service-learning has been identified as a high impact educational practice with many benefits for all parties involved. A service-learning component was integrated into the agricultural leadership curriculum at two different universities. The courses focused on the application of team leadership knowledge and skills. Students were assigned to teams and then chose a community partner. The teams worked with their community partners to identify a project and had to serve a minimum of 8 hours with their team members. As a tangible assessment piece, teams created a project portfolio documenting the stages of their service-learning project. At the conclusion of the semester, teams developed and delivered a presentation about their service-learning project. Students completed reflection assignments at the mid-point of the service-learning project and at the end of the project. Students evaluated their own performance and the performance of their teammates.

The service-learning design of this project has several advantages. First, it is a pedagogy linking meaningful community service with instruction and reflection of course objectives. It also creates solutions for the community organization and enriches students' learning experience by engaging them in the community. The emphasis on civic responsibility while teaching critical thinking is an added benefit to this pedagogy. In addition to the course objectives, students are also able to learn from community agencies' expertise. The broader benefits include building partnerships between the university and community organizations and enhancing university engagement in community issues.

Several lessons emerged while facilitating students' service-learning projects and related assignments. Instructors need to identify their goals and motives for implementing a service-learning

project in a course. What knowledge, skills, and competencies should students gain through this experience?

Specific objectives should be developed for service-learning experiences and communicated to students and community partners. Instructors can facilitate the successful selection of a community partner by preparing a list of potential community partners. The list is by no means comprehensive, but it will provide guidance as to who is an acceptable community partner. Students crave structure and will appreciate a list of previous successful projects.

The relationship between the teacher and the community partner should be fostered. It is critical that all parties are satisfied with the experience. One way to help establish and maintain expectations is to create a written agreement with each community partner that all parties must sign (i.e., teacher, community partner, and students). This will help maintain the high meaningfulness of the project. Once the projects have been approved, it is important to monitor service-learning groups' progress and completion of their project. Teachers also need to guide students' reflection to ensure connection of service-learning activity and course content.

Once the project has been completed, it is good practice to celebrate and publicize student teams' service-learning projects and thank the community partners. This can be done in a variety of ways including newspaper articles, features on university websites, and handwritten notes.

Finally, with any good learning activity it is important to evaluate your outcomes and make any needed modifications before the next group of students begin their service-learning projects.

Even with ample preparation, there is still potential for things to not go as planned. Several of the more common issues we have encountered include student teams choosing community partners unprepared to work with a team, not enough instructor contact with community partners, and students selecting projects that did not meet the minimum time requirement. Awareness of these potential pitfalls before the projects begin will hopefully help limit negative experiences.

Service-learning is a great educational teaching strategy which has benefits far exceeding the challenges.

About the Authors

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