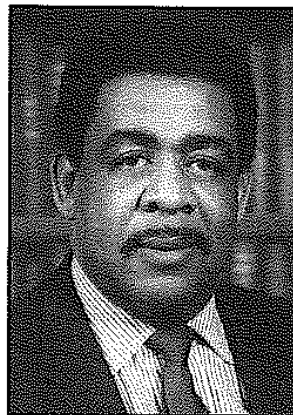




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## **Required Service Learning: The Ultimate Expression of Outreach**

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Since its initiation in 1991, required service learning at Southern University has left an indelible mark on the landscape of higher education in Louisiana, the nation, and in selected sites abroad. This essay shares some of SU's successes and challenges, with the hope that other institutions might benefit from its experience on the unique educational odyssey.

When originally conceived, the program was thought to have two principal benefits — namely, that of heightening the sensitivity of students to the importance of volunteerism and that of providing a means of addressing social, economic, and educational ills which afflicted the greater Baton Rouge area. SU's view was that in a four-year period, 10,000 students rendering service to the community would produce graduates equipped to render volunteerism and that their collegiate efforts would have a pervasive effect on the social and educational fabric of the area. The success of this program not only has brought a new level of respectability to outreach, but also has provided a medium for reinforcing students' skills in speaking, writing, and reading.

The SU service-learning program has exceeded the expectations originally envisioned. This essay describes the structure of the program, some noteworthy accomplishments, and challenges faced in integrating this requirement into the academic fabric of the university.

### **The Beginnings**

In fall 1990, the governing board of the university approved a community-service graduation requirement of 60 clock hours which would affect those students entering college for the first time in fall 1991. Students were given an option for satisfying this requirement: enrollment in a three-hour course which would include a speaking and writing component and participation in 60 validated hours of

service. The details of this bold plan were worked out by a faculty committee and endorsed by the academic council before its submission to the governing board. While the program received formal endorsement of the faculty and support from the student government association, there was some residual apprehension about making volunteerism a graduation requirement. Hence, the center for service learning saw the necessity of developing publicity strategies which would clarify the meaning of service learning and give assurance that this was not a punitive endeavor but one of academic substance.

To place the program on a solid foundation, SU formed an advisory board composed of key university decision-makers and prominent representatives from the community. The posture of service learning was further solidified by the identification of key faculty liaisons in each college with the energy, vision, and innovative spirit to sustain this program until it assumed a life of its own. The faculty liaison officers became the official advocates and change agents of each college or school.

### The Program

The concept for operating this program was basic: students were required to perform 60 clock hours of service learning with an approved service agency in the Greater Baton Rouge area. At the end of the assignment period, the agency provided validation of the service rendered and the completion of this activity was entered on the student's transcript. Most students elected to fulfill this requirement for academic credit and they were able to do so by satisfactorily completing a writing and speaking assignment. In addition to providing reinforcement of writing and speaking skills, this activity gave students an opportunity to reflect on their experiences and exchange these reflections with the service-learning staff and other students.

In one facet of the program the university joined in a partnership with the East Baton Rouge Parish Housing Authority. In this regard, the service-learning program "adopted" Clarksdale, a public-housing complex adjacent to the university campus. The general objective of the effort was to empower the Clarksdale residents with skills that would enable them to become self-sufficient in various aspects of their lives. Hence, it was expected that nutrition majors would assist residents with various aspects of diet. Business majors would provide assistance in financial planning and management, and architecture and agriculture majors would lend their skills in landscaping, home maintenance, and neighborhood aesthetics to the project. The general expectation was that residents would acquire skills and an enhanced sense of ownership for their personal belongings and their future.

### The Accomplishments

The most significant accomplishment of this program has been the substantive ties the university has established with the commu-

nity. Today, the university enjoys partnerships with more than 200 service agencies in the Greater Baton Rouge area. The average number of students who participate in service learning exceeds 650 students per academic term. The program is held in high regard by civic organizations. Many students become so consumed by the benefits of service learning that they frequently quadruple the required hours during their assignment. Evidence from reflections and job patterns suggests that the program is having a profound impact on students. Many of them change their majors to fields related to service-learning experiences and others take jobs with their assigned service agencies.

### **Discussion**

The service-learning program described in this essay has proven to be the centerpiece for academic innovation at Southern University. Through its experiential-learning emphasis, the program had cemented a "town-and-gown" bond of unprecedented proportions. The community benefits have been numerous, and the social and intellectual development of students have exceeded expectations. Further, we have been able to overcome initial internal resistance by involving influential faculty, community leaders, and students in program development and governance. The fact that service learning is housed in academic affairs also reaffirmed its legitimacy and longevity.

Perhaps the most remarkable achievement the program has experienced can be found outside the boundaries of the Greater Baton Rouge community. For example, our most prominent university model for study abroad is built around a highly successful, three-week service learning effort in Orizaba, Veracruz Mexico. This intensive course of study has provided an opportunity for Southern University students to render health and educational services to Mexican citizens while engaged in immersion study of Spanish. We have had equally rewarding service-learning experiences through important partnerships with Louisiana State University and Colorado State University. Several other universities have expressed interest in either joining us in certain activities or in learning more about our program. These initiatives collectively give assurance that Southern University has taken a giant step in carrying out the spirit of its land-grant mission of teaching, research, and service. We are confident that we have brought outreach to a new level of exposure, respectability, and influence.

### **About the authors**

Barbara West Carpenter (Ph.D., Kansas State University) is director and professor of the Center for Service Learning and Continuing Education at Southern University, Baton Rouge, Louisiana. She has taught at all educational levels, served as state supervisor of Vocational Education Programs, and served in several academic and administrative capacities in higher education. Dr. Carpenter is a fellow of the 1993 Class of Leadership Louisiana.

Since 1980, she has directed international projects for the Agency for International Development in several countries including Sierra Leone, Jamaica, Belize, and Mexico. She is the recipient of numerous awards for academic achievement and community service. Dr. Carpenter is serving a second term as Chair of the Board of Commissioners of the Baton Rouge Housing Authority and a four year term as International President of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc.

William E. Moore (Ph.D., Purdue University) is vice chancellor for Academic Affairs at Southern University at Baton Rouge. He was the first African-American to earn a doctorate in chemistry from Purdue. Dr. Moore is a graduate of the 1990 class of Leadership Louisiana.

During the past 30 years, he has held a variety of faculty and administrative appointments in Louisiana, Virginia, and Texas, including department chairman and director of several federal programs and chief academic officer of three universities. Dr. Moore has published widely in the fields of research, science education and on social issues. He has provided academic leadership at Southern University in the areas of academic computer technology, community service, mentoring, skills enhancement, international cultures, and in a variety of literary efforts. He was one of the invited participants for the NAACP Daisy Bates Education Summit held in Little Rock, Arkansas in Spring, 1991. In October 1996 he received the United Minorities Contractors' Association Vision Award.



## Upcoming Conferences

- The Health Professions *Schools in Service to the Nation* Program and Community-Campus Partnerships for Health will hold their second annual conference, *Community-Campus Partnerships for Health: Building Sustainable Futures Together*, Saturday through Tuesday, April 26-29 in San Francisco. Keynote presentations will be given by John McKnight, author of *Building Communities from the Inside Out*; Charles Hathaway, chancellor, University of Arkansas; Cheryl Maurana, director, Wisconsin Area Health Education Center System; and Barbara Aranda-Naranjo, University of Texas nursing faculty and AIDS activist. For more information contact Alisa Holmes at [alisah@itsa.ucsf.edu](mailto:alisah@itsa.ucsf.edu), phone (415) 502-7979 or use the FAX-on-demand service by calling (503) 402-1307 and requesting document 409.

- Washington State University will be the host of the conference *Distance Education: Designing for Success* from Sunday, May 18 at 1 p.m. through Tuesday, May 20 at noon at the Sea-Tac Marriott Hotel in Seattle. Attendees will include higher-education faculty, administrators, support-services personnel and course-production personnel. Conference topics are organized into four tracks: course design and production, faculty interests (reward systems, intellectual property rights, copyright issues), organizational structures that support distance education and the distance-education learner (student profiles and support services, assessment). More information is available on the conference World Wide Web page at <http://www.eus.wsu.edu/c&i/programs/distance-ed.htm> or call Muriel Oaks, Director, Extended University Services at WSU ([oaks@wsu.edu](mailto:oaks@wsu.edu)), phone (509) 335-7878.