

## **Modeling Service Learning for Future Leaders of Youth Organizations**

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### **Abstract**

This project provides instructors seeking to integrate Service Learning (SL) into collegiate level courses a model for future use and adoption. Approximately 60 students in a collegiate youth leadership course and two collegiate student organizations participated in a SL project at an environmental center in West Philadelphia. The majority of students who participated were enrolled in either the youth leadership development course or in a special topics course on SL. In both instances students were exposed to service learning from an historical and operational perspective and participated in guided reflection at the completion of the project. The SL project allowed the instructors to model a unique experiential learning strategy that could be adopted by future agricultural education instructors, 4-H youth development educators, collegiate or youth organizations.

### **Introduction**

Service learning is more than conducting a community service project like picking up trash in a park or volunteering at a local food bank. Service learning involves connecting individuals with the community. It is more than just doing a one time project where you go in and provide a service for others. It is systematic process that takes place through a structured framework and involves the community in the planning, implementation, and evaluation. Academicians note that service learning provides hands-on-experiences for students while connecting academic theory to the real world (Zlotkowski, 1998). Historically, chapter FFA advisors and 4-H club leaders have utilized community service and/or service learning to support community needs and contribute to local, state, national, and international initiatives. These community based efforts reflect some of the core philosophical

components of these organizations. For example, the motto of the FFA is “*Learning to Do, Doing to Learn, Earning to Live, Living to Serve*” (National FFA, 2004). The 4-H pledge states, “*I pledge My head to clear thinking, My heart to greater loyalty, My hands to larger service, and My health to better living, For my club, my community, my country, and my world*” ( Pennsylvania 4-H, 2004). Additionally, there are numerous opportunities for youth and collegiate groups to secure reward and recognition for their involvement in a service learning project.

Anderson (1998) defines SL as both a philosophy and instructional strategy. He believes that from a philosophical perspective SL helps students develop a sense of civic and social responsibility. From an instructional approach he notes SL engages students in real community needs through active engagement and experiential based learning. Furthermore, the value of exposing future educators to SL has been associated with positive attitudes about community participation during their internship experience (Wade, 1995) and resulted in gains in their professional attitudes and values ( Root, 1997).

From a multicultural perspective Segiel (cited in Anderson, 1998) noted that pre-service teachers who participated in a service project as part of a diversity course increased their sensitivity on diversity issues and showed more depth about their responses to diverse students. Building community among diverse learners can help future educators attain culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2002). Boyle-Baise and Sleeter (1998) feel that community service/service learning can provide pre-service teachers with opportunities for cross-cultural engagement and teacher development, however, they caution that these programs must be well planned, part of an on-going learning process, and contain multiple opportunities for education and guided reflection.

Service learning is an excellent means to model and involve students in an active learning experience and help meet community needs. Bonwell and Eison (1991) strongly support integrating active learning in higher education. They conclude that “a thoughtful and scholarly approach to skillful teaching requires that faculty become knowledgeable about the many ways strategies promoting active learning have been successfully used across the disciplines” (p.1).

## Methods

During the fall semester 2003, 65 individuals spent a weekend participating in a service learning project at Cobbs Creek Community Environmental Education Center in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Cobbs Creek Park is comprised of approximately 300 acres of riparian forest, meadows, flood plains, and waterways in West Philadelphia (Cobbs Creek Park, 2004). The facility is one of three environmental education centers located in Philadelphia’s 8,900 acre Fairmount Park system. The Fairmount Park system began when a track of land was purchased in 1855 and was then dedicated as a public park. As Philadelphia began to rapidly expand the city realized land needed to be set aside for recreation and to

sustain the environmental quality of the surrounding water supply (Fairmount Park, 2004).

Participants included students enrolled in *AEE 311 – Developing Youth Leadership*, student members of the Pennsylvania State University MANRA (Minorities in Agriculture and Natural Resources Association) chapter, Pennsylvania State University Collegiate FFA members, graduate students, and faculty members from Agricultural and Extension Education. As part of the course(s) students were provided with information on how to incorporate SL into youth organizations/programming. This included the importance of providing participants background information on the SL issue, providing a level of involvement, and securing commitment by the participants. Information on sources of resource attainment, funding, and recognition for service learning projects was also shared. The value and process of guided reflection following completion of the project was modeled and shared with the students.

### **Purpose**

The goals of this project were twofold: (1) to involve students in a service learning project so they could replicate the components within their collegiate organizations and when they were youth advisors or club leaders, and (2) to work with others in a multicultural environment.

### **Results**

Upon arriving at the environmental center, participants were given a brief historical background and tour of the facility. The projects and tasks assigned to the group were determined by the staff at Cobb's Creek. All students were given instruction on the safe and proper use of hand tools and identification of poisonous and invasive plants. The staff outlined the day's activities and split the group into teams. The activities that were to be performed were: collecting trash and debris, digging trenches for erosion control, working in a riparian forest removing invasive plants, clearing an area for planting shrubs and trees, and planting approximately 120 native trees and shrubs. Later that day the students had the opportunity to visit historical sites in the center of the city of Philadelphia. The group ate dinner together that evening and left for home the next morning. This project was funded through a College of Agricultural Sciences Seed grant that was secured by the authors. Student meals, transportation, lodging, and snacks were included in the grant.

Once the group returned to campus students participated in a guided reflection session, developed a reflection paper and a poster/web site based on their experiences with the project. Students were guided through questions that asked about their feelings and attitudes toward the project, their experiences in working with others from a different background or race, and what they were committed to doing now that the event was over.

Overall comments about the SL project were positive and included statements like “I enjoyed working with everyone from the project. I started making friends and talking with people as soon as I entered the van.” – “I didn’t realize that Philadelphia had an environmental focus. It was weird going into the “city” and seeing that they face some of the same issues that we face in rural areas.” – “I would like the FFA chapter and the MANRA chapter to get together on campus. This should not be end of us doing something together. We need to take this experience and build upon it.”

Suggestions for future SL projects include “We should go to a rural area next time so that others can see our perspective and where we come from.” – “We should have stayed longer and had the opportunity to visit and see more things within the Philadelphia area.” – “We need to do something to the State College area. We have a lot of stuff around here that we could do to show the diversity within Central Pennsylvania.” Future plans include incorporating the SL project into the course and to continue to collaborate with the MANRA chapter and Collegiate FFA.

## **Conclusions**

Student comments could be categorized into the two distinct areas: exposure and continuous action. Comments made by students before and during the event seemed to support the idea that there needs to be greater opportunities for learning about others. Students’ suggestions supported the notion of in-depth activities that allowed for individuals to move out of their comfort zone. Situations such as these will possibly assist the learning process and as students commented, “will make you really think about who you are and where you come from.” The second theme, continuous action was seen as integral part of the exposure process. Students as well as the community organizers supported this idea with remarks that this should not be a one time event. Single exposure activities only help to reinforce negative stereotypes by giving students a glimpse of other cultures and not providing mechanisms to discuss and reflect on the activity and observed environment. Essentially, when activities are a part of an organization's structure, it is incorporated into the social fabric. Events that are incorporated into classes or clubs help to institutionalize concepts and beliefs.

Comments and suggestions from the students and faculty involved were summarized and taken into account for the fall 2004 semester service learning component in the course. For example, the decision to work locally was incorporated into the planning. In 2004, collegiate organization members and the class will work with the county United Way to participate in a “Day of Caring. The focus of the United Way event will focus on service to military families in the area. To include additional youth leadership organizations an invitation to participate with the class was extended to the collegiate 4-H chapter at the institution. A review of course evaluations yielded numerous positive comments

about the service learning component both from participant and future youth organization leader perspectives.

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