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Service-Learning: Expanding Educational Attainment

Dominique Derbigny

Service-learning involves applying knowledge gained from the classroom to assist others in response to community needs (Robinson, 2009). From national crises relief efforts to local community initiatives, service-learning opportunities were well integrated with the Elon University curriculum.

Located in Elon, North Carolina, Elon University is a small liberal arts college known for its extensive study abroad programs and numerous service-learning opportunities. An astounding 87% of undergraduate students participate in volunteer service at Elon, which has been proclaimed as one of the top three universities in the nation for community service by the Corporation for National and Community Service (Elon University, 2010). During my Human Services studies at Elon, three of my courses each required that I complete 20 or more service hours to receive course credit. These varied service opportunities allowed me to explore learning beyond the classroom setting, expand knowledge of social systems, and address social issues.

I completed my first service experience with E. Bynum Education Center in Burlington, North Carolina. My role was to provide mentorship and leadership for disadvantaged youth, grades K-8 in an after school setting. Though I was nervous and unsure of what to expect, I quickly established rapport with the students. It was empowering to interact with different students, and witness their excitement for having a mentor with whom to communicate. I particularly remember one student who was struggling with his math assignments. For several weeks I devoted additional one-on-one time to this student. I grew extremely proud as he progressed, and his enthusiasm brought a new joy that I had not previously experienced. Unfortunately, a couple weeks after he began making progress, the student's mother suddenly pulled him from the program. I was devastated because he

was beginning to realize his potential, but the director explained that these students often come and go depending on their situation. It was difficult realizing that beyond academic struggles these children often had multiple challenges in their lives. At this point I made a commitment to focus on helping others empower themselves to reach their full potential.

My second service experience offered an alternative macro level approach; I collaborated with a student peer group to generate a successful fundraiser proposal for a local community agency. Our group selected Girls Inc., of Greensboro, N.C., an agency that empowers young girls to achieve their goals by providing after school activities and summer camps that promote academia, social interactions, and career and financial planning. We coordinated with the director of Girls Inc. to determine agency funding needs, established a fashion show fundraiser involving Girls Inc. members, determined appropriate grants that could be attained, and created a video public service announcement (PSA). The PSA captured client and staff testimony regarding the benefits of the program, and was given to the agency to use for promotional activities. As a Human Services major and Communications minor, it was interesting to bridge the two fields. This opportunity helped me to understand the systems perspective, and I was able to explore linkages between individuals, communities, and organizations as well as connections between disciplines.

A third service-learning opportunity involved using the Mentoring Violence Prevention (MVP) program to communicate with high school freshmen about relationship violence. This was an interesting experience because instead of simply presenting content information about domestic violence my team and I used role-plays and vignettes to facilitate discussions concerning verbal, physical, and sexual abuse. Many students were deeply

engaged in the conversation, asking questions and sharing stories about personal experiences. I remember feeling moments of shock that several young students, 14-15 years old, had witnessed or been victims to partner violence. The students completed a pre- and post-test questionnaire to evaluate their knowledge of partner violence, and it was rewarding to review written evidence from the post instrument that students were learning from the program. The data collected was used to evaluate the effectiveness of MVP in comparison to other available violence prevention programs, which gave me an opportunity to compose an evaluative intervention research piece as part of my course work. Through this experience I was able to practice clinical skills of rapport building and empathic listening while also gaining macro-level skills surrounding program evaluation. Although a valuable learning experience, it may have been more beneficial if the project adopted more of an engaged scholarship approach and the data had been used to publish a scholarly paper concerning the MVP program.

Through service-learning opportunities at Elon University I established a strong

foundation in human services work. These hands-on experiences fostered my appreciation for helping others and have driven me to become a beneficial contributor to society. I always knew that I learned better from experience, and service-learning afforded the opportunity to practice integrating classroom knowledge with real world application.

These experiences prepared me for graduate school field internships, illuminated the necessity of helping others, and motivated me to become a civically engaged member of society.

References

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About the Author

Dominique Derbigny is a master's student in social work at the University of Maryland, Baltimore.

CALL FOR STUDENT MANUSCRIPTS

The graduate student editorial board of the *Journal of Community Engagement and Scholarship* (JCES) invites the submission of original student manuscripts for the summer 2010 issue. JCES is a refereed journal, published three times a year, providing a mechanism through which faculty, staff, and students of academic institutions and their community partners may disseminate scholarly works from all academic disciplines. A goal of the publication is to integrate teaching, research, and community engagement. All forms of writing, analysis, creative approaches, and methodologies are acceptable for the journal. Student research not only bridges the gap between knowledge and experience, but also has the benefit of laying the groundwork for career exploration and development. The opportunity for students to publish in a national journal becomes an added value to their overall educational experience.

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