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El Milagro: The Miracle of Service Learning on the Border

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Description of Session

In 2000, DoZa Ana Branch Community College (DABCC) received a grant from the American Association of Community Colleges Broadening Horizons through Service Learning program to develop service learning in southern New Mexico. Poised on the United States-Mexico border, DABCC serves a population that includes 40% *colonia* residents. *Colonias* are communities within 150 miles of the border that lack basic infrastructure such as paved roads, water and sewage treatment facilities, and adequate housing. DABCC has developed community partnerships with *colonia* residents and with agencies that provide services within the *colonias*. In their presentation, a DABCC team will describe service learning projects in technical, vocational, and developmental courses that place students at the core of learning and service in their own community. They will provide a list of courses that have a service learning component, a brochure describing *El Milagro* Service Learning Initiative, photos from service learning activities, and a brief video of *colonia* life.

Motivation/Foundations for Session

Many, or even most residents of DABCC's service area were unaware of the desperate

living situations faced by many of DoZa Ana County's residents. The 40% *colonia* population statistic mentioned above shocked the faculty and staff who helped write the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) grant, and later the entire college community who began to learn more about *colonias* through the grant project.

Within each of our communities, there are no doubt populations living in poverty conditions. Within DoZa Ana County, *colonia* residents often live without the basics that most Americans have and do not even consider when determining their quality of life, basics such as clean drinking water, paved roads or roads that are passable during seasonal rains, indoor plumbing, lots that have been platted and have gas and/or electric lines, trash pickup, wastewater facilities, telephone service, and schools to serve the community population. *El Milagro* Service Learning Initiative and this presentation attempt to awaken the sensibilities of all those living "comfortable" lives, that we might see and be sensitive to the working poor who cannot conceive of even the most basic necessities as a given in their lives.

As we consider *colonia* and border issues in this presentation, we will also discuss the issues facing the colleges and communities of the participants. The crossing of borders through service learning—students becoming service providers, college personnel traveling to the community and community people crossing the college threshold, recipients of aid becoming givers of aid, "book learning" subsidized with hands-on learning, teachers as learners—all these border crossings create the opportunities for the transformations that will be described in the presentation.

Participant Learning Objectives/Understanding about What Is To Be Achieved at Session

The primary participant learning objectives are an understanding of the complexities of *colonias* and an ability to replicate service learning in technical-vocational colleges. To address these objectives, presenters will describe *El Milagro* Service Learning Initiative with pictures, video, PowerPoint, and handouts. Questioning and brainstorming will be used throughout the participatory workshop, and participants will form learning communities for a hands-on project. The focus will encompass diverse technical-vocational programs including: Legal Assistant, Digital Graphics and Drafting Technology, Facilities Maintenance, Dental Assisting, EMS/Paramedic, Public Health, and Health Occupations. Also discussed will be a math service learning course and a First-Year Interest Group (FIG) service learning course that is one of four shared courses in a learning community. Opportunities will be available for participants to reflect on possible transformations within classes, colleges, and communities; the group will leave with new ideas from the sharing of those possibilities.

Other Information for Participants

In its third year of the three-year Community Colleges Broadening Horizons through Service Learning grant, DABCC continues its goal to further institutionalize service learning. Students, faculty, administration, and staff are supportive of the idea and practice.

- Plans are being made for the second annual *El Milagro* Community Partner Luncheon in June of 2003. During this festive and informative gathering, faculty and community partners work together to set service learning goals for the coming academic year.
- The focus remains on *las colonias*; however, the college is strengthening partnerships with a diverse group of community agencies throughout DoZa Ana County.

- Funding will continue for the project, with a long-term goal being *El Milagro* Service Learning Center, staffed with a full-time director and work studies. The center will facilitate contact between the community and the faculty and will provide further opportunities for successful partnerships. Additionally, service learning materials will be available through the center.
- Increasing numbers of faculty are offering service learning, and increasing numbers of students are realizing the benefits as they participate.
- Plans are progressing to have service learning identified in college materials such as catalogs, schedules of courses, and transcripts.

Assessing needs and forming community partnerships with agencies that serve *colonias* and other border communities in a rural, impoverished county has been a challenge that DABCC continues to meet through *El Milagro* Service Learning Initiative. This program will inspire participants to partner with those most in need in their own communities.