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Recommended Citation

Friesen, Carol; Whitaker, Sue H.; and Piotrowicz, Kay, "Service Learning in an FCS Core Curriculum: A Community-Campus Collaboration" (2004). *Partnerships/Community*. 34.
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Service Learning in an FCS Core Curriculum: A Community-Campus Collaboration

Journal of Family and Consumer Sciences, Sep 2004 by Friesen, Carol A,
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The new core for the Department of Family and Consumer Sciences at Ball State University was designed to provide students with a better understanding of the integrative nature of the family and consumer sciences (FCS) profession. The resultant 9-credit core includes an introductory course, a capstone course, and one student-selected course. The content in the introductory class centers around the conceptual framework and cross-cutting threads described by Baugher et al. (2000) in the "Body of Knowledge for Family and Consumer Sciences." Topics covered in the course include professional ethics, public policy, technology, systems theory, critical thinking, diversity, communication skills, global perspective, and civic engagement.

As part of the Department's efforts to promote the importance of belonging to a professional organization as a student, the Journal of Family & Consumer Sciences is used as the required course textbook. Articles corresponding to course concepts are assigned and discussed in class and through electronic discussion boards. Plans are underway to engage authors of selected JFCS articles in electronic discussions with the students to further their understanding of the profession. The Journal also is used to teach students how to abstract research articles and cite references using APA style.

Students have been willing to become student members of AAFCS once they understand the value of belonging to a professional organization and when they realize that membership is less costly than most textbooks! (A student membership in AAFCS, which includes a subscription to the Journal of Family & Consumer Sciences, is \$60; in Texas, \$70.)

Service Learning Requirement

One of the profession's key cross-cutting threads described by Baugher et al. (2000) is civic engagement. To operationalize this concept, 20 hours of community service, obtained through a structured service-learning experience, is required of each student enrolled in the Introductory FCS course. Service learning is defined as "a method of teaching through which students apply newly acquired academic skills and knowledge to address real-life needs in their own community" (Payne, 2000, p. 3). Service learning has gained wide attention at colleges and universities nationwide, as well as in FCS courses in middle and high school (Paulins, 1999). Service learning provides an outstanding opportunity for FCS professionals to collaborate with community agencies by providing a needed service while bringing relevance to the traditional text-based approach to learning. The objectives of the service learning experience in the Introductory FCS course are to help students: (a) increase their social awareness, (b) demonstrate a connection between academic information learned in the classroom with real life, (c) develop or enhance their professional skills (e.g., communication, leadership, time management); and (d) develop a sense

Service opportunities are made available to students through Ball State University's Office of Student Voluntary Services, and the University provides transportation to a select number of sites. Students choose from a variety of opportunities, at times that are convenient for them (e.g., soup kitchen, food pantry, the Muncie Mission, senior citizen centers, the Children's Museum, after-school tutoring and arts programs, resale clothing stores, daycare centers, and the Salvation Army). A typical schedule for these volunteer activities is 2 hours per week for 10 to 12 weeks throughout the semester.

Reflection opportunities (e.g., discussion, reading, and writing) that enable students to think critically about their service experience are an important component of service-learning (Payne, 2000). To be effective, critical reflection should be continuous, connected, challenging, and contextualized (Eyler, Giles, & Schmiede, 1996). Students in the Introductory FCS course keep a journal about their experiences throughout the semester. A list of specific, structured questions (see "Questions" box) guides the students' reflection process and helps them integrate course concepts with service learning. Journals are submitted to the instructor three times throughout the semester; at least three focused group discussions are held. Specific examples that tie course concepts to service learning are introduced daily, providing students with concrete examples of otherwise amorphous concepts (e.g., critical thinking, public policy, communication, diversity, global perspective, community development, professionalism, and ethics).

At the beginning of the semester, a majority of the students perceive engaging in this community collaborative effort as a burden; they are full of resistance and complaints of "I'm too busy, I don't have time to do this." By the end of the semester, however, students are filled with pride, joy, appreciation for what they had taken for granted, and a sense of having made a difference. Student comments in reflection papers and class discussions confirm that the service learning experience enhances students' social awareness, increases their perception of the connection between academic study and real life, and heightens their sense of community and civic responsibility (see "Select Quotes" box). Their comments reflect personal growth and self-awareness, time management skills, and an appreciation for their families, their upbringing, and their modest income (which previously had seemed woefully inadequate). In addition, students are able to weave a more comprehensive understanding of the profession's role in society. Clearly the students received more than they gave.

To date, FCS students have provided more than 12,000 hours of in-class community service in the Muncie area. In addition, several students have continued their involvement with community service throughout their college career, either as a part of other class assignments or on their own. Student comments and evaluations clearly indicate that the service component has proven to be extremely valuable.

Service learning has provided a hands-on laboratory experience allowing students to articulate the body of knowledge while learning more about the community in which they reside. In addition, students truly discover the "heart and soul" of the profession (Anderson & Nickols, 2001)-and perhaps learn more about themselves in the process.

Select Quotes from Reflection Papers Indicating Impact of Service-Learning on

http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3770/is_200409/ai_n9453188

Students Enrolled in Core FCS Course

"Every department should make service learning a requirement because it provides students with opportunities to learn things that can only be learned through real life experience and not in a classroom setting."

Amanda Dixon

"I think this wonderful experience has made me a better person. I feel that it has made me more diverse and to have an open-mind and a positive outlook on things. It has taught me to be grateful for everything I have and everyone that I have. "

Abby Lamb

"In class I have learned many things about improving the quality of other people's lives. I have learned how to think creatively and how to communicate effectively. I have used my creative thinking skills to plan interesting and entertaining activities. I have used my communication skills to make those activities work. I am hoping the activities I have planned and participated in with the residents at the Nursing Center brought joy and entertainment into the residents' lives. I feel that I have become more assertive as a result of this activity. I have learned to take on challenges and successfully work through them. I have definitely changed for the better as a result of this experience."

Nadia Denton

"Critical thinking skills have allowed me to put my experiences at the Center into perspective, and compassion for the community has helped me to put these skills to work. I believe that critical thinking skills are essential to my future career as a businesswoman and the compassion that I have experienced through my service learning is a "people skill" that we all can improve. These skills are allowing me to see things in a different light, not only for my volunteer work, but my personal life as well. I feel like I don't sweat the small stuff as much as I used to and I am more thankful of my family and my economic situation than before. I don't have a lot of material things, but just having the things that I do and the support of my family is so much more than what some of these ladies have. For that, how could I not be thankful?"

Balinda Hall

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