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Jennifer Evans-Cowley
The Ohio State University

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Encouraging Civic Commitment in Diverse Neighborhoods:
An Evaluation of a City Planning Service-Learning Course

by Jennifer Evans-Cowley, Assistant Professor
City and Regional Planning
The Ohio State University

Many students who study city planning are interested in working in community development. However, their demographics are often dissimilar to those of the communities with which they will work once they graduate. For instance, most of the students who study planning at The Ohio State University are white and come from a middle-class background, but they often want to work with diverse populations and income groups. In order to prepare students for their future professions, educators have an obligation to assist students in understanding the communities with which they will work. Increasingly, planning educators are focusing on community service-learning courses to promote student understanding of the social and public purpose of their profession.

One strategy for accomplishing this is greater curricular emphasis on community-based service. Providing service to neighborhoods and individuals is one of the reasons students choose to study planning as a profession, and students typically enter school with a strong desire to help shape communities. Service learning, a pedagogy that fosters and reinforces a service ethic and helps students develop a sense of civic responsibility and social justice, has emerged in response to the need to strengthen the relationships between academics and their communities. It is a structured learning experience combining community service with explicit learning objectives, preparation, and reflection (Dewey, 1963; Kolb, 1984). Service learning activities and resulting projects are guided by the outcome of needs assessments where the capacities of associations and institutions are identified and mobilized (Kretzmann and McKnight, 1993). The combination of service and learning transforms the information presented in classroom settings into knowledge and skills that students can use in the communities they work with and helps sustain their commitment to making a difference (Eyler et al., 1997). However, there are many orientations to service learning, ranging from charitable to social justice ends (Kahne and Westheimer, 1996; Morton, 1995). Opportunities for academic growth derive from mutually beneficial service and learning partnerships within culturally diverse and/or low-income communities (Radest, 1993; Rhoads, 1997).

In 2002, the Service-Learning Initiative at the Ohio State University solicited proposals to develop innovative approaches to implement service-learning courses across the campus. A $5,000 grant was provided to support the redevelopment of an existing course—Urban Project and Policy Planning—into a service-learning course that would allow the students to enter a learning partnership with a culturally diverse, mixed-income community.

This article presents an evaluation of the first year this course was offered and describes what students learned from working with a community that was different from their own personal backgrounds.

Seeking Student Participants

To recruit students participants, an announcement was sent to listservs of related fields across the campus and advertisements were posted in the building in which the course was offered. A total of 11 students elected to participate in the course. The class was made up of six females and five males. Nine of the 11 students were white, one of the female students was Jordanian, and another female student was Korean. Four of the students were non-traditional, older students in their thirties and forties and two of the students worked in jobs where they regularly interacted with people from diverse or low-income neighborhoods.

Selecting Community Agencies

The course sought to assist a community organization(s) with policy evaluation and change. The faculty member for the class was working with the University District Code Enforcement Task Force as part of her own personal community service work. The Task Force, which represents a wide range of neighborhoods surrounding The Ohio State University, suggested that a student class might be able to assist them with policy research. The neighborhoods surrounding OSU have more than 43,000 residents, a median household income of $19,846, a 12.5 percent homeownership rate, and include the largest concentration of Section 8 housing in the City of Columbus, Ohio (Census, 2000). They also have a mix of low-income residents, homeowners, students, seniors, African-Americans, and immigrants. These demographics were ideal because one of the goals of the course was to allow participants to work with underserved groups such as elderly, African American, and low-income populations. In particular, it was important to know whether the Task Force would allow students to conduct a needs assessment of the community members.

In the end, two separate organizations were a critical part of the service-learning project: the University District Code Enforcement Task Force and the University District Association, which is an umbrella group that handles the majority of the communication between residents and organizations throughout the university district.

The Class Project

The two clients, the University District Code Enforcement Task Force and the University District Organization, wanted assistance in analyzing existing city policies related to code enforcement and in drafting legislation for new policies that they could present to the City Council. After meeting once a month over a six-month period prior to the start of the course, the professor and Task Force more carefully defined what type of service the students would be doing. The course was divided into seven parts:

1)   Formation of focus groups with area residents to identify top code
     enforcement issues;
2)   Documentation of reported code problems in targeted areas;
3)   Research on current city policies and procedures;
4)   Research on other cities' policies and procedures;
5)   Development of a preliminary report;
6)   Presentation of findings to residents and community leaders;
7)   Preparation of the final report.

In addition, a student representative would be sent to each meeting of each association in the district to make sure that everyone knew about the work the students were doing and to learn about other issues and concerns of area residents.

The University District Organization mailed flyers to residents in the district advertising the focus groups. The focus groups were the most valuable piece of the project in terms of student learning. While the students had used surveys and other forms of information collection before, this was the first experience in a focus group for all of them. The students were quite surprised at the number of residents that attended the focus groups and how serious their concerns about them were. Through the focus groups, the students identified the top code enforcement problems in the area, including trash, graffiti, parking on front lawns, and stuffed furniture/grills/etc. on front porches. In all, 60 residents participated in focus groups held on two days in January 2003. This was also the first time that many of the students had held meaningful discussions with people from backgrounds very different from their own.

After identifying the major code enforcement problems, the students went out into the neighborhoods and observed more than 900 homes to determine the extent of the code enforcement issues identified by the residents. The students found that more than 35 percent of the properties observed had one or more of the code enforcement issues identified by residents. Trash and graffiti were identified as the most common problems.

The students then broke into teams centered on each code enforcement issue and interviewed city officials, studied the Columbus city code, and spoke with community organizations to determine the local policies related to their issue. After learning about the existing policies, the students researched ways other cities deal with similar issues. From this research, the students developed recommendations.

The students prepared a report which incorporated all of the work from each team and was presented to the University District Code Enforcement Task Force and the University Area Commission (an arm of the City Council). From the meetings with the Task Force and University Area Commission, suggestions and recommendations from these groups and the public were incorporated into a final report (which can be viewed at http://facweb.arch.ohio-state.edu/jevanscowley/crp852/final.pdf).

As a result of these students' dedication and service, the Task Force is now meeting with city officials and city council members to modify existing code and policy.

For example, the Task Force is working with the city to have code enforcement officers work in the evenings during the fall to help catch people who park illegally on front lawns. In the end, the Task Force and University District Organization were quite pleased at the service the students provided.

Course Evaluation

In order to assess student learning, three evaluations were conducted during the course. Each of the evaluations was developed by the Service-Learning Initiative at the Ohio State University and administered by the instructor. A pre-test, mid-term evaluation, and post-test were conducted with each of the participants in the class. These types of evaluation are common in service-learning (Batchelder and Root, 1994; Giles and Eyler, 1994; Markus et al., 1993; Osbone et al., 1998; Wutzdorff and Giles, 1997). A total of 11 students responded to each evaluation. The mid-term evaluation focused on making sure the students understood what they were supposed to be doing and asked questions about their learning in the course. They were asked a series of 40 questions in the pre-test. During the post-test, all of the pre-test questions were asked along with an additional 24 questions. Students assessed the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with statements on a seven-point Likert scale. The tests were divided into several sections including academic learning, personal development, interpersonal development, mature interpersonal relationships, civic awareness and involvement, social justice perspective, and student class experience (post-test only). A sample statement from each category is included below.

> Academic Learning: I know how to communicate my ideas in a cross-cultural situation.

> Interpersonal Development: I am comfortable working closely with people from different racial, ethnic, or cultural groups.

> Mature Interpersonal Relationship: I deal with students who are different from me (for example, of another race or who speak a different language) by being polite and staying away from them as much as possible.

> Civic Awareness and Involvement: I have a responsibility to provide community service.

> Social Justice Perspective: I have a responsibility to help efforts directed at social justice changes in society.

> Student Class Experience: The service we performed for the community was recognized and appreciated by the community participants.

There were differences between the pretest and posttest responses for almost every question given, however there was a statistically significant change on six of the

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questions. Table 1 illustrates the statements on which there was a significant change in student response.

Table 1. Comparison of Significant Changes in Student Responses Pre and Post Course

	Pretest Mean	Posttest Mean	Mean diff. (Post-Pre)	Std. Deviation	Std. Error of Mean	P Value
I generally keep my beliefs to myself in order to avoid offending others (Mature Interpersonal Relationship)	4.0	2.4	-1.6*	2.413	0.763	0.065
I am very aware of some of my own weaknesses and strengths (posttest) plus "because of this service-learning class (Personal Development)	6.00	4.88	-1.12	1.642	0.581	0.094
I have a good understanding of the needs in the community service (pretest) where I am going to provide services vs. (posttest) where I provided services (Civic Awareness and Involvement)	5.20	6.10	0.90	0.994	0.314	0.019
We should reach out in a charitable way to specific people in need. (Civic Awareness and Involvement)	5.40	6.10	0.70	0.829	0.260	0.025
I feel that each individual controls whether he or she is poor or wealthy (Social Justice Perspective)	4.10	2.90	-1.20*	1.619	0.512	0.044
I know how to organize efforts for social changes (Social Justice Perspective)	4.90	5.20	0.30	0.483	0.153	0.081

*indicates a negative mean difference is the desired outcome

In the areas of Civic Awareness and Involvement and Social Justice Perspective there were significant shifts in students' agreements with statements about their responsibility to provide service. One of the interesting findings is the shift in agreement with the statement "I feel that each individual controls whether he or she is poor or wealthy." This was many of the students' first interaction on a professional basis with people who have few financial resources. A number of the students admitted in reflection discussions that prior to the course, they thought people who are poor were that way because they were lazy, stupid, or made poor life choices. After meeting with residents, they realized that just because someone is poor doesn't mean that they don't care about their neighborhood.

Reflection Sessions

Following each major milestone in the course, students participated in reflection discussions that provided insights into their personal experiences with the community, as well as the effectiveness of each team. Questions focused on the project development process (e.g., describing project goals and their relationship to class topics) and team

function. In response to the latter, common comments included: "I'm a little concerned about how our work will fit with other teams' work." and "Our group works well together. In the beginning, we had some trouble getting started with our research. But once we got going, the project became much easier."

Later reflection discussions addressed student impressions of their project's impact as well as the meaning they derived from their experiences. In describing project barriers, some students discussed weather (an 18-inch snowfall limited documentation efforts). Others noted legal issues related to their projects, such as the lack of state enabling legislation. In describing their community, students noted how surprised they were that these low-income people actually cared about what was happening in their neighborhoods.

Conclusions

This service-learning project served several purposes. First, it provided community organizations with assistance in policy analysis and second, it provided students with an opportunity to work in a community unlike those to which they were accustomed.. In the end, the students showed a significant increase in their beliefs about the importance of civic awareness and involvement and social justice. The organizations that participated benefited from the service project provided by the students and the students benefited from having the opportunity to work in a diverse community. In this case, service-learning resulted in a win-win situation for the students and the organizations.

About the Author:

Jennifer Evans-Cowley is an Assistant Professor and Planning Education at a Distance Director in the City and Regional Planning program at The Ohio State University. She holds a master's degree in public administration from the University of North Texas, a master's degree in Urban Planning and a doctorate in urban and regional science from Texas A&M University. Evans-Cowley spends a substantial portion of her time concentrating on outreach and service activities in Columbus, Ohio.

Cowley.11@osu.edu
(614) 247-7479 (phone)
(614) 292-7106 (fax)
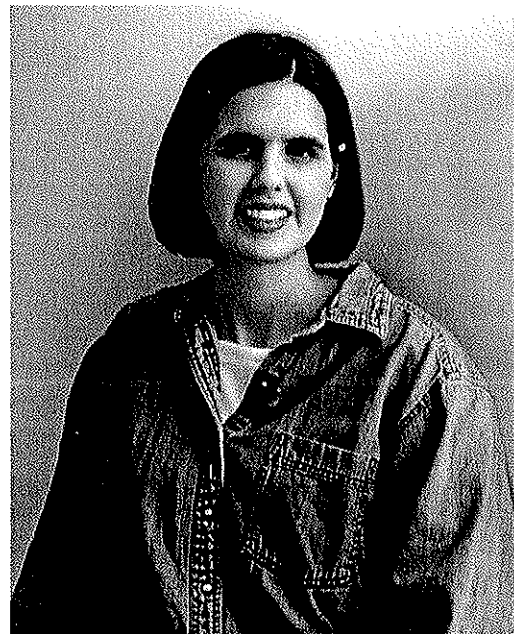
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