The Journal of Extension

Volume 46 | Number 6 Article 23

12-1-2008

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Recommended Citation

Eames-Sheavly, M., & Miller, M. (2008). Recommendations for Engaging Undergraduate Students in Community-Based Extension Field Experiences. *The Journal of Extension, 46*(6), Article 23.
https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/joe/vol46/iss6/23

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December 2008 // Volume 46 // Number 6 // Tools of the Trade // 6TOT1

Recommendations for Engaging Undergraduate Students in Community-Based Extension Field Experiences

Abstract
The first author and youth program leader for the Cornell Garden-Based Learning Program created a multi-tiered approach to providing real-world Extension experience for Cornell undergraduate students while simultaneously gathering essential data for an online curriculum. The second author served as the project evaluator. Eight Cornell University undergraduates enrolled in a two-semester course sequence, in which they learned the knowledge required to create a living sculpture project with youth-adult teams at three New York State sites. This article addresses the factors we discerned that lead to effective student engagement in field experiences, and generalizes our findings for others.

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Introduction

Eight Cornell University undergraduates enrolled in a two-semester course sequence in which they learned numerous skills and knowledge required to plan, design, and create a living sculpture project with youth-adult teams at three New York State sites. Although the project served several objectives, this article generalizes our findings for anyone interested in factors that lead to effective student engagement in field experiences.

Students divided into groups and selected a site to work with over two semesters. Sites included a school for visually impaired children and youth, a Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) Center, and an urban community center. Students learned about factors that lead to effective youth-adult partnerships, facilitation skills, how to work as a team and to lead meetings, and how to move groups from a collaborative planning and design process to implementation. Simultaneously, they learned about approaches to living sculpture and the horticultural techniques needed to create them. Depending on participants with whom they were working, they may have undertaken additional training for audience sensitivity. They traveled to sites over several months, beginning with simple introductory exercises before executing larger scale works.

Methods and Results

To gather data, we employed a three-tiered study to evaluate project effectiveness, document the process, and assess immediate outcomes. The study used qualitative and quantitative methods. At the end of the spring semester 2007, Cornell students de-briefed, critically reflected on the experience, and met with the evaluator for an hour-long interview on their perceptions of the entire experience.

Overall, the project was viewed as positively affecting student perspectives of community development efforts, working with youth and adult community members, living sculpture in general, and gains from a youth/adult partnership. A variety of valuable knowledge and skills were

perceived as having been gained through participation.

Perhaps our most significant finding was the need for similar community-based Extension courses. One student indicated that:

> The more I think about it, the more amazing the whole experience was. It taught me that the process is the most fruitful and important. It reminded me of how landscape architecture can be used to empower people, and bring them together. I realized that this project... inspires me to pursue an LA career with a focus on designs for people, rather than on purely designer ego or aesthetics.

Conclusion

We generalized our findings into a universal set of recommendations for anyone intending to involve undergraduate students in community work. The opportunities for undergraduate Extension experiences seem limited, possibly due to logistical challenges, such as transporting students off campus. We believe the benefits outweigh challenges, and hope these findings promote more of this activity.

Mission/Roles

Objectives should be developed (and if necessary, reviewed and revised) to provide the basis for a mission statement, which should be communicated to all participants. The goals and concepts inherent in the mission should filter through all project phases. In addition to day-to-day tasks of instruction, a project instructor and teaching assistant should foster creating a mission, clarify all roles, promote project improvements, formulate and document changes, and recommend means to implement improvements. Buy-in from department chairperson or other administrator is necessary to successfully conduct an intensive project.

Team Building

Make efforts to engage all the students in a team-building process early on to cultivate relationships among team members and convey how to effectively enhance teamwork in the community sites. Students in our project repeatedly addressed the benefit of a workshop on leading effective meetings.

Institutional Memory

Any documents and communications arising out of the project should become a part of "institutional memory," properly stored, accessible to future participants and/or staff, reformatted for future activities, and reported to appropriate personnel.

Project Structure

When initiating a community-based project, consider:

- Participant recruitment;
- Formal meeting arrangements, including weekly meeting times and clear communication avenues;
- Explanation of the evaluation process, roles, and actions needed;
- Clarity of the relationship with site participants;
- Identification/delivery of content-based information necessary to conduct the project;
- Initial meetings with sites to identify best contacts and deepen understanding of the culture of the organization/community;
- Realistic timeline to allow for successful completion; and
- Opportunities for critical reflection throughout.

Evaluation

- Collect valuable data from adults and youth participating in community-based projects by:
- Determining the best internal and/or external personnel to conduct an evaluation;
- Establishing a plan for data collection, analysis, and reporting;
- Submitting a proposed plan and documents to an institutional review board for approval of

consent forms, evaluation documents, data collection, and analysis process;

- Conducting training of project staff and/or volunteers to ensure appropriate data collection; and
- Providing analysis and final reporting to all those who should receive findings.

Additional Time

Project faculty should build in extra time for unanticipated changes in staff, busy schedules and the potential for additional or unanticipated instruction: perhaps 10% additional time.

Sharing Feedback

The project instructor should share appropriate feedback about the project with the undergraduate students who participated in it. While communicating with and collecting additional data from the undergraduate students and community site members who participate in these types of projects, the evaluator(s) should share appropriate feedback about the project with previous participants. In our project, the Cornell students expressed a sincere interest in "finding out what happened" with sites, participants, and the project in general.

Collaborators

Others can provide knowledge and skills not present in the group. An example in our case was relying on an independent evaluation consultant to interview students and to guide record keeping, observing, and surveying participants.

Longitudinal Follow Up

As a supplement to the initial data gathered in a community-based project, a longitudinal piece is ideal to explore:

- Sustained maintenance and changes at the sites;
- Changes in participant perceptions and how they may have been maintained or shifted; and
- Perceptions of the students about themselves as a result of participating in this type of project.

Participating undergraduate students and community members could be contacted by an assistant and the necessary data collected at 6-month and 1-year intervals following community-based efforts.