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Service-Learning: Going Beyond Traditional Extension Activities

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Service-Learning: Going Beyond Traditional Extension Activities

Abstract

This article advocates service-learning as an integrative strategy for Cooperative Extension Educators to advance the concept of a truly engaged institution through the use of college students. The authors, having designed and implemented a service-learning course, discuss the advantages of experiential education and its positive impact on the university, students, communities, and the Cooperative Extension Service.

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Introduction

The Cooperative Extension Service has a rich heritage of serving communities through outreach activities. However, the Kellogg Commission has challenged higher education to go beyond traditional notions of Extension, outreach, and service in order to become truly engaged institutions. The Commission defines engagement as: "a partnership of campus and community where all parties involved are committed to reciprocity and mutual respect for what each party brings to the table."

This article introduces the concept of designing and teaching service-learning courses as an activity that can allow Extension educators to become a more integral part of a "truly engaged institution." The context is based on a service-learning course, "Learning, Culture, and Community," developed and team-taught by an Extension faculty member, a non-Extension faculty member, and a teaching assistant at Purdue University.

The undergraduate students enrolled in this course travel by van to Indianapolis once a week to tutor and mentor middle-school children at the Martin Luther King Jr. Community Center. Travel time in the van is used for discussion of assigned readings and reflective journals written by the students. Learning covers a range of topics, including: learning styles, child development, multiculturalism, "at risk" labeling, sources of poverty, motivation, the nature of community, and more.

As this course has evolved, a number of important questions have been raised.

1. How does service-learning, viewed as a form of engagement, differ from traditional Extension activities?
2. What benefits might involvement in service-learning bring to all stakeholders, and especially to members of the Cooperative Extension Service?

3. How might an individual Extension educator, a county Extension office, or a statewide Extension program go about engaging young people in service-learning activities?

Service-Learning

Service-learning is a form of experiential learning, typically course-based. The notion of service-learning is familiar to many in Extension, but at the level of (for example) members of a 4-H club participating in a community service project, and then undertaking reflective activities. In this article, we focus on Extension educators acting as leaders, or co-leaders, in service-learning activities performed by college-level students in college-level courses.

To meet the criteria for a service-learning course, those college students should participate in an organized service activity that meets community needs. In addition, service-learning goes beyond volunteerism or even organized community service by necessarily including elements of reciprocity (the presence of shared decision making and commitment of effort between campus and community) and reflection (a framework linking coursework and community service whereby students are involved in critical thinking about the experience).

How does service-learning, involving Extension educators working with college students, tend to differ from traditional Extension Service activities? Any sweeping generalizations run a danger of being gross oversimplifications, but for reasons of space we will take an almost stereotypical view of Extension activities.

First, traditional Extension activities tend to involve an expert, typically a "practical" expert, providing information, guidance, or other services to groups of "clients" in a largely one-way process. The reciprocity element of service-learning emphasizes the importance of providing services that reflect explicitly stated community needs. It also emphasizes the importance of *all* parties involved being viewed simultaneously as learners *and* as teachers.

Second, traditional Extension activities rarely involve college students as an integral part of the provision of services.

Third, traditional Extension Services tend to involve, and to be associated with, Schools of Agriculture and Schools of Consumer and Family Science. Undergraduate service-learning courses can involve students and faculty from a range of disciplines beyond those schools.

Benefits of Service-Learning

For college-student participants, service-learning has the potential to make classroom learning more meaningful. This occurs because of the necessity of confronting community issues and taking them seriously, as well as forcing the participants to apply, adapt, and reflect on ideas and theories found in the classroom. An engaged institution will better prepare students for today's global society by developing a strong sense of civic responsibility, accompanied by a better understanding of self, one's own resources, the links between individual and community, and the relevance of classroom concepts and theories.

Participants typically develop leadership and teamwork skills and become more attuned to working amongst populations of varying ethnicity or socioeconomic status. The institution itself is likely to benefit from more satisfied students, often more motivated and more likely to stay in college, as well as from better relations with potential employers, neighboring communities, voters, state legislators, parents, and current and future alumni.

However, how might this form of engagement benefit the Cooperative Extension Service? If it takes time and effort to organize well-run service-learning courses, and if college students need to be trained, supervised, and assessed in such settings, then why take on that extra burden? We see a number of reasons, none of which can be covered in great depth here.

1. By teaming up with non-Extension faculty and students from a variety of disciplines, the Extension Service gains "access to" advanced academic learning in topics and disciplines that are often very pertinent to urban issues and concerns (e.g., computer literacy, information technology, accounting, pharmacy practice, health sciences, kinesiology, public relations, law and society, ESL, and audiology).
2. These same connections can help Extension programs provide a broader array of services, as well as assisting the lifelong learning of the Extension educators involved in such collaborations.
3. The Cooperative Extension Service is often one of the best kept secrets within a campus and also statewide. By involving college students as co-learners and by working with non-Extension faculty as partners, Extension will become more visible and more appreciated. These benefits can take a number of forms.

- Student participants are more aware of the nature, mission, and resources of Extension in their state.
- Non-Extension faculty members more fully understand the role and the expertise offered by the Extension Service.
- Top-level university administrators see Extension as an important player in a holistic approach to a collaborative scholarship of engagement that can contribute to the research, teaching and service missions.
- Community citizens and state legislators become more aware of the pervasive presence of the Extension Service as a major asset.
- The Cooperative Extension Service has the potential to recruit, from among student participants, more entrants into the service, at a time when many stalwarts are approaching retirement age.

In essence, an engaged institution tends not to have totally distinct roles for classroom instructors, student-service specialists, outreach providers, and community-relations staff. Instead these traditional boundaries are very much blurred. The Cooperative Extension Service has much to bring to the table in such a context. Topics such as leadership, food and nutrition, mentoring K-12 students, and a host of others are addressed on a daily basis (but often in total isolation from each other) in the contemporary Extension Service and on the non-Extension side of campus.

In a context where college administrators see much value in service-learning and related experiences, but worry about faculty resources to oversee such labor-intensive activities, the Extension Service can offer:

1. Practical expertise;
2. A collaborative role in supervision;
3. An array of existing programs and models for college students to utilize; and
4. An existing network of county-level contacts with community groups.

Developing a Service-Learning Course

Most land-grant institutions will already have a number of non-Extension faculty members involved in service-learning courses, and some will have a full-fledged service-learning office and full-time service-learning coordinator. Some institutions have Community Outreach Partnership Centers, funded by HUD. These faculty members and support staff would be delighted to discuss opportunities for collaboration.

At West Virginia University, under a grant from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, they have created a program where county agents, plus a service-learning coordinator, act as intermediaries between community groups with needs and campus faculty members and students who can provide services that address some or all of those needs. In addition, there is a national Campus Compact and nearly 30 state-level Campus Compacts, which are a consortium of colleges and universities committed to promoting engagement, not least in the context of well-run and effective service-learning courses. Help is also available through the use of Web sites, handbooks, discipline-specific guides, and workshops.

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