

Reason and Respect

Volume 3
Issue 1 *Winter 2007*

Article 3

2-1-2008

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Recommended Citation

Santos, David (2007) "Service learning enhances the "college experience"," *Reason and Respect*: Vol. 3: Iss. 1, Article 3.
Available at: <http://docs.rwu.edu/rr/vol3/iss1/3>

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Service Learning Enhances the "College Experience"

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Like other institutions of higher learning in the United States, Roger Williams University promotes values that it believes are important for students to have. RWU extols such core values as "appreciation of global perspectives," "love of learning as an intrinsic value" and, most importantly, "commitment to community service" ("Mission Statement"). Yet the value of community service is not what most students envision as a large part of their college education. Nonetheless, many universities and colleges now offer service learning as an additional medium for students to explore. But why is service learning considered to be of ever-increasing significance? Service learning is considered important to colleges because it provides students with a method of interaction within their communities and teaches them important life lessons.

Societies are able to thrive through the actions of their engaged citizens seeking to improve their communities to suit the average citizen's needs. Then why is it that so many people feel so estranged from the rest of the active community, and even lose their functionality as components of a healthy society? C. David Lisman puts it best in *Toward a Civil Society* when he states, "Respective groups become competitive rather than cooperative whenever it appears... that another group is not pulling its own weight"(1). When different groups feel as though they are receiving unequal treatment, those groups tend to lose the desire to participate in their communities. Though these groups believe that they cannot accomplish much, the fact is that they can only lose by becoming disengaged citizens. The U.S presidential election of 2004 is an example, where George W. Bush regained the presidency, despite the negative press that he had been receiving on multiple issues. This result seems like it could largely be attributed to the disconnect that liberals felt when the Republican Party gained control over the presidency, the House of Representatives, and the Senate. Liberal-minded citizens felt that they could not win and did the worst thing possible by not voting. This argument is also supported by a recent change of events, with votes for Democratic representatives actually changing the direction of the House to the left. But where does service learning fit in with all of this? The purpose of service learning is to create groups of people who are more disposed to actively engage with the rest of society. Through working with others as a group, individuals gain the skills necessary to stay involved with the community.

Through service learning, students learn important lessons that cannot be taught in the average classroom. Students gain an understanding of more abstract concepts and not just through interpretation, but also through action. Riverwoods Field Laboratory in Lorida, Florida, for instance, provides students with just such an opportunity to discover values outside of their ordinary classroom. Riverwoods' service learning program is based on "land stewardship and water resources management projects," while "the objective of the program is to provide classes and students with the opportunity to enhance their classroom experiences by assisting in field activities that are mutually beneficial" ("Student Service-Learning"). This program allows students to gain field experience in the wetlands of southern Florida, while benefiting the Field Laboratory itself. Lisman echoes the same sentiment towards interaction: "Our collective silence... seems to constitute the condition of our freedom to build our own private spaces and live our own self-contained lives"(5). In pursuing action to improve a community, students learn humility—knowing that it is important and helpful to engage in community activities, no matter who you are. Humility also operates in many work situations, and it is a good habit to observe in order to be successful. The students who are engaged enough to help the Riverwoods Field Laboratory recognize the value of humility and hard work and are living examples of progress as a result of group coordination. Rona J. Karasik, a community studies professor at St. Cloud State University, delineates some of the many benefits of service learning programs like Riverwoods offer, including improvement on "time management development," "enhanced critical thinking skills," and "a deeper appreciation of civic engagement" (6). According to Karasik, it thus follows that service learning will help students gain an appreciation of intrinsic values, such as humility and diligence, and to perform better in the workplace. Only through interaction and cooperation can a person change what is negative about a community, and that is why universities such as RWU seek to adopt community service as a core value. Community service is the most effective way to gain appreciation for interaction between a community and its people.

The idea of emphasizing education and service learning as a way of producing well-rounded individuals is not an original one, however. A multi-faceted education has been the goal of academia as far back

as the classical age. Philosophy professor Jordy Rocheleau, who explores educational ethics in his writing, notes, “The classical theories of Plato (1961) and Aristotle (1997a, 1997b) presented education as intended to produce good persons...to act on that knowledge in pursuit of good ends”(3). Producing good persons was the final goal of education that these philosophers aimed for. A classroom where the teaching is done solely by oral and visual methods is not the place students can typically find the same civic experiences as they would by service learning. With Riverwoods Field Laboratory, students participate in activities that will hopefully mold them into more complex people. Through engaging in civic activities, students learn, at a tangible level, that every bit of help counts—that is, everyone can and should influence the path that their communities take. By combining service learning with the current educational structures, students can become well adjusted individuals.

Service learning is a process that is able to take what students learn in the classroom and morph that learning into something more tangible. Participation in one’s community is what more and more modern day institutions encourage their students to strive for, because service learning creates experienced and engaged individuals.

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