

SERVICE LEARNING – ENGAGEMENT, EXPERIENCE, AND RELATIONSHIPS

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Abstract

Attracting and retaining talent and young professionals in a region can be approached in many ways. Building a new media cyberspace community network is one way to connect young professionals with the opportunities available. Using a cyberspace network would fuel innovation and disseminate knowledge throughout the participating community. Talent can also be attracted by going green, whereby the community offers incentives and rewards for new businesses and individuals. Another way to retain talent in a region is by offering more experiential learning opportunities; Binghamton University is not exploiting every option available. Experiential learning is the process of making meaning from direct experience. These opportunities include expanding mentorships, internships, cooperative education programs, and service learning. Service learning can help to build a sense of community, which is another way to retain talent and young professionals. In such a practice students are doing more than studying, participating in extracurricular activities, and socializing; they are participating in a class that provides a unique and important learning experience. The key to building a sense of community among people is embedded in focus on engagement: social, professional, civic, and political.

Keywords: Service learning; Civic Engagement; Cross-Cultural Service Learning; Intellectual Capital

Binghamton Keywords: Binghamton University; Broome Community College; Cornell University; Davis College; New York Campus Compact Program

I. INTRODUCTION

This paper offers reasoning why civic engagement is important to every student's college career. Civic engagement is collective actions of people identifying and addressing issues of public concern. In part, civic engagement can be participating in service learning programs, which allows students to connect with the community in a way that is incomparable to any other experiences in higher education. Through service learning programs students are able to apply what they have learned in the classroom to the real world. Not only are students applying their knowledge, but they are also connecting with the community to develop a mutually beneficial relationship.

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Civic engagement is an unpopular idea in many colleges; it is not often top priority. However, Binghamton University supports civic engagement as stated in their mission statement, "Binghamton guides students in the development of their intellectual life and prepares them to contribute constructively to their community and region, to New York State, the nation, and to a world that is rapidly changing and increasingly interdependent" (Binghamton 1). Binghamton University mentions the ability of students to "contribute constructively to their community and region" making it apparent that supporting service learning programs is part of its mission. Clearly it is important for Binghamton University students to engage in the community during their college career.

The idea of service learning programs directly relates to civic engagement. Service learning programs should be incorporated into the college experience because they allow the student to actively participate in the community. In such a practice students are doing more than studying, participating in extracurricular activities, and socializing; they are participating in a class that provides a unique and important learning experience. By affording students to have these experiences, universities have the capacity to promote the intellectual capital to stay in college communities and, more specifically, in the Southern Tier.

Throughout this paper I will present the background research that I have done in order to create my recommendations. After, I will provide various case studies and best practices that include practices with the New York Campus Compact Program and at the University of Pennsylvania. Finally, I will propose recommendations for Binghamton University.

Key Research

Engaging students in the community where they go to college requires a lot of effort but has a great outcome. An economic development director in West Virginia reports, "students who volunteer in the community often end up staying or coming back after they graduate because they find out they can make a difference" (Brisbin and Hunter 467). That is the desired outcome. Volunteerism should connect students to the community when they are at college in and make them want to stay. This connectedness allows the community to have both short-term benefits and long-term gains. Service learning is able to greatly attribute to the feeling that the graduate has.

Service learning is an essential way in which universities can help engage the students to the community. Cross-cultural service learning has the aspect of volunteerism, and also has an academic component. According to Gregory Jay, "the service learning experience must be integral to the syllabus and advance the student's knowledge of the course content. And just doing the service is not enough; there needs to be an academic "capture" of knowledge through written reflection or multimedia projects or other forms that express what the student has learned" (1). Service learning is fundamental in making students feel like they are important to the community.

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The National and Community Service Act of 1990 defines service learning as an effort to:

- Promote learning through active participation in service experiences.
- Provide structured time for students to reflect by thinking, discussing and/or writing about their service experience.
- Provide an opportunity for students to use skills and knowledge in real-life situations.
- Extend learning beyond the classroom and into the community.
- Foster a sense of caring for others. (Designing 1)

Service learning is significant to many different people, the students that take part in the classes, the community members, and the teachers that promote the program. It allows students to become connected to the community and vice versa. Service learning is very important in the sense that it bridges the gap between the community and the university. The relationship between the students and community members can lead to opportunities for students during college and upon graduation.

Community outreach provides and encourages the connectedness of the students with the local area. Allowing for active participation in service experiences permits the students to apply what they learn in the classroom to social situations. Often times, students are not given the opportunity to exercise what they learned in academia in real-life interaction. These service learning programs afford for students to see the bigger picture and recognize ways their knowledge can be applied to places outside of the classroom. According to the article, "Active Learning Through Service-Learning," written by Lynette Goldberg and Cynthia McCormick Richburg, "service learning guides students to reflect on their community experiences, link what they learn theoretically in the classroom to these experiences, gain insight into their own perspective and the perspectives of others, and make changes in the application of what they have learned to ongoing and future experiences" (131). Service learning allows students to not just memorize facts from a textbook for a test, but apply their knowledge to real life situations.

Not only do the students apply their acquired skills to the situation, but they also gain new knowledge through service learning. Students become more aware of the community and of how they can contribute. Furthermore, participating in these programs allows the development of the student to occur. "A study conducted on an education service-learning course revealed that participation facilitated at least four aspects of student development: a greater sense of personal efficacy, expanded awareness of the world, greater understanding of personal values, and a higher level of engagement in the course (Ikeda qtd in Pisano 1)." Becoming aware of the community allows a student to mature because they see that they are not just responsible for themselves, but also affect the people in the community around them, allowing students to develop the sense of caring for others.

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If students were not involved in service learning programs they may need to go through the career center for their internships and future opportunities in the community. Fortunately, these students have ties in the community and can receive internship information firsthand. These students are given information that they otherwise would not have access to in such a way. With students actively participating in the community they represent a different essence of people from the University. The students are not adults, but the actual talent that employers are looking to hire.

Service learning programs often change the career plans that the students had in place for their future. Rebecca Pisano conducted a survey among a class called "Taking it to the Street: Spanish in the Community" that was comprised of eleven students. As a requirement for the class, the students had to volunteer eight to ten hours a week at an approved Spanish-speaking site in the local Latino community. This class was a service learning one without using the words 'service learning' in the description. Pisano followed the class from the beginning to the end of the semester to try to see how meaningful their experiences were. (2)

At the outset of the "Taking it to the Street: Spanish in the Community" class eight students when surveyed said "their service placement was related to their career goals" (Pisano 3). All the students received unique experiences that affect their goals in the future. According to Pisano at the end of the study:

Two students in health placements felt they had expanded upon their skills in this field and three students reported that their career goals had actually shifted as a result of the service experience. One student claimed to have gained more career focus, stating, "I learned more about what I want from a job." Two additional students stated they were now looking into careers related to their service placement as a direct consequence of this experience. (3)

All of the students enjoyed their experiences especially because of how they experienced growth. The students were not solely in an advanced Spanish course, but involved in one that directly related to the community. At the end of the study, "four of the eleven students specifically cited personal growth as one of the greatest outcomes resulting from their experience" (Pisano 3). Service learning programs are not just about the academic credit students receive, but more about the overall experience of every student immersed in the profession and in the community. These classes are important because they allow students to explore different opportunities available in the community that will then affect their career choices.

Richard A. Brisbin and Susan Hunter conducted a study looking at the relationship between universities and communities. They surveyed community leaders who hold positions in collective organizations in western Pennsylvania and northern West Virginia. The study was formed, "to gather information on the relationship between college and university experiential education programs and collective organizations" (Brisbin and Hunter 470). Brisbin and Hunter were able to see what needed to be fixed in service learning environments from the results of the survey. In the study, "community leaders reported that they sometimes see change in students' career plans and attitudes, particularly as they have longer and "deeper involvement"

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in the program and more contact with organizational clients” (Brisbin and Hunter 481). In Rebecca Pisano’s study, the course was offered to upper level students to focus on a specific cohort, students that would not be able to be involved in the community as long as a freshman would. Allowing the freshman to participate in these service learning programs shows them a window into their future. These service learning programs can change their career plans as Brisbin and Hunter’s study mentions. It is helpful for freshmen to begin thinking about their career path; the service learning programs can steer them in a new direction of study. Both the results of Brisbin and Hunter’s study and Pisano’s study validate that community outreach tended to change student career choices.

Students and the community benefit from service learning programs. In the study Brisbin and Hunter revealed that community leaders “wanted higher education institutions to provide them with *specific* programs to mentor teenage youth in need of self-esteem and attention outside of fixed institutional settings or time periods” (476). These community leaders displayed that there is a need for student involvement in their region. Community leaders do not want higher education institutions to stand by idly, contrastingly, in fact, they want to have the active participation of students in the community. Many of the communities’ leaders in the study mentioned that they did not know who to get in contact with at the university. Participants reported that, “much of the contact between collective organizations and higher education institutions involved interaction with students rather than with administrators or faculty.” From this study it is apparent that there is a lack of participation between the universities and community organizations possibly due to a lack of communication. It is important to create ties between the community and university for service learning programs to prosper (Brisbin and Hunter 476).

Service learning programs affect the way that the students feel about the community. In Brisbin and Hunter’s study, it was found that “for rural communities in economic difficulty, like many included in this study, student assistance might have the long-term effect of reducing the loss of college graduates to growing urban areas” (Brisbin and Hunter 481). Binghamton is considered to be a community that has a need for revitalization, which, in turn, increases the demand for graduates. It is important to have the intellectual capital stay in the region. Intellectual capital includes college graduates; they are very knowledgeable because of what they have learned in college. Service learning programs will help retain graduates and intellectual capital in the area.

Moreover through the service learning programs the network that the students form it becomes hard to pass up the career opportunities shown to them at upon graduation. These opportunities have been created by the student demonstrating the intellectual capital that he or she has at their service site. Since the student has made a connection to the community through the service learning program making it almost impossible for them to part with the community upon graduation. The business person also has interest in retaining the knowledge in their community. Once people are used to working with creative and intelligent individuals, they do not want to let them go. It was shown in a study among service learning in community colleges that “18 percent of service learning colleges indicated that service learning has a positive impact on retention at their institutions” (Prentice, Robinson, and McPhee 15). There is

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correlation between those that participate in service learning programs and those that stay in the community after graduation.

Service learning programs are meaningful to the lives of many different people. They affect the students, the participants, the community, and the faculty, which makes it necessary for all of those people to work together for the program to succeed. Without service learning programs, it is less likely that students will engage with the community. Service learning programs help students to realize what career choice they want when they graduate from college. Often times, they discover how important their program is to them and decide to stay in the community where they went to college. Allowing students to have new experiences that foster individual development and growth is one of the foundations of college.

II. BEST PRACTICES

Service learning programs are present in the curriculum of many universities. These programs are more important depending on the mission and financial status of the school. Two different best practices occur at the Campus Compact of Cornell Program and the University of Pennsylvania. All of the service learning programs differ from campus to campus at the collegiate level.

The Campus Compact Program is hosted by Cornell University with a mission, “to promote active citizenship as an aim of higher education. In a statewide leadership role, NYCC will strengthen the capacity of member institutions to partner with their communities; increase student involvement in academic and co-curricular public service; advance engaged scholarship; and cultivate the knowledge, values, and skills of civic responsibility and democratic participation” (About NYCC 1). Promoting active citizenship can occur through service learning programs. The Campus Compact Program encourages students to learn more about the community surrounding their college.

Binghamton University is a part of the Campus Compact Program through the Volunteers in Service to America program. Oftentimes called the “domestic Peace Corps,” the VISTA program has three priority areas: access to higher education, community partnerships, and service-learning. The VISTA representative that works at Binghamton University is Joe Picalila whose priority area is service-learning. Joe Picalila directs two classes, one for Honors students and one for Non-Honors students. These classes only affect a small amount of students at Binghamton University and unfortunately there are only certain students that can experience Mr. Picalila’s classes.

Twenty different service learning classes are available at Binghamton University; the majority of which are upper level classes. Most of the service learning classes are considered to be internships or independent study classes. Quite a number of the classes are also unavailable for the fall 2009 semester, as they are not listed in the schedule of classes. Underclassmen cannot take internships or independent study classes, so the service learning program is missing those key students.

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Luckily Binghamton University is able to maintain these service learning classes because of a grant they received from New York Campus Compact. The grant is shared by two other colleges in the area; Broome Community College and Davis College. Collaboration between the three colleges has been key to the success of the grant. The goal of the grant is “for faculty to mentor faculty to increase the use of service learning” (Service-Learning 1). The grant allows faculty to show other faculty members what can be done with service learning. Hopefully, the use of the grant will create more service learning classes.

By using the grant more classes aimed at underclassmen can be created. This will allow those incoming freshman to see what Binghamton has to offer from the start. Negative connotations about the town of Binghamton should not be allowed to be formed by incoming freshman. Oftentimes when a student enters Binghamton University they are told not to go to downtown Binghamton because it is dirty and there are strange ‘townies’. Without allowing a freshman the opportunity to go off campus and discover what kind of place downtown Binghamton is they will continue with these thoughts. Instead their thoughts should be fostered by the service learning courses that they take as incoming freshman. These service learning programs can be integral in retaining intellectual capital to the Southern Tier.

Secondly, looking specifically at the University of Pennsylvania, it is evident that they have a Barbara and Edward Netter Center for Community Partnerships, which was founded in 1992. When the Center was formed, it was a turning point for UPenn’s presence in West Philadelphia. It displayed their commitment to the community, by presenting UPenn’s help in “ways to use its truly enormous resources (i.e., student “human capital and intellect”) to help improve the quality of life in its local community; including public schools, economic and community development” (Sharpe 37). The opening of the Center showed that UPenn did not just want to keep the human capital and intellect for four years but wanted them to stay for a lifetime. The following is the mission of the Barbara and Edward Netter Center for Community Partnerships:

Penn’s primary vehicle for bringing to bear the broad range of human knowledge needed to solve the complex, comprehensive, and interconnected problems of the American city so that West Philadelphia (Penn’s local geographic community), Philadelphia, the University itself, and society benefit. The Netter Center is based on three core propositions:

1. Penn’s future and the future of West Philadelphia/Philadelphia are intertwined.
2. Penn can make a significant contribution to improving the quality of life in West Philadelphia/Philadelphia.
3. Penn can enhance its overall mission of advancing and transmitting knowledge by helping to improve the quality of life in West Philadelphia/Philadelphia. (Axelroth 5)

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The ultimate goal of the Netter Center is to unite the students of UPenn with the people in the community of West Philadelphia. There are many classes in the UPenn curriculum to help reach this goal. The Netter Center is able to be the program that it has become because of the generous donations made by alumni, more specifically made by the Netter family.

According to Ira Harkavy the Associate Vice President and Director of The Netter Center, "approximately 1500 Penn students participated in 59 academically based community service courses, which were taught by 49 faculty colleagues from 21 departments in 8 Penn schools" (Harkavy qtd in Axelroth 7). An abundance of students at the University take the classes. There is not just one school in UPenn that participates in the service learning programs, but all of them do. The service learning programs are cross disciplinary because of how they are presented by the Netter Center, allowing students the freedom of taking different classes based on their interests. The Netter Center affects many college students and citizens of the community.

A main focus of the Netter Center is creating university-assisted community schools. This combines the university with the community to create support for the public schools in West Philadelphia. Academically Based Community Service (ABCS) is considered to be "the building block of university-assisted community schools" (Axelroth 16) by the Netter Center. "ABCS courses advance beyond traditional service-learning as they aim to bring about structural community improvement, including effective public schools, neighborhood economic development, and strong community organizations" (Axelroth 16). The Netter Center has service learning classes, but according to the Center the classes go beyond what normal ones do. As compared to the service-learning courses at Binghamton University, the ones in the Netter Center cover a much more broad range of topics in the community. The Netter Center has classes that concern education, economic and community develop.

Binghamton University and the University at Pennsylvania are striving to meet the same goal; connect students with the community. The connection that occurs between the community members and the college students may be one that makes them not want to leave the community.

III. RECOMMENDATION

After researching best practices in the service learning field there are a lot of different ways to promote service learning in the university. A different take on service learning is integrating the college students, business people, and the community members in need. Hopefully this will form unique bonds that are irreplaceable.

With this type of service learning program networks will form that students would not have otherwise. The business people will be assigned to classes depending on the industry that they are in, which will allow them to inform the students of the happenings in their industry. Both the students and business person will be required to commit three hours a week to their service placement. Having the business people volunteer with the students will help to form meaningful connections due to the time that they are committing to the program.

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Through active participation in these classes the students will see that community members care about the surrounding area. When people see others caring about the community they develop a sense of compassion. With the commitment of business people the students will want to mirror their behavior so that they can be just as successful. Students learn from what they see done so watching a business person will instill the value of caring for ones community and the people involved.

A Mural Art class taught in downtown Binghamton is an example of a service learning class that can combine college students, business people, and community members in need is a "Mural Art in Binghamton" class. At the Barbara and Edward Netter Center at UPenn there is a class similar that takes place in West Philadelphia. The "Mural Art in Binghamton" class will be offered to anyone that wants to take it, including incoming freshman. The class would learn about different types of murals and how they affect the neighborhood. According to Charlotte Lapsansky's article, "Community on the Walls: How Public Murals Can Affect Intergroup Relations in a Shared Neighborhood," it was found that, "public murals are an important component of community arts and cultural participation in enabling civic engagement and community ties" (1). With the "Mural Art in Binghamton" class the students will develop community ties as Lapsansky discovered.

The "Mural Art in Binghamton" class would study many different aspects of mural art. One focus can be on cities or towns that have been positively affected by mural art. Charlotte Lapsansky's studied the different murals in Los Angeles; there are over 3000 (1). Lapsansky explored, "the context of creation of these murals, and how their content (which often addresses themes of ethnic pride and/or diversity) reflects the patterns of tension and integration among these two communities" (1). Murals are not just a piece of art on a wall, but they have a deeper meaning to those that made the mural and hopefully to those that will view the mural. The students that helped in the creation will form a connection with the community where the mural was painted. Both the college students, students in either middle or high school, and the business person in the related field will all work together to create this mural. The mural will have a deep meaning to all of those related; the location of the mural will also be important in deciding the content of the mural.

Weekly the students can volunteer in a middle school or high school that has an art program either during class time or in an after school program. Students can help in the art classes, with some class time devoted to the creation of this mural. The business person can also come to these classes as a volunteer to help students. Moreover the class will allow the college students to learn how to interact compassionately with people in a community.

The college students will forever have a mural in the town of Binghamton, making them have one root that connects them to the community. With this class occurring every semester Binghamton will become a city full of murals, full of people that are dedicated to the cities growth. The students will develop a love for Binghamton so they do not have the negative connotation about the town anymore. Instead they have seen some of the gems the city has to offer, making them want to explore to find more gems.

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Combining the students, business people, and community members will create a different type of service-learning programs, where the students do not just interact with community members, but also business people. "Mural Art in Binghamton" is just one type of service learning class that is possible with this setup of people. The business people that the students interact can be good service to them when they are looking for an internship or job. Developing networks from these service learning classes will be invaluable to the students. This type of experiential learning is a service learning class.

IV. CONCLUSION

Service learning programs are very important in a way of changing or shaping the view students have of their surrounding college community. Participating in a service learning program provides students with opportunities that they would not otherwise have. Students are exposed to more than just their own universities. They actually see the happenings of the community and are able to interact with many different types of people.

The New York Campus Compact Program and University at Pennsylvania's Barbara and Edward Netter Center for Community Partnerships are two unique best practices. Both programs offer different opportunities for students. The service learning program at Binghamton University is one that has many good qualities and has room to expand. My recommendation is one that takes the service learning program in a new direction. Allowing students to not only volunteer, but also interact with business people will entice them to the program since they will form a whole new network of people.

Service learning programs are able to connect students to the community of their university or college. The connection is very important when trying to retain human capital and intellect to the area. Through the exploitation of service learning programs students will begin to find reasons to stay in their college community; the networks formed will be ones that can be kept for a lifetime.

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