A MODEL FOR STUDENT EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

Chaunda L. Scott

INTRODUCTION

The role of service learning in institutions of higher education has been argued as one of the most influential ways to affect students as future leaders. Service-learning programs have proven to impact attitudes, values, skills, and the way students think about social issues (Tyler, Giles & Braxton, 1997). A strong service-learning program engages students in community service in the context of academic course-work, with intentional reflection focusing on the learning process.

Experiential learning, *in the form of service-learning*, is one of the best ways to teach for the development of the whole person. Eads (1994) suggests that academic proficiency is not enough to ensure an understanding of societal problems, the systemic causes underlying those problems, and the steps that are needed as part of the solution. Students benefit from education which combines course theory with community service experiences. A connection is made between the textbook issue and the reality of the issue experienced in the community. It is this connection which affects and cultivates student attitudes and values. Eads (1994) believes, through this connection students have the opportunity, "to hear and understand the per-

spective of the 'other', which is a goal of service learning" (p.39).

Through service-learning, students gain academically, as well as personally and socially. Perspectives change, awareness of the self and the community is broadened, and development occurs. In a 1993 study of undergraduate students involved in service-learning at the University of Michigan, students reported that they ". . . had developed a greater awareness of social problems" (Markus, Howard, & King, p. 410). William Hudson (1996) reported the same outcome with his public policy course at Providence College. After conducting a pre/post test study of students' personal values and orientations involved in service-learning and receiving no significant data, Hudson drew upon his experiences with his students in class. As a post-course assessment, Hudson found that the students did relate their service experiences with the public policy issues being discussed in class. Hudson (1996) also cites that, "Most importantly, however, the service experience seemed to empower students by making them 'experts' on, at least a portion of the material discussed in class" (p.88). The students' knowledge of public policy and what they were experiencing in the community led them to ask more questions and get involved in more discussion (Hudson, 1996). The desire for students to know more about the community issues they see during their service is the essence of their learning and part of their developmental process in becoming informed, responsible citizens.

To this end, the central questions that all higher education service learning programs need to answer are the following: What are students gaining from participating in a service learning component? And are students' experiences reflecting the core goals of service-learning? Students should be the focus of the service-learning endeavor, and their response to the experience is the evaluative key to what is accomplished.

In this paper I will define how The University of Detroit Mercy (UDM) uses service learning as a form of experiential learning. Next, I will list the courses across disciplines at UDM

that use service learning as part of their course curriculum. Finally, I will discuss how UDM uses service learning to help students in higher education and its constituent communities form learning communities through cooperative linkages.

The Service Learning Program at UDM

The University of Detroit Mercy is an independent Catholic Institution of higher education which exists primarily for teaching, learning and research. Based in the Jesuit and Mercy traditions, the University mission supports and actively engages students in education which emphasizes concern for the dignity of the person and for the common good of the world community. Undergraduate liberal arts, sciences and professional programs are supported by a comprehensive core curriculum through which intellectual inquiry challenges students to understand their social, leadership and service responsibilities.

The University demonstrates its own responsibility by providing a value-based holistic education of exceptional quality; by supporting research in service to both higher education and the larger community; and by sharing its human resources in various ways as to alleviate problems common to people of a large urban area (lack of education, lack of employment poverty, low self esteem, etc.). Located in Detroit, the University views the city as an important context in which to examine and address issues of social justice. All members of the UDM community embrace a learner-centered, learner-first philosophy of service (UDM 1990).

To enhance the efforts of the University, the Leadership Development Institute was created in 1994 from a leadership grant funded by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation. The Leadership Development Institute (LDI) integrates the University's values and vision for the future and fosters a particular kind of leadership: *leadership in service*. This concept of leadership

touches the very core of the University's mission which states our role is to "challenge students to an understanding of their social, leadership and service responsibilities." The University aspires to graduate women and men with the motivation and skills to provide leadership in service to others in a *multicultural urban environment.* The UDM student population totals 6,000. Seventy percent of the students are adult learners between the age of 25 to 50 years. Adult African American females represent fifty-two percent of the total population. Traditional age male and female students who are African American and European American between the ages of 18 to 24 represent the remaining 48 percent of the total population.

The Service-Learning program, coordinated through the LDI, provides students the opportunity for experiential learning in the community where the University is located. The primary goals of service-learning are to help students develop an understanding of today's community needs, help students hear and understand the perspective of others who are different from them in many ways, help students close the discrimination and communication gap between all races and cultures, help students gain valuable insights through practical experience, and help students grow as educated citizens. Service is directly related to course content and ***integration and reflection are key components in the process***. Integration and reflection are accomplished through in-class assignments, such as journalizing on the service experience, conducting direct research, or writing papers. However, verbal group reflection is a ***mandatory componen***t of service-learning in which all students must participate.

Method

Data was gathered from student evaluations of the service-learning component in fifteen courses, representing both graduate and undergraduate students. Four graduate courses and eleven undergraduate courses incorporated service-

learning into their curriculum. The courses ranged from criminal justice, communications studies, English, and human services to MBA, nursing, and philosophy courses. During the fall term of 1998, approximately 237 students participated in service-learning, some as a requirement and some choosing service-learning as an option. Adult learners between the age of 25–50 represented the majority of the evaluation sample.

Sixty-eight percent of students participating completed and returned service-learning component evaluations. The evaluations were distributed during the last three weeks of the course semester by the professor. The evaluation was four pages in length, with a self-rate skills assessment section and questions focusing on the students' feelings about their service experience. The students were also questioned about the relationship between the service experience and course content, the identification of social justice issues, and their feelings or response to the issues. Students were also asked to comment on whether or not they would recommend the service-learning experience to other students and why.

Data was collected by recording each student's response to four questions on the evaluation. Each response was then broken down by classification based on type of response. Classifications were based on two response categories; personal insights and social awareness.

Student Perspective Outcomes

Student service-learning experiences were varied. The types of service students performed ranged from tutoring to building homes with a variety of community service agencies in the Detroit metropolitan area. The following results describe the student's perspective. Students explain personal changes that they experienced, what they learned about the organizations and how the organizations relate to the community in which they are located, the effectiveness of the community organization, and their recommendations to other students.

Highlight one or two personal changes you experienced.

Students experienced many changes as result of service-learning. The personal changes the students experienced fell into three categories. First, students' feelings and perceptions about community service and the population they served changed. Many students indicated they learned about the poor from "real life" situations. Students shared, prior to the service experience, that they questioned whether or not the people were truly needy, and now they know that many people are really in need. Two other prevalent populations the students learned about were those involved in domestic violence situations and those affected by drug addictions. The second category of changes the students experienced as a result of service-learning was personal enlightenment. Students repeatedly explained that they have greater understanding of themselves since performing the service. Some expressed developing a greater spiritual faith, compassion, an appreciation for all people and self-confidence. The third category of changes the students experienced as a result of the service-learning experience was their perceptions and feelings about the community service agency. Most students developed a greater respect for the organizations. However, some students learned that the organizations were not well organized.

What did you learn about the organization and/or how it relates to the community in which it is located?

The students learned two major things about the community service organizations and how they relate to the local community. First, students learned about the relationship of the service organization to the community and its role. Students described learning about outreach programs for seniors in the Detroit inner city; an after-school tutorial and recreation program for grade school children in Highland Park; shelter programs and services; and others. Students saw that these organ-

izations are committed to helping people deal the many challenges they face such as poverty, unemployment, racism, crime, and sexism. And, all of these factors contribute to the personal struggle in the lives of the community members. Second, the students learned about the organization itself and how it is organized. One student described an organization as a "definition of strength in the area." Students observed how well the organizations work toward common goals to serve those in need. They not only learned about the many programs the organizations sponsor but how they are structured, funded and staffed.

How effective do you believe the organization is in responding to the need people have for the service it provides?

Overwhelmingly, students believed the organizations were *very* effective in responding to community needs. Students learned that these organizations helped people find jobs, feed large numbers of people, built homes, provided mentors, organized recreational activities for youth, provided a safe haven for women and their children, offered life skill training, and provided comfort and security for children along with tutoring and recreation. It was also noted that the staff within these organizations is very dedicated.

However, a recurring theme was evident in student responses about these organizations: a lack of necessary resources. Students felt the children did not receive enough individual attention, support or positive feedback. Students also felt that facilities were not adequate enough for the great need in the community (limited shelters, beds, soup kitchen seating and amount of food . . .), and staffing within the organizations was minimal.

Would you recommend this experience to other students? Why?

Virtually all of the students engaged in service learning would recommend their experience to other students. Three major themes emerged addressing the reasons why students would recommend service-learning. The first theme focused on the students' personal rewards and the intrinsic benefits of the service-learning experience. Students described their experiences as very enriching, eye-opening, heart warming, personally satisfying, and an opportunity to build character and self-confidence. The second theme the students expressed was the value of helping others. Students described the service-learning experience as an opportunity to truly touch someone's life. By providing community service, the students became aware of how their efforts made a difference in the community. The third theme focused on what the students learned as a result of the service-learning experience. Students gained a better understanding of neighborhoods and cultures, improved communication skills, and enhanced their understanding of problems in today's society.

Only two students would not recommend service-learning. Both expressed challenges and frustration dealing with the community agency. They described the community agency's lack of experience in working with volunteers, the disorganization of project sites and lack of "hands on" experience.

Discussion

To help students develop an understanding of community needs, gain valuable insight through practical experience, and grow as educated citizens, which are some of the primary goals of service-learning, are evident throughout the preceding data and results. Students learned about community problems while working with the community organization and

meeting individuals who were directly affected by these problems. Direct service in the community provided an opportunity to work towards the goals of the organizations where they provided service. Students reported changes in their perceptions of the surrounding community and a better understanding of the people in the community. Thus, the service-learning experience increased the students' understanding of community needs while providing them with practical experience.

Measuring students' growth as educated citizens is a challenge in any realm. However, if the students' feedback and comments are an indication of their greater understanding of their community, its needs and the organizations that attempt to alleviate the needs, then the preceding results indicate growth as educated citizens. These personal and social changes are as varied as the students' service-learning experiences.

A significant fact that is highlighted in the results is that almost all of the students would recommend the experience to other students. This reflects the students' perceptions of the value of service-learning to the classroom experience. Students were able to integrate the community service with their course work. Note that the two students who would not recommend the experience to others indicated dissatisfaction with the community service agency and the lack of organization within it.

The increase of the students' personal and social awareness as a result of the service-learning experience is evident based on the data and results. Service-learning played a significant role in the development of students as responsible citizens. Community service, as an integral component of the academic curriculum has the power to effect change and contribute to the development of the whole person. Overwhelmingly, students experienced personal enlightenment about themselves in relation to the community and the satisfaction of serving others. Students were able to identify the relationship between course content and their experiences in the community. Overall, students felt the service component was a valuable experience, helping them to actively learn in their course and about themselves.

Finally, the central questions for all service-learning programs to answer are the following: What are students gaining and are student experiences reflecting the core goals of service-learning? Based on the information presented here, students did gain and enhance their personal enlightenment, social awareness and practical experiences. Further research on the value of service-learning in courses and programs in other types of higher education institutions is needed to compare this outcome with future outcomes.

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