Service Learning

Service Learning is a form of experiential education through which students apply what they are learning to a neighborhood, community, or concern in a direct, meaningful way. Service is the vehicle for the achievement of specific academic goals and objectives. Although not limited to higher education, this strategy exploits the civic purposes of higher education institutions and encompasses goals of producing responsible citizens. Service Learning combines instruction, learning, and reflection on learning with the intent that the project or activity change both service provider and recipient for the better.

The pedagogy behind Service Learning is accomplished by combining tasks with well-designed opportunities that link that task to self-reflection and self-discovery. The acquisition and comprehension of affective learning outcomes such as commitment to service also have important cognitive components. Through the process of Service Learning, course objectives attempt to help students understand the world through their endeavors to change it - and vice-versa. Ideally, students' inquiries seek to address both specific and broad questions. In other words, in a Service Learning environment it is not enough to feed the homeless for a period of time; participants should also reflect on *why* there are homeless in our society, thereby producing meaningful knowledge about social systems.

Service learning projects provide avenues for students to work with theoretical subject matter in a contextual, community setting. These projects create a reciprocal relationship in which the service elements reinforce learning, and learning strengthens the service elements. Learning becomes active, inquiry is abetted by genuine experience, and personal development is enriched through interaction with diverse individuals in the wider community.

What are the benefits of engaging in Service Learning? Recipients mentor students and collaborate with faculty, student and institutional partners as well as profit from project outcomes. Colleges and universities embrace their responsibility to educate students for citizenship and act as catalysts for building a culture of service to the community. Some research also shows that service courses aid in student retention. This form of active learning helps to weaken the perception that institutions of higher education are sovereign bodies disconnected from everyday concerns and issues. Faculty have opportunities to enrich their teaching and integrate service as well as develop student learning and reflection through active/experiential learning and/or action research projects. Students learn practical applications of learning outcomes and theory by incorporating classroom learning with what is happening in a larger social or community structure; students are able to link personal and social development with academic and cognitive development.

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