

FLORIDA

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION



# Service Learning in Community Colleges

## Program Review

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**Abstract.** Two forms of community connections, service learning and volunteerism, are ways to ensure that students who attend a community college are aware of the larger world around them and of their personal role in it. According to Richard J. Light, a professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, students who find a way to connect their academic work to their personal lives are the happiest students on campus and tend to be the most successful in the classroom (Davis, 2001). Service learning and volunteerism are structured methods for colleges to provide students with the opportunity to make these connections.

Florida's community colleges embody both components of community outreach. Though not all community colleges are participating in both components, they are moving in that direction as evidenced by their move towards formal, written policies on service learning and volunteerism and their outstanding service learning initiatives. Several institutions are participating in AmeriCorps or other Volunteer Florida programs. Miami Dade College was selected in 2003 by Campus Compact to participate as one of 13 community colleges in the nation for their "models of engagement" project. Hillsborough Community College's Service Learning Program Coordinators have been selected to give a presentation at the 2004 National Service Learning Conference. Chipola College created "A Day in the Life: The 20/20 Challenge," which was for students, faculty, and community members to donate 20,000 volunteer hours and \$20,000 to charitable causes throughout the academic year. By the time the survey was conducted, they had received 20,915 volunteer hours and donations in excess of \$64,000.

**Background.** The primary mission and responsibility of community colleges is responding to community needs for postsecondary academic education and technical degree education (Section 1004.65, Florida Statutes). However, the services provided by community colleges have expanded far beyond this basic charge, and the possibilities are large for continuous expansion.

The typical mission of community colleges—urban, rural, or suburban—makes them the appropriate vehicle to provide assistance to every community. Community colleges are the segment of higher education that usually provide basic skills to older individuals who dropped out of K-12, vocational entry-level skills, lower-division academic instruction, and retraining for persons in need of upgrading their job skills. Additionally, they are institutions that serve minority and under-prepared students. To fulfill their missions, community colleges must embrace the full implication of having "community" in their name and reach out in as many ways as possible. The Commission on the Future of Community Colleges noted that community should be defined "not only as a region to be served, but also as a climate to be created" (The Commission on the Future of Community Colleges, 1988).

To review the service learning activities occurring in Florida's community colleges, the Division of Community Colleges and Workforce Education conducted a survey on volunteerism and service learning. Twenty-seven community colleges responded. This program review will first review the literature on

FLORIDA COMMUNITY COLLEGES & WORKFORCE EDUCATION



service learning, and then it will describe service learning activities in the Florida Community College System.

**Literature Review.** Universities have historically served communities through partnerships, volunteerism, and cooperative learning opportunities for students. It is more difficult for community colleges to build these types of relationships than it is for four-year institutions. According to Mittelstet and Santos (1997) three reasons for the difficulty are: (1) students are on campus only for classes, before or after taking care of family obligations or jobs; (2) most community colleges do not have residence halls, eliminating the opportunity for students to share in extended living/learning situations; and (3) most students take only a few courses before leaving for work or transferring to a university.

These same authors suggest that an institution must have a strong sense of internal community before it can build viable external links. This internal sense of self involves ensuring that the vision or mission of the college clearly supports community building; that the support is understood and shared by the entire campus; that students and employees feel welcome to contribute; and, perhaps most importantly, that the institutional leaders are authentically building their own communities (Mittelstet & Santos, 1997).

Community outreach can be accomplished using various scenarios. The major ones are service learning and volunteerism. The lines between service learning and volunteerism are often blurred. However, for the purposes of this review, service learning will be limited to those activities that are part of a formal classroom curriculum, and volunteerism restricted to those activities that are traditionally thought of as "volunteer."

**Service Learning.** The Alliance for Service Learning in Education Reform (ASLER) defines service learning as "...a method by which young people learn and develop through active participation in thoughtfully-organized service experiences..." (2000). The 1991 National Society for Experiential Education report, "Research Agenda for Combining Service and Learning in the 1990s" (Quoted in Gray, Ondaatje, Fricker, and Geschwind, 2000) states that service learning is distinguished from volunteerism in "its balance between the act of community service by participants and reflection on that act, in order both to provide better service and to enhance the participant's own learning..." Service learning, therefore, combines a strong social purpose with acknowledgment of the significance of personal and intellectual growth in participants.

The roots of the current service learning movement extend deep into the fabric of American education. During the first decades of the twentieth century, John Dewey envisioned the need for direct personal experience as a tool of learning (Serow et al., 1996). The experiential education movement of the 1970s provided background for today's service learning projects (Kezar, 1988), and American citizens are urged to take a more active role in efforts to effect positive social change (Astin, 2000).

In a keynote address to the Conference on Information Technology, Oblinger (1988) challenged institutions to incorporate 21<sup>st</sup> century skills into the "fabric" of the institution and "transform" the students and personnel by becoming a learning college. She defined a learning college as an institution that makes use of what is known about cognition in an effort to make learning more productive. The environment created by a learning college supports increased student engagement in the learning process. Students retain more information and move from storing ten percent of what they read to ninety-five percent of what instructors teach. They retain seventy percent of what they discuss with others and eighty percent of personal experience (Oblinger, 1988).

Combining the need for improving civic life in America and the knowledge that students retain more from personal experience has led organizations such as the American Association of Higher Education (AAHE)

to endorse service learning (Zlotkowski, 2001). In this context, service learning is seen as both encouraging learning and a method of stimulating the conscience (Serow et al., 1996).

The promise of service learning is that it will address a number of perceived educational and social problems. Among these are the need to increase a student's understanding of course content, boost critical-thinking skills, and improve the integration of theory and practice. It also seems well suited to prepare youth to meet the responsibilities of living in a democratic society (Gray et al., 2000).

**Evaluation of Service Learning Projects.** According to Hesser (1995) there are at least three major stakeholders in a typical service learning project: faculty, students, and community. Gray et al., (2000) suggest that the appropriate outcomes to be considered for these stakeholders are: 1) evidence that service learning has produced a positive effect on student development and learning, 2) benefits to communities and community agencies that exceed the costs of participation, and 3) evidence of incentive for community agencies to continue in the program.

The Alliance for Service Learning in Education Reform listed the components necessary for a good educationally-based service learning project. The components are preparation, collaboration, service, curriculum integration, reflection, celebration, evaluation, and professional development (Singh, 1999).

Similarly, Honnet and Poulsen (1989) developed the following list of principles of good practice for service learning projects:

1. Engages people in responsible and challenging actions for the common good.
2. Provides structured opportunities for people to reflect critically on their service experience.
3. Articulates clear service and learning goals for everyone involved.
4. Allows for those with needs to define those needs.
5. Clarifies the responsibilities of each person and organization involved.
6. Matches service providers and service needs through a process that recognizes changing circumstances.
7. Expects genuine, active, and sustained organizational commitment.
8. Includes training, supervision, monitoring, support, recognition, and evaluation to meet service and learning goals.
9. Insures that the time commitment for service and learning is flexible, appropriate, and in the best interests of all involved.
10. Is committed to program participation by and with diverse populations.

**Volunteerism.** Volunteerism is outside the realm of specific academics or coursework in which a student is concurrently enrolled. Work by Astin and Sax, referenced in Astin, Sax, and Avalos (1999) suggests that the benefits of service participation to the student are positively associated with several short-term cognitive and affective outcomes. These include students making a commitment to their community, helping others in difficulty, promoting racial understanding, and influencing social values.

Classroom volunteering is closely linked with service learning. Astin (1999) studied the long-term effects of volunteering and found that participating in volunteer service during college is positively associated with attending graduate school, earning higher degrees, donating money to one's alma mater, socializing with persons from different racial and ethnic groups, and participating in community service work in the years after college. It is also positively associated with five variables that Astin categorizes as being in the value realm: 1) helping others in difficulty; 2) participating in community action programs; 3) participating in environmental cleanup programs; 4) promoting a racial understanding; and 5) developing a meaningful philosophy of life.

In 1988, America's Promise was created as a national organization to mobilize people from every sector of American life to build the character and competence of our nation's youth. This mission is to be fulfilled by ensuring that young people have access to the following five fundamental resources that the organizers feel are necessary to become successful adults: 1) an ongoing relationship with a caring adult parent, mentor, tutor, or coach; 2) safe places and structured activities during non-school hours; 3) a healthy start; 4) a marketable skill through effective education; and 5) an opportunity to give back through community service. The American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) became the first national higher education association to make a commitment to community service as a resource for aiding youth in character building and competence while serving local communities.

The AACC website (<http://www.aacc.nche.edu>) provides information on community colleges and the America's Promise programs sponsored by each institution. Most colleges pledge to provide leadership in all five resource areas identified by America's Promise. Colleges are reaching out to communities through their students to meet community needs in such areas as health screenings and educational support. Colleges are utilizing such programs as Breakfast Buddies, Upward Bound, Partners in Education, Shots for Tots, Job Training Partnerships, Habitat for Humanity, and the National Youth Sports Programs to provide leadership opportunities for their students. Some colleges have extended their commitment by setting a requirement of thirty hours of community service or a service learning course for all Associate in Arts degree-seeking students (AACC, 2000).

**Service Learning Survey.** In a survey of Florida's community colleges about service learning and volunteerism practices at their institution, twenty-seven colleges responded. For purposes of the survey, service learning was defined as, "activities that are designed to be of service to others and are integrated into a standard course of instruction," and volunteerism is defined as, "designed to be of service to others but is usually done outside a course." Following is a description of the service learning and volunteerism activities occurring at the institutions.

Seventeen institutions currently include service learning as a component of the curriculum. Of these, it is included in courses for psychology, nursing, education, English, speech, health, honors, political science, sociology, business, history, math, biology, humanities, art, and reading.

The types of activities that are considered service learning fall into five major categories: health education, tutoring/mentoring, assisting the elderly, assisting the poor, and miscellaneous. Six institutions reported students providing health education. This included activities such as free dental cleanings, providing oral health information to elementary school children, service learning in community hospitals, and health screenings.

Twelve institutions reported students participating in tutoring or mentoring activities to public school children. Three institutions reported students providing assistance to the elderly, such as haircuts, and three institutions reported students providing assistance to the poor, such as free haircuts and serving the homeless.

In providing service learning and volunteer opportunities, community colleges have created partnerships with others in the community. Eight community colleges have more than 10 partners, with the most being 375 organizations (Brevard Community College). Seven institutions have 10 or fewer partners and eleven community colleges do not have any partners. One institution allows individual faculty to maintain partnerships so the total number is unknown.

At institutions where there are partnerships and activities, students seem to be participating. Six community colleges had more than 100 student participants. Brevard Community College had the most students participating (over 3,500 students), followed closely by Miami Dade College (2,069 students).

Five community colleges had between one and 100 students participating. Eleven community colleges had no students participating, and further analysis reveals ten of the community colleges responding do not currently include service learning as a component of the curriculum.

Students participated in volunteer programs as well as service learning projects. Six institutions had more than 200 students participating in volunteer programs. Thirteen community colleges had less than 200 students participating and two institutions had none. Miami Dade College had the most students participating in volunteer programs (estimated at 2,000 students), closely followed by Brevard Community College (approximately 1,000 students).

Students do not receive any type of financial incentive for taking service learning courses at any community college, yet they still continue to participate. However, at six community colleges students did receive scholarships for volunteerism. Student scholarships came from the Student Government Association, Campus Diplomats, a Talent Grant from the Student Volunteer Coordinator on campus, the Hope Scholar, and Volunteer Leadership Grants.

At ten community colleges students received academic incentives for service learning. Academic incentives ranged from a notation on the student's official transcript to counting the activities towards course completion, to counting towards one of the required writing assignments, and to receiving up to 6 credit hours. Three community colleges grant credit for volunteerism. However, at all three institutions, the credit is granted only for either completing a specific class or as part of experiential learning.

The majority of the community colleges do not yet have established policies on service learning but several are in the development phase. For those that have policies, they are in the form of a Center for Community Involvement, Office of Student Volunteerism, or outlined in the Program Handbook. Fourteen community colleges are members of Florida Campus Compact, an organization which promotes service learning, and these campuses are either beginning to develop service learning initiatives or already have an established service learning structure.

All but six schools have a mentorship or tutoring program between students and public schools. A common program for this initiative is the College Reach-Out Program (CROP). Four community colleges place students through this program. Another common program is Take Stock in Children. Two community colleges serve middle school and high school students in this program. For the most part though, community colleges have created their own tutoring or mentoring programs and serve their area's public schools.

*Exemplar Service Learning Initiatives.* Several institutions have had outstanding service learning initiatives. To describe just a few, Tallahassee Community College has established relationships between "future teachers" and public schools. At Santa Fe Community College, graphics students had their marketing plans adopted by local and national companies. The Florida Community College at Jacksonville has five newly established positions called Student Learning Specialists. At Pasco-Hernando Community College, students have been able to earn internships with state legislators. Indian River Community College students organized the "Holiday Pioneer Event" to promote reading to young children. Finally, at Chipola College, the "New Friends" program allowed college students to mentor/tutor elementary school children with special needs. Hillsborough Community College's (HCC) Service Learning Program Coordinators have been selected to give a presentation at the 2004 National Service Learning Conference. HCC has also recently been awarded a three-year grant by Community College National Center for Community Engagements to expand the service learning initiative at HCC.

Brevard Community College is a national model for service learning programs offering many different initiatives for students to get involved. Program initiatives include America Reads, America's Promise, K-



14 Partnerships, Service Hours on Academic Transcript (SHOAT), Citizen Scholars, Service Learning Leaders, and Employee Service Project. Miami Dade College was selected in 2003 by Campus Compact to participate as one of 13 community colleges in the nation for their "models of engagement" project.

Service learning can be found in campus events such as Community Connection Day (faculty, students, and agency partners gathered to discuss civic responsibility), Community Recognition Awards, agency workshops, training by a nationally recognized service learning consultant, and over 200 classes offering service learning each term.

*Exemplar Volunteer Programs.* Several institutions also had outstanding volunteer programs. For instance, Valencia Community College has split its volunteer efforts into two groups: Valencia Volunteers East and Valencia Volunteers West. The East group provides placement for clubs and organizations that want to do special projects and also hosts two volunteer fairs. The West group creates one day volunteer opportunities for students and faculty. They also put individuals who would like a more permanent volunteer opportunity in touch with community members.

Chipola College created the program, "A Day in the Life: The 20/20 Challenge." The challenge was for students, faculty, and community members to donate 20,000 volunteer hours and \$20,000 to charitable causes throughout the academic year. So far, they have received 20,915 volunteer hours and donations in excess of \$64,000.

Tallahassee Community College started Service Saturdays in Fall 2000. Service Saturdays are one-day service projects that provide students opportunities to fulfill service requirements for a course.

*AmeriCorps.* Volunteer Florida (<http://www.volunteerflorida.org>) partners with Volunteer Centers across the state to provide citizens access to service opportunities. One of their main programs is AmeriCorps Florida. Currently, seven community college participate in Volunteer Florida programs. All six have students in the AmeriCorps program and were further surveyed to find more about the programs they have. Central Florida Community College receives a grant from AmeriCorps for the Legacy Corps Program, beginning March 2005. Gulf Coast Community College has two students participating in AmeriCorps. Their volunteerism is associated with a local state park. Indian River Community College has several students whose tuition is paid by AmeriCorps.

Miami Dade College (MDC) has had an AmeriCorpsVISTA program for the last seven years in a variety of areas with more than 30 VISTAs serving with the college during that time. MDC's efforts include America Reads, Entrepreneur Corps, and Service-Learning FASS (Florida Alliance of Student Services) VISTA.

Tallahassee Community College (TCC) has an average of 70 work-study students who serve as volunteers that serve alongside AmeriCorps Tallahassee program. These students are also considered part-time AmeriCorps members. Additionally, TCC provides AmeriCorps Gadsden Reads members with a college success course, which counts as three credit hours toward an AA degree.

Santa Fe Community College (Santa Fe) provides matching funds through its Workforce Board to the AmeriCorps Dignity Project in Gainesville. Santa Fe is also a key supporter of their efforts for recruiting members and volunteers specializing in auto mechanics, computer repair, and construction to mentor and teach AmeriCorps members.

Several institutions also participated in other Volunteer Florida programs. Program participation included "Service Leadership Florida," Service-Learning Conference, and Florida Alliance for Student Services (FASS).

The AmeriCorps Okaloosa-Walton College (OWC) program has been in existence for over ten years and is closely aligned with the mission of OWC to provide quality educational programs and services that enhance the community through academic, vocational, and personal development opportunities. Over the past ten years, a total of 273 AmeriCorps OWC members have tutored to help raise reading levels of over 6,000 school children identified as reading below grade level. The 2004-05 members continue to provide intensive, consistent, and systematic one-on-one and/or small group reading assistance to 1042 students in grades K-8. In a collaborative partnership with the Okaloosa and Walton School District, over 20 partner schools serve as host service sites for the members.

Currently 40 members are enrolled OWC students. They are enrolled in one to four classes; in addition they receive over 80 hours of pre-service and recurring tutor competence training from OWC faculty, school district staff and experts in the community. The majority of AmeriCorps OWC members use the education award they earn to pursue a degree or further education at OWC. In May, four former members will receive their A.A.S. in Early Childhood Education.

Members also help mobilize reading and community service volunteers from the college student body and the local community. OWC service learning students tutor reading and math at AmeriCorps host site schools, and have participated in numerous service projects for the community. Examples of OWC's service commitment are the college-wide participation in disaster efforts and the Christmas Shoebox Project. AmeriCorps OWC mobilized college students and staff to staff shelters, distribution points, and the volunteer center during the aftermath of Hurricane Ivan. In November, OWC, the Florida Association of Community Colleges, and the AmeriCorps OWC held a "Breakfast with Santa" in the College Mall and involved 60 families and in a service project for National Family Volunteer Day. OWC faculty and staff, college and collegiate high school students, GED students and OWC Even Start Family collected over 6,000 personal care items to assemble 331 Christmas Shoeboxes for the homeless through a collaborative effort with the Waterfront Rescue Mission.

Thanks to the support of OWC, the AmeriCorps OWC tutoring program is a "win-win" program. The AmeriCorps tutor "wins" with the experience and training gleaned in the tutoring process. The schools "win" by having extra support for students in need. Students "win" because they receive the extra support to help them become successful readers. The community "wins" because of the valuable service of volunteers mobilized to meet critical community needs.

**Conclusions and Implications.** Both forms of community connections discussed in this paper—service learning and volunteerism are ways to ensure that students who attend a community college are aware of the larger world around them and of their personal role in it. According to Richard J. Light, a professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, students who find a way to connect their academic work to their personal lives are the happiest students on campus and tend to be the most successful in the classroom (Davis, 2001). Service learning and volunteerism are structured methods for colleges to provide students with the opportunity to make these connections.

Florida's community colleges embody both components of community outreach. Though not all community colleges are participating in both components, they are moving in that direction as evidenced by their move towards formal, written policies on service learning and volunteerism.

A group that oftentimes works with community colleges regarding service learning is Florida Campus Compact. For more information about this group, please visit their website ([www.floridacompact.org](http://www.floridacompact.org)). For more information regarding service learning and volunteerism initiatives, please contact Dr. Pat Windham via e-mail at [Pat.Windham@fldoe.org](mailto:Pat.Windham@fldoe.org) or via telephone at (850) 245-9482.

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