

EVALUATING INSTRUCTION OF SERVICE LEARNING COURSES AT TULANE UNIVERSITY

Service learning is a relatively new approach to instruction at Tulane. Since it is being adopted quite widely, and since it is a unique pedagogical approach, evaluation of instruction with this focus should take into account standards of good practice emanating from the field of service learning. Creation of a service learning course, if done appropriately, requires considerable time and special effort from a faculty member. We hope that such efforts will be recognized and rewarded as Deans and P&T committees evaluate faculty performance.

Service learning is a particular kind of experiential learning, in which there is a reciprocal relationship between classroom and community. Ideally, service activities enhance the student's acquisition of course concepts, while the knowledge gained through academic work enhance the quality of service the student provides. Research has shown that university students gain from high-quality service learning, reporting more positive self-evaluations and increased awareness and understanding of social issues, as well as improved academic learning (Eyler & Giles, 1999).

Theoretical bases for service learning as an instructional approach include David Kolb's model of experiential learning, based on John Dewey's articulation of an experiential model of inquiry (Cone & Harris, 1996; Deans, 1999); the views of Paulo Freire, the Brazilian literacy educator (Deans, 1999); and characterizations of learners and learning processes made by cognitive and cognitive developmental theorists (McEwen, 1996). These theories generally emphasize the learner as actively constructing a viewpoint through experience: The student brings a conceptualization to the learning situation, one that can be elaborated, changed, and developed through exposure to new concepts and through the active use of those concepts in service activities and in reflection. The instructor plays a crucial role in helping the student make connections between classroom and community (Cone & Harris, 1996).

From the work of Heffernan (2001) and others, we propose the following as important points that should be considered in evaluating service learning courses. Information can be gained from course syllabi, supporting materials, and faculty members' reports of their teaching efforts. In addition to the standards that apply in evaluation of any college-level course, well-taught service learning course should include the following:

1. A clear logical/conceptual connection between the service experience and the academic content of the course

2. Evidence of a well-planned service experience (clear goals/objectives for the service activity, consideration of student development over the semester in planning)

3. Service activities from which students can learn and apply course content (e.g., not routine clerical work), with the number of hours required ranging from 20-40 per semester -- appropriate to the course credits earned.

4. Assigned readings and writing activities (where possible) that link the service placement and course content

5. Opportunities for students to engage in guided reflection through written journals, classroom discussions, scheduled "rap" sessions, or discussions with the instructor

6. Opportunities for students to show what they have learned in their service, through journals, papers, or oral presentations

7. A clear indication is given of how the service experience will be evaluated and how service activities contribute to course grades

8. Provisions are made for students to obtain a sense of closure to the community service work, if possible including feedback to the community agency at the end of the semester

9. For LAS courses that include the ___389 add-on credit for service learning, students must complete at least 40 hours of community service during the semester and must complete a product that can be evaluated as part of the course grade (e.g., a review paper on an issue relevant to the service activity, or some product of value to the site).

References

Cone, D., & Harris, S. (1996). Service learning practice: Developing a theoretical framework. Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning, 3, 31-43.

Deans, T. (1999). Service-learning in two keys: Paulo Freire's Critical Pedagogy in relation to John Dewey's Pragmatism. Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning, 6, 15-29.

Eyler, J., & Giles, D. E., Jr. (1999). Where's the learning in service learning? San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Heffernan, K. (2001). Fundamentals of service-learning course construction. Unpublished paper, Campus Compact, Brown University. (Materials from a faculty workshop held at Tulane in August, 2001).

McEwen, M. K. (1996). Enhancing student learning and development through service-learning. In B. Jacoby, et al., Service learning in higher education: Concepts and practices. (pp. 53-91). San Francisco; Jossey-Bass.