

**Service Learning
in the
First-Year Seminar**

Best-Practice Recommendations to Faculty

Center for Service Learning
Western Carolina University

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Service Learning in the First-Year Seminar

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THE FIRST-YEAR SEMINAR is designed to help students establish a connection to Western Carolina University and an appreciation of their unfolding higher education experience. With the primary goal of introducing students to intellectual life at the university level, the First-Year Seminar addresses the student's sense of place, fundamental skills, integration of knowledge, and moral reflection, among other things.

The Seminar offers opportunities for faculty to make strong connections with first-year students and for students to build bonds with one another. It should provide intellectual stimulation and opportunities for student engagement inside and outside the classroom.

The exploration of ideas characteristic of Seminar sessions will help students understand and appreciate that important cultural, social, economic, and political issues of a global society are not limited to the traditional boundaries of the academic disciplines or the specializations of the professions. In addition, it will foster positive attitudes to student engagement in the classroom, across the campus, and in the wider community.

Role of Service Learning

At Western Carolina University, the Center for Service Learning promotes the use of the service-learning pedagogy as a critical element of a student engagement initiative. Service learning is defined as:

... a teaching and learning strategy that integrates community service with academic instruction and structured reflection in such a way that students gain further understanding of course content, meet genuine community needs, develop career-related skills, and become responsible citizens.

(Center for Service Learning, Western Carolina University, 2007)

Service learning is a principal component of the University's Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP), which focuses on *synthesis* – integrated learning linking theory and practice – with strong assessment protocols at each stage of the

student's development. Students are expected to evaluate and integrate knowledge gained from a variety of experiences and settings, inside and outside the classroom, in support of career preparation and lifelong learning. Experiences outside the classroom (and the laboratory) are typically in a community setting, where students participate in various experiential education activities, including service learning, and strengthen their sense of educational purpose.

Research across the United States has revealed that faculty and students regard a service-learning component within First-Year Seminars as effective pedagogy and as an enriching experience that advances many of the goals articulated for the Seminars.

In November 2006, the National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition undertook its seventh national survey of First-Year Seminar programming in American higher education. Chief Academic Officers, Chief Executive Officers, or Chief Student Affairs Officers at all regionally accredited colleges and universities with undergraduates and lower divisions were e-mailed an invitation to participate in the Web-based survey. A total of 821 institutions (84.8%) responded that they offered First-Year Seminars and 40.2% of institutions (n=322) reported including service learning as a part of their First-Year Seminars. More than 40% reported increased persistence to sophomore year as well as improved peer connections.

Benefits and Outcomes of Service Learning

A HERI (Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California, Los Angeles) study found a positive relationship between service (community service/service learning) and the overall undergraduate experience:

Service participation shows significant positive effects on ... 11 outcome measures: academic performance (GPA, writing skills, critical-thinking skills), values (commitment to activism and to promoting racial understanding), self-efficacy, leadership (leadership activities, self-rated leadership ability, interpersonal skills), choice of a service career, and plans to participate in service after college.

(Astin et al., *How Service Learning Affects Students*, Los Angeles: HERI, UCLA, 2000, p. ii)

Service learning in the First-Year Seminar helps students gain valuable skills in

- understanding academic content insofar as the service activity is tied to specific learning objectives
- solving problems and communicating effectively
- developing greater self-understanding and a sense of personal efficacy
- dealing with diversity and, more fundamentally, with that which is unfamiliar
- developing positive peer relationships and working collaboratively with classmates
- interacting purposefully with community members
- reflecting morally on affective experiences
- achieving and sustaining social activism

In addition, service-learning projects expose students to the assets, institutions, and dynamics of the wider community and introduce them to various ways in which they can make become involved as active citizens. Moreover, service-learning projects demonstrate the University's commitment to building an engaged campus and to being a good institutional citizen.

“Positively Related to Retention”

[Community service/Service-learning] participation ... during the first college year is significantly and positively related to retention. ... volunteerism and service-learning appear to enhance involvement and facilitate integration (both social and academic) during the first year of college, and these, research shows ... are critical to student retention.

(Vogelgesang, et al., Service-Learning and the First-Year Experience: Outcomes Related to Learning and Persistence, 2002, p. 20.)

“Providing Reciprocal Benefits and Enhancing Connections”

A 2003 study¹ investigated the benefits of incorporating the pedagogy of service learning in two First-Year Seminar courses by examining: (1) the unique ways service can be incorporated in freshman classes; (2) the extent of interpersonal connections made as a result of the service; and (3) the impact of service on future community service involvement. First-year students enrolled in the Alpha seminar program in either of two introductory classes were surveyed. Responses were received from 14 students from 1

class (response rate: 35%) and 21 students from the other (response rate: 47%). Results of the survey show that most students in both courses found the service-learning experience to influence subsequent service positively, to facilitate connections within the class and in the community, and to be very beneficial overall. More research is needed to determine the aspects of the service-learning experience that contributed most to the change in student perceptions and behaviors. (An appendix to the research report contains the survey. The paper contains 3 tables and 17 references. Available from the Center for Service Learning.)

¹ Preis, J., & Fenzel, L. M., Service-Learning in the First-Year Seminar: Providing Reciprocal Benefits and Enhancing Connections. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Chicago, IL, April 2003.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Integrate service learning into the Seminar with a view to engaging students in responsible and challenging actions for the common good.
- Include a clear description of the service component in the syllabus so that students are well aware of this course expectation and can plan accordingly. New students benefit from having a clear rationale for course expectations. Articulate explicit service and learning objectives in the syllabus, and revisit them in class discussions and reflection activities.
- Provide structured opportunities for students to reflect critically on their service experience. Students need time to think about what they are going to do, what they did, and how it went.
- Emphasize critical thinking and writing (e.g., journal entries and short reflection papers focused on writing for social change).
- Include training, supervision, monitoring, support, assessment, and recognition to meet service and learning goals. (The Center for Service Learning will provide assistance.)
- Identify, early on, a community agency or service site. Meet with agency staff to discuss and prepare for the service component. Work towards developing a strong partnership with the community agency. (An effective approach is to invite the community partner to a Seminar session on campus prior to the service experience.)

- As an alternative to selecting a community agency or service site, guide students in selecting sites and projects that will meet the learning objectives. Students should understand that the service project is not merely about feeling good but is really about substance – about learning and development. While the service experience should contribute to the student’s self-exploration and personal development, it should also foster social awareness and critical thinking.
- Design group service projects, rather than individual service activities, so that the service component builds peer relationships and strengthens communication between the students and their instructors. Through group projects, students will learn to work collaboratively and appreciate the value of teamwork. Group projects can lessen the anxiety that may be associated with venturing out into the community. Offering opportunities for students to interact with faculty and staff members in diverse roles is very beneficial.
- Require one-time service projects (e.g., creating a mural at a community center, engaging in an environmental clean-up activity, or organizing games for residents of a nursing home). This will allow students to complete a project with a sense of accomplishment. All First-Year Seminar students as a large group could commit to a larger, ongoing service project (e.g., preparing a vacant house for renovation) and “pass the torch” from one First-Year Seminar group to the next over a few years.
- Consider blocking out class time for the service project, in the same way that one would block out time to complete a lab assignment or to visit the Career Center. Alternatively, plan for the entire Seminar group to meet on a Saturday or on a Sunday afternoon to complete a major service project.
- Give student mentors (e.g., Medford Service-Learning Scholars) a role in handling some of the details associated with a service project, such as conducting reflection activities.
- Recognize and celebrate students’ involvement in the service-learning project by providing pictures to the campus or local community newspaper and the service-learning newsletter. Nominate students and community partners for campus-wide recognition during the Annual Service-Learning Awards hosted by the Center for Service Learning.

This document was written and designed by Glenn Bowen,
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