

# SERVICE LEARNING: A NEW APPROACH IN HIGHER EDUCATION



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Southern University is rare, if not unique, among public institutions in requiring undergraduates to complete sixty-clock hours of community service before graduation. The purpose of this initiative was to heighten the sensitivity of graduates to the indispensable role that volunteerism must play in our society. We also envisioned collectively addressing some of the ills of the State of Louisiana by having a pool of 16,000 students in the Southern University System contributing to the alleviation of human suffering and social decay. In this paper, we describe some of the noteworthy accomplishments that the program has made over the past three years.

During the fall semester of 1990, the Southern University System became the first public institution in the state of Louisiana to require its students to render sixty clock hours of community volunteerism for graduation. It was envisioned that the community service activities performed by the more than 16,000 students would be laboratory extensions of the classroom, while at the same time addressing some of the serious social and educational problems which afflicted the State of Louisiana.

The most compelling reason for establishing the community service requirement, however, was that the University believed that its graduates would now have a greater sensitivity for the needs of humanity and that they would view volunteerism as a legitimate means for addressing those needs. The university also believed that volunteerism in the minority community was an indispensable

activity in creating a society in which the quality of life is improved.

The fact that our public university took a futuristic approach in 1990 by making service learning an integral component of the academic program is unique in higher education. In 1983 the Alliance for Service learning set standards that helped to define the framework for service learning. These standards, based on a combined knowledge of practice and expertise ultimately gave impetus to the development of service learning programs throughout the country. However, the movement did not become a nationally recognizable one until 1992. By that time this university had established the Center for Service Learning at the main campus in Baton Rouge. Because the university's mission stressed teaching, research and service, the Center for Service Learning became a means by which the university could implement innovative

ways to render service to the community.

Following program approval, eighty service agencies were identified within the surrounding neighborhood of which students could be assigned for service. More than 2,000 students have performed community service in the areas of health promotion, nutrition counseling, crisis intervention, financial advisement, neighborhood redevelopment, drug education, parenting skills and tutoring.

From the recipient side, persons were taught to read and write at the six grade level and beyond. Students helped to create behavioral changes in at-risk youngsters who moved from antisocial behavioral traits to eagerness to learn. From the university student side, faculty members saw a heightened sensitivity for the needs of the less fortunate and for volunteerism in general. In a recent survey, it was found that students who entered the program with great reluctance, returned for more volunteer work well beyond the graduation requirements.

Students have also taken on jobs with service agencies as a result of their community service assignments. In a recent survey of volunteers, it was found that the academic performance of students improved as a result of participation in community service, which required more structure, planning and discipline.

The community volunteerism program has identified several components that have been incorporated into the academic fabric of the university. The agency readiness training model is used to provide the participating service agencies with the assistance for working with student volunteers. Curriculum development workshops are provided for university faculty and kindergarten through 12th grade teachers to introduce service learning principles into existing curricula. As the program grew, it was important to ensure that the oral reflection and journal writing would reinforce the university's requirement of participation in the "writing across the curriculum plan"; thus students improved their speaking and writing skills.

Two unique programs are operating through the Center for Service Learning, the

Clarksdale Service Program and the Students Serving Students Program at Belfair Elementary School. In the fall of 1992, a special partnership was formed with the Clarksdale Residential Unit, a residential housing unit adjacent to the Southern University campus. Clarksdale is a housing development in which 80% of the fifty residential units are headed by single parents. In this partnership, the students used a holistic approach toward assisting the residents in solving problems. Students worked with residents to empower them with skills to improve their communities and their family lives. The focus was on teaching basic home maintenance, parenting skills, consumer education, recycling and proper nutrition. The pivotal activities at Clarksdale were daily tutoring provided for all children in the housing development and special classes for parents. As the children improved, so did the parents. A sense of high self esteem and pride began to permeate the community.

In the Fall of 1993 the Center for Service Learning formed a partnership with the Belfair Elementary School to create "Student Serving Students." University students worked with thirty-two fourth and fifth graders to become trained to mediate conflicts among their peers. In the past six months, conflicts among students at Belfair Elementary have decreased by 50%.

Finally, the students at the University are recognized frequently for their heroic and dedicated efforts to address the social ills that plague our society. The Center for Service Learning is called upon regularly to provide technical assistance and training to help universities, elementary and secondary schools, and community based organizations to implement service learning programs. The service learning program at this university has provided positive experiences which have contributed to the academic development of students. It has also served to foster civic responsibility, solve social problems and give students a greater sensitivity for the needs of humanity.

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