

Civic Engagement and Service-Learning: An Initiative with First-Year Students

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In the last two decades, Trinity University in Washington, DC, has undergone a transformation from its historic role as a liberal arts Catholic college serving mostly white, middle-class women to the role of an urban university whose student population in the College of Arts and Sciences, while still all women, is now 85% African-American and Latina.

Service had traditionally been housed in Campus Ministry, and Trinity faculty and administration generally perceived it as extracurricular. Due to the changes in the student population and the influx of students of all faith traditions over the last 20 years, the university noted a decline in volunteerism through university channels. Recently, some Trinity faculty expressed concerns that our mostly minority student population might be uninterested in or unlikely to benefit from a service-learning pedagogy, due to high personal and financial obligations and/or academic under-preparedness. Moreover, faculty believed that their own instructional challenges were significant without the burden of integrating service-learning into the curriculum. Clearly, advancing service-learning required attention to beliefs held by the administration and faculty about the viability and effectiveness of a service-learning educational model for our students.

First-Year Seminar – Overview of Transformation

At Trinity, all first-year students are required to take the first-year seminar. Each semester, we offer five or six sections, with faculty from philosophy, physics, theology, English, and psychology. From 2002 to 2005, the faculty-selected theme was Identity: An Interdisciplinary Exploration, with a service-learning component, Human Agency and Human Identity. This case narrates how the learning objectives of the seminar were expanded to emphasize service-learning and civic leadership.

New Opportunity and New Pedagogy

In 2003, a sociology professor engaged in service-learning pedagogy for more than 10 years received a Learn and Serve sub-grant from the Corporation for National and Community Service through the Community Research and Learning (CoRAL)

Network to institutionalize service-learning at Trinity University. Faculty resistance seemed well entrenched until six faculty on an interdisciplinary first-year seminar team agreed to attend workshops on service-learning supported by the CoRAL grant. The grantee's approach to this team proved a successful strategy in overcoming faculty resistance to the pedagogy. That faculty team, already working outside of disciplinary boundaries and accustomed to collaborative learning and teaching, turned out to be just the grouping of risk-taking innovators research has shown are likely to adopt models of experiential learning, particularly service-learning (McKay & Rozee, 2004).

Connecting Service-Learning to Curricula

Even within this cohesive group, resistance emerged, especially over the appropriateness of service-learning to the teaching of course content and over the suitability of the pedagogy to the learning needs of urban minority students. They integrated civic engagement by having students choose placement sites from a list provided by Campus Ministry or based on contact with agencies represented at a Community Service Fair organized by Campus Ministry. However, as the team discovered, neither our students' academic strengths and weaknesses nor their academic and economic backgrounds impeded their success.

We assessed our initiative from the beginning, to shape our revision of the content, pedagogy, and community placements. What we learned emerged from a multi-constituency assessment and an integrated set of strategies such as student portfolios, student surveys, and faculty reflection. Student portfolios contained reflections, journal observations, self-assessments, and a final paper integrating their service experiences with the course objectives. Faculty discovered that many students were unable to make connections between course content and service experiences.

Since students perceived the service-learning as an add-on course requirement not wholly integrated into course pedagogy or content, faculty concluded that they had inadequately prepared students to be careful participant/observers at the service sites. Inadequate integration of service-learning occurred because

(1) faculty spent little time modeling the integration of service-learning into courses, placing emphasis on disciplinary content while crowding out reflection on service-learning; and (2) community placements hindered integration because the sites chosen did not necessarily fit the course design. Students' selection of community placements from the list in the Campus Ministry office had dispersed their placements across the District's metropolitan area in activities that generally did not coincide clearly with or enhance the course materials.

The following year (2004-05), to remedy these problems and to bolster the learning outcomes, faculty implemented structural and pedagogical changes. Each seminar section was paired with a specific agency whose aims dovetailed with course objectives. Community partners were a resource/drop-in center for expecting parents and families with young children; two organizations that provide housing and services to homeless families or women; an after-school program; and an organization that links schools, families, and the community to support quality education. Students' *shared* service experience enhanced their reflection in class. The community service requirement was increased from 12 to 20 hours to give students sufficient exposure to the agency and its clientele, and, consequently, enough time for learning on-site. Faculty set aside class time before the service to introduce service-learning, underline its pedagogical rationale, and prepare students to construct their service experiences in terms of learning. Faculty accepted the necessity of streamlining course content to foster acquisition of course objectives through service-learning.

Assessment

Faculty engaged in assessment in collaboration with the service-learning staff in order to understand outcomes. Their review of student portfolios provided one means of assessment (and effected changes described above); student surveys provided another. Since fall 2004, students enrolled in first-year seminars have participated in the CoRAL Network pre- and post-surveys, measuring their expectations of service-learning, and its effect on writing and critical thinking skills and their grasp on course content. Students' community-based experiences generally confirmed and exceeded their positive expectations (Table 1).

Table 1
Students' Expectations and Experiences of Community-Based Learning, Fall 2004 and Spring 2005

	Fall 2004		Spring 2005	
	Pre-Survey (n = 91)	Post-Survey (n = 93)	Pre-Survey (n = 57)	Post-Survey (n = 42)
The community-based learning will. . .				
Develop my critical thinking skills	36%	79%	34%	76%
Enhance my academic experiences	42%	86%	46%	81%
Help me understand course readings and content	30%	74%	38%	79%

Note: Percentage of students who agreed or strongly agreed on pre- and post-surveys reported.

Student surveys reinforce the conclusion that community-based learning is most effective when faculty ensure a high-quality community placement and fully integrate service activities with the course material through critical reflection and discussion (Eyler, Giles, Stenson, & Gray, 2001).

Recently, the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) showed that Trinity's first-year students scored well above coeducational peer institutions on a large number of service-learning and civic engagement indicators. Compared with all other first-year students nationwide who took the NSSE survey in spring 2006, Trinity students had a higher rate of participation in course-based service-learning projects and were more likely to have voted in national and state elections. They reported significantly stronger experience in developing personal values and ethics, contributing to their community's welfare, and understanding diversity.

The first-year student initiative in incorporating service-learning to promote civic engagement succeeded in developing a cadre of professors willing to employ service-learning pedagogy and in enhancing the learning experiences of Trinity University students.

Supplemental Materials

Please refer to our service-learning link to view our Community Partner Manual and Student Manual: http://www.trinitydc.edu/academics/service_learning/

References

Eyler, J. S., Giles, D. E., Jr., Stenson, C. M., & Gray, C. J. (2001). *At a glance: What we know about the effects of service-learning on college students, faculty, institutions and communities, 1993-2000*. (3rd ed.). www.compact.org/resource/aag.pdf. Retrieved September 2, 2006, from <http://www.compact.org/resource/aag.pdf>.

McKay, V. & Rozee, P. (2004). Characteristics of faculty who adopt community service learning pedagogy. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning* 10(2), 21-33.

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II. Institutional Description

- a. Trinity University, Washington, DC
- b. Private
- c. Four-year
- d. 1,800 FTE undergraduates; 200 are first-year students.
- e. 117 of the 200 first-year students are residential in 2006-2007.