

# VOLUNTEERING 101

## **Service Finds a Home in the Classroom** Are you overlooking a low-cost approach with huge and long-lasting benefits?

BY KAREN BOWMAN

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Many student volunteers are coming into contact with community-based volunteer work through academic “service-learning” programs. Service-learning links community-service activities with classroom topics and projects as a way to bring real-world application and social awareness to traditional coursework. In true service-learning programs, the service activity is far more than token volunteer work. It is an integral part of the course, providing a focus for classroom material.

The service-learning approach is based on the idea that volunteer service and classroom learning can enhance each other, providing results greater than either alone. Classroom learning is aided by seeing theory in action within the service setting and experiencing valuable “hands-on” education. In turn, community service becomes more meaningful as students see below the surface activity and discover larger social and economic issues surrounding the service provider. Students develop a greater appreciation for the nonprofit organization and its role in the community through their combined experiences.

## Benefits to Nonprofits

Entering a service-learning partnership with a college or university can be very beneficial for a nonprofit organization. The most immediate benefit is an increased volunteer pool for day-to-day operations. In addition, exposure to community service increases the chance that participants will continue their volunteer activities in the future. A survey of volunteers found that 36.1% of respondents had come into their present position through some previous participation with the organization.<sup>1</sup> Those who had volunteered during their younger years reported above-average levels of volunteering and giving later in life. These findings suggest that a service-learning partnership can build the foundation of an organization’s future volunteer base.

Another benefit to nonprofits is access to college resources. Professional services that could cost thousands of dollars may be performed at little or no cost as part of the students’ training. For example, chemistry students might perform analyses to determine water pollution levels for a local environmental group as part of their laboratory assignment. Business students might create a business or marketing plan for an expanding nonprofit as a term project. Computer science students might develop new programs for client database management or organizational recordkeeping using the university’s computing facilities. In addition, service-learning partnerships can lead to ongoing research and consulting relationships between nonprofits and university faculty.

Nonprofits also gain access to the university’s publicity and public relations programs. Such support can increase community and media awareness of the organization and its programs. Smaller nonprofits or those with limited publicity resources may find this aspect of the partnership particularly useful as it allows them to increase their public presence with little or no additional effort.<sup>2</sup>

Besides these economic advantages, service-learning programs deliver intangible benefits. Students, many of whom are from the local community, gain a heightened awareness of the value of nonprofits and of their own contributions. Working together, service-learning partners develop a closer relationship and greater sensitivity to each other’s needs. They and their community benefit.

## Challenges to Successful Partnerships

There are two potential problems which the academic and nonprofit partners should address early on:

**Problem 1. Student Turnover.** Perhaps the hardest problem to overcome is the turnover in student volunteers. Since service-learning courses are scheduled around semesters or trimesters, instructors and nonprofit partners receive a batch of new students about every four months. The nature of the academic calendar can lead to difficulties in training, stability, and timeliness. Organizations that require intensive training may find the semester too short for meaningful work from their student volunteers. Service providers whose clients require a stable, long-term staff of volunteers may also find the quick turnover disruptive. On the other hand, organizations interested in having students perform professional services for their organization may find the semester too long to wait for results.

The key to resolving the turnover issue lies in understanding the needs of both the students and the nonprofit organizations. When forming partnerships with academics, nonprofit managers must be sure to explain the difficulties that the academic calendar may provide for them. In turn, the academic partner must relay the learning objectives set for the students. Together, the partners should work to discover a task or set of duties that will satisfy the needs and goals of each. In

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some cases, the needs of the nonprofit and instructor may simply be incompatible, and a partnership cannot be formed at that time. While unfortunate, it is better for all to discover such incompatibility before undertaking a project.

**Problem 2. Division of Responsibility.** The second issue is the way responsibilities will be divided between partners. Forming a service-learning partnership will require additional time and responsibility from both partners as they plan and carry out the program. They must clearly define their relationship, along with the duties to be performed by each partner. Differing assumptions and expectations will lead to poor communication and performance on both sides. Once the nonprofit and academic partners have an understanding of their respective capabilities and limitations, they can find a project and format that fits within these boundaries.

### Useful Internet Addresses Related to Service-Learning

- The American Association of Community Colleges —  
<http://www.aacc.nche.edu/spcproj/service/service.htm>
- The Association for Research on Nonprofit Organizations and Volunteer Action — <http://wvu.edu/~socialwk/A/arnova.html>
- The Corporation for National Service — <http://www.cns.gov>
- Illinois Campus Compact for Community Service —  
<http://www.ilstu.edu/depts/icccs>
- The Partnership for Service-Learning —  
<http://www.studyabroad.com/psl/pslhome.html>
- The Service Learning Clearinghouse —  
<gopher://gopher.nicsl.coled.umn.edu>
- The University of Colorado at Boulder —  
<http://csf.colorado.edu/sl/index.html>

Nonprofits also gain access to the university's publicity and public relations programs.

requires the most effort—but also provides the most control. While the instructor is responsible for the classroom component of the course (lecturing, conducting reflection sessions, assigning and grading student work), the nonprofit supervisor is responsible for training and placing student workers, overseeing on-site activities, and evaluating performance.<sup>3</sup>

**2. Students as Consultants.** A less common format places students in the role of professional service providers or consultants to the nonprofit partner. This approach is particularly appealing in schools of business, since the skills application is obvious. For example, business students often conduct library and field research on behalf of a nonprofit “client,” and develop plans for new business ventures, promotional campaigns, and other strategic activities. The students operate as agents of the nonprofit’s management or as an outside source for scientific research.

This is a very different setting for the nonprofit partner. Other than site visits, classroom visits, or perhaps joint data-collection excursions, the nonprofit has little independent interaction with students. The nonprofit’s duties are largely informational, guiding students toward organizational records that may be useful to complete the project. While time demands are minimal, demands for information may be large. In addition, top managers may need to approve the release of some of the records.

**3. Students as Managers.** The roles are reversed in this relatively uncommon service-learning format. Students are charged with the task of planning and implementing a nonprofit venture throughout the semester. The class is responsible for researching community needs and planning all aspects of the venture, including managing volunteers, soliciting donations, and promoting the enterprise. For example, some classes plan a series of fundraising events for a local charity. Others develop mentoring programs or educational workshops for an under-served community.

This format places the nonprofit partner, chosen for its relevance to the class venture, in an advisory role. The nonprofit partner is typically asked to speak to the class, answering questions about the population being served, how to reach donors, and past successes and failures in similar ventures.

## Service-Learning Course Formats

There are three major formats for combining service and learning components in courses:

**1. Students as Workers.** A common blueprint for combining service and learning involves placing students in nonprofit organizations as traditional volunteers. For example, many service-learning classes require students to work several hours per week at an organization chosen from an approved list. These students typically keep journals to help them reflect upon and internalize their experiences. Then they write a term paper on the organization or the relevant social or economic issues.

For the nonprofit partner, this format

# Forming a Service-Learning Partnership

If you'd like to explore the idea of forming a service-learning partnership with a college or university in your area, there are a number of places you can start. Many service-learning programs are funded in part by grants from organizations such as Campus Compact (headquartered in Providence, Rhode Island) and the Learn and Serve America initiative of the Corporation for National and Community Service (Washington, D.C.). These organizations maintain records of the service-learning programs they fund, and can direct interested parties to the nearest college or university's program coordinator. (See page 44 for the Web sites of these and other helpful organizations.)

Not all service-learning programs are funded through outside agencies. To find out if a particular college or university is engaged in service-learning, contact the school's Vice President/Director of Academic Affairs or the school's Office of Community Service. If there is an existing service-learning program, these offices should be able to provide the names of the individuals involved. Or you may choose to go directly to a department relevant to the service-learning project you have in mind and inquire with the department chairperson.

Once a potential service-learning partner has been identified, the nonprofit and academic coordinators should arrange to discuss the project goals and requirements. When built upon a foundation of mutual understanding and cooperation, this partnership can be a rewarding experience for the students as well as for the nonprofit organization, the college or university, and the community. ■

The students keep journals to help them reflect upon their nonprofit experiences.

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>Administered by the Gallup Organization for Independent Sector, 1992.

<sup>2</sup>"Universities Offer Marketing Research Key" by Gilberto de los Santos (see "Selected References") describes how universities provide valuable marketing services for nonprofits.

<sup>3</sup>For guidelines on working with student volunteers, see "How to Reap the Benefits of Youth Volunteerism," *Nonprofit World*, November-December 1993.

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\*Wilder Foundation, *Collaboration Handbook*.

\*Wilder Foundation, *Collaboration: What Makes It Work*.

\*Starred publications are available through the Society for Nonprofit Organizations' Resource Center. For ordering information, see the Society's *Resource Center Catalog*, included in this issue, or contact the Society at 6314 Odana Road, Suite 1, Madison, Wisconsin 53719 (800-424-7367).

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