

Creating a Service-Learning Program -- Critical Concepts to Keep in Mind

Lessons Learned at Miami Dade College

Since our formal program began in 1994, some 20,000 student and 200 faculty participants later, we have learned a great deal about developing and sustaining service-learning at an institution of higher education. Some of the most important of these lessons include the following:

- **Set and maintain standards** – clearly differentiate service-learning from volunteerism and internships and emphasize academic rigor—academic credit for demonstrated learning, not for hours of service provided—faculty must very purposefully and rigorously use reflective assignments to guide and assess learning,
- **Reflection, reflection, reflection** – without reflection, there is no service-learning, when reflection is understood and utilized, service-learning is successful—reflection starts prior to the service project via thorough preparation,
- **Faculty coordinator/leadership** – faculty listen to other faculty—having a respected, knowledgeable faculty member to champion service-learning is invaluable in recruiting and supporting others,
- **Faculty training/workshops/support** – faculty need training in the pedagogy of service-learning so they can understand what it is and how to use it effectively, and they need support to handle the logistics of placing and monitoring students in service-learning projects,
- **Customer service** – the Service-Learning Center must provide outstanding customer service to all stakeholders to be successful—faculty, students, and agency partners alike,
- **Infrastructure is key** – in order for service-learning to become a widely utilized teaching strategy, there must be space and staff allocated to coordinate and administer the program,
- **Student leadership/student ambassadors** – there is nothing more powerful than student voices; utilize students as leaders, coordinators, and advocates for service-learning,
- **Utilize Community Service FWS to help coordinate program** – 7% of all Federal Work Study funds must be utilized for “community service” — coordinating a college’s service-learning program is an approved use for these students. Student assistants can handle much of the logistics involved with placing and supporting service-learners,
- **Document and evaluate** – gather data on all program activities to demonstrate accomplishments and to constantly improve program,
- **Quality vs. quantity** – it is more effective to start small and maintain program quality than to grow too quickly,
- **Market, celebrate, and recognize** – say thanks to all program participants for their hard work and let college administrators and the community know the excellent services being provided,
- **Hold mandatory agency workshops** – agency supervisors generally are unfamiliar with service-learning and require training to ensure that they help students both serve and learn,
- **Foster support of administration** – administrative support is required to make service-learning work. Administrators need to be consulted and involved from the beginning,
- **Encourage partnership model instead of clearinghouse model** – encourage faculty to work closely with one agency, or a handful of agencies, rather than giving students a long list of options to pick from.