

# A Service Learning Project: Community Service, Interpersonal Skills, and Personal Growth

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## Abstract

A service learning project was introduced during the Spring 1998 Semester to a senior-level capstone course in the Department of Agricultural Economics at Kansas State University. The learning outcomes of the project were significant and meaningful. In a writing assignment about the service learning project, students reported that the positive outcomes included: new insights into the social conditions of their community; unique challenges that were overcome by applying critical thinking and teamwork to new situations; and opportunities to work through conflicts that inevitably arise when working with other individuals and organizations. These positive, tangible benefits were considered more important for some students than for others. A diversity of projects were selected, based on student interest and the availability of time to be allocated to the project. Written reports of the projects were well done. However, class discussion could have provided for a more meaningful method of sharing service project experiences, and will be incorporated into future courses.

## Introduction

Student interest and participation in charitable activities are extraordinarily high (Jacoby, 1994). In response to this increasing desire of students to "give something back" to their communities and institutions, many colleges and universities have introduced "service learning" into their curricula, to merge the benefits of experiential learning with classroom instruction. For example, San Francisco State University recently received an \$850,000 grant from the California State University System to mobilize a greater commitment to service learning. Dr. Ehrlich, a distinguished scholar at San Francisco State University, has found that service learning allows students to apply what they are learning to real-world problems, become more involved in the community surrounding the campus, and develop career goals at an earlier age than they might otherwise (Gose, 1997).

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Service learning refers to expanding the learning environment from the classroom to the community through the integration of community service activities into academic curricula. To be successful, a service learning project includes not only an experiential learning experience, but also guided reflection about the service project, and how it fits into a student's life, career, and relationships. The benefits of service learning appear to be large and significant. Not only do communities and organizations gain from the increase in volunteer hours, but the students gain insight and knowledge into an area which is often previously unexplored by them. Participants in service learning activities are often placed into unique situations that allow them to grow intellectually, socially, and morally. Community service can be challenging at times, which is perhaps the ultimate reward: doing something of consequence is not always easy.

Bekkum (1993) reported that "community activities" and "volunteering" were identified as valuable experiences for gaining skills at working with people by employers of agricultural graduates of Iowa State University. Radhakrishna and Bruening (1994) similarly found that agribusiness employees who attended a workshop at the Pennsylvania State University ranked "interpersonal skills" to be the most important skill needed in the workplace. Andelt et al. (1997) recommended that both coursework and co-curricular activities, including internships and service learning emphasize the development of personal skills. In a survey by Andelt et al., employers of alumni of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, College of Agriculture and Natural Resources, gave the importance of personal qualities the highest mean ranking. The authors concluded, "This finding supports the need for classes in interpersonal skill development. Students need to become more aware of their personal strengths/weaknesses, and be afforded the opportunity to practice inter-personal skill in settings other than the classroom, such as may be found in practicums in the community."

Given the large perceived benefits of service learning, Astin (1995) has challenged colleges and universities to incorporate service learning into their curricula to promote the democratic virtues of honesty, tolerance, empathy, generosity, teamwork, and social responsibility. Astin also be-

lieves that these virtues should be practiced by teachers in their professional conduct, and in university policies and practices. Many researchers have found that introducing service learning into the curriculum can increase student learning (Markus et al., 1993; Boss, 1994; Cohen and Kinsey, 1994). Leatherman (1997) reported that researchers at Brandeis University found that students who participated in service learning programs in school earned better grades, were more committed to their communities, were more open to cultural diversity, and were more likely to go to college.

The objective of this study is to report on a newly-initiated classroom service learning requirement in a senior-level capstone course in the Department of Agricultural Economics at Kansas State University. After the first year of the service learning requirement, students were unanimous in their positive evaluation of the project. Learning outcomes were tangible, obvious, and significant. A discussion and critique of the service learning project follows.

## Methods

The course AGEC 610, "Current Agricultural and Natural Resource Policy Issues," is a senior-level capstone course that has been taught since 1992 (described in Barkley, 1995). Upon hearing of several other successful service learning experiences of teachers in other academic departments and institutions, the following assignment was developed for inclusion in the course during the Spring 1998 semester. The assignment comprised 10 percent of the final grade.

### AGEC 610 Service Learning Project

**Objectives:** The main objective of this capstone course is to serve as a "bridge" between your college experience and your career. Service has become an increasingly popular and important aspect of life in the United States. The ideas of "giving something back," and "helping those less fortunate than ourselves" are influencing a large number of individuals to volunteer and work on service projects. This assignment will provide you with an opportunity to design and implement your own service project while you are enrolled in school.

**Assignment:** Select an area of service that you believe would create the largest benefit to you and to those who will be helped by the service project. Your service project must be approved by the instructor prior to 5 PM, Friday, January 30, 1998. This assignment is intended to be flexible, to accommodate a wide variety of student interests and abilities. Each student should be able to design a service project that will be most advantageous to him or her. The service project could consist of: (1) A written plan, or strategy, of what you hope to accomplish during the semester, (2) A minimum of 10 hours of

service on the project, and (3) A final evaluation and assessment of your service project, including: (a) What you accomplished, (b) The effectiveness of your service to others, (c) What you learned from the experience, and (d) What you will do in the future based on your experience. Creativity is encouraged; plan a truly meaningful, fun, and productive service project!!!

Given this assignment, many students selected service learning projects with the major charitable organizations within the community, including the Flint Hills Breadbasket (a food bank), the Manhattan Emergency Shelter, Habitat for Humanity, Big Brothers/Big Sisters, the Home Project (an organization designed to help maintain the homes of the elderly, disabled, and poor), and 4-H. Other students created their own project, including providing golf lessons to children, dressing up as Smokey the Bear at the local shopping mall, tutoring at an elementary school, and coaching basketball in the city youth league. The outcomes of this diversity of projects are reported in the next section, together with a critique and analysis of the class assignment.

## Results and Discussion

The extensive and growing literature on service learning (Bellah et al., 1985; Cha and Rothman, 1993; Jacoby and Associates, 1996) has identified several important positive outcomes of service learning, including (1) civic or social consciousness, (2) critical thinking, (3) awareness of and comfort with diversity, (4) collaborative problem solving, and (5) conflict resolution. The results of the service learning assignment will be organized around these five major outcomes, including quotations from the written assignments turned in by the enrolled students.

### 1. Civic or Social Consciousness

One of the major outcomes of the service learning project was a heightened awareness of the social conditions within the community. One woman in the class, after working for Habitat for Humanity, reported that she was shocked to learn the extent of the homeless situation in Manhattan. This student believed that homelessness was something that existed primarily in large metropolitan areas on the coast, rather than in the Mid-West. Another student volunteered with the Community Food Basket, and reported that there were many more families in Northern Riley County that need assistance in getting food than she would have believed.

Many College students have not had exposure to the work of charitable organizations. Learning about the lifestyles of individuals who struggle to obtain life's basic necessities provided a valuable learning experience for many students in the class. This may be particularly true for students who came from a farm background, who in many cases

had never been exposed to urban issues and problems. Widening student experiences is a major goal of this capstone course, together with providing an introduction to the type of real-world issues that may be found by graduates of the College of Agriculture at Kansas State University.

One student summarized his writing assignment with the observation that the service project made him realize that there are many needy individuals in town, and that not-for-profit distributors like the Flint Hills Breadbasket make a huge difference in the lives of those in need.

## 2. Critical Thinking

Two students provided golf lessons to boys from their hometown. Although this type of project was originally intended to be more fun than work, one of the two golf teachers stated, "I think this service project was worthwhile for everyone involved. We learned some things about dealing with kids in general and some of the challenges involved with teaching kids."

Several students selected projects in which working with children was a major part of the assignment. Many students found this to be a challenging opportunity to learn critical thinking skills. A student who had played basketball in high school signed up to coach a fifth- and sixth-grade basketball team: "We played a total of five games and lost all five games." Some of the nontangible aspects of this experience were succinctly stated in the student's project report, where he described overzealous parents who believed their sons to be the next Michael Jordan, and believed that they knew much more about how to coach than he did. What a great learning experience for a college senior about to embark on a career in agribusiness! In spite of the team's win-loss record, the student concluded that coaching was a new experience for him and he had enjoyed helping the kids learn how to play basketball.

Another student who had been active in 4-H as a child became a cat project leader for a local 4-H Club. After working on the project, she reflected on her enhanced appreciation for parents and volunteers, due to the large amount of time and effort required to do the job correctly.

The service projects led to numerous real-world experiences for leadership opportunities, an excellent way to gain critical thinking skills by working with people and organizations. It is these "critical thinking" and "people skills" that agricultural employers continue to emphasize as increasingly necessary in the workplace.

## 3. Awareness of and Comfort with Diversity

In an increasingly diverse and integrated global economy, successful agricultural graduates will be required to become experienced and comfortable working with individuals and groups who are different than themselves. Many of the service projects resulted in experiences that are very

unlikely to occur within the confines of an academic classroom environment. For example, one woman described her fear upon beginning work at the Manhattan Emergency Shelter Inc. (MESI), which is a safe place for those with nowhere else to go. When this student first walked into the shelter, she reported feeling anything but safe. This initial discomfort gradually eroded as more time was spent at the shelter: "The more time I spend at the shelter, the more people open up to me. Whether it is the staff, the interns, or residents, I think MESI feels more comfortable around me every time I return." This frank report of a real-world experience met one of the objectives of the service learning project: to expose students to other people and experiences that they would not have otherwise had the opportunity to learn about.

Another student volunteered at the Home Project, an organization that helps elderly, disabled, and poor maintain their homes: "From doing the service project I learned how good it feels to help others. I also learned that elderly people really enjoy the company of young people... It made me feel good to know that I helped them and also brightened their day by listening to them, not to mention some of the stories were very entertaining."

These students learned what most of us learn early in life but often forget in the hectic pace of everyday living: one of life's greatest rewards is helping other people.

## 4. Collaborative Problem Solving

Working together to solve problems continues to be one of society's greatest needs. One student who worked for the Habitat for Humanity summarized her learning experience,

"Volunteering is definitely a humbling experience, especially for someone who is used to being in charge of projects. One thing I have learned from this experience was how it feels to be on the other side of the delegation process, and how important it is to make everyone feel important and needed." The service learning writing assignment provided ample evidence that a great deal of learning about working with other people, on teams and in organizations, was a major outcome of the assignment.

## 5. Conflict Resolution

One woman in the class volunteered to tutor in Mrs. Duckworth's fifth grade class at Northview Elementary School in Manhattan, Kansas. She was assigned to work with a difficult child, who challenged (and frustrated) her in many significant ways. After several sessions, however, the tutor reported that she had, "truly enjoyed my experience and have been rewarded in many ways." The reports of service learning projects reported above demonstrate that the assignment forced many students "outside of their comfort zones." Like many life experiences, the effort put

forth to meet a difficult challenge was rewarded later.

Although every student in the class reported a positive experience with the service learning project, the assignment was considered vitally important to some, and relatively uninteresting to others. A recent study on the relationship between personality types and academic goals helps to explain why. Sorensen (1998) recently reported the results of a study where freshman students enrolled in a University Foundations course at the University of Nebraska were asked to rate the importance of 86 academic goals to their own college programs. One of the goals was, "Prepare for a life of service to others." Although this goal did not make the "Top Ten" list for all students, the goal was more important for some personality types than others. Students were categorized into personality types by the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI).

Students who were of the "sensing-perceiving" (SP) type rated the goal of a life of service seventh, and "sensing-judging" (SJ) types ranked this goal as second out of the list of 86 goals. Clearly, service was seen as an important goal by some college of agriculture students, but not all. Sorensen recommended that teachers need to provide a variety of learning activities so that each student can develop his or her own specific strengths and improve on weaker areas.

Since different personality types place different values on activities, it is not surprising that debate has centered on whether service learning is appropriate to include in the academic curriculum. The major question to be answered is, "should students earn college credit for service learning, or should it remain outside of the curriculum?" After one year of experience, the positive outcomes and learning experiences of senior agricultural students led to the conclusion that for many students, service learning provides an excellent opportunity for learning the type of problem solving and people skills that are crucially important in today's work environment.

There are several limitations to the service learning assignment. First, as described above, many personality types may not be enthusiastic about this assignment. Surprisingly, it appeared that both introverts and extroverts enjoyed the assignment, and were pleased with the amount and quality of learning that took place. Some objections came from very busy individuals who were actively involved in extracurricular activities and achieving good grades through more conventional means, such as tests and writing assignments. However, these students benefited by being required to do something outside of the academic community, and to help other people, in many cases those who were less fortunate. Many busy and successful students found that the service project acted as a friendly reminder about what was truly important in their lives. This type of introspection is particularly valuable for agricultural college seniors preparing to graduate

and take on the challenge of a career.

A second limitation is that, given the freedom of choice of a service project, a small minority of students would have liked to select projects that may not be as beneficial as others. For example, a student desiring to write about her experience as a teaching assistant in another class may not have provided the same type of quality experiences that many of the students who worked for a charitable organization had. An attempt was made to counter this possibility by requiring all projects to be approved by the instructor early in the semester. Of course, it is not possible to completely enforce what students decide to use for their project, or how much effort is put into the project. The response to this was to continually emphasize that "you will get out of this project what you put into it" throughout the semester.

Lastly, rigorous reflection and examination of the project is necessary to benefit fully from the service project experience. Some students reflected upon their experience, and integrated their new knowledge into their actions and lifestyles. Others may not have considered their experiences as anything more than an assignment to be completed before the deadline. A greater amount of in-class discussion could enhance future assignments by providing a forum for students to reflect upon their own experiences and learn from other students.

## Summary

The learning that took place in the fulfillment of the service learning project requirement in a senior-level capstone course in the Department of Agricultural Economics at Kansas State University was large and meaningful. Students reported that the positive outcomes included: new insights into the social conditions of their community; unique challenges that were overcome by applying critical thinking and teamwork to new situations; and opportunities to work through conflicts that inevitably arise when working with other individuals and organizations. These positive, tangible benefits were considered more important for some students than for others. Many diverse projects were selected, based on student interest and the availability of time to be allocated to the project. Written reports of the projects were well done, in general. However, class discussion could have provided for a more meaningful method of sharing service project experiences, and will be incorporated into future courses.

The outcome of the service learning assignment is effectively captured by one student's conclusions: (1) To be thankful for what we have been blessed with and to remember that many people who are good people get into bad situations. (2) To remember how good it feels to know that you are helping someone, even if they will never know that you existed. (3) The people who work for shelters and community

groups are overworked and underpaid. (4) To stop being so focused on ourselves—there are a lot more people with bigger problems than us. Finally. (5) although volunteer work is neither glamorous nor challenging—it does make you feel like you are doing something to help another person—and that makes all the difference.

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## Determination of Learning Styles in an Introductory Food Science Course

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### Abstract

Student learning styles and preferred instructor type were determined in an introductory food science course to facilitate curricular planning and provide direction for implementation of teaching techniques. The predominant learning styles in the course were common sense and analytical learners. Students indicated that the preferred instructor type was an interactive instructor. Student perceptions of study skills and ability to remain attentive in class ranked higher for common sense and analytical learners than for dynamic learners ( $p < 0.05$ ), while student perception of time management skills, note-taking skills,

making classroom contributions, and academic aptitude were not different among learning styles ( $p > 0.05$ ). No differences were identified for any of these categories among preferred instructor type ( $p > 0.05$ ).

### Introduction

Hartel (1995) and Iwaoka et al. (1996) argue that university food science education could be improved by incorporating a range of teaching and learning techniques into course curriculum to accommodate the variety of learning styles present among students. This article