

Landscape Design Courses Provide Opportunities for Service Learning

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Abstract

The Environmental Horticulture Department's landscape design course at the University of Florida included a service learning component in which student teams completed the design process in cooperation with Habitat for Humanity, an international service organization. Students designed a landscape plan for a local Habitat client and, working with other community volunteers, installed the landscape. The course, like other landscape courses, provided students the opportunity to integrate their horticultural knowledge, graphical and communication skills, and the design process. The service learning component, however, expanded their appreciation of giving to the community as volunteers while gaining needed hands-on experience.

Introduction

Landscape design courses typically include real-life projects in which students integrate design principles with plant and materials selection. Such projects also allow students to sharpen their graphical and communication skills because students must draw plans to satisfy a client. With slight modification, these courses provide ample opportunities for a service approach to learning.

The University of Florida Environmental Horticulture Department's senior-level design course incorporated service learning into one of its projects. Service learning refers to the integration of community-based student service projects within the formal curriculum of an educational institution (Serow et al., 1996). In the context of academic courses, service learning has been described as a form of community service that is valuable for two reasons. First, it provides practical experience that can enhance learning and second, community service reinforces the moral and civic values inherent in serving others (Ehrlich, 1995).

Recent evidence indicates that service learning is rapidly becoming a mainstream mode of instructional delivery as more colleges, universities and other schools incorporate it into their curricula. As of 1994, approximately 500 institutions were members of Campus Compact, an organization founded for the purpose of promoting community service as an integral part of the educational process (Cha and Rothman, 1994). Institutional membership is also increasing in such higher education organizations as

the National Society for Experiential Education, the American Association for Higher Education, and the Council of Independent Colleges. These groups have organized conferences and colloquia around service learning themes (Serow et al., 1996).

Although this is a recent trend, the concept of service learning is far from new. Its roots are in experiential education and the well established service mission of colleges and universities. Both of these represent community service and offer opportunities for gaining life experience, earning academic credit for internships and practica, and doing so in nontraditional, or at least non-classroom, settings. Other precedents have been set in the varied facets of civilian youth service, the latest of which is the Clinton administration's national service projects that tie student financial aid to several forms of civilian service (Clark, 1996).

Our landscape design course offered a service learning opportunity in which students developed their design and horticultural skills plus contributed to the off-campus community via the Habitat for Humanity (HFH) program. HFH is an international organization dedicated to the creation of affordable housing for low-income families who want to improve their situation in life, can demonstrate financial responsibility, and who are motivated to work hard to provide decent housing for themselves and also for others (Fogarty, 1994). The potential homeowner provides "sweat equity" by working alongside volunteers to construct the dwelling and pays for the home via a reduced interest rate mortgage.

Methods

The service project was the second of three major design projects of the semester. The products of typical design courses include landscape plans on paper that each student develops individually for local residents who request landscape assistance. Unique aspects of the service project were that students were assigned to work in pairs with the project objectives listed below as guidelines for evaluation. Then, as a group, they were to use their expertise and labor to install the landscape. Essentially design teams competed in developing the plan that would be selected for installation. HFH suggested a single parent with four children as the client for the project because her new home was in the final stages of construction.

The service project objectives were as follows: 1) meet with the client to conduct a landscape needs/wishes inventory; 2) conduct a site inventory and analysis; 3)

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develop a preliminary landscape plan; 4) present the plan orally to the client; 5) provide input and assist on the final chosen plan; 6) order plants and other materials; and 7) install the landscape.

Design

Each design team had three and a half weeks to work through the design process. In the first week, the students conducted a client interview, which allowed the class to clarify design goals and objectives and better prepare to satisfy the client's needs and preferences. Representatives of HFH, including the local Habitat director, site coordinator, and architect, were also present to communicate specific project guidelines, such as the budget. This budget (\$700), the standard landscape budget tied to construction of the dwelling, would be applied to equipment rental and the purchase of topsoil and all plant materials at wholesale prices. Mulch would be available free (delivered) and installation labor would be donated by the class and other volunteers. The class also visited the site, where each team was responsible for taking measurements and conducting a site inventory of existing vegetation. Using this information and their site analysis, each team developed a base plan and a hand-drafted preliminary planting plan during the second week.

In the project's third week, the design teams discussed and presented their preliminary plans to the client committee (the future homeowner and the HFH representatives) on site. After the client committee selected a plan, the class worked together to finalize the planting plan. They also worked as a group to order materials and prepare for installation.

Installation

Students developed and coordinated plans for site preparation and delivery of materials and scheduled a suitable date (Veterans Day, a university holiday) for installation of the landscape. Because of the minimal fine grading required at the site, the class was able to prepare the site and plant the landscape using rented and borrowed hand tools. Other HFH volunteers, the client, and her family assisted the class on installation day. This meant at times more than 20 laborers were moving topsoil, placing plants, digging planting holes, planting, and spreading mulch.

Results And Discussion

Several observations about this learning experience are worth noting. The idea of designing a landscape for a real client in a design course is not a novel concept. What makes this service project unique is that it exposes students to the world of helping others through volunteerism. Working side by side with community volunteers and with the less

fortunate can instill an attitude of helpfulness and cooperation in students (Ehrlich, 1995). Team-building and the development of interpersonal skills are inherent in service projects if the students are allowed to organize and work in groups to accomplish tasks. Coordinating the many tasks on installation day required such team-building, leadership and organizational abilities. The students gained hands-on knowledge of how to budget their time, prioritize a complex hierarchy of tasks, and share workload. Because many more laborers were present than would be typical in installation operations, the class had an exceptional learning opportunity for organizing labor to accomplish objectives. Finally, the project was unexpectedly transformed from a learning opportunity to a teaching opportunity. Although follow-up maintenance schedules were not required, students taught the client details of specific plants and how to take care of the new plantings. Also, a group of students followed up on developing and providing a landscape maintenance schedule for the client.

Representatives of our respective industries often indicate desirable traits they seek in potential employees who graduate from educational programs. Leadership ability, the abilities to think creatively, improvise, and communicate, and practical experience are usually on this list (Wiening, 1995). Service projects such as this provide opportunities for developing and enhancing all of these characteristics. Students recognize the need to gain practical experience, and based on written comments in the students' course evaluations, this service project was by far the most appreciated and rewarding activity of the course.

Universities and other educational institutions have much to gain and little to lose from the outreach opportunities provided by service learning projects. However, instructors have been slow to adopt public service projects. Part of the reluctance to commit time and resources to such projects has been attributed to inadequate systems of institutional evaluation and rewards and the belief that an instructor's own highly specialized field is better suited to scholarly work than community service (Boyer, 1991; Lynton, 1995). As support grows for institutionalizing service learning projects, the lines between teaching, research, and service may blur and further promote additional faculty and student involvement in community service through course projects.

Summary

The service learning approach in a landscape design course provides opportunities for students to gain not only the traditional experience of designing a residential landscape under budget, but also the experience of competing to create the design for a committee of decision makers. Students earn the satisfaction of seeing a site evolve

from an empty lot to a finished landscape, knowing they are enhancing a homeowner's and the community's environment. Finally, this specific approach also provides a teaching environment for students in which they can convey horticultural information and the importance of landscaping to the HFH homeowner.

Literature Cited

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Developing and Teaching an Orientation Course for Students at a Technical College

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Abstract

First-year orientation courses can be very effective at helping students succeed. However, orientation courses should be adapted to meet the needs of the student population served. This article discusses journal writing, student facilitator teams, and other learning activities used in an orientation course for students enrolled in an Associate of Applied Science degree program at a technical college.

Introduction

Many universities and colleges have established first-year orientation courses to help students achieve success at college and in their professional lives (Tinto, 1993; Noel et al., 1985). The effectiveness of these courses in promoting student success and improving retention at colleges has been well-documented in several recent studies (Fidler and Moore, 1996; Hoff et al., 1996; Glass and Garrett, 1995; Barefoot, 1993; Stumpf and Hunt, 1993; Davis, 1992; Fidler, 1991).

Barefoot and Fidler (1996) have published information about orientation courses offered at colleges across the nation including types, descriptions, structure, and content. The National Resource Center for the Freshman Experience at the University of South Carolina maintains a Website ([\[/yc.sc.edu\]\(http://yc.sc.edu\)\) which provides considerable information about orientation courses including syllabi for several courses offered at selected colleges. A number of texts written specifically for orientation courses are available including those by Gardner and Jewler \(1998\) and Ellis \(1997\).](http://</p></div><div data-bbox=)

The orientation courses and texts cited in the previous paragraph are directed primarily toward students enrolled at colleges which offer curricula with a strong liberal arts component. However, it is well-documented that the personality types, learning styles, and interests of students who enroll in two-year or four-year technology-oriented programs differ substantially from those of the general college population (Zimmerman et al., 1994; Barrett et al., 1987; Myers and McCaulley, 1985).

I am a faculty member at the Agricultural Technical Institute (ATI), a small (800+) two-year technical college which is a school in the College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences at The Ohio State University. ATI attracts students who are primarily interested in and motivated by course work and learning activities that emphasize applications and are career-related. The campus is open-admission and many of the students are required to enroll in developmental reading, writing, and/or mathematics courses based on placement tests.

Several years ago, a required orientation course entitled *Personal and Career Orientation* was established at ATI for all entering students who enroll in Associate of

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