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Making the Most of Service Experiences

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Service learning has become an increasingly important part of the college experience. Institutions of higher learning have been implementing service programs more and more, with the hopes of creating community-conscious students. An article in the NEA Higher Education *Advocate* says it best: "There is no single 'right way' to do service learning, but it must fit both the learning needs of the student and the service needs of the community" (Karasik 6). One of the most effective ways they can do this is by having the students organize their own projects. By handing over this responsibility, educators can insure that the students make the most out of their experience.

When students learn to take the initiative in helping their community, they learn to be responsible. The National Service-Learning Clearinghouse says that one of the benefits of service-learning is that it "develop(s) personal and social responsibility." This responsibility is applicable in two environments. First, organizing any kind of project will teach the student the kind of responsibility that is valued in any work place. Second, organizing a project that will benefit the community will teach the student that everyone is responsible for the well being of society. The result is a student who is well prepared for the "real world." While there may be several ways to demonstrate this point, the best proof is the personal experience of a student.

I, for instance, have had several successful endeavors in organizing service projects. One of these was a collection for victims of the recent tsunami. My idea was simple: we would collect people's spare change and give it to a respectable tsunami related charity. I first asked members of my Interact club to donate empty cans that would be used to collect the money. I then designed labels for the cans that would draw attention and quickly persuade someone to donate. Because people are most likely to donate their change when it is just being handed to them, we brought the cans to the school cafeteria and local businesses. We left them there for an extended period of time, checking on them periodically, and ended up collecting hundreds of dollars. The money was sent to a charity that was determined, after much research, to be trustworthy. Thus, the project was complete. I believe that this experience has helped me see that my efforts are needed in this world. I was in charge of people, money, materials, and research; and this all strengthened my sense of responsibility. If all students were to have such an experience, it would likely have the same effect on them.

Organizing service projects also teaches students to think about how their community needs them. According to the National Service-Learning Clearinghouse, one of the characteristics of service learning is "students are able to identify the most important issues within a real-world situation through critical thinking." When a student is asked to create a service project, one of the first questions he/she needs to answer is: how does my community need me? The only way to answer this question is to research the community's needs. The results will most likely open the student's eyes to just how much the community needs him/her. This understanding will hopefully result in the student being more aware and active in the future. Dr. Barbara A. Holland, author of "Assessment of Service-Learning: Principles and Techniques," has much to say on the subject of service learning. She lists seven key concepts for students involved in service learning. Two of these are "awareness of community" and "commitment to service." She also lists many objectives of service learning, including "learning about a particular community or population" and "learning about the provision of services to a community." After presenting these different concepts and aspects, she gives an example of how service might affect a student. In her example, the goal of the project is to "prepare students to be effective and active citizens in their communities"; the concept is "awareness of community"; and the indicators that the student has learned are "knowledge of issues, ability to identify assets/needs, understanding of problems and policies." Holland is not the only person who feels this way. She attributes much of her information to other experts, including the National Service-Learning Clearinghouse. It is clear that the effects of students organizing their own service projects are highly desirable in the world of service learning.

If Roger Williams University were to require or provide opportunities for student-planned service projects, it would greatly enhance the service learning that goes on in the school. As a writing tutor in the Roger Williams University Writing Center, I have read many papers in which freshman complain about their service

experience during orientation. The general complaint was that they felt as though they were not helping their community, but rather providing free labor. The school's program would be much more beneficial to the students and the school's reputation if the students felt happy with what they were doing.

Overall, the results are rewarding when students create their own service projects. They learn to be both responsible and aware of their community. If all institutions of higher learning would ask their students to organize their own service projects, they would be making the experience much more effective and fulfilling.

Works Cited

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