Benefits of service learning

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During the past few years, Roger Williams University has implemented a service learning program called Community Connections that requires freshmen students to participate in various service activities throughout the local area. According to the RWU Service Learning website, the goals of service learning are to “nurture the core value of community service in our students while meeting the needs of the community by fostering partnerships, encouraging and supporting service learning initiatives, and offering resources and opportunities for civic engagement” (“Goals”). Even though the program is relatively new, university representatives are pleased with its success. The service learning program is a beneficial part of the Roger Williams learning experience, and should remain a part of the curriculum because of its ability to assist students in gaining new perspectives, to form life-long bonds, and to provide different learning environments.

Those who oppose service learning claim that it is not the responsibility of the university to instill values. For example, in his article “Save the World on Your Own Time,” Stanley Fish argues that “The university is primarily a place for teaching and research.” Critics also disagree with taking away class time to perform community service and argue that, while service is good, it should be done on students’ own time. What opponents of service learning don’t consider, however, is its potential to greatly impact students as much as traditional learning.

When students enter a university, they most likely have an outlook that has been influenced by their home, town and school. Leaving these comfortable environments for the first time, while occasionally nerve-wracking, provides an experience like no other. In college, it is important that views are challenged and opinions are formed through the different experiences encountered. Community service is one of those experiences. By stepping out of their “comfort zone,” students are forced to participate in activities they normally would not. Some of the sites that students went to on Community Connections day during Fall 2006 include senior centers, churches, the Narragansett Bay and local YMCA’s (“Community Connections”). Recently, freshman participant Katie Conte told me that she worked for a home restoration company and did yard work for housing developments in Pawtucket. When asked if the activity was something she would have done normally, Katie replied, “No, but it was a rewarding experience.” Being thrown into unfamiliar environments might make students feel awkward at first, but after awhile they will be able to see their labor positively effecting members of the community around them. For example, some students that assisted in teaching mentally challenged students how to dance said that they were impressed with the activity and its ability to allow them to see the mentally challenged in a different light. Whether students walk away pleased with the experience or not, they will walk away with a different perspective about people and community, influenced by the service they perform. This influence will be helpful in shaping the people that will enter into the “real world” once students leave college.

In addition to altering perspectives, service learning brings a variation to the learning environment. The goal of all universities should be to educate students with the use of several techniques and methods that stimulate the mind in different ways. The most appealing part of service learning is its unique ability to dramatically change the normal learning environment. HomeHearts, a home schooling support website, includes an article titled “Learning Styles” which mentions three types of learning styles: visual, auditory and kinesthetic. It also discusses the ways in which each style offers different benefits to students. Similarly, service learning offers the benefits of learning in different ways because it changes the atmosphere from a typical classroom setting, to a hands-on situation that requires participation different from usual classroom discussion. In order for students to accomplish all that is necessary in university education, a curriculum with varied teaching approaches should be adopted to acknowledge different learning styles. Knowledge that is obtained through several experiences is more likely to impact and stay with students. In her article “Let’s Learn about Learning Styles,” educational reviewer from the Eclectic Home School Resource Center, Peg Flint, says that the way students’ process information is based on the choice of materials and the way in which they are received. Service learning is a perfect way to expose college students to new learning atmospheres.
In addition to providing new experiences and learning atmospheres, service learning helps students foster lasting friendships with their peers. When students unite to achieve a common goal, they work together, problem solve, and focus on a purpose. Through this type of group arrangement, students will likely bond with their fellow group members. Establishing friendships is an essential part of the college experience, and service learning is an outlet for forming those bonds. By working on projects that positively impact the community around them, students might feel a collective sense of accomplishment and pride that they will share for the rest of their college career. From that point on, whenever group members run into each other, they will have that commonality as a basis for creating a relationship. From a personal point of view, I look back at my experience and see how positively it has affected me. I painted a garage at the Bristol Fire Station, I worked together with my fellow group members, dividing tasks and assigning responsibilities. Later on, I found that I had classes with some of those people and have become friends with them. We will always have that experience to look back on. Community Connections has the potential to be the start of many meaningful relationships.

Service learning is a unique addition to the Roger Williams curriculum that should be taken into consideration by all colleges and universities. Its potential to accomplish great things for students and community members is unparalleled. Not only does service learning open the eyes of students and give a new perspective, it provides a different learning atmosphere and allows its participants to bond in a unique way. Considering these factors, service learning should be a university requirement.

Works Cited

Conte, Katie. Personal Interview. 5 November 2006.
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