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Service learning impacts both campus and community

A 2005 survey of over 40,000 faculty members by UCLA’s Higher Education Research Institute indicated that more than 80% believed students should be involved in community service activities. The survey also showed that over 80% of the faculty members believed their institutions have a responsibility to work with local communities.

In a recent article in Change, Dan W. Butin suggests that community engagement is not just about connecting universities to students’ lives and to local communities. “The goal” writes Butin, “is to provide faculty with an additional set of tools by which to do their jobs effectively.”

Since fall 2005 KU’s Center for Service Learning has provided those tools for faculty members. In the last two years, it has expanded its programming from 20 designated service learning courses taught by 17 faculty members in 10 departments to a total of 65 service learning courses taught by 47 faculty members in 18 different departments.

One of the CSL’s central goals is to assist faculty members in creating meaningful and experiential learning opportunities. For students who participate in these experiences, the CSL offers a certification program. The program consists of four components: completion of a service learning course, an independent service project, a set of directed civic engagement and leadership readings, and a reflection.

In the program’s first year, the CSL certified 91 students. During the 2006–07 academic year, 154 students were certified. In the past two years, students in over 26 majors and four graduate programs have been certified in service learning, impacting over 40 community organizations and partnering with them for more than 5,725 hours of service.

KU faculty members have many options for incorporating service learning into their courses. Some examples are highlighted in this issue of Teaching Matters. These illustrate Butin’s (2007) belief that “community engagement offers a range of curricular and instructional strategies to engage students in the issues deemed most valuable by each faculty member in each course, as well as new strategies for tackling scholarly problems.”

Community-engaged learning connects content, experience

Dan Bernstein, CTE

Students in Danny Anderson’s Spanish language and culture class served as translators for non-English speaking residents of Lawrence. Fiona Yap’s students in international politics designed projects that generated funds for tsunami relief. In a class on women in American history taught by Kim Warren, students volunteered at local agencies providing services for women. Students taking Ann Cudd’s feminism and philosophy course spent time in various settings, including a women’s shelter, community center and preschool. All these students wrote assignments that connected class content to their experiences in the community.

Having students take their knowledge into community settings is one important strategy for getting students’ attention on course topics and goals. Many teachers find that students are more engaged in a course when they experience first hand some non-university settings in which they can see the relevance of what they learn in a university course. Engaged learners give more time to their preparation, use ideas and skills in meaningful settings, and connect learning to a larger domain of experience. The result is richer learning that is retained better over time.

The range of engagement is quite varied. Students who provide fluent and accurate translations give valuable professional service that may be unaffordable for the people they work with. Students who raise money selling raffle tickets for donated items are not using any particular skills in political science, but they are much more interested in reading about international relations because it helps them understand how their work aids people across the Pacific. In the feminist philosophy class, some students bring relevant skills from their field of study to a women’s center or preschool, while others serve only as willing and generally competent helpers in non-skilled roles. If there is relevant knowledge or skill the class project is doubly effective, but it still promotes rich learning by giving focus and context to the intellectual work students do in their classes.

[Community engagement] promotes rich learning by giving focus and context to the intellectual work students do in their classes.

With the establishment of the Center for Service Learning, faculty members can build community engagement into their courses much more readily. The CSL connects faculty members with community agencies or settings that are looking for assistance from people with student-level skills, and it also provides models of how this engagement can be integrated into the flow of a course. There are many examples of assignments that provide students with an opportunity to connect their academic learning with situations and issues beyond the usual scope of university life. The Center for Service Learning is yet another key place on campus in which faculty members can share their work and learn with and from colleagues about optimal learning for students.
KU faculty members develop teaching workbook

This fall, CTE distributed to new faculty members the first edition of a workbook, designed to serve as a guide to teaching at KU. New faculty members and CTE’s departmental liaisons are providing feedback about the text, which will be incorporated into the next edition. Several sections of the book will be incorporated into CTE’s website, as well.

Primary authors of the text were Paul Atchley, psychology, and Dan Bernstein, CTE/psychology. CTE staff members Sarah Bunnell, Cathy Collins and Judy Eddy also served as authors.

Contributing authors were Helen Alexander, EEB; Ruth Ann Atchley, psychology; Ann Cudd, philosophy/women’s studies; Cynthia Colwell Dunn, music and dance; Andrea Greenhoot, psychology; Marla Herron, Registrar’s office; Shannon O’Lear, geography/environmental studies; David Pendergrass, EEB; Tracy Russo, communication studies; and Val Smith, EEB/environmental studies. Reviewers were Caroline Bennett, CEA engineering; Robert Rowland, communication studies; Linda Stone-Ferrier, history of art; Michael Vitevitch, psychology; and Susan Williams, mechanical engineering.

The book is divided into four chapters. The first chapter addresses essential teaching practices, such as aligning course goals, assignments and practices, writing a syllabus, developing assignments and evaluating learning, using class time well, engaging and motivating students, using technology in teaching, facilitating learning outside of class, using writing to generate and measure learning, and obtaining student feedback.

The second chapter suggests ways faculty members might represent their teaching, particularly for reviews. This section includes a specific timeline and plan that faculty members can use to document key parts of their teaching work. Prompts for both self-reflection and for peer reviews also are provided.

Chapter three covers more advanced topics: helping students think like a scholar in your field, mentoring students and advising independent work, working with GTAs, and teaching in a variety of settings—large classes, studio or one-to-one classes, science laboratories and graduate classes.

The last chapter summarizes KU policies and procedures on communication, course enrollment, special services, class attendance, privacy of student information, course withdrawal, academic misconduct, and grading strategies and decisions.

Appendices provide forms and worksheets for promotion and tenure. For more information, contact Judy Eddy at 864.4100.

CTE board announces awards for spring programs

CTE’s advisory board recently made the following awards for spring 2008 programs.

Faculty Seminar on Interdisciplinary Teaching: Marie Alice L’Heureux, architecture; Shannon O’Lear, geography/environmental studies; Mariya Omelicheva, political science; Raymond Pierotti, ecology and evolutionary biology; Jeremy Shellhorn, design.

Teaching Grants: Sharon Ashworth, environmental studies, and Naima Omar, AAAS.

New Designs in Learning: Nina Vyatkina, Germanic languages and literatures.
Accounting course blends taxes, activism and service

Raquel Meyer Alexander, Accounting and Information Systems

Tax students in the Masters of Accounting (MAcc) program have a long history of service learning. Each year MAcc students volunteer hundreds of hours preparing tax returns for low income taxpayers through the Law School VITA program. In 2005, MAcc students created a website to help Hurricane Katrina victims, donors and employers understand tax laws passed in the wake of the disaster (www.ku.edu/~katrina), which was praised by the American Bar Association. This summer, MAcc students created a tax brochure for Greensburg, Kansas residents which will be soon be an official IRS publication.

Disabled veterans higher education tax credit legislation

Students drafted proposed federal legislation to provide tax credits for disabled veterans who purchase special equipment necessary for college. For example, disabled students may need special writing tables for wheelchairs or laptop computers if they cannot hold a pencil. Under current tax law, medical expenses such as these are not allowed for a higher education deduction/credit, even though they are necessary for a disabled student.

“Research has been exasperating for me, because it takes so much practice and I can’t be good at it immediately. However, this project was worth all of the time, frustration and effort that I’ve put forth the past few months.”

—Kristen Kuhn, MAcc student

More important, the students developed proposed legislation to assist Americans who served our nation and deserve assistance in returning to school. With the draft legislation complete, we are now reaching out to MAcc students nationwide to support this proposal that remedies an oversight in the tax law.

Performing artists tax and personal finance workshop

Students conducted two workshops on tax and financial planning for graduate performing arts majors and faculty/staff in the School of Fine Arts. Group presentations were compiled from each student’s research paper on tax issues relevant to entertainers. Presentations focused on minimizing self-employment tax, maximizing deductions, calculating estimated payments and establishing retirement savings. This project required students to apply tax knowledge while refining their communications skills. Both projects were very successful.

With this community service tradition and a CTE Best Practices workshop as inspiration, I redesigned ACCT 731, Tax Research, as a service learning course.
Accreditation standards for schools of pharmacy state that “…The college or school must provide a continuum of pharmacy practice experiences throughout the curriculum, from introductory to advanced…” Service-learning has been recommended as one form of early pharmacy practice experience. I offer the Service Learning Elective (PHPR511) every spring. I feel that service learning holds promise for equipping health professionals with problem-solving skills needed to effect change in community health care. I also hope that the service learning experience helps to foster civic responsibility in our students and the development of a sense of caring for others.

The course is designed to have limited classroom sessions; the majority of time is spent at the service agency. The course requires a minimum of two hours of agency work per week for 11 weeks during the semester. These requirements (fewer hours/week but with a minimum of 11 weeks) are designed to ensure continuity of contact between students and clients.

Reflection is crucial for students to convert their experiences into learning. Therefore, students must post an online journal entry using Blackboard for each week of volunteering. We use this as a means of making students reflect on their experiences and for us as instructors to give them support and feedback about their experiences.

Since journal entries are private (not viewable by other students), we also require students to post two reflection papers using Blackboard’s discussion board feature. These postings are viewable by all students and help minimize feelings of isolation.

The class meets formally four times during the semester. The first meeting is an orientation and discussion of course requirements and volunteer sites. For the remaining meetings, students present various assignments. One assignment requires students to create or find something visual that represents their clients and write a short paper on how and why the artwork illuminates their client’s physical being, as well as spiritual and emotional state. The following example is an excerpt from a student volunteering at a hospital:

“Silly Billy is a puppet made by a little girl at Children’s Mercy South. … It is easy to see a puppet and relate it to a child but I believe there is a deeper story that can be told through (believe it or not) a paper sack…. My feelings towards the children at CMS are reflected in Silly Billy. I am amazed to see how resilient children are, to see their innocence, to watch them play and just be kids no matter what their situations may be. Different socioeconomic classes, different cultures, raised by different parenting philosophies, sick or healthy, there always seems to be this common thread among children of light-heartedness and innocence. … I am there to volunteer for the children but truly believe they are the ones giving to me and reminding me how to be silly and enjoy life.”

For their final project, students give a presentation on a concept they experienced in their service work, such as empathy, communication or charity. Students define the concept and describe how they perceived it to be illustrated during their service learning. Then they describe how the concept translates to providing care to patients in a pharmacy practice setting. Students consistently demonstrate insights from their experiences that will be useful in their pharmacy careers.
Collaborations yield process-based learning opportunities
Jennifer Church-Duran & Erin Ellis, KU Libraries

Colleges and universities are pressed to meet various student needs, not only to help students achieve academic objectives, but also to equip them with lifelong learning skills. Librarians, writing specialists and other academic units are in unique positions to partner with faculty members in curriculum reform and create process-based learning opportunities for students. Through a CTE project, Libraries Instructional Services, the Writing Center, Instructional Development and Support, and the Academic Achievement and Access Center (AAAC) collaborated to develop integrated curriculum approaches to writing and research/critical thinking skills acquisition. Teams focused on new models for support, curriculum planning, assignment design and team teaching.

While working with faculty members from American Studies, history, philosophy, education and psychology, staff focused on developing realistic and workable research assignments, as well as providing instructional support. Teams designed opportunities to help students better understand disciplinary research and writing strategies.

One course that was redesigned was Psychology 430, Cognitive Development. The instructor, Andrea Greenhoot, was interested in applying scaffolding to the class—breaking up assignments into manageable chunks, allowing for intervention when it would be most meaningful and useful. By using scaffolding and incorporating academic partners (Writing Center and Libraries), students learned to pace themselves in a research project, devoting sufficient time to each component. Students also learned to take time to select quality sources and make their own meaning from the information they read.

Ultimately, they were learning the skills they needed for the final paper throughout the process. By providing structure and accountability for them, the instructor also provided a learning experience on planning for research.

Another course that used an integrated curriculum approach was History 397, From Mao to Now. Course goals that the instructor, Megan Greene, established were to teach students how to complete research and produce a research paper; to teach students how to use library and writing resources available on campus; to encourage students to think about argument, thesis and use of evidence when producing historical writing; and to encourage students to be intentional about the research and writing process.

To accomplish these goals, the team mapped out a series of assignments and in-class activities that included the following:

- Hands-on research skills workshops—Effective searching for primary and secondary sources.
- Research proposal—Short description of proposed topic.
- Primary source paper—Analysis of two primary sources.
- Thesis workshop—Preliminary thesis statement was peer reviewed in class then revised.

Other courses that have implemented this model include American Studies 550, Introduction to Current Issues and Research in American Studies, and Curriculum and Teaching 645/745, Reading and the English Language Learner. Additionally, supplemental instruction was piloted in a collaborative effort between AAAC and an introductory philosophy course. Supplemental instruction helps students in historically difficult classes to master course content while they develop and integrate learning and study skills. A student who previously received a high grade in the course is trained to lead study sessions, which are open to all students on a volunteer basis.

Each semester, a number of slots will be available for faculty who want to participate in course redesign: to re-think, re-vision and re-structure student learning opportunities in an upcoming course. For more information, contact Jennifer Church-Duran with KU Libraries Instructional Services at 864-8920.
New student rating form designed for spring 2008

Last academic year faculty governance convened a task force on the evaluation of teaching at KU. It reported a broad range of activities that should be included in documenting teaching. The task force also recommended changes in the student rating form supported by the Provost’s office, making it shorter and more focused on certain student perceptions. The task force felt students were a very good choice to evaluate clarity and organization of classroom time, faculty support and availability, clarity and organization of course materials, setting and meeting goals and expectations, maintaining a respectful climate, and perception of learning.

These areas include the dimensions requested by the Regents’ policy on evaluation of teaching.

A team of KU faculty members who do research on scale construction volunteered to evaluate the proposed form. Last spring and summer over 1200 students filled out different versions of the survey. Todd Little, Neal Kingston and William Skorupski designed a plan to see if the new system provides stable and orderly representations of students’ perceptions. Students used long and short versions of questions, with a five-point and seven-point response scale. All students completed a long and a short form, in counterbalanced order.

Gita Sawalani, a graduate student in psychology and a CTE research associate whose dissertation is on the construction of such scales, implemented the plan. She worked with Testing Services director Celeste Smith to design various prototypes of the format, and she recruited faculty members who took class time for their students to complete the forms. Thanks to the cooperation of both faculty members and their students, Sawalani gathered a data set large enough to allow sophisticated analyses of the information provided by students about the key dimensions of teaching. She analyzed the results and has now reported to the task force.

The analysis made clear that the new rating form is a demonstrably reliable indicator of student perception about teaching. The long rating form asked students to make 74 separate judgments of qualities of teaching, while the short version asked for only nine. Performance on the long instrument was slightly superior to the short one, but the gain in information was quite small in comparison with the large cost in time and effort. Keeping the form short was a priority for the task force, and the analysis supported using the short version.

Similarly, Sawalani told the task force that a seven-point scale gives slightly better data than a five-point scale, but the difference was not large. Taking her analysis to heart, the task force recommends continuing to use a five-point response scale.

The task force will hold open meetings with faculty members and students for comments on the recommended form, scheduled to be introduced spring 2008. Important changes from the last form supported by the Provost’s office include the absence of overall summary questions and relocation of open-ended comments to a sheet separate from numerical ratings. As with the last form, the Provost’s office will cover processing costs of recommended forms; units still may use other formats at their expense.

Additional advantages of the new format will be apparent in the way results are reported. For each question there will be a distribution of scores across five categories. A faculty member or department can select a comparison distribution from a subset of courses, not just an overall department average. Instead of a single comparison for all courses, whether a large lecture or a small studio, the new system will give a more nuanced context for evaluation.

Watch for public meetings about the new format to be announced by faculty governance early next semester.
Five principles of effective service learning

In their exploration of service learning as a learning activity, Janet Eyler and Dwight E. Giles, Jr. examined the relationship between integrated service learning and students’ performance in regard to critical thinking. As a result of their study, the researchers identified the following five principles of reflection:

1. **Connection**—According to Eyler and Giles, connection is “a central concept of effective service learning. At its heart, service learning rests on the assumption that learning cannot be compartmentalized between the classroom and the use of what is learned later, in the community, or between affective and cognitive learning.” The authors assert that service learning connects people—students and their peers, students and community members, and students and faculty. Moreover, service learning connects college and community, experience and analysis, feeling and thinking, and present and future. “Effective programs maximize these connections,” state the authors.

2. **Continuity**—Eyler and Giles report that “the principle of continuity was central to Dewey’s thinking; learning is never finished but is a lifelong process of understanding.” Applying this principle to service learning means different things to different groups: For college administrators, service learning would be a component of students’ academic and social programs over the course of their college experience. For teachers, reflection upon service earning would take place before, during and after service experiences. “It is through multiple opportunities for service and reflection that students have the opportunity to test and retest their ways of understanding and thus to grow and develop.”

3. **Context**—“Knowledge and skills are contextual; we learn in ways that prepare us for using knowledge by using it on real problems in the real world…. Service learning allows students to think and learn with the tools, concepts, and facts of the particular learning situation,” write Eyler and Giles.

4. **Challenge**—The authors suggest that the needs of individual students should be the basis of determining appropriate challenges: “Growth rests on puzzlement, on challenge to current perspectives, and on the challenge to solve the conflict. Students develop more complex and adequate ways of viewing the world when they are challenged but not overwhelmed by new experiences.”

5. **Coaching**—“As [students’] service develops and their questions become more sophisticated, they need intellectual support to think in new ways, develop alternative explanations for experiences and observations, and question their original interpretations of issues and events,” conclude the authors. Teachers who effectively use service learning not only grasp academic content of a course, but also are aware of students’ service experiences and provide ample opportunities for interaction.
