

Editorial: Service Learning in the Post-secondary System

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One purpose of education is to improve society. Most post-secondary institutions have service in their mission statements. Not every citizen is able to participate in higher education, but every student in higher education can give back to society through service learning.

What is service learning? Service is engagement with another for the benefit of the other without expectation of reward. Learning is acquiring new understandings about a person or phenomena. Therefore, service learning is learning through engagement as you provide benefit to another. Service learning is about taking knowledge or theories learned in formal education and seeing if they work in the real world, and it is about creating new theories from practice. Working on service projects, allows students to apply theory to practice and derive theory from practice.

The National Service Learning Clearinghouse states that civic engagement and service learning began on American university campuses in the nineteenth century, was revitalized in the 1960s, 1980s, and is still being used today (http://www.servicelearning.org/what_is_service-learning/history_hesl/index.php).

In Canada, the idea of service did not enter the education system until after the Second World War. As well, when entities called colleges appeared in the 1960's and 1970's, the idea of service started to infiltrate the post secondary institutions. Today, it is common practice for universities and colleges to have a statement on service to society included in their mission statement.

Service learning projects are a win/win, both for the student and the community. Service learning is not new to many disciplines. In nursing there has always been a practice component allowing students to apply their knowledge in a variety of community settings including hospitals. In the area of skilled trades, apprenticeship is the model that is used, where practicing journeypersons work alongside and help apprentices (learners) apply theory and practise new skills. In the nursing program that I teach in, service learning is incorporated throughout the curriculum. Students are involved in providing service to patients in the hospital and working with the community to improve their health. Some of the students have been involved in improving nutrition and fitness at an elementary school, reducing tobacco usage of university students and faculty, and helping the homeless access social services.

Service learning is being incorporated into most health care program curricula. There is some agreement that the experiential component of service learning leads to better educational outcomes and enhances the chances of future civic involvement of those engaged in service learning.