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Service-Learning Helps Students Tackle World's Tough Issues

By Linda Walters
UCF Forum columnist
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The end of each spring semester brings out the best in academia. Not only is graduation soon to occur, but campuses everywhere celebrate excellence – of faculty, staff and students.

I am always excited to attend the research showcases where our graduate students and undergraduates enthusiastically share their data. For many students, it is their first formal opportunity to present as scientists. That makes for a very proud occasion for all – the student, the mentor, and often their parents, who may travel many miles to participate in these events. As universities strive to make research opportunities possible for our students, I've had the parents of first-generation college students break down in tears when they fully realize the significance of their child's accomplishments.

I must say, however, that my favorite showcase each spring is our Service-Learning Showcase. What appeals to me is that this showcase is really diverse. Courses must be approved as service-learning courses, so the faculty members involved have dedicated themselves to the programs in their own unique ways.

This year's showcase really shows this diversity. Courses included Writing for Social Change, Cognitive-Communication Disorders, Foundations of Leadership, Third Wave Feminisms, Environmentalism and Island Nations, and Professional Skills for Business. Where else might you find undergraduate students of Russian Language and graduate students in my Marine Conservation Biology class sharing their experiences?

According to UCF's Office of Experiential Learning, academic service-learning is "a teaching method that uses community involvement to apply theories or skills being taught in a course. Service-learning furthers the learning objectives of the academic

course, addresses community needs, and requires students to reflect on their activity in order to gain an appreciation for the relationship between civics and academics.”

The goals of the faculty working toward instilling civic engagement in their students are as diverse as the course titles. Medical school and nursing classes practice their skills and understand the needs of underserved communities, business students learn to create business plans for nonprofit agencies (rather than fake plans just to please the professor), and writing classes create technical documents needed by organizations such as Special Olympics. One of the course objectives of my Marine Conservation Biology class is to make my students better communicators of science.

Graduate students are eager to share their opinions with their colleagues inside the walls of academia, but few are engaged in sharing information with diverse audiences. So, using service-learning as the vehicle, we create multifaceted presentations from our course content that is then presented in 4th-8th grade public school classrooms. While it might *seem* easy to take a topic like sea-level rise and present it to a 6th grade marine biology class at a Title 1 middle school, it is not. Vocabulary and jargon must be scrutinized, and engaging learning stations must be created that will excite even the most hormonal preteen. We know we were successful with this group, as one 6th grader who didn't want to leave the event, cried when she was picked up early by her mom.

Service-learning is successful if civic engagement becomes a way of life for our college students, both before and after graduation. Two students from this year's event document this. The testimonial speaker was an undergraduate named Gabe. Gabe is a bit older than most undergraduates, as he has already seen two tours in Iraq and continues in the Army Reserves. Brushes with the law before joining the military almost kept him from being allowed to complete his service-learning. The school where the service-learning was to occur decided to take a chance on him, and his service-learning class project won multiple awards at the 2012 showcase, including best-in-show.

I also had the opportunity to meet Zavia, the 2013 showcase's peer-choice winner. Through her leadership course, she first got 1,200 signatures on a petition and then began a conversation with University Dining Services with a goal of making sure all eggs used on campus come from hens that are cage-free. This is a topic I had not thought about, but I am very happy that Zavia did.

My goal, and I think the goal of every service-learning faculty member, is to have our students feel like rock stars when they complete and reflect on their service-learning experience. Why? We need our graduating class each year to include people like Gabe and Zavia – individuals well trained in their fields and excited to tackle our planet's toughest social and environmental issues.

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