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Integrating Public Health and Community Service In your Curriculum

Barb Stackhouse
Elkhart Area Career Center

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Involving America's students in community service activities is one of the first objectives that was established by Congress under one of the National Education Goals for the year 2000. Unfortunately, national data on the subject has been sparse in the past.

The 1996 National Household Education Survey provides statistics relating to youths involved in community service. About 50% of 6th - 12th graders in 1996 reported some type of Community Service and the majority of those students were in schools that encouraged community service. Schools that arranged community service had the highest number of students participating. Further, this survey found those that were more likely to participate in community service were students who:

- received high grades,

- females,

- English was their primary language, and

- were 11th or 12th graders.

The greater number of activities the student is involved in, the more likely they are to volunteer. Some are unlikely to volunteer unless encouraged or arranged.

Three years later in 1999, the National Center for Education Statistics reported the following:

- 64% of all public schools (elementary, middle, and high), and

- 83% of high schools) had students participating in community service recognized by the school,

- 57% of all public schools organized the community service for their students, and

- 32% of all public schools organized Service Learning for their students.

If we look at just the high school statistics, 50% of high schools reported organized service learning for their students.

What is the difference between community service and service learning? Service learning is defined as "curriculum based community service that integrates classroom instruction with the community service activity." It involves mandatory student participation. Learning objectives and assessment are key to the program. Service learning meets an actual community need and includes a learning component. There is a notion of reciprocity in service leaning that says you have something to learn from the people you serve.

It is difficult to compare these statistics from 1996 and 1999 because one is a household survey of students and the other is a survey of schools. It will be interesting to look at further surveys by NCES to compare the data submitted by schools. This information is accessible via the National Center for Education Statistics home page, (http://www.nces.ed.gov/)

Interest for students involved in some form of community service is on the rise. The November/December issue of Techniques (ACTE Publication) included articles about service learning.

Why integrate Community Service or Service Learning into the health sciences curriculum? What are the benefits?

1. develop leadership skills in students by allowing them to network with other professionals in the community organizations where they may serve.

2. broadens their perspective of other populations and cultures

3. inspire them to take on civic responsibilities later in life.

4. teach them important employment skills that they can use later.

When you think about objectives for implementing a project, consider:

- yourself (the instructor),

- your students, and

- the community organization you plan to serve.

Also of importance:

- What do you, your students, and the organization each hope to gain from this experience?

- Are your goals and objectives in alignment with each other?

The community organization your student will serve may have their own set of goals or objectives for the project. For example, I send students to our local health department to work in the children's dental program. We each have goals for the project that may be different but we work to make them fit. Make sure you communicate well with them and that you are flexible. Your objectives should include changes that will occur in the student's awareness, skills, and knowledge.

So how do you find a project or need in your community? Start by asking friends and co-workers. Also call upon your community leaders and directors of established programs in your community. A list of sample projects is included below.

- Teach a skill or educational program to an elementary or preschool class. (examples, child care and 1st grade)

- Volunteer at a health fair.

- Set up an information booth at the mall.

- Volunteer at a homeless shelter or women's shelter.

- Help out with special needs students.

- Work at the local food pantry.

- Volunteer for Habitat for Humanity.(example)

- Work at a senior citizens center.

- Make or deliver meals on wheels.

- Host a blood drive at your school.

- Get involved in a child abuse prevention program.

- Work with city officials to "clean up" the city.

- Work with local officials to promote safety issues. (BYB)

- Get involved with the local health department (Healthy Beg.)

- Plan a "Make a Difference" day project.

One of the projects with my students is to provide "Dental Health Presentations" to all first graders in the Elkhart Community Schools. We begin planning in January and

offer the presentations during February in conjunction with "National Children's Dental Health Month" (http://www.ada.org/). Our local dental society gives us support by donating toothbrushes when we need them. The schools also get free tooth brushing kits from Crest (http://www.crest.com/index_flash.html) if they order them in time. I coordinate the project with the school nurses. The schools we service love the presentations and we have been featured in their elementary school newsletters. Not only do we fill a community need but we get positive publicity for our program and our school.

Also locally students are placed in a children's dental program with our local health department. We have a full time dental hygienist who runs the program and she is a great role model for the students. This has proven to be a wonderful learning experience for the students. They see many cases that they would never see in a general dental office.

The other project planned and implemented involving two students each year is a "Children's Dental Health Clinic" at a mission in southeastern KY in the Appalachian mountains. This is an economically depressed area of the country with very little dental care available. We work in conjunction with a mission there that has a full time dentist on staff. I take two students who have been chosen by my advisory board from their application and essay. The students assist in all aspects of the care given. We stay at the mission for one week and give care four days of that week. We get donations from many of the dentists where my students go for clinical experience so it really becomes a combined effort in order to make the trip possible. The students have proven to be an invaluable asset to the program in Kentucky. This is strictly a voluntary program and the

students do not receive any type of grade for their work. They do receive recognition for their volunteer service and are able to add this experience to their portfolios.

The format in which community service or service-learning assignments are set up may vary. Make it fit the needs of your students and your style of teaching. It may be a required assignment and the entire class participates or it may be strictly voluntary and you use it as extra credit since not all students may choose to participate. There is another option that I call required "voluntary service". This means that you give the assignment and all must participate but students may choose which project or area they would like to volunteer. This requires flexibility but allows students to feel more a part of the decision making process.

Finally, include assessment with the assignment. Make sure students know the objectives and how they will be assessed. The assessment process should show a change in behavior in your students. Don't assess just to give a grade or make a report. Do it to help your students learn. Immediate feedback is best for change to occur. Student journal writing before, during, and after the project is one way to assess the outcomes. An in class presentation about the project is another method. Also, the community organization that benefited from the project may evaluate the student. Make a rubric to use. Keep it simple and easy to use with clear definitions.