

Capitalizing on Student Interests: Community Service and Orientation

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Alexander Astin's (1998) Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) survey results indicate that students are entering college with increasing levels of volunteer experience. Student affairs practitioners have a responsibility to build on these experiences. Connecting community service activities to orientation programs assists students in making successful transitions into college while continuing and enhancing their service interests. For the past three years, St. Mary's University has included an optional community service project as part of a three-day orientation program for first year students. Students and parents can each register for the project which occurs the day before orientation begins.

St. Mary's University is a private, Catholic, Marianist institution in San Antonio, Texas with an enrollment of approximately 2,400 undergraduates. Sixty-four percent of the under-graduate students are Hispanic and 65% are women.

Students and their guests (parents and family members) who pre-register for the community service program arrive on campus the day before orientation begins. They are permitted to check into their rooms and to select one of the scheduled service projects. The projects vary to meet differing interests, but all are hands on and interactive, with most involving children. As the students and guests arrive, current students greet them, explain the project options, and match participants with their interests. Once everyone has registered, the entire group meets for a brief overview and is divided into smaller working groups. The groups are led by student volunteers from the Service Learning Center as well as student orientation assistants. They begin with small "get to know you" exercises to help the new group feel comfortable and connected. The groups are given a briefing of their sites (the population or agency with which they will work), and the details of the activity. About half of the volunteers travel off campus in university vans to their sites while the remaining participants stay on campus.

Participants

In 1997, 25% of students attending new student orientation participated in the community service activities, and each year the number of students has increased. In 1998, 63 students participated in the community service projects, while 127 students participated in 1999. Approximately 20% of the guests who register for orientation also register for the community service projects. That number continues to rise as well. In 1999, the number of guest participants increased by 20%.

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Projects

Projects vary each year depending on agency needs, weather conditions, number of participants, and evaluations of the sites. The projects introduce new students to the types of programs in which they can become involved with their new university community. Accordingly, projects are selected with community partners with whom the university has an ongoing relationship. For example, some participants visit the Marianist Brothers and priests living in the retirement community and nursing facility on campus. Furthermore, at the end of the project students can be matched to volunteer to continue these visitations throughout the school year. Some of the more successful projects include hosting children for a storytelling session, providing an internet work-shop and video production, facilitating activities at a children's museum, sorting donations, and painting a shelter for homeless pregnant women; and participating in city programs.

At the conclusion of the projects, all participants are invited to share a meal. Students and guests then shared their experiences with the entire group. In addition, the staff of the Service Learning Center informed students about ongoing opportunities coordinated through St. Mary's University.

Evaluation

During the reflection session and meal, participants were asked to evaluate their experiences. In 1999, students were asked if they were more likely to volunteer at St. Mary's and if they were able to make a connection with students who have similar interests and values. When asked, "After your service project, are you more likely or less likely to participate in community service work during your time at St. Mary's or in the future?," 96% of the student participants answered that they were more likely to participate in community service. Ninety-two percent of the students indicated that they had made a connection with new people who have similar interests and values. In the 1999 overall evaluation of new student orientation, 91% of the students who participated in the community service program rated it as "very good" or "good." In addition, 88% of the participants indicated that they had learned something new through their service work, an obvious goal of all service learning programs. All participants from the past three years recommended that community service opportunities be offered as a part of orientation, an indication of the program's success.

Additional benefits from a program like this can be highlighted through conversations with parents and students. Parents mentioned the importance of an experience which introduces students on equal ground. Students articulated they were able to connect with others in a service activity and environment that was familiar to them. Parents particularly enjoyed the opportunity to participate in the activity with their sons and daughters before they began to "let go." From the institutional perspective, the program proved to be both low cost and highly effective.

The number of students actively involved in community service continues to rise across the nation as community involvement, service learning, and service requirements in schools continue to increase. As institutions of higher education integrate service into their orientation programs, they often find that community service and outreach

are excellent ways to welcome new students into their new college or university environments.

Reference

Astin, A., & Sax, L. J. (1999). How undergraduates are affected by service participation, *Journal of College Student Development*, 39 251-262.