

Scott McLean, Associate Professor of Political Science, Quinnipiac University
Statement of Objectives and Outcomes of Service Learning Course

Course: "Introduction to American Government." (Syllabus Attached).

Course Objectives:

The syllabus of "Introduction to American Government" states that the goal of the service learning section is to learn about the ideals of community and citizenship and to "explore how the concepts of democracy, power, justice and freedom affect practical politics in the post-9/11 world." Reflecting on service experiences, class discussions, reading and writing assignments, the students learn how government and citizens like themselves deal with the problems of racial/ethnic harmony, urban poverty, citizen disengagement and education reform in their communities.

I teach the first half of the course as an introduction to participatory democratic theory and service learning. This is done to provide a context for the issues students will need to grapple with in their service projects. I open with the idea of civic decline in America and the recent rise of grassroots activism and community service, which Rimmerman calls "the new citizenship." We also discuss the socio-economic and structural factors affecting the amount and type of civic involvement. I used the National Issues Forums (NIF) books to introduce students to the policy and normative elements of the issues they would be dealing with in the service projects. I supplemented the issue books with lectures on the local historical and policy background of the issues. Teaching the students deliberation skills was only a secondary goal and it showed because although the discussions were good, they were not really the give and take exercises I usually see in my NIF forums. Next time I teach the class, I'll return to a method I employed years ago: require each service "team" to orally present one of the "choices" in the issue book and debate the issues, then an open "deliberation," then require the students to write a paper discussing which choice they feel most drawn to.

I require all students to engage in a service project for approximately 90 minutes per week for 8 weeks. I explain this requirement in detail during the first two class meetings. Students may choose between service in a soup kitchen, a charter school, or a community center.

The first two years I taught this course, about half the students immediately dropped out when they heard of the service requirement. New students would join when they heard from friends about the course. This occurs less and less, as students and their faculty advisors are aware of the service learning aspects of the course and select it specifically for that reason. Also, I am finding more and more entering freshmen had some type of service learning requirement in high school, so service is a normal thing for them.

I attempt to create situations both inside and outside of the classroom for students to develop relational styles of leadership and skills of civic deliberation on issues. Through group reflection on service experience and class discussion of National Issues Forums (NIF) books on poverty and education, students become familiar with the larger policy

debates connected to their service projects. Each student keeps a reflective journal and writes a research paper related to some aspect of the service projects.

Course Outcomes:

Student outcomes.

The most general student out comes is a shift in attitudes. My students began to see themselves as having some responsibility for community issues and to act to respond to community needs, as defined by the community. They also began to see an active role for government in working with citizens to deal with problems. Finally, while students were still skeptical (cynical?) about the ability of citizens like themselves to set or change government policies through conventional actions like voting, they nevertheless stated over and over that they could "make a difference" through small-scale efforts and volunteerism.

Students had less uniform success in gaining leadership skills through the experience of the course. Most picked up a few new research skills for learning about issues in the community. Others picked up the confidence to be able to organize a service project, communicate with members and even manage a car pool -- but not without initial stumbles and breakdowns as the pressures of final exams and pleasures of springtime weather distracted them. Partly due to my difficulties with scheduling and focus, I feel this class learned less than some of my previous ones about specific skills of public deliberation. We certainly had good discussions using the NIF issue books but they were less "deliberative" than in other classes. This might also be related to the unusual size of the class. There were 34 in this class and my usual service learning class has 20-25 students.

A major change was the acquisition of knowledge and awareness of invisible problems, public policy aspects of social issues, awareness of the differences in culture between college students and minority neighborhoods. The students became more comfortable working in an urban environment and confident in making their way to service sites. Finally, I was impressed with the very great improvement of students on exam skills. Grades were higher on the final exam than on the midterm. I also noticed more ability to write and think critically about service and service learning techniques. Not all were uniformly excited about, say, making service experiences a requirement for students.

There were, as always, a small minority who did not have the "wonderful" service experience and others who found it frustrating because of unrealistic expectations or uncertainties about "what we are supposed to be doing here." I continue to believe that students who require a great deal of structure and who dislike having to improvise in new situations have difficulty opening up to the situation. Extra effort must be made through the journals and discussions to address and respond to their expectations and concerns so that they can learn as much as the other students.

I've written perhaps too much already so I will be brief about institutional, community and faculty outcomes of the course.

1. Institutional outcomes

Students spread the word about service learning in general and this course in particular. Helps normalize idea of service as an academic experience. More and more students asking for this kind of class, requesting to have reserved seat in the course, more students taking the course. More students interested in being in student service clubs, students independently doing more service.

2. Community outcomes

The community agencies the class serves -- a community center, a soup kitchen, and a global-studies based magnet school -- all benefited from the work of the students. Giving regular staff more time to deal with issues is an obvious advantage, but I notice that the agencies appreciated my students as role models for the children, and in the soup kitchen, as "hospitality" workers who talk to the guests. This also was the most meaningful part of the experience for the students too. The general issues we discussed in class had a human face. "Homelessness" for example seems much different when you learn, as many students did, the names and stories of people without adequate housing.

The drawback is that the service learning course does not allow great amounts of time to be spent in the service sites. Tutors at the Magnet school, for example, were really needed for 2 or 3 hours per week rather than 90 minutes. The students at the soup kitchen might have had a more powerful learning experience by spending more time at the soup kitchen or working there more than one day per week. Students seem to recognize this, but also realize that spending more time is a scheduling nightmare. I tended to say to them, "there's no reason you can't spend all the time you wish in service and you are very much invited and needed to continue your service after the semester ends."

3. Faculty outcomes.

My colleagues heard about my class and I got many inquiries. Many were interested in how to do the class, how to find community partners, how to make it academically rigorous, and whether the students actually learn anything. My institution is moving toward the idea of a combination of leadership training and service learning and so it is important to me to be knowledgeable on the "leadership studies" approaches that other institutions utilize.

Outcomes for me as a faculty member are mixed. I think the course is a success but I also would like it to be much more successful. Some areas I would like to use the APSA Workshop is to ask other faculty how I might move this course toward more of a "community leadership course" tied to service learning. I think here of Greenleaf's notion of "servant-leader" and also Alinsky's idea of relational power and leadership here, but also the NIF idea of "deliberative skills" and the learning the language of "common ground." Should issues like "how to run a meeting" be a part of such a course? How about "public speaking?" Or "profiles" of community leaders who we might invite to the

class or go into the field to observe? Along with is the question of whether service learning offers enough leadership experience for students. How can I add more responsibility for students to create their own projects? How can I create opportunities for students to have influence or decisionmaking power within the community organizations they serve? Time constraints (mine, students' and agencies) make this difficult to implement in a 14 week course.