

Does Experiential Learning Enhance Student Knowledge
of Course Material?

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DRAFT:
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INTRODUCTION

As a political scientist and the director of a service learning center, I spend time promoting the benefits of service or experiential learning to my faculty colleagues. One claim that I (and others) make is that by participating in experiential learning, students gain a variety of skills including better knowledge of the course material than those students who do not. As a supporter and a practitioner of experiential learning, I decided to study its effects on students in my American Government classes during the fall (2006) semester. Since my department was also beginning an assessment project during this semester, I expected to be able to use the results to help examine this question. Students in one section were pre-tested on core knowledge and post tests were completed by both sections in December. Unfortunately the results of this assessment have not been completed at this writing. Therefore this paper will use some of the initial data and other course related evaluation material to consider the effects of experiential learning on student knowledge of course material. This preliminary study will hopefully contribute to the discussion at this conference on the value of service/experiential learning to the discipline and how one might assess it effectively to entice more practitioners.

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

Experiential learning is important to the college education process. It differs from volunteering or passive attendance in lecture classes in a very specific way. Experiential Learning definition's vary but it can be considered (as it is at Merrimack College) an umbrella term which encompasses several different parts of a students' education. Service Learning, Cooperative Education, Internships, Directed Research, and Student Leadership are all common and familiar categories of experiential learning. Experiential learning engages students in a guided and facilitated process in which they construct new knowledge, skills and values. Students participate in a purposeful experience, reflect on their engagement and observations, conceptualize their experience in terms of their academic knowledge, integrate their learning into their academic and/or personal growth as members of the college community and increase their civic engagement.¹

Studies show a many effects on student participants in experiential learning opportunities. Students report a significant effect on interpersonal engagement, interaction and friendship with

peers and others on their campus². They also report greater understanding of community problems and greater knowledge of diverse races and culture³. Students believe that they can make a difference; they show a higher commitment to future community service and executed plans for service careers⁴. These studies also show that student's academic engagement is enhanced by experiential learning opportunities. There is a positive impact of experiential learning on their acquisition and understanding of course concepts, knowledge about their field of study, and grades in course linked to experiential learning.⁵

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING AT MERRIMACK COLLEGE

Merrimack College was founded in 1947 by the Order of Saint Augustine to serve as a major educational resource for the surrounding Merrimack Valley community about 30 miles north of Boston. Merrimack College has had a long history of student involvement in experiential learning activities. Every year hundreds of students participate in local service learning projects, travel across the country on alternative spring break trips, work as part of the cooperative education program, or collaborate with faculty on directed research projects. The Augustinian value of community and the teachings of St. Augustine underscore the importance of experiential learning and guide the underlying education mission. The College has committed to experiential learning and promotes its value to both current and incoming students. In 2005 a campus wide Experiential Learning Committee was created and charged to enhance and enrich experiential learning opportunities among the faculty and between the faculty and student life departments as part of the major curriculum revision occurring on the campus. It is my membership on this committee that has sparked my interest in this topic.

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING AND POLITICAL SCIENCE

Experiential Learning is vitally important to Political Science education. The APSA Civic Education project and even this conference are evidence of its popularity and its significance. Most of us, as political science professors, will encourage our students to "get involved." We prompt them to volunteer with campaigns, intern at government offices, and participate in class debates or simulations. As service learning is becoming more widely used and accepted as a part of our pedagogy, we can now expand this call for involvement to volunteering at homeless shelters, senior citizen centers or in after school mentoring programs. We understand that by

getting our students out of the security blanket of the classroom and the campus and into situations where they are interacting with government institutions or agencies working directly with public policies, our lecture topics become not only more interesting but more relevant as well. We hope that our students will become better citizens from these opportunities not just better students. We know intuitively, from anecdotal evidence and personal observations that the discussion and debriefing of these experiences (whether in oral or written form) allow the students to reflect and connect these adventures to class themes. It is this connection and how well it is done that seems to enhance students' knowledge of course material.

POLITICS OF THE UNITED STATES – FALL, 2006

In the Fall Semester of 2006 I taught two sections of our department's Introduction to American Government course (Politics of the United States). 59 students were enrolled (31 in Section A and 29 in Section B). As this is an introductory class and satisfies a college social science requirement it is not surprising that class year and major varied widely among these 59 students. Most of the students (73%) were upperclassmen not freshmen and only a few (10%) were political science majors (at least at the beginning of the semester).

STUDENTS IN POLITICS OF THE US

Graduation				Major	Number	%
Year	Number	%				
				Athletic Training	1	2%
2007	16	27%		Biochemistry	1	2%
2008	8	14%		Biology	3	5%
2009	23	39%		Business Administration	18	31%
2010	12	20%		Chemistry	1	2%
				Civil Engineering	2	3%
				Communication Studies	1	2%
				Computer Science	1	2%
				Economics	1	2%
				English	2	3%
				Health Science	1	2%
				History	2	3%
				Liberal Arts	1	2%
				Math	2	3%
				Political Science	6	10%
				Psychology	3	5%
				Sociology	3	5%
				Spanish	1	2%
				Undeclared Arts	8	14%

During the first class meeting I asked the students to fill out information sheets to gather basic demographic information and background regarding their level of experiential learning and civic participation. Students were to check off any type of experiential learning (using the commonly accepted categories of experiential learning mentioned previously) they had done and whether they were registered to vote, registered to a political party, and/or worked on a political campaign.

HAVE YOU EVER PARTICIPATED IN?

Service Learning		Directed Research	
Yes (18)	31%	Yes (1)	2%
No (40)	69%	No (57)	98%

Study Abroad		Internships	
Yes (0)	0%	Yes (10)	17%
No (58)	100%	No (48)	83%

Cooperative Education		Student Campus Organizations	
Yes (0)	0%	Yes (8)	14%
No (58)	100%	No (50)	86%

Campus Ministry Activities		Hold Leadership Position	
Yes (6)	10%	Yes (13)	22%
No (52)	90%	No (45)	78%

LEVEL OF POLITICAL ACTIVITY

Are you registered to vote?	
Yes (39)	67%
No (19)	33%

Are you registered to a party?	
Yes (13)	22%
No (45)	78%

Have you ever worked on a political campaign?	
Yes (3)	5%
No (55)	95%

This information allows me to get a sense of who these students are collectively before I get to know them individually in the classroom. As evidenced in the table above, Service Learning was the most common experiential learning activity done by the students. Overall these students did not have much involvement with experiential learning activities. In terms of civic participation two-thirds of the students were registered to vote but most were unaffiliated

with a political party. Only a handful of students had worked on a campaign. Studies by organizations such as CIRCLE (Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement) point out similar trends among college students nationwide.⁶

SEMESTER PROJECT: SERVICE LEARNING VS. CURRENT EVENTS

In order to encourage and promote class discussion and to introduce the students to the ideas of civic involvement, I included a service learning component as part of the course requirements. Merrimack College is less than five miles away from Lawrence, Massachusetts one of the poorest and neediest cities in the Commonwealth. It was my hope that by volunteering in the Lawrence area, my students would have unique experiences and develop an analytical framework that would help them to understand, in a more personal way, the topics that were being discussed in class.

Having taught classes with a service learning component and in my role of overseeing the service learning program, I have found that mandating service in larger classes can cause problems within the classroom and among the students and the sites. While many students enjoy their service, a few unhappy students can negatively affect the classroom atmosphere and sour the attitudes of others in the class. This unhappiness can also be seen in teaching evaluations at the end of the semester and in the work that these students do at the service agencies (lack of responsibility, absenteeism, disruptions, etc). To avoid some of these potential problems, I decided not to mandate participation in the service learning project. Students who chose the service learning option were required to complete 16 hours of service in an agency in the area which related to a public policy (hunger/malnutrition, poverty relief or welfare, homelessness, social security/healthcare, education reform, immigration, etc) Students who opted not to do the service learning project would do an alternative current events assignment. These students would select a current public policy/topic relating to these same issues as the service learning projects (hunger/malnutrition, poverty relief or welfare, homelessness, social security/healthcare, education reform, immigration, etc). These students would then track the issue through coverage given to it in a national newspaper.

No matter which option the students selected, each student was to write a three part reflective journal. In these journals the students were asked to relate their service experience or newspaper article to a general theme of the course reading or class discussion and include their

own reaction to and evaluation of the ideas and events. Finally students were to write a 5-7 page paper on their topic at the end of the semester. 34 students selected the service learning assignment and 25 students selected the current events project. Comparing the selections to the initial information sheet, I found that students who had no prior experiential learning experience split almost in half between selecting the service learning project or the current events project. Students who had past experiential learning experiences were more likely to select a service learning assignment. Students who were not registered to vote all chose to do a service learning assignment where the students who were registered were more evenly divided.

		Option Selected		Total
		Current Events	SL	
Experiential Learning History	No experience	12	13	25
	1 Experience	7	11	18
	2 Experiences	3	7	10
	3 Experiences	0	2	2
	4 Experiences	2	1	3
Total		24	34	58

		Option Selected		Total
		Current Events	SL	
Voting	No Voting experience	2	17	19
	Registered to vote	13	11	24
	Registered to vote & party or campaign	9	5	14
	Registered to vote in party & campaign	0	1	1
Total		24	34	58

The 34 students who chose the service learning option volunteered at a variety of different service organizations. Many worked with children in schools or in after school programs as tutors or mentors. Others worked with the homeless in area shelters and soup kitchens. A few others worked in a congressman's local district office or with the consumer protection agency. The 25 Students who chose the current events project examined a wide variety of issues. Examples of these choices included gas/energy policy, global warming, hunger, poverty, stem cell research, gay marriage, steroids, war, and welfare.

Before the semester started my expected outcome for this assignment was that some of the current events issues chosen would match the themes of the service assignment. Then, through class discussion, students would come to understand and connect the service to the public policy themes. I had hoped that these crossover discussions would draw out and examine

class topics using “real life” examples as a deeper and more enriching way to enhance the lecture material.

The actual outcome was a little more mixed. I had scheduled time for this crossover discussion to occur three times during the semester. Students participating in service learning spoke about what their service experiences had been, what they were doing at their specific sites and their reactions to the site and the service. The students doing the current event project were then asked to speak about the articles that they had found during the past weeks and the policies that were involved. I then tried to guide them to connect the themes together. However, the relationships between the two projects were at times very difficult to find and define. While the students enjoyed the discussions and listening to each other’s accounts about what they were doing for their projects, the results of this common discussion time was disappointing to me. A few common points were discovered but there was no real exchange of ideas. This outcome might have been too much to expect for an introductory course. I probably should have spent more time on the individual reflection techniques for both projects.

ASSESSMENT OF THE SERVICE LEARNING PROJECTS – JOURNAL GRADES

Throughout the course of the semester class members were required to pass in their reflective journals four times during the semester. The service learning students were to make four entries in their journals. The current events students were to record a journal entry per week. Each journal entry was worth 50 points and the most points (25) were awarded for the third part where the reflection, critical analysis and connections needed to be specific and clear. This was the part of the journal where the students had the most difficulty. Depending on the class topic for that week some connections were easily made. At other times, it was more challenging and the students’ analytical skill was tested.

Over the course of the semester the journal content improved and thus the students’ grades improved. At the end of the semester the average journal grades were higher for the students who participated in service learning. Some possible reasons for this noticeable difference in grades could be that the service learning participants enjoyed their assignment more than the current events students. The service learning students had more experiences to write about and were practicing more analytical skills as a result of their day to day work at their sites. For example, students tutoring at the Boys & Girls Club experienced many different situations.

The type and amount of homework that “their” student had to do and the surprising difficulty that “their” student had with certain subjects were frequently mentioned in the journals. Criticism and frustration towards the school system and speculations about the weaknesses of the state testing system were also referred to in the journals. The home life of a student or stories that this student told his college mentor about life in an urban environment were also unforgettable points that the service learning students used in their journal which then allowed them to relate these experiences to legislative priorities, judicial systems or campaign processes. On the other hand, the current events project topics did not seem to change much throughout the semester, therefore the students did have as many angles from which to connect the topics and readings together. Without any significant changes occurring throughout the semester, the students’ enthusiasm and creativity seemed to wane. One student examining energy policy always seemed to focus on rising gas prices. As the semester progressed his entries became more and more monotone and less analytical. He admittedly lost interest in the topic and thus it became less relevant to him which then interfered with his ability to critically analyze or relate the articles to class topics. Journal writing can be an effective tool for student reflection and is a hallmark of a successful experiential learning project. Students in these classes adapted to the journal writing and it seemed to allow the service learning students the outlet they needed to reflect on their experience and then relate their service to the class. For the current event students, a few less journals entries might have made the assignment more effective.

STUDENT KNOWLEDGE OF COURSE MATEIRAL

Measuring whether experiential learning enhanced the knowledge of students who participated is a complicated task. It was made more difficult after the departmental assessment was not finished in time. Therefore, I examined a few different subjective measures to at least begin the study of its effectiveness. First, I looked at students’ grades for the two exams and any progress that might have been made during the semester. A few service learning students seemed to improve from the midterm exam to the final exam. A few current events student grades declined from the midterm to the final.

Grade Differences from Midterm Exam to Final Exam

	CE Students	Service Learning students
Better grade on final	1	5
Worse grade on final	9	9
Grade did not change	15	20

These results are not very significant given the other factors that can affect grades such as test taking anxiety, study skills, student's lack of preparation for testing, and the ultimate pressures of the final exam week.

I also looked at the grades for the papers. These final papers were mixed in terms of the quality and analysis. Most of the current event students did not do well. The service learning students papers were better written and their corresponding grades were higher as well. Again, other factors including talent and skill can affect the grades of papers. Also, many students in this course did not know how to write this sort of paper and did not leave themselves enough time to seek assistance.

Finally, I considered the students' semester grades for the course. The class average was a B. Service learning students grades averaged a B+ and the current event students' grades averaged a B-. Service learning participants performed better in this class. But is difficult to determine if it were the service learning assignments which helped these students understand the material better or if they were just better test takers or paper writers..

STUDENT COMMENTS

In order to go beyond just looking at grades and I examined what the students had to say about the project and the class. I looked at two different evaluations for the class where students could contribute written comments: service learning questionnaires and the teaching evaluations. The service learning center collects questionnaires from student participants which are then shared with their instructors. These questionnaires are not anonymous and one might question how free the students feel to answer the questions truthfully. Over the years I have found that this is less problematic than one would expect. Our students are usually very blunt and honest in their opinions. The center reported that for my classes 25 students filled out their questionnaires. Out of these 25 students, 12 agreed that their service assignment related very well to the class. 13 students answered that it related somewhat to class.

Two questions asked in these questionnaires are especially important in evaluating the experiential learning project. These questions are:

1. Did class readings and discussions help you with your service learning project?
2. Was service learning an effective way to make class material more meaningful?

Most of the responses to these two questions were positive in nature. Below are some specific comments by students.

Positive Comments

- Class discussions on the legislative process helped me understand the importance of constituent service. Seeing that at work in the Congressman's office really helped me apply what I learned in class.
- Class readings and discussions helped w/my service learning project b/c it made me look at the voting process differently and see how it affects people on a local level.
- For my politics class, applying certain issues (school) to the project helped me with my journal entries.
- I had somewhat of a hard time connecting material in class with homelessness b/c class material was mostly about the government, which needs to do more to prevent homelessness.
- They didn't help me directly with my volunteer work, but they helped me with understanding the political issues behind it.
- Yes, especially because we had to write journal entries comparing our service learning to class.
- Yes, although at times it was hard to relate homelessness to politics and the topics in class.
- Yes, because after I would learn things in class I would see them in the office.
- Yes, because I was able to apply the lectures & the things I've learned in class to help the students.
- Yes, different communities and reasons for this were looked at and identified.
- Yes, every week in the journals we had to incorporate class issues with the service learning.
- Yes, I was able to compare how the government relates to the Consumer Protection Agency and how different parties can affect the jobs of employees.
- Yes, the discussions gave me a guideline for thinking about things at the site.
- Yes, they helped me to apply knowledge in the classroom to my experience at Horizons for Youth. I used the class discussions to reflect on education in society.
- Yes, we had to relate our experiences at the site to something we were learning in class through a journal entry.

Negative Comments

- Somewhat, since the same agenda happened every time I went then it was hard to relate to different topics.
- Not really because we never specifically talked about education reform.
- Little hard to relate
- Not really, at times what we were learning in class was not applicable.
- No, it was difficult to relate therapeutic riding to the study of American government focused on in class.
- Only sometimes not always... was hard to relate to the classroom sometimes.
- Not really, I had trouble relating it to politics.

Most of these student comments show that after a semester of journal writing and reflection, the students were able to relate their experiences to class material. Unfortunately there was no similar questionnaire given out to the current events students.

To accompany the questionnaires from the service learning center, I also looked at my teaching evaluations for the two sections. These are administered at the end of the semester. Students complete them anonymously and they are scored by the department secretary using a scantron machine. Students are also invited to write comments on the back of the form. The student evaluations were mixed. While the instructor scored well on questions regarding teaching style and receptiveness to students, the students were less enthused about the paper that they had to write. When asked for specific comments about the class (what you liked the best and least?), the most common negative comments were about the journals.

One student wrote: "I felt that the journals were unnecessary & did not really contribute to the course work" Another wrote: "Journals for every topic is hard to find articles that compare to class topics" A third wrote "it was often difficult to make connections to coursework in the journals". And finally a fourth wrote "The journal entry and paper we had to write for service learning. I disliked doing it but I understand why it was necessary."

Most of the written positive comments in the evaluations spoke about the enthusiasm and teaching style of the instructor. There were no positive comments about the journals but some commented that they enjoyed the class discussions on the issues. Since this evaluation is a department wide teaching evaluation, there were no separate questions about service learning. Students had to take the time to write the comments listed above; therefore the lack of a quantity of comments should not be misconstrued. Also, after looking at both of these evaluation tools, it seems as if the journals did have some impact on the students, whether they liked or disliked the assignment itself.

PRE and POST TESTING

As part of an assessment project being done in the Political Science Department during the fall, students in Section B were issued a pre-test during the first day of classes. Students were asked to identify ten terms that were associated with an American government class (Separation of Powers, Cabinet, Caucus, etc) they were then asked some demographic information as well (SAT scores, grades in High school, etc). These 10 terms were to be scored on a 0-1 scale (0 for wrong, ½ for partial credit, and 1 for full credit)

On the last day of class the post-test was distributed. This time, students in both sections were tested and were asked to identify eleven terms (the original 10 and one extra). Students were asked the same demographic questions as the first one and were also asked if they participated in a service learning assignment. 51 students took the post test and the results are broken down according to participation in the service learning assignment. Students who did not participate in service learning seemed to have higher scores in terms of content where the service learning students had better average scores.

		Did you participate in Service Learning		Total
		Yes	No	
Post Test Grading -	0.50	1	0	1
11 possible points	1.00	5	7	12
	1.50	5	1	6
	2.00	7	2	9
	2.50	4	2	6
	3.00	4	2	6
	3.50	1	1	2
	4.00	3	2	5
	4.50	0	2	2
	5.00	0	1	1
	6.00	0	1	1
Total		30	21	51

The post-test also measured the level of interest that the student had in government and politics.

		Did you participate in Service Learning		Total
		Yes	No	
Interest in Politics	Very	7	9	16
	Somewhat	19	10	29
	Not very	4	2	6
		30	21	51

The service learning assignment seemed to be more attractive to the students who were not highly interest in politics. This seems to support the studies that tell us that the younger members of the electorate are more likely to participate in a service opportunity than in politics itself. When the department assessment is complete, I expect to be able to more fully analyze these results.

CONCLUSION

Experiential learning is an important factor in higher education. Studies continue to find that students who are engaged are more likely to persist keeping our retention numbers stable. The benefits of civic or experiential learning to the Political Science discipline are very significant. Through experiential learning students have the opportunity to become “active participants in their learning experience and engaged citizens in their community.”⁷

Since the assessment of the Politics of the United States courses was not completed in time for use in this paper, I did not have the data I expected to be able to use to examine whether there was enhancement of student knowledge through experiential learning. While I realize that there is no statistical significance to these numbers, I believe that the measures I used to compare the students who did the experiential learning assignment against those who did not, give us at the minimum the opportunity to continue the discussion about experiential learning. Students who participated in the service learning assignment received higher journal grades and higher final grades. Student reactions to the service assignments through evaluations and questionnaires also seem to confirm that the students benefited from the assignment. In future papers and conversations we need to study how course material is enhanced by student service or other experiential experience. Was it just the enjoyment of the service assignment that created enjoyment of the topics? Was it the involvement “on the ground” that showed students that what they were learning had relevance in the “real world?” Did they understand the material better because of these examples?

Experiential education models tell us that students learn most successfully when they are involved and knowledge is attained through discovery⁸. Experiential learning in my classes allowed those students who participated the opportunity to use the community as a lab. These students were able to understand the material better than the students who did not participate. Hopefully our discussions in this conference will help us frame these questions in a more cohesive manner and aid our colleagues who embark on the process in the future.

POLITICS OF THE UNITED STATES
(PL 101A, Sec A, Fall, 2006)

TIME AND PLACE: Tuesdays & Thursdays 11-12:15 in Mendel 274
INSTRUCTOR: Mary McHugh
OFFICE HOURS: MWF 8:15-8:45 AM and T/TH 8:30-9:30 AM and/or by appointment
Office: Sakowich Campus Center, Room 380 – x. 5123
Home: (978) 568-0414 (no calls after 10 P.M. please)
Email: mary.mchugh@merrimack.edu

COURSE DESCRIPTION:

This course provides a general introduction to the basic political institutions and processes of the United States government. We will ask and answer questions such as who governs the US, why, and to what ends?

COURSE REQUIREMENTS:

FINAL EXAM (20%) - As scheduled by college on **Wednesday, December 13th at 11:30 AM**

EXAM #1 (20%) - In class on **Thursday, October 19th**

SERVICE LEARNING PROJECT or CURRENT EVENT PROJECT (25%) - See details below

Journal (10%) – Due: four times during semester
Paper (15%) – Due: **Thursday, December 7th**

DEBATES (15%) – See details below

Position Paper (10%) – due on day of debate
Participation in Debate (5%)

CLASS PARTICIPATION AND ATTENDANCE (10%)

Class discussion and participation is both encouraged and required. Unless otherwise indicated, all reading assignments are required and should be completed *before* class. Your participation is valued and the quality of your participation will be a component of your grade. You will be marked down for all absences after your first **three**. Missing more than 50% of the classes could cause you to fail the class. Please remember that being present in class does not equal participation.

ASSIGNMENTS (10%)

Good participation moves beyond discussion of current events to critical engagement of the readings and application of the theories to contemporary politics. Students will also be asked to do small assignments throughout the semester such as watching a program on C-SPAN, doing a web based assignment, or attending a campus wide event. Completion of these assignments and reporting on them in class will also be incorporated into your final grade. Please check on **Blackboard** for specific assignments and due dates.

BOOKS AND READINGS:

All readings are required. The three main books can be purchased at the Merrimack Bookstore.

Benjamin Ginsberg & Ted Lowi, We the People 5th edition (shorter version)
John T. Rourke, You Decide 2006

In addition, you will be responsible for any and all other assigned readings or assignments. ***Please check Blackboard (blackboard.merrimack.edu) on a regular basis for discussion questions and updates to assignments.***
Also: It is strongly suggested that you read a daily national newspaper or a weekly news magazine in order to keep up to date with current political events and to use for journal entries. *You can pick up copies of the Boston Globe and other papers at the Sakowich Campus Center Information Desk on Main Street.*

BLACKBOARD

TO LOG ONTO BLACKBOARD GO TO THE FOLLOWING LINK

URL: <http://blackboard.merrimack.edu>

Log on using your last name, first initial

Your password is your ID number and zip code

SERVICE LEARNING/CURRENT EVENTS PROJECT

Your assignment is to investigate a current issue that is of interest to the United States government. The purpose of this assignment is for the student to interpret and analyze political issues and to make a clear link to the concepts discussed in this course. You will be able to choose between two options: Service Learning or Current Events. For both of these options students will keep a journal and write a paper.

Some Potential Public Policy topics could include:

Hunger/malnutrition

Some aspect of poverty relief or welfare

Homelessness

Social Security/Healthcare

Some aspect of education reform

Immigration

Economic urban development

Women's issues Energy

Topics should be cleared with me before you start either project.

OPTION A - SERVICE LEARNING

Students who choose this option are expected to spend 16 hours volunteering in the Merrimack Valley Area. For this project you are expected to volunteer at a location relating to a public policy that you will choose and will need to keep a journal of your experiences (as noted below). You will should to sign up for your service work at the Stevens Service Learning Center (x. 5125 – Campus Center 380) by **Tuesday, September 19^h** and begin your service by **Tuesday, September 26^h**. You will be able to choose from a variety of options of service work at a variety of times and locations. Students are expected to honor their commitment and to show up each week on time.

1. SERVICE LEARNING REFLECTIONS JOURNAL

Each student will keep a journal in a separate notebook. Each week you are expected to make one entry into your journal reflecting on your experiences with the service learning project. Each journal entry should include three sections denoted by three different colors of ink. In black ink you should describe what you actually did that week at your volunteer site – what were your tasks? How did you complete these tasks? With whom did you work? Etc. In blue ink, you should write your reflective or subjective reactions to what happened during the week – how did you feel about your experience this week? Why? Finally, in red ink, you should reflect thoughtfully on the relationship between the things that happen “out there” and what we are reading about or discussing in class that week – what connections can be made between the issue that you have chosen to the reading or to the class discussion? How does your volunteer experience help you to understand the issue better? How does it help you to understand the balance of power in our political system? The role of the citizen? Of the voter? Etc. Your grade on the journal will reflect the degree to which your entries are thoughtful and complete. All entries should include three parts, however most emphasis in terms of your grade will be placed on the portion written in red ink as it will reflect critical thinking about the project, the readings, and the issue. The journal will constitute 15% of your grade in this class. **Journals will be collected and reflective discussions will occur on four times during the semester: October 3rd, October 24th, November 21st, and December 7th**

2. SERVICE LEARNING PAPER

After you complete your service hours you will write a small research paper that examines the public policy and how it relates to the service project that you did. After the introduction the paper should begin with a little background on the issue and explain why it is important to the study of American Government (For example: What is the recent history of the issue? How does the issue affect people? What is at stake? Who are the key players? How does it relate to the topics of the course or to issues related to the service project? The body of the paper should look at key facts and the debates around the issue. (For example: What are the options, how does the issue get processed in the political or social system?) In the conclusion reflect on the issue and how it connects to the national political system that you have studied. **This paper should be 5 pages in length and will constitute 10% of your grade. This paper will be due on Thursday, December 7.**

OPTION B - CURRENT EVENT PROJECT

If you do not have the ability to participate in the service learning project this semester, you may do this alternative assignment. As you can see, A major component of this course is staying informed on national policy issues. At the national level, decisions and debates of the US government are directly relevant to the subject material of the class. Students who choose this option will also select a public policy issue/topic to follow for the semester. Students will be expected to read a major newspaper (including the editorial pages) on a daily basis and track the issue throughout the semester in this paper.

1. CURRENT EVENT - NEWS COMMENTARIES

Each student will keep a journal in a separate notebook. Journals will be collected periodically throughout the semester. You should plan to write in your journal at least once a week. For each week the journal should include an analysis of one or more current **national** newspaper articles (from a newspaper such as the Boston Globe or New York Times) that concerns your topic. This commentary should relate the article to a general theme of the course reading or class discussion and should always include your own reaction to and evaluation of the ideas and events. Be sure to include a copy of the article in the journal. In black ink you should summarize the newspaper article. In blue ink, you should write your reflective or subjective reactions to the article – Why did you pick this particular article? What is your reaction to it? Finally, in red ink, you should reflect thoughtfully on the relationship between the things that are mentioned in this article and what we are reading about or discussing in class that week – what connections can be made to the reading, to the class discussion? How does this article help you to understand the issue better? How does it help you to understand the balance of power in our political system in regards to the policy issue? The role of the citizen? Of the voter? Your grade on the journal will reflect the degree to which your entries are thoughtful and complete. All entries should include three parts, however most emphasis in terms of your grade will be placed on the portion written in red ink as it will reflect critical thinking about the project, the readings, and the issue. The journal will constitute 10% of your grade in this class. **Journals will be collected and reflective discussions will occur on four times during the semester: October 3rd, October 24th, November 21st, and December 7th**

2. SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS

At the end of the semester you write a small research paper that in this paper you are expected to provide an overview and analysis of the current issue/policy that you chose. After the introduction the paper should begin with a little background on the issue and explain why it is important to the study of American Government. Your analysis must include these components:

- An overview and description of the main dimensions of the issue. These may include historical description of what has happened, the place where it is happening and key players.
- An explanation of why it is important and relevant to US Politics and government and why the reaction of the US government is relevant to the actors in the situation.
- A discussion of your own views of the issues, why it has happened, and what if anything, should be done by the US government to confront this problem. In making your case for why and what you believe should happen, be sure to support your position with documentation and rational arguments..

This paper should be 7 pages in length and will constitute 10% of your grade. This paper will be due on Thursday, December 7.

¹ Merrimack College's Experiential Learning Committee, working description of Experiential Learning, 2005-2006

² Eyler, J. and Giles, D. E. Where's the learning in service learning? San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1999.

³ Astin, Alexander W and Linda J Sax, "How Undergraduates are Affected by Service Participation". *Journal of College Student Development* 39, no. 2 (1998): 251-262.

⁴ Eyler, J. and Giles, D. E. Where's the learning in service-learning? San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1999.

⁵ Moely, B.E., McFarland, M., Miron, D. Mercer, S.H., and Ilustre, V. :”Changes in college students’ attitudes and intentions for civic involvement as a function of service-learning experiences”. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning* 9, no. 1. (2002):18-26.

⁶ Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, 2004, 2006.

⁷ Dicklitch, Susan, “Real service = real learning: Making Political Science Relevant through Service Learning,” *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 33, no 3. (2000); 773-776

⁸ Taub, Diane, “Strengthening the Social within Social Psychology: An Experiential Learning Approach” *Teaching Sociology*, 19, no 3. (1991), 186-92