Service Learning Spotlight

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Q. What is your background in service-learning (mention any courses you have taken as a student that has a SL component, research done, etc.)

1. Since social work is a people and service oriented profession, service learning has always been a natural way for me to engage students in the community and the profession. In fact, admission to the social work program requires a certain number of service learning hours. We believe it is important to instill the idea that service to others is part of a social worker’s ethical responsibility to individuals, families and communities. When I started as an adjunct professor in 2006, I taught SW250 – Introduction to Social Welfare and Social Work. At that time, MSUM had a service learning office on campus and students were able to work with that office to coordinate their hours. This was phased out within a year and I began to contact and work with agencies myself before classes started each semester. Since starting in 2013, I have also taught SW450 which included a service learning component that focused on “macro” practice, or in other words, working with agencies who had a broader mission such as the community, state or national outreach activities.

Q. Why do you continue to incorporate service-learning into some (or all) of your courses?

2. I think it is essential to continue to incorporate service learning in our courses for a variety of reasons. As already mentioned, it is a critical part of our ethical responsibility as a profession to give back to others and so instilling this early on with students is important. It is also another way to help students begin to see the problems people face as not just individual issues, but issues that are part of larger systemic barriers. In addition, since social workers are employed across a wide spectrum of issues and different clientele, getting involved in service learning helps students find the type of social work areas they believe would fit them best as well as beginning to network with agencies in the community. These networks can also lead to future internships and employment in human service agencies!!

Q. What do you think are the major benefits for students by having them participate in service-learning?

3. The benefits and results for students are numerous. I think they feel gratification by knowing they helped other’s in a tangible way. I also think as mentioned earlier, they are exposed to the profession in ways that are impossible to duplicate in the classroom setting along with creating future networks which will assist their internship and job searches. Finally, service learning requires that students utilize good communication skills as well as learning how to work effectively and efficiently in groups. Task and treatment groups are the most common modes of “getting the work done” in the social work profession so this experience is critical.

Q. What do (one or two) of your service-learning projects look like? (Explain the course it is linked to and what part of the curriculum you believe the students would learn best through their service experience, hours of service, expectations you have for the students i.e., reflective journals or final reflective essay or other)

4. In SW450; Generalist Practice with Communities and Organizations, I began to reach out to agencies that I felt would be able to have a broader community scope in their service learning activities. Contacting agencies before classes started was crucial to creating successful experiences for both students and agencies. During this conversation with agencies I would discuss that the activity should be community wide in scope and also that students would work in groups of 4-5 and would provide 20 hours a piece of time in service learning. During one of the SW450 classes in the 2nd or 3rd week of classes, agencies were invited into my class to discuss the particular service learning activities that students may get involved in at their agency. Then, students would make their choices and then I assigned them to their groups.

Students are given some class time hours to complete these activities. The assignments attached to the service learning in SW450 include a group Agency Analysis paper, a self-reflection paper and a final group presentation (usually power point) to the class regarding their service learning project and their analysis of the agencies. These assignments are very integral to learning about macro social work at the organizational and community levels. The classroom discussions and lectures are connected on an ongoing basis to the service learning experience.

Some examples of service learning projects include:

* Project JUA – students met with refugee women and assisted in helping to make jewelry; then this group created a Facebook page to sell the jewelry and also sold the jewelry on the campus of MSUM for a day during the semester.
* PRIDE – for several years groups of students have assisted the FM PRIDE group in a fundraiser which included a supper (one year spaghetti, another year soup supper). The students found the venue, got the food donated, did the advertising, serving of the food etc.
* Planned Parenthood – students assisted this agency in providing educational outreach by holding various awareness days/booths at the CMU and also doing some fundraising.

Q. What is some advice for someone who is considering adding service-learning into their courses?

5. I have learned through the years that it is important to start planning early for the service learning activities. In addition, the contact with agencies is crucial to explain the parameters of your class, dates, assignments etc. In addition, it is very helpful to continue conversations throughout the semester (often by e-mail with the agency representatives) as the projects progress in order to trouble shoot any concern from their perspective. I also spend time in class with each service learning group at various junctures. I have found this helps keep students motivated and focused as well as answering any questions or concerns. This tactic also holds all students more accountable and lessens the chance that all the work will fall on one or two students.