Rethinking Several New New Way to

by Gary M. Stern

Ten public and private four-year and community colleges in the New York metropolitan area, including New York University, Columbia University, Wagner College, the City College of New York, and Queensborough Community College, are participating in a program that takes volunteering to a new level by giving students credit for their time. In these service-learning programs, student volunteering is incorporated with coursework.

Launched in 2001 in New York, the service-learning program has taken on greater meaning since many nonprofits are hurting during the recession, receiving less funding and cutting back on staff, so student involvement can help maintain services. Proponents say service learning helps colleges connect with their community, provides real-life experience for students, prepares them for a variety of careers, and benefits the nonprofits as well. It’s a win/win situation.

The nonprofit New York Campus Compact, based in Ithaca, N.Y., was formed by eight university presidents in 2000 to promote the public mission of higher education. It in turn formed New York Metro Area Partnership for Service-Learning (NYMAPS) to encourage campus and community partnerships. NYMAPS’ goal is to create “regional networks, expand service learning and advance the public service of higher education,” explains James Heffernan, executive director of New York Campus Compact. Having service coordinators meet enables them to discuss and share community partners, exchange training tips and sharpen curriculum development.

There’s also a Pennsylvania Campus Compact project that has similar goals. In this program, service is integrated into the curriculum. Hence, students in a public relations program write press kits for nonprofits while pre-med students conduct research for a cancer prevention center. In 2009-10, 452 students in New York provided more than 10,000 hours of volunteering. Latinos and other minority students, who often don’t have the time to volunteer, are playing a major role in this program.

Service learning could be integrated into just about every class, with certain exceptions, Heffernan says. Advanced math classes, for example, might not lend themselves to collaborating with a nonprofit, but even students in geology classes could test lead content in the soil or accounting students could review tax structures for public education.

Service learning differs from traditional volunteering because it offers credits and is guided by an instructor. Instructors tailor the students’ experience and provide time in class for students to reflect on their service activities and make connections to the curriculum. The program encourages students to apply classroom theory to real-world situations and also can lead students to pursue careers in nonprofit agencies.

Nonprofit organizations benefit because they gain the participation of “energetic and committed young people,” Heffernan says. For example, several Wagner College students have been volunteering at an African Refugee Center (more about that later) in Staten Island for several years, leading to the center depending on them as a resource. As some colleges are viewed as operating in an ivory tower, this program helps reduce that distance, bringing students into the community.

At the City College of New York (CCNY), service learning is connected to the Colin Powell Center for Policy Studies, which offers two-year scholarships to minority and underrepresented students who want to pursue careers in policymaking and public service, though other students can get involved as well. “No one else was coordinating service learning at CCNY, and it was a natural fit for our mission at the Colin Powell Center,” explains Erin Bowley, director of service learning at the Colin Powell Center. The Powell Center debuted in 1997, and service learning started in 2005. In 2008-09, 176 CCNY students participated in service learning. Of that number, 43 percent were Latino and 29 percent were African-American. In addition, the Powell Center also provides six hours of faculty training to show staff how to mix volunteerism with coursework.

Any CCNY student who enrolls in any of eight designated classes, including Methods of Teaching English in Secondary Schools, Environmental
Volunteering – York Colleges Introduce a
Encourage Student Service

Entrepreneurship, or Introduction to Public Relations Writing, participates in service learning. Service learning is described in the curriculum and provides part of the basis for receiving three credits on completing the course. Since students spend 35 hours a semester at the nonprofit, the teacher may reduce the reading list to compensate for the out-of-class learning.

For example, students in Elena Romero’s Introduction to Public Relations course develop press kits for one of five organizations, including the Literacy Assistance Center of New York, Neighborhood Housing Services of New York City and Grameen America, which offers micro-financing in poor countries. Each nonprofit organization sends a representative to the class to explain why it needs assistance and describes projects required for the semester, and students select a nonprofit based on their interests.

“Students are more engaged and take these assignments seriously because the stakes are higher,” Bowley said. For example, one group, LIFT (Legal Information for Families Today), helps children dealing with family courts, so students learn about policy and the judicial system, not just public relations.

Facing tightening budgets and an increasing number of foreclosures, Neighborhood Housing Services of New York City (NHS) has derived several benefits from the contribution of CCNY students, explained Susannah Gillette, its director of program quality. During one semester, economics students performed property research to determine whether its counselors reduced foreclosure delinquencies. Its current students are developing a media kit. The media outreach will help the nonprofit “reach our target audience in a cost-effective way,” Gillette said.

Gillette described the CCNY students as “very professional, very enthusiastic and genuinely excited about the projects.” She said that because of fiscal difficulties at the nonprofit, “working with these students has been a highlight of my day. They re-energize me. We need the troops.”

Working with NHS in the Bronx was Alexis Villar, a CCNY economics major who was taking service learning via his Government Regulations and Public Policy class taught by María Binz-Sharf. Villar expects to graduate in 2010, study for a master’s degree in economics and eventually work for an economic development organization. As part of service learning, he collaborated with four other students to survey new condo residents in Soundview, a working-class neighborhood in the Bronx.

“The purpose of the survey was to get a sense of how the people felt about the neighborhood, whether they needed more services or financial assistance, and what adjustments had to be made,” said Villar, a native of the Dominican Republic who moved to New York at age 11. Though the students were given a template for the survey by NHS, the CCNY team of five students developed a sample methodology and decided which residents to target. In going door to door to conduct the survey, the students encountered resistance, and eventually the condo’s management completed the survey.

After interpreting the residents responses, the team presented the survey to NHS. “I was able to put my book learning from economics class into practice,” Villar said. Working as a team was also a learning experience since Villar learned that some students are skilled at interpersonal relationships; others, at collecting data; and some, like him, at organizing members of the team.

Villar’s economic class had also discussed a bank’s social responsibility, and he got to see in person how these ethical considerations weren’t always adhered to. Furthermore, economic development agencies like NHS provide a service to people to help them with mortgages, and yet these nonprofits must overcome people’s resistance. “The difficult part is making people trust you. It all comes down to persistence,” Villar said.

The ultimate goal of the service-learning program is “We want students to have a clear understanding of how their learning is applicable to the real world,” Bowley said. Students can see how public relations can impact a nonprofit’s reputation or increase fundraising. Students’ résumés are strengthened by their service-learning work, which “produces graduates who are better prepared for their careers,” she noted.

The quarterly NYMAPS meeting and annual symposium were helpful in getting service-learning coordinators to share ideas and learn new techniques. Each meeting focused on professional development, network and support and on topics such as what outcomes the community organizations expect to derive and how to help them achieve those goals.

At Wagner College, a private college in Staten Island, every student in the freshman year is required to spend 30 hours working in community service, which is interwoven into the curriculum, explained Cass Freedland, director of Wagner’s Center for Leadership and Service. Therefore, NYMAPS is part of overall service learning at Wagner, not offered in separate classes as at CCNY. Since Wagner is a small school, taking in 500 freshmen annually and numbering about 2,000 students total (of whom 6 percent are Hispanic and 5 percent are African-American) and 100 full-time faculty, it can track the experiential learning of every student.

Wagner started experiential learning in 1997 and now has longstanding relationships with many community service organizations throughout Staten Island. Each professor decides what percentage of community service impacts the student’s grade, how many hours students spend at the site, and weaves the community service into the course. Students write journals about their experience and then return to the classroom to discuss it.

For example, Wagner students volunteer at the African Refugee Center, which helps integrate Liberian immigrants into Staten Island. Many of these
Liberian immigrants, who live in Park Hill, an area of Staten Island now known as “Little Liberia,” are victims of civil war or former child soldiers, live in housing projects, and face major problems integrating into New York City. Three Wagner students work with Liberian youth on recreational activities, tutoring and mentoring them; nine Wagner’s nursing students run a clinic there; and next semester 40 students from a history course will work at an elementary school attended by many Liberian students.

Not only do the Liberian immigrants gain, but so do Wagner’s students. “We believe that students can learn about themselves, challenge their beliefs and learn about the world through an uncomfortable experience,” Freedland said. Students learn about cultural differences and can view their community in different ways. The African Refugee Center attracts very few volunteers, so Wagner students fill the void and can play a major role in acculturating these immigrants.

Wagner College also benefits from students’ experiential learning. “Wagner College is an integral part of the Staten Island community. If we can’t give back to the community as part of our educational model, we’re not being successful,” Freedland said.

Service learning provides multiple benefits for all participants. Hefferman says it furnishes “enriched learning experiences for students that go beyond finals and textbooks and offers career development and personal growth. For the faculty, it offers exposure to the community different from the academic environment. The college gains community-building through the joint program, and the nonprofit gains idea power.”

---

**Scholars’ Corner**

I grew up a young *mexicano* in a Southern California barrio, and with the eventual encouragement and support of my parents, I pursued higher education as a means to “get out” of the neighborhood. But the road I traveled was not a direct route to academia. Years after dropping out of high school, I initiated GED studies and completed them in 1997, whereupon I became the first in my family to pursue higher education. I labored through community college without the benefit of extensive familial, administrative, faculty or peer support systems. Defying odds, I persevered and graduated with honors from both Chaffey Community College in 2000 and Pitzer College in 2002 with a B.A. in Chicano psychology.

Upon earning my B.A., I planned to pursue a doctorate in clinical psychology, but fate intervened, and I chose to pursue a Ph.D. in sociology at the University of California-Riverside, where I have recently completed seven years of graduate work. In general, my life experience has provided me with ready access to the Latino community and with insights not evident to outsiders, serving me well in my research. That is, my firsthand experience with gang members and working as a landscaper alongside my father and his Latino immigrant laborers laid the groundwork for my research.

Subsequently, my areas of specialization are criminology and race and class inequality, with research foci on immigration and crime, social movements and the mental health of street gangs and day laborers.

My interest in mental health qualified me for the American Sociological Association Minority Fellowship, equipping me with necessary tools to successfully tackle graduate school while providing an array of academic mentors nationwide. Having cycled off the fellowship in 2007, I sought ways to advance my academic vitae. When I applied for the American Association of Hispanics in Higher Education (AAHHE) graduate fellowship, I sought to garner support and advisement as I entered the job market searching for a tenure-track faculty position. The support I received from the junior faculty fellows at the recent AAHHE conference in San Antonio, Texas, was exceptional, especially as it related to fostering my professional image, vitae development and pertinent job search information.

During the next year, I will be embarking upon a doctoral fellowship at the University of Texas-Arlington in the criminology department. This is an indispensable opportunity to complete my dissertation, titled “Organizing the Brown Tide: La Gran Epoca Primavera en Los Angeles, 2006, an Insider’s Perspective,” based on my participation in the Immigrant Rights Movement in L.A. My project covers the past four decades of the immigrant rights struggle, paying closer attention to the development of the 2006 mass mobilizations that many Latino scholars now reference and in which I played a key role.

My future plans are to become a professor of criminology and continue researching topics related to immigration and crime while organizing in the Immigrant Rights Movement, bridging academia with both real-world and real-time issues that unwarrantedly criminalize the undocumented community.

**By Jesse Diaz**

Doctoral Student, Sociology, University of California-Riverside, 2009 AAHHE Graduate Fellow