

Educationally Meaningful Service: The Adapted Five Critical Elements

Although the Five Critical Elements are listed in a linear format, it is our experience that these components inform each other, creating a fluid interaction throughout a service experience.

Community Voice

Community voice is essential if we are to build bridges, make change, and solve problems. It is vital that the community partner's needs and assets are central to any service experience. It is also important to remember the needs and goals of the participants. This allows for a more meaningful experience; the development of reciprocal relationships; and the likelihood that the project will "do no harm."

Education, Orientation and Training

Education (information about the social issue), orientation (overview of the agency) and training (skills needed to complete tasks) are important aspects for any community service experience. When community service is grounded in social issue education, the participants' learning is deepened and their development as active citizen leader is positively influenced. Orientation to an agency's mission/work lays the groundwork for participants to connect to the organization and perhaps become returning volunteers. Proper training supports risk management efforts and expands the participants' skill sets.

Meaningful Action

In order for service to be meaningful, community voice must be incorporated so that the work being done is valued and necessary. Participants should feel involved and useful, and the service agency must have the proper amount of resources to support the work. By engaging in meaningful action, participants experience situations which challenge their ways of knowing and allow them to expand their perspectives. Participants are educated, oriented and trained and have a sense of both the "big picture" regarding social issues as well as the skills and details to successfully accomplish the tasks set before them. Essential to meaningful action is thoughtfully processing the experience and learning from past endeavors.

Reflection

Reflection involves the intentional processing of participants' experience and the incorporation of lessons learned into future actions. Reflection should occur before, during and after the experience in order to discuss reactions, stories, feelings, and facts about the issues. A guide for effective reflection is the framework of What? (What occurred?), So What? (What does it mean?), Now What? (What does this mean for future actions?). Service-learning teaches us that reflection should be continuous, connected, challenging and contextualized.

Assessment

Assessment measures the impact of the students' learning experience and the effectiveness of the service to the community. Students should evaluate their learning experience and agencies should evaluate the effectiveness of the students' service. Assessment gives direction for improvement, growth and change.

Lorrie Brown and Caroline Huck-Watson, 2006
Adapted from the Campus Outreach Opportunity League (COOL), 1991.
and Janet Eyler and Dwight Giles, Where's the Learning in Service Learning? 1999.