Preparing Students for Service-Learning

Preparation activities will vary in according to the course and the professor’s learning goals for the service-learning project. Examples of such preparation might include the following:

**Exploring with students their own assumptions and expectations about the experience.**

What do students assume about the people with whom they will be interacting?  What do students think they know about these people?  What do students assume about their roles? About how others will react to them? What do students think they know about the organizations they will be working within?

**Helping students prepare an open-mind that is ready to observe and learn.**

Talk with students about the distinctions between simply observing as opposed to drawing conclusions or making inferences based on their experiences.  Explore various types of biases (e.g. stereotypes, one’s own personal history, values, etc.) that can lead an observer to draw erroneous conclusions. Stress the value of an open, non-judgmental attitude and acceptance of human diversity as starting points in learning from service.

**Exploring basic issues related to cultural diversity.**

Discuss ethnocentrism, culture clash, and agency culture. Students could develop an overview of the community by compiling a community profile based on census data. Such factors as median household income, percent of population with high school education, and prevalence of various demographic groups may be interesting for students to consider and help prepare them for the realities they will encounter in the community(ies). Students may also find it interesting to compare this data with that from their home counties.

**Assigning relevant reading.**

Include readings on relevant topics such as service-learning in general, the populations with whom students may be working and the types of organizations they will be partnered with.

**Exploring ethical issues.**

Consider engaging the class in framing a code of ethics for their service-learning activities. Thinking together about students’ basic responsibilities in service-learning and the values and principles that should guide behavior can aid in the preparation of students for difficult situations. This discussion can also demonstrate the importance of ethical consideration in approaching all human activities.

**Considering social justice issues.**

Considering issues related to student service areas helps students move beyond a “blaming the victim” mindset and other individual levels of explanation for social problems.  Think with students about the types of social conditions that create the need for agencies, organizations and services like those they will be serving within.  What types of social change might reduce or eliminate the need for such services in the future?

**Exploring how students can shape their own service-learning experiences.**

Discussing such basic skills as communicating with agency staff, asserting oneself appropriately, and working through problems as they arise helps to empower students to be active participants in their own experiences.

**Brainstorming the various levels and types of learning that can occur through service.**

What types of academic learning can occur? What types of skills might students develop? What types of personal growth might students experience? What will students need to do for such learning to occur?

**Informing students about your own philosophy and thoughts concerning service-learning.**

What is your rationale for including service-learning in this particular course? As students begin this intellectual journey, it will be helpful for them to hear what you hope they will encounter along the way and the destinations they might reach in their learning. While it is helpful to prepare students for what to expect, also prepare them to expect and learn from the unexpected. Including a definition of service-learning and a description of potential project(s) in your syllabus is often very helpful.

**Preparing students to receive as well as give in their experience.**

Work to instill the idea that students are working with people, communities and organizations that possess strength, wisdom, resourcefulness and resilience. Challenging students to see such strengths, and not just the obvious problems, helps to reduce the "us and them" types of thinking that can occur if students see themselves as providing a "charity" to those who are "needy".

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