Chapter 9

Experience as Textbook: Service–Learning for Career Development in the Community College

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores how experiential learning opportunities, specifically service-learning, foster career exploration, development of transferable skills, and readiness for employment and/or higher education among community college students. By drawing upon experiences leading service-learning opportunities, career development, faculty partnerships, and leadership development at urban community colleges, the authors present an approach to community college education rooted in experiential learning. The chapter proposes the use of Usher, Bryant, and Johnston’s model of learning from experience to develop students’ vocational practices and help “learners become more empowered to respond to their changing vocational environments” (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007, p. 68). These impacts are illustrated through the programs and student voices of a community college recognized for its service-learning opportunities. Colleges and corporations share responsibility to prepare citizens (Holton, 1998). Community colleges must take the lead in developing these partnerships and designing learning environments that benefit students and community, in turn creating a next-generation workforce.

INTRODUCTION

Cody visited the college’s service-learning center to request a list of volunteer opportunities in the local area. He was a non-traditional adult learner who needed late-night and weekend hours to accommodate his schedule, so the coordinator suggested a homeless shelter downtown. After a brief moment of silence, he readily agreed, sharing that he lived in the facility and would love to give back.
Jessica enrolled to pursue a computer programming degree and help her family escape a history of incarceration, but she believed there was not much chance of actually doing so. Initially prompted by a work-study requirement, she began attending every weekend service event the college sponsored. Through these experiences, Jessica obtained employment with a local corporation that funded a bachelor’s degree and helped end the cycle of poverty for her family.

Rita escaped an abusive marriage and relocated to start over. She felt lost, but also called to help other women improve their lives. At the prompting of a professor, she began volunteering with a legal aid group committed to protecting women and children. Through her service and political science studies, she obtained an internship with the mayor of a major city and eventual admission to law school.

Carlos’s high school teachers praised his science abilities and encouraged a career in medicine. As the first in his family to attend college, Carlos wanted to pursue nursing. His parents disapproved of male nurses for cultural reasons and stopped supporting his education. He scheduled the course-required service experience at a local hospital, where he met successful men with nursing careers and learned more about the responsibilities of his desired profession.

Every day, thousands of community college students serve their community in food banks, hospitals, public housing projects, homeless shelters, elementary schools, and civic organizations. They serve to complete course requirements, earn scholarships, and understand prospective professions. Many are first generation students with little knowledge of higher education institutions. Others are unprepared to succeed at baccalaureate institutions and gain a stronger sense of academic engagement through their service. Countless community college students are recipients of the services at the very organizations they provide service. They serve to repay perceived debts, learn more about the organization’s inner-workings, and gain the knowledge and experience necessary to change the system. They are students, but the vast majority are also employees in the community, either working full- or part-time to finance their education. Through service-learning opportunities connected to community colleges, these students impact their surroundings while gaining the academic and career experience necessary to significantly impact community organizations, higher education institutions, and corporations.

Higher education institutions continue their commitment to produce an educated and socially responsible citizenry as described by Dewey (1938). As the global workforce becomes increasingly connected, colleges face responsibility not only to prepare students academically, but also socially and civically for a career without boundaries (Sax & Astin, 1998). Community college students, who hold a median age of 29 years old, work full time, and attend school on a part-time basis, differ from traditional college students at four-year institutions (AACE, 2014). Whether they are of nontraditional student status or not, community college students must process their multitude of experiences into reflective, growth-oriented lessons that further their academic, professional, and personal identity development. These institutions have turned to experiential learning opportunities to provide career exploration, skill development, and application of classroom learning to real world settings. Specifically, “service learning combines community service with classroom instruction, focusing on critical, reflective thinking as well as personal and civic responsibility. Service learning programs involve students in activities that address local needs while developing their academic skills and commitment to their community” (AACC, 2014). Over two-thirds of all community colleges offer or require service-learning as part of a holistic curriculum (AACC, 2014). In 2012, community college students contributed $9.7 billion worth of time and service to their communities through these nontraditional learning opportunities (Campus Compact, 2012). These experiences shape the transferable skill sets of students, allow them to explore their local and global communities, and support the community agencies and corporations connected to learning institutions.