Chapter 17

High-Impact Practices: Integrating the First-Year Experience with Service-Learning and Study Abroad

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores how combining carefully selected high-impact educational practices in the critical first-year of college can benefit students, particularly traditionally underserved student populations, and promote cultural sensitivity and communication with a wider campus audience than is typically available to the traditional college freshmen. The First Year Experience Study Abroad (FYESA) program combines three high-impact educational experiences; freshman seminar, service-learning, and global learning, in one innovative program targeting freshman students in their second semester. The purpose of the program is to provide students with an extension of the Freshman Seminar through their entire first-year, coupled with strategies for increasing diversity awareness and sensitivity in the classroom and abroad by engaging in experiential learning in the form of service-learning. As part of the program, freshman students will plan a service-learning project in the host country over the spring semester and then deliver the project during the travel abroad portion of the course.

INTRODUCTION

Two critical components to the health of a university are found in its enrollment numbers and retention rates. While enrollment of first-year students remains steady at most colleges and universities, graduation rates at four-and six-years offer a dismal picture. In a ten-year period from 1998 to 2008, six-year graduation rates stood at almost 56 percent in the United States (Finley & McNair, 2013; Tough, 2014). Graduation rates for students from historically underserved populations are even lower (Duncheon & Tierney, 2014). Future enrollment projections indicate that more students will be entering their first year of college under-prepared (Kelly, 2014), making the likeli-
hood of the students’ success, as defined by degree completion, even more doubtful. Institutions of higher learning are increasingly being called on to develop programs that help support our students and increase retention and graduation rates.

Many colleges and universities are turning to educational practices that enhance student engagement and serve to promote student achievement and success (National Survey of Student Engagement, Annual Report, 2007). A host of best practices in the field of higher education have demonstrated track records in engaging students, inside and outside of the traditional college classroom setting. In 2007, the National Leadership for Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP) identified ten innovative practices in higher education in their report, *College Learning for the New Global Century*. These high-impact educational practices (HIPs) include varied, rich experiences, such as first-year seminars, common intellectual experiences, writing-intensive courses, collaborative assignments and projects, internships, learning communities, undergraduate research, capstone experiences, diversity/global learning, and service-learning.

Research on these high impact educational practices reliably demonstrates the benefits of such experiences (Kinzie, 2012). According to the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), students who participate in specific high impact practices evince real gains in deep approaches to learning (NSSE, 2013). The cumulative effect on students’ self-rated perception of learning is even more pronounced when students participate in 3 or more of these HIPs over the course of their undergraduate career (NSSE, 2013).

There are several characteristics that make these high impact educational experiences particularly effective. As Kuh (2010) outlined, participation in many of these practices essentially demands that students devote more time and energy to tasks that strengthen their commitment to their academics. Many of the high impact practices require that students interact more with peers and their instructors, often outside the traditional classroom setting and beyond the traditional one-semester course. The first-year experience on many college campuses, for instance, often pair enthusiastic instructors with peer mentors to engage college freshmen in this critical first academic course. Several of the practices, such as service learning, global learning, and internships, encourage students to interact and engage with those who offer different cultural, family, religious, and racial/ethnic backgrounds. This exposure to ‘otherness’ challenges some students’ preconceived notions and understanding of the world and, when set in an academic context, challenges students to think in new ways.

There has been a call for colleges and universities to develop successful campus programs that incorporate these high impact educational practices in innovative ways that reflect an institution’s culture and strategic objectives (Brownell & Swaner, 2009). But, this call extends well beyond the university walls. Increasingly, employers in local communities clearly state their desire to employ a workforce that is equipped with a series of specific skills and is able to apply knowledge in novel situations (Hart Research Associates, 2013). Many, if not all, of these valued skills can be developed and practiced in well-designed programs that incorporate high impact educational practices to allow students to practice ethical decision-making in applied settings, develop intercultural skills in varied settings, and demonstrate a capacity for experiencing new ways of learning. Employers also cite community involvement as an important characteristic in potential employees, with the recognition that it is vital to give back to those communities where we work and live. When done correctly, students, the institution, the greater college campus, and the larger surrounding community can all benefit from the creation of new and innovative programs at the college level.

This chapter will explore how combining carefully selected high impact educational practices in the critical first year of college can benefit

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