TURNING SERVICE INTO LEARNING: HELPING STUDENTS GET THE MOST OUT OF THEIR SERVICE EXPERIENCE

How students learn from this experience

There are countless benefits that can result for students, community, and community partners when service learning is successful. To name just a few, students learn the value of service and their ability to make a difference, classroom learning is enhanced, they become lifelong volunteers, and they are better prepared to lead lives of engaged, democratic citizenship. Agencies and schools gain invaluable people-power, fresh ideas and energy, and client needs are met. Our communities gain a more involved, engaged citizenry who are more informed and more likely to work collaboratively to solve community problems.

However, we also know that community service in and of itself won't necessarily result in student learning or the benefits that we mentioned above. In fact, without conscious attention to the issues addressed and the learning strategies employed when engaging in service learning, students merely engaging in service may come away as civically disengaged as they were when they started participating in service learning. As John Dewey (1938) understood it, the "discipline of experience" by itself may even be "miseducative," and therefore must always be subjected "to the tests of intelligent development and directions."

Reflection - the key to helping students gain the most from their service learning experience.

In order for your agency/school to most effectively foster student learning, reflection activities should be included in the service experience. Reflection means the process of thinking about what we do and processing it to draw meaning from our experiences. Reflection is an intentional endeavor to discover specific connections between something we do and the consequences which result. Reflection translates experiences into knowledge.

In your role as a community partner supervisor, it is essential that you help students reflect on their experiences - in short, help them think critically about what they are doing, why it is important, and what it means. The following are a few examples of how you can help students reflect:
Reflection Activities for Community Partner Supervisors

1. **Thorough orientation** – The orientation should be comprehensive, informing the student about your agency's/school's mission, goals and the work you do in the community. Talk to them about why they have chosen your site and what interests them about it, etc.

2. **Processing meetings** – Ask students open-ended questions about their experiences (e.g., What are you learning? What has surprised you? What can we do to solve this societal problem?)

3. **Critical thinking questions** – Ask students questions that challenge them to explore and think critically about your agency/school and the societal issues it addresses. Ask them to find answers to these questions during the course of their service and process that they discover with them periodically. (Why can't children read? Why does homelessness exist?) Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of a career in this field.