

**An Innovative Example of Service-Learning in Agricultural Education**

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### **Introduction**

The concept of service-learning can be traced back to the philosophical underpinnings of works composed by historic figures such as John Dewey and Aristotle (Roberts & Edwards, 2015). Despite the long-history of service-learning as a method to displace traditional education, in practice, service-learning still remains an emerging pedagogical technique in the typical public institution (Glickman & Thompson, 2011). Due to the gravitation of career and technical education towards hands-on work experience, the development of life-skills, and career-readiness, service-learning has been supported by agricultural education. In fact, many studies have found that service-learning is a preferred pedagogical technique in agricultural education (Mattingly & Morgan 2001; Slavkin & Sebastain, 2013; Webster & Hoover, 2006). According to Roberts and Edwards (2015), large disagreements regarding the pedagogical worthiness of service-learning continue in education, as community service is mistaken for true service learning. Service-learning includes community action in a form that has an academic purpose related to course content. Furthermore, it must provide students with time to reflect on what they have learned during those experiences (Franta, 1994). Therefore, it is essential that models of effective service learning activities are recognized and discussed in order to clearly identify the merit of service-learning in agricultural education. The authors of this innovative idea poster abstract believe to have exemplified a service-learning experience that can be used as a model for service-learning in our discipline.

### **How it works/Methodology**

The service-learning experience was a week-long, overnight, work experience for junior and senior level high school students enrolled in agricultural construction and mechanics courses. This experience was done each year, for a three-year span, at a state-owned living campus for children with disabilities. Before each yearly experience, meetings with the childrens' campus administrators were conducted to identify specific construction related projects. Typical projects represented the equivalent of contracted work such as pouring concrete foundations and sidewalks, roofing, electrical wiring, building construction, and installing windows, siding, drywall, and gutters. For each yearly experience, full collaboration with campus administrators ensured a daily outline of trade industry-specific projects to be completed. In further collaboration, volunteers were sought and found who held careers in the trades. Examples of careers that volunteer tradesmen held included masonry professionals, electricians, roofing professionals, structural engineers, general laborers, and building contractors. Junior and senior high school students who were enrolled in upper level agricultural construction and mechanics classes who demonstrated interest in the construction trades had the opportunity to attend. Each year, around 25 students attended the service-learning trip. Students identified areas of career interest and they were pre-paired with industry experts for the week who held positions in that field.

The first morning of the work week all participants, including industry volunteers, met for a large breakfast to get to know each other. Following the breakfast, all participants traveled to the childrens' campus and unpacked bags and tools for the week. Shortly after, a thorough agenda

was discussed for the week. Students and industry-paired experts started working on projects shortly after. Each day of the work experience was treated as a typical work day for an individual in the trades. Students dressed and acted as they were members at a job site. Work began at 7 AM and went up until a group lunch. Following lunch, work resumed until job sites were at a stopping place, which was usually around 5 to 6 PM. A group dinner, social activity, and time to relax were provided after. Before bed, students were given a reflection prompt in which they wrote in a journal about their experiences that day and what they learned. This cycle continued the rest of the week.

### **Results/Implications**

At the end of the week students were understandably exhausted, but were extremely proud of their work and the friends they made during the experience. Many students proclaimed that they learned more from this experience than any other they had in school. Students who were juniors couldn't wait until the following year's "work camp". Student journals reflected gains in technical skills and confirmations of a future career choice. Students were excited to apply what they learned in agricultural coursework to an actual job site under the guidance of a real-world professional. Journals also reflected students' appreciation for service. They were proud to help out a local community and children who were in need. At least once during each yearly trip, a special social event (cookout, birdhouse making, dodge ball game, etc.) was held with the children who were residents of the campus. Students got to know these individuals and were enlighten by getting to know children who are different and less fortunate than themselves. Lastly, many students wrote about the relationship they developed with their mentor in the trades. Many students remain in contact with these individuals today.

### **Future Plans**

It is expected that the agricultural education program will continue this service-learning experience with the continued support of the childrens' campus and industry volunteers. This service-learning program continues to grow in size as new industry volunteers are recruited and past volunteers return. Expansion of this program is in the works. Projects that lie outside of typical construction and mechanics could be included. For example, students who are interested in landscaping and horticulture could be paired with industry experts from these trades to develop landscapes for the campus. Furthermore, collaboration between other CTE programs such as videography is being discussed to make a mock television show starring students who would explain to viewers how to do construction and home repair.

### **Resources Needed**

This service-learning program would not be successful without the abundance of resource needed. The most important resource is a collaborating partner such as the childrens' campus in this example. This program is fortunate in that all building expenses were paid for by the campus. Industry partners who volunteer their time, work, and energy, as well as the tools they bring to the job site, is another component that makes this program successful. A high ratio of industry experts to students, increases the supervision and individual attention each student receives.

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