

The \$100 Solution: A Service-Learning Project for Students Enrolled in an Undergraduate Agricultural Leadership Course

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Introduction

Due to the nature and diversity of the discipline, secondary and post-secondary instructors of agriculture often use a variety of teaching methods and instructional strategies within their courses (Talbert et al., 2022). Some of the most commonly applied methods in agricultural education include lectures, demonstrations, guest speakers, field trips, discussions, case studies, inquiry-based instruction, and experiential learning activities (Blackburn & Stair, 2022). One form of experiential learning frequently used, known as service-learning, was developed as a means to intertwine the principles of civic engagement and the educational process (Binard & Leavitt, 2000). While not necessarily a new idea, service-learning as a teaching method continues to evolve and is increasingly being implemented in our agricultural education programs (Roberts & Edwards, 2015).

Roberts et al. (2019) defined the service-learning method as a “form of reciprocity in which students extend classroom learning into society to resolve communal problems while also accruing distinct benefits for all members” (p. 37). Further, researchers have reported many benefits to using this method of instruction such as the development of teamwork, leadership, and communication skills in their students (Lemons & Strong, 2016, Meyers et al., 2014; Robinson & Torres, 2007). While there are many advantages of using this method of instruction, one disadvantage has been the lack of a clear instructional framework for educators to use in planning, implementing, and evaluating their service-learning projects. This was the case until we learned about the \$100 Solution service-learning project model.

How it Works

The \$100 Solution project utilizes course learning objectives combined with the five principles of service-learning to answer a central question for students: with a \$100 bill, what can you do to enhance the quality of life for others? The \$100 Solution teaches students to ask what they can do rather than self-determining the needs of others. Further, it demonstrates that many social problems exist that can be solved with small amounts of money, or rather, by even thinking beyond monetary solutions to make a difference in their communities.

The \$100 Solution model incorporates the following five principles of service-learning: partnership, reciprocity, capacity building, sustainability, and reflection (English, 2014). English (2014) denoted both the students and community partner should work closely together to determine the needs and assets of the organization, plan and implement solutions, and evaluate efforts. Further, the students involved, and community partner should both benefit from the chosen service-learning activity. While this will look different for each project, the ultimate goal is for each party to learn and grow personally and professionally (Jacoby, 2003). Regarding capacity building, English (2014) emphasized helping the community partner learn and become self-sufficient so the project can continue beyond the time the students are involved. Related to self-sufficiency, the project should also be sustainable with a lasting impact (English, 2014). Finally, unlike basic volunteerism, a continued oral and/or written reflection component should be used as a tool for awareness, deeper understanding, analysis, and interpretation in order to transform the experiences into meaningful learning for the students (English, 2014).

At our institution, the \$100 Solution project is incorporated into our AGR 391 Team & Organizational Leadership, Communication, and Change course taught each spring semester. This is a required course for all students majoring in Agricultural Teacher Education and Agricultural Communication and Leadership and is offered as an elective for all other agriculture majors. At the beginning of the semester, the students in the course are divided into groups of 4-6 students depending on class enrollment. Each group then identifies a community partner in which to volunteer their time and work with. During the time volunteering, the group identifies a specific need of the organization or agency and works with them to find a sustainable solution for their problem. The students will then develop a proposal that incorporates the five principles of service-learning and make a presentation to the class. If their proposal is approved, their group is awarded \$100 which is used to fund supplies and materials for their project. The students then implement their project throughout the semester. Finally at the end of the semester, each student completes a written reflection assignment, and the group collectively creates a poster presentation, which is then presented during an open house during one of the final class sessions.

Results and Implications

This course has been offered for six semesters at Illinois State University and during that time, nearly 100 students have partnered with 14 different community organizations. Community partners have included local municipalities, assisted living centers, museums, and a food insecure family, just to name a few. One semester, a student team partnered with the Town of Normal, the Little Library company, and several local libraries to provide the community easier access to books, especially for younger children. Throughout the project the team had to overcome numerous issues including obtaining permission to place the little library along a popular local recreation trail, building the actual little library, and finding libraires and individuals to donate books to stock the library. Throughout this process the students were guided by the five principles of service-learning discussed above and applied leadership, communication, and change theories discussed in the course. In reflecting on the experience, one student stated, "I learned not only about working with others, but also about myself. I learned how to be a better teammate, as well as how to keep a level head. I see this project as something to be proud of, as when we first started it seemed an impossible, gargantuan task, but slowly piece by piece we were able to overcome."

Future Plans and Advice to Others

We plan to continue to utilize this service-learning framework during future offerings of our AGR 391 Team & Organizational Leadership, Communication, and Change course. When implementing this project, it is critical to provide the student teams with adequate guidance and resources to help them identify potential community partners and to plan and implement their projects without being overly prescriptive. We recommend pushing students to first identify a partner that aligns with their interests and then, collaboratively, identify a problem or issue they face and work to find a solution.

Costs and Resources Needed

Beyond the \$100 budget for each team, the only other direct costs associated with this project have been the printing of posters for the final presentation. We have been lucky that our department alumni association has been willing to support this course project each year. Campus offices that support service learning, civic engagement, and sustainability could all be a useful resource to fund project ideas.

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