

Promoting Lifelong Leadership in Secondary Agricultural Students through Service-Learning Projects

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Introduction

The National FFA Organization describes a service-learning project (SLP) as a student-initiated experience which provides a service to a community need and engages students within the AFNR skill framework (The National Council of Agricultural Education, 2018). In SLPs, students find a need, find out more about the problem, create a plan for addressing the need, act on it, then summarize/reflect upon their experiences (Oklahoma State University Extension, n.d.). Unlike community service alone, SLPs require students to invest greater time and cognitive thought (SAE for All, n.d.). Service learning can increase students' experienced value in a school and/or community, and has shown to better equip adolescents with social and emotional skills, but are present in only a third of United States public schools (Youth.gov, n.d.). This poster describes a semester-long project designed for twelfth graders in a rural Missouri Agricultural Leadership course to plan, implement, reflect, and share results of their own service-learning projects.

How it Works

“Service learning is a process that takes time and intentional planning” (Oklahoma State University Extension, n.d., p.1). Six weeks of prep work and conversation, and months of prior thought, went into developing the semester-long experience in a rural Missouri high school agricultural leadership course. First, students performed a ‘walk the walls’ activity to gauge their perceptions of leadership needs in the community. Once the basis of need for leaders and change was established, the teacher introduced students to the concept of service-learning projects. At this point (Weeks 1-2), examples of potential projects were shared, along with due dates and check points for the semester. After the initial introduction, students carried out a community needs assessment (CNA) using the chart provided by the National Council for Agricultural Education (2018). Students worked through examples of needs at the international, national, state, and local levels. The teacher asked students to select some of the needs addressed and evaluate the ‘why’ and ‘what can be done’ (The National Council for Agricultural Education, 2018). During Week 3, the teacher defined stakeholders and SMART goals. Students practiced creating goals and identifying stakeholders in teacher-designed case studies.

Throughout Weeks 4 and 5, students used their new knowledge to propose their SLP. Proposals identified the issue/need, why it mattered to the student, how the student planned to address it, potential stakeholders, three SMART goals, and a timeline. After the teacher provided feedback and approval, students moved to creating an action plan in Week 6. Plans asked students to specify project goals, roles, tools/materials needed, stakeholders, how to measure impact, and their project timeline. By asking students to create a more detailed timeline, the initiative was handed over to them. The next checkpoint (Week 9) asked for a summary of

progress, challenges, and any changes needed on their timeline. The teacher reminded students each class period to be working on their SLPs, but had no additional written checkpoints. The semester concluded with final presentations, where each student discussed data collected (pictures, costs, hour logged, etc.), impact of project, challenges, and recommendations for the future. Student presentations were given in front of their peers, various community members/stakeholders, school administrators, and the agriculture teacher. Finally, students wrote a one-page reflection paper over their SLP.

Results and Implications

Eight students enrolled in the course completed seven different service-learning projects. Students' projects covered a wide range of needs: food insecurity, agricultural literacy, mental health, interpersonal relationship building, beautification, and elder care. Students averaged 10.5 hours of work outside of school time. Twelve different stakeholders were engaged and approximately 200 community members were impacted by students' projects.

At the time of the mid-point check-in (Week 9), only one of the eight students shared they were on track with the timeline they had created. The other students explained they were struggling to set dates with stakeholders, juggling other commitments, and/or had not anticipated the time needed to work on the project. This anecdotal evidence suggests students may require additional support in creating and meeting realistic and attainable goals. Conducting service-learning projects in the classroom requires extensive monitoring and responsiveness from the teacher.

Future Plans/Advice to Others

As service-learning projects continue in our agricultural leadership classroom, we will be making some modifications and improvements. Since this is a new concept for students, additional structure and scaffolding is required, especially concerning engaging stakeholders and creating goals. In the future, we plan to design a database of stakeholders and their information for future students to draw from for executing future projects. Additionally, we will implement check points at weeks twelve and fifteen to encourage more proactive work and sticking to student-generated timelines.

Cost/Resources Needed

The cost for a secondary or post-secondary classroom to implement service learning projects with their students is little to none. Though monetary cost is non-existent, prior experience, community connections, and the ability to make adolescents think through community/group engagement is invaluable. Physical and digital resources are available through the National FFA Organization/*SAE for All*, various University Extension programs, and nationwide community groups.

References

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