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Inclusive Service Learning: Accessibility and Diversity

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Abstract

This session focuses on how to make service learning programs more inclusive and accessible for all community college students. Learn how accessibility can provide a framework for the development of service learning programs and possibly reduce barriers to engagement for students with disabilities. Two community colleges will share their experiences as part of the American Association of Community Colleges' (AACCC)

Project Reach: Service Inclusion for Community College Students, a national initiative which focuses on the development of service learning programs that are accessible to community college students with disabilities and aims to increase students' awareness of career opportunities. Project Reach was developed with support from the Corporation for National and Community Service.

Session Goals:

- To outline the difference between universal design and individual accommodation and how they impact service learning
- To share ideas for working with community partners, faculty, and students in the design of accessible service learning opportunities that are appealing to all students
- To share ideas for providing support for faculty, community partners, and students with disabilities engaged in service learning
- To share preliminary project results from two colleges participating in AACCC's Project Reach initiative

Background

Students of all ages benefit from teaching and learning methodologies that emphasize hands-on experience, real world application, skill transfer, and self-reflection. Service learning is one teaching tool that unites all of these desirable pedagogical traits.

Participating in service learning enhances students' understanding of course content and core competencies, increases their awareness of community needs, and encourages an appreciation for the importance of civic responsibility. Service learning opportunities developed with an understanding of universal design make these valuable experiences available to students with disabilities without sacrificing academic rigor or diminishing expectations.

In AACC's Project Reach, the participating community colleges are required to develop inclusive service learning opportunities on their campuses. In order to accomplish this task, community college service learning coordinators, service learning faculty, community partners, and disability support service staff must engage in deliberate discussions on the accessibility and appeal of service learning to students with disabilities.

Building an Accessible Service Learning Program

Community colleges are a diverse and vibrant community. Building a service learning program that fully engages this community requires input from staff members well versed in working with students with disabilities. The benefits of designing an accessible service learning program are not limited to students with disabilities. Accessibility provides a framework for the inclusion of students with unique backgrounds, learning styles, life experiences, and abilities.

Disability support service (DSS) staff should be key members of service learning advisory committees and should engage fully in committee meetings. In fact, for students with disabilities to participate successfully in service learning programs, it is imperative that a DSS representative be involved in discussions about service learning. DSS staff have a unique understanding of the impact of particular disabilities on academic and social situations. Due to their experiences with accommodation needs and the concept of universal design, they can assess whether a particular placement site is

accessible to all students. DSS staff can expand the list of community partners, drawing on their own connections to service providers in the local community who can advise or assist with necessary accommodations or serve as new placement sites for service learning activities. They also can train service learning faculty, staff, and community partners on accessibility issues. In their role as advisor or counselor to students with disabilities, DSS staff can play an important role in recruiting students with disabilities to participate in service learning.

Service learning can empower community college students with disabilities by providing an opportunity for them to share their abilities to help meet a community need. For some students, a service learning project may be the first academic experience that focuses on their abilities – not their disabilities. A positive service learning experience can enhance the self-esteem of any student. For students struggling with physical, emotional, mental, or social challenges, service learning can alter how they see themselves and their future in the workforce. Participating in service learning provides opportunities for students to explore their independence and employability skills - which are important lessons for students with, and without, disabilities.

Conclusion

Because service learning is an educational tool that strengthens communities and promotes understanding of individual and community needs, it should be an inclusive – not exclusive – exercise. Service learning programs benefit when all stakeholders, including faculty, staff, students, and community partners, embrace the value of an accessible program. Reaching out to students with disabilities by including disability support staff in discussions about service learning helps to ensure that this powerful teaching and learning experience is accessible to all.