

## **SERVING BABY BOOMERS THROUGH GIS AT GATEWAY COMMUNITY COLLEGE**

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### **INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND**

GateWay Community College (GWCC), one of the Maricopa County Community Colleges, is located in Phoenix, Arizona. GWCC offers more than 100 degree and certificate programs in the areas of Business and Information Technology, Nursing, Allied Health, Industrial Technology, and University Transfer in education and social work. The college is affordable and accessible, with strong ties with local business and industries.

GateWay is an urban campus located in the heart of Phoenix, the nation's fifth largest and fastest growing city among the nation's ten largest cities. Centrally located near the airport and the intersection of several major freeways, the college draws students from all over the metropolitan area. The college's enrollment and diversity is more a reflection of the general population of Phoenix than of a specific area in the city. GWCC's diverse student population comes from a wide variety of social, economic, ethnic, and demographic backgrounds. Nearly one-third of its 7,800 students are both low-income and first-generation students, who face considerable challenges associated with their family's limited success with formal education. Minority students make up 51% of the college.

### **GATEWAY COMMUNITY COLLEGE'S ASSETS PROJECT**

GateWay is creating a service learning project that will target re-careering baby boomers, getting them involved in community service and civic engagement options as they consider, or become involved in, midlife career transitions. GateWay faculty and administrators involved in this boomer-focused project, see service learning as an important strategy for connecting disadvantaged or re-careering boomers with opportunities in the workplace and the nonprofit sector. Service learning opportunities can give boomers who are enrolled in a community college class or workshop the opportunity to transition their skills to appropriately support the nonprofit environment. Boomers will have the opportunity to augment and reframe their existing skills while doing service learning.

Nonprofit organizations have many needs for skilled volunteers, effective planning, management and coordination strategies, accounting support, and specific skills in the arts and sciences. However, the nonprofit sector is different from the for-profit sector in many ways. Often a nonprofit role requires workplace skills to be used in a way that may be new to the boomer. Currently, systems that connect nonprofits seeking senior leaders with talented people are largely non-existent.

To create a method for matching boomers with meaningful opportunities in the areas of healthcare, education, and social services, GateWay Community College is developing a GIS (Geographic Information System) map of community partners that can be used when placing boomers/students at a volunteer service site. This map will support transitioning boomers in a

variety of ways. The GIS map of community partners is based on a set of updatable databases reflecting community partnerships on many levels – GateWay’s nonprofit organization (NPO) partners, governmental agencies (city/state/federal), healthcare organizations, and schools are a large part of the database. Software and map maintenance will be housed in the Workforce Transition Center, as will the paperwork documenting risk management and insurance coverage for boomer volunteers. The actual map will ultimately be accessed through GateWay’s website, when the newer version of ArcView GIS software is available for purchase and installed next year.

Because the GIS map tool offers visual search capacity by neighborhood, the boomer can view his or her own neighborhood and note which agencies are present. Additionally, data from agencies can give an overview of areas of need, and indicate information about available work environments. Hopefully, this will help boomers visualize and plan for volunteer experiences that may be useful and meaningful for them. The map will be searchable by topic, such as “health care” or “elementary education”.

If, for example, participation in an educational program is necessary to qualify a boomer to transition into a new role, a service activity can be coordinated with any service learning activities that are required in the classes they might take. In this way, GateWay Community College and local partners – both for-profit and nonprofit entities – can work as a team, coordinating roles in helping boomers transition from primary careers through retirement and into positions where each person is supported in dignity and inspired to contribute his or her talents as a legacy to a better, more enlightened society.

To assist GWCC in implementing this project, through its proposal for a Career Transition Center, in the spring of 2007, GWCC service learning students are helping to implement a survey of boomers in the Phoenix area to find out whether there is an expressed need for a Career Transition Center at GWCC. To do this, students are put in touch with their local neighborhood associations, and asked to disseminate questionnaires to baby boomers through the social networks of the neighborhood associations. This project will support students in becoming more aware of their neighborhood associations, and encourage more communication with and among boomers about their career transition needs at midlife. These questionnaires are expected to provide much needed information that can clarify some career transition needs of boomers within the area GWCC serves.

## **ASSETS’ SUCCESSES AND CHALLENGES DURING THE FIRST YEAR**

Our first year of the *Accent on Student Success: Engaged Together in Service* (ASSETS) project has yielded both successes and challenges. Our successes have arisen through implementation of our original vision of creating a map of neighborhoods. That original idea of connecting ‘people’ visually with ‘place’ is a sound one, and we were able to find technical assistance that allowed us to implement the visual map component. What helped us to do a good job of implementing our vision was to place no barriers on what we set out to do. We brainstormed incessantly with people in different roles and with differing points of view. We started with the question, “What would a map be like if we included *everything*?” The answer, of course, was “too big!” and by the

time we realized what “too big” meant, we had more or less developed a consensus of what we wanted to remove from the map. If we had started out saying to ourselves, “We can’t do this; we can’t do that,” the project would have been created through a totally different set of conversations that would not have allowed us to be as creative.

The primary challenge in creating the map project has been the issue of insurance. Phoenix has more than 400 grassroots neighborhood associations, and not all of them are insured. We are currently thinking with the City of Phoenix about how this issue will be handled. Our existing partner neighborhood associations do have insurance. However, if we expand along the concept of working with neighborhoods, the issue will emerge on its own. One way to deal with these issues is that since neighborhood organizations often have overlapping boundaries, we can choose among several in many cases, and we can find a way to know the insurance status of a neighborhood organization so that we choose to partner with insured organizations. Another strategy would be to encourage the City governments to partner with us in supporting our students’ participation in neighborhood associations.

Another set of challenges and successes regards the nature of the service learning activities of our existing students in our present classes. The success of service learning at GWCC has been based on the flexibility of being able to support individual student interests and project choices. This year, for example, we have had projects with Habitat for Humanity, hospice, tutoring, coaching, book drives, and so forth. Finding a way to focus on boomer-related projects has proven to be a challenge. Being able to partner with the GWCC Career Center, helping them to implement their survey of boomer midlife career transition needs has been a necessary assist in providing us with a way to focus activity and reflection on boomers, as well as neighborhood and multigenerational issues. We have come to realize that a ‘theme’ comes at the cost of a certain lack of diversity of choice. However, service learning at GWCC can adjust to this necessity, and plans to brainstorm boomer-related service alternatives for next year are already emerging.

## **SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

The boomer-focused service learning ASSETS project, assisted by GIS maps focusing on neighborhoods and service opportunities in healthcare, education, and social services, is an appropriate challenge to GateWay Community College in many ways. Serving a widely dispersed, predominantly first-generation and minority student body who are largely targeted toward careers in healthcare, industry, and social services, there is a fairly good, if not perfect, match between authentic student need and the scope of the project. We have had good success with technology, and have developed a way to actively engage service learning students in the early implementation stages of this project. Although not without challenges, this project has managed to position itself well to meet the needs of both existing service learning students, and future students who may be coming to GateWay Community College seeking assistance with midlife career transition issues.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR:**

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