

## SERVING THE COMMUNITY AT KINGSBOROUGH COMMUNITY COLLEGE

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### **BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION**

Located in Brooklyn, New York, Kingsborough Community College resides in the southeastern corner of the borough. Kingsborough serves a highly diverse student population, representing eighty different countries. The college seeks to serve many who are poor and economically disadvantaged. A significant number of students face severe financial obstacles to completing their education. Kingsborough serves a remarkably wide age range among both traditional and non-traditional students. While over half of degree-seeking students are under 22 years of age, significant numbers are between the ages of 23 and 45. Many Kingsborough students are the first in their families to attend college, and they often must cope with work, family responsibilities, and a long commute to campus.

Coney Island. Often referred to as the “College by the Sea,” Kingsborough is positioned on a tranquil beach overlooking the Atlantic Ocean, Sheepshead Bay, and Jamaica Bay. Although the college is located in an affluent enclave, a few short blocks away lies Coney Island, an inner city neighborhood where residents of high rise public housing live in close proximity to residents of new condo developments. Coney Island, once a major resort and home of Astroland Amusement Park, reached its peak in the early 20th century. It declined in popularity after World War II and endured years of neglect. Although in recent years the area has been revitalized, the community has been victim to urban blight and depression. As the only community college in Brooklyn, Kingsborough’s mission reflects a commitment to serving the needs of its neighboring community, and the Coney Island community openly welcomed Kingsborough students.

Kingsborough service learners readily “adopted” the residents of Coney Island, and in the program’s introductory semester, they have been working primarily with young children living in public housing in Coney Island. The service learners have provided mentoring, homework help, arts and crafts classes, rap sessions, and recreational activities. In the second semester expansion, new courses offering the option of service learning allowed for students to participate in service activities at a variety of different community agencies. In addition to continuing activities at several local after- school programs, the service-learners extended their service to the elderly population, engaging in oral history projects in two local nursing homes. Eager to address the complex issue of domestic violence and the ravages that accompany this complex issue, one class of service learning students created a student-run domestic violence education and prevention program. They presented workshops on campus, in local public schools, at other colleges, city-wide health fairs, and local community organizations, and over the Internet through the use of a MySpace web page.

## EVOLUTION OF THE KINGSBOROUGH SERVICE LEARNING MODEL

Although the college was poised for the introduction of service learning as a pedagogy that would provide an opportunity to enhance Kingsborough's already strong involvement in the community, the challenge lay in setting up an infrastructure that would allow service learning to succeed and flourish. Research was conducted on a myriad of service learning national models and ultimately the examination of best practices led to the understanding that each institution must establish its own unique model, one that is compatible with its unique culture, administration, and resources. Kingsborough's model is grounded in a strong collaboration among the lead faculty members, a student affairs practitioner who serves as the service learning project director, and a service learning coordinator. This team approach, one in which the responsibilities of each member of the team are clearly delineated, has proven to be highly successful.

*The Service Learning Team.* The two faculty co-coordinators integrated service learning into their courses, as they simultaneously began the process of introducing service learning to other faculty and infusing service learning into the fabric of Kingsborough pedagogy. The Kingsborough Center for Teaching and Learning, a pre-existing program that offers a wide range of activities to enhance faculty development, became the principle venue for disseminating information about service learning to the faculty. Several steps have been taken in order to integrate service learning into the culture of the college. The tasks of developing community partnerships, handling the logistics of student placements, and developing service learning agreements were delegated to the service learning coordinator. The project director, along with the service learning coordinator, assumed the major responsibility for community outreach and partnership development. This collaborative infrastructure is a primary reason for the successful implementation of Kingsborough's first year of service learning. A critically important aspect of successful service learning programs is the systemic development of community partners who are viewed as co-educators in the learning process and who will provide direct supervision and guidance for service learning students. It is crucial that there is a shared vision for service learning, and a clearly defined, mutually agreed upon understanding of the roles that each participant in service learning plays. Faculty must engage in a dialogue to understand the needs of community partners and the role of their students in meeting these needs. In situations where service learning students are working to complete a specific project for the community partner, it is essential that the project emanates from an expressed need of the community partner.

*KCC Service Learning Highlight: Service Learning and Teacher Education.* Although student internships have long been a part of the course sequence in Kingsborough's teacher education programs, these internships have generally been offered as capstone classes, just prior to graduation. Recently introduced in teacher education courses at Kingsborough, service learning was integrated into a course that appears earlier in the

sequence of courses required for the degree. Students were given “hands-on” opportunities to learn basic educational concepts, while they simultaneously assessed whether the teaching profession was indeed the right field for them. Service learning in this context has proven to be immensely valuable to our students and their professors in a number of ways.

## **POSITIVE OUTCOMES FOR EDUCATION MAJORS**

*Increased self-awareness.* It became evident that as the Kingsborough service learners became immersed in their projects, they became significantly more self-aware and conscious of the assumptions about children that they originally brought to the project. Student responses during structured classroom workshops, as well as in their reflection papers, indicate that through their interactions with children in after school programs their assumptions about children’s abilities were challenged. For example, students commented:

“I never knew third graders couldn’t read.”

“I don’t understand how a girl can bully so many boys.”

“I never saw boys dance that way.”

These student responses suggest that the service learning program afforded our students with opportunities to reflect on their long-established assumptions about children’s abilities. Clearly, it is vitally important for future teachers to critically reflect upon their assumptions about children’s abilities as such assumptions underlie and influence their expectations for children’s social, cognitive, and emotional growth (Merton, 1948; Cooper & Good, 1983). For example, Merton’s (1948) self-fulfilling prophecy effect indicates that teacher expectations about the academic ability of an individual student or an entire class may influence their curricular, instructional, or evaluative decisions.

*Linking coursework to fieldwork.* A second outcome of the service learning project for our education students was an increased ability to connect theoretical concepts learned in their course work to what they experienced in the field. For example, through their interactions with children of diverse ages within the same after school program our students were able to observe varying stages of development consistently linked to the specific age of each child. One student commented:

“All of the younger kids don’t share, and when I ask them to share, they start crying...the older kids don’t like to share, but when I tell them to share, they do it...after a while I stopped trying to get the younger kids to share and worked with them individually.”

This student’s response, which is representative of many others, suggests that he/she was connecting the child’s lack of sharing behavior to theories of child development, specifically the developmental concept of egocentrism. Further, when this student

decided to work “more individually” with younger children, it suggests that she was not only connecting theoretical concepts to observed behavior, but was also adjusting her practice in order to implement theoretical concepts. In this case, she implemented the concept of developmentally appropriate practice.

Career exploration. A third important outcome for future service learners in the education program was increased insight into their potential careers as teachers. Virtually all of our students were enthusiastic about the opportunity to work with children in an educational setting and the fact that they chose the service learning option to meet a course requirement affirms the sincerity of their enthusiasm. However, student responses suggest that the service learning experience had varying, and perhaps unexpected, impact on our students’ choice of careers:

- “I can’t wait to have my own classroom.”
- “I was scared in the beginning, but after I got to know the children, they really liked me...next semester (when education students begin their student teaching courses) will be fun.”
- “I love teaching little kids, but I don’t like the older ones.”
- “These kids don’t respect anything; I’m just happy this assignment is over.”

These responses indicate that the service learning experience had an impact on the KCC students in terms of career exploration at several levels. For some, the service learning experience seemed to validate their career choice and, perhaps as a result of this validation, consistently expressed excitement about the student teaching courses they would be taking in the semester following the service learning experience. For others, the service learning experience not only seemed to validate their career choice but also seemed to enable them to focus more clearly on the specific population with which they wanted to work. For still others, the service learning experience seemed to alert students that teaching was perhaps not their preferred career choice.

## **POSITIVE OUTCOMES FOR EDUCATION FACULTY**

Ability to introduce a reflection component that was not previously part of the academic program. An important outcome of the service learning project for the education faculty was an increased awareness of the need to consider the education program as a whole when incorporating service learning. Kingsborough’s education students log 164 hours in classroom settings as a result of their student teaching internships. Implementing the service learning project into the education program would add an additional 24 hours to that total. Thus, the issue arose concerning how to structure the service learning project so that it would complement, rather than replicate, the existing field courses and therefore, enhance the entire education program.

The primary focus of student teaching internships is aimed at developing specific skill sets such as curriculum development, teaching methods, and classroom management. However, while these specific skill sets are obviously vital to classroom teaching, the rigors of student teaching internships leave little time for students to reflect on their own personal development and histories and how their personal histories might impact them as teachers. Therefore, the faculty decided that a primary focus of the service learning component of the education program would be aimed at critical reflection on personal development and histories and how their personal histories may impact the students as teachers. To achieve this goal, service learning instructors designed structured assignments (classroom workshops and reflection papers) that promote introspection and empower our students to explore their personal histories, reflecting on their service learning field experience.

*Awareness of course sequencing as it relates to strengthening to Education Program as a whole.* A second positive outcome of the service learning project for the education faculty was an increased awareness of the importance of strategically placing service learning within the established sequence of education courses. Since Kingsborough's education courses are sequenced to lead into and build upon one another, and since the education program has four different areas of concentration that have differing sequences of courses, it was necessary to consider precisely where within the various course sequences service learning should be placed in order to maximize its usefulness. To address this issue, the faculty decided to place service learning in a social studies curriculum design course. This course was chosen because it is common to all four areas of concentration, it is a prerequisite to the first student teaching course, and students typically take this course in the semester immediately preceding the first student teaching course.

## **LESSONS LEARNED**

Service learning has proven to be an incredibly flexible and powerful pedagogy which can be adapted to meet the needs of students and faculty in virtually any curriculum. Service learning at Kingsborough has enhanced the curricular offerings in the field of teacher education at Kingsborough and has offered students and faculty wonderful new opportunities for personal and professional growth.

Service learning at Kingsborough has offered a unique combination of benefits to our students and to the community. Kingsborough's service learners come from ethnic and economic backgrounds that are similar to that of the young people they work with. Indeed, a number of our service learners actually come from the Coney Island area. As a result, they easily establish rapport with the young people they are working with and they also take pride in helping to improve their own community. Secondly, we have found that service learning offers students a chance to learn work skills, such as punctuality, responsibility, following directions, and appropriate professional behavior, while gaining valuable experience that can enhance their résumés. Students in

Kingsborough's Education, Mental Health, and other career programs at Kingsborough also get the chance to see firsthand whether a particular career option is right for them early on, before they have completed so many courses that switching majors is problematic. In addition, service learning provides students with an alternative, hands-on way to learn course material that can greatly help under-prepared students learn course material more effectively and gain confidence.

## REFERENCES

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