

# “SHOWTIME AT DELGADO” AND THE SERVICE LEARNING CURVE

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## INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Delgado Community College began as a trade school for boys in 1921 at the main City Park campus located in Mid-City, New Orleans. It has evolved into a multi-campus, multi-parish community college now partnered with the Louisiana Community and Technical College System (LCTCS). It provides both two-year vocational degrees and certificate programs to prepare students for the workforce, and its associate degree programs provide students with the foundation to transfer to senior institutions.

In August 2005, the main City Park campus and the Slidell campus of Delgado were damaged from Katrina flood waters. Enrollment prior to the storm in Spring 2005 was 16,787 total and 11,441 at the City Park campus alone; enrollment in Spring 2006 was 10,002 total and 5927 at the City Park campus, the highest enrollment for higher education institutions in the city of New Orleans post-Katrina.

In Spring of 2007, Delgado Community College offered faculty the opportunity to enroll in faculty development workshops for service learning. Faculty who participated came from areas as diverse as marketing, nursing, speech communication, psychology, veterinary tech, and mass communication. The project that is the focus of this article resulted from collaboration between the speech and mass communication faculty members who attended these workshops.

This article will focus on the challenges and benefits of service learning for students and faculty, based on the project, “Showtime at Delgado.” The findings are that the main challenges of service learning involve miscommunication, vulnerability, and unpredictability, with the benefits of confidence, real-world learning and experience and deeper connections between students, faculty and the community outweighing the challenges.

## THE SEEDS FOR “SHOWTIME”

At one of the break-out sessions for Spring 2007 Convocation, the first class from Delgado’s service learning training presented what they had done for their projects with community partners. At this workshop, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Charter School (MLK) was announced as Delgado’s service learning project partner, and this K-8 school in the lower ninth ward was the first to come back in an area decimated by the failure of the levees after Katrina. This school provided

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shelter and refuge on the second floor from the floodwaters that claimed at least 30 students and faculty members of MLK. As the first school to come back in the lower ninth ward, it also served the community with a public library and was a beacon of hope for the area. This made the charter school an obvious choice for a community service learning partner.

In the Fall of 2007, speech communication faculty Jenny Louis assessed her Fundamentals of Speech Communication (SPCH 130) classes to see which would be the most receptive to including a service learning component to the class. SPCH 130 is a hybrid course which includes a section on small group

dynamics and the service learning project would be tied in with this course objective. Students would work in small groups to achieve a common goal of raising money for the charter school, and would decide the different ways to reach this goal as a class, which included a Delgado student talent show. Susan Hague's mass communication class, Writing for Media II (MSCM 201), looked at creating a publicity campaign for a worthy cause, and collaborated with Louis' class to provide the publicity for this project, "Showtime at Delgado."

The learning objectives for service learning involved small group dynamics. This content was not covered until late September, leaving about a month to organize and complete the project, which was set for Wednesday, November 7, 2007. Students in SPCH 130 decided on a talent show similar to "Showtime at the Apollo," complete with a dolphin head for contestants to rub for good luck. In addition to the advance ticket sales for the talent show, students planned several other internal fundraisers at the event, such as silent auctions, refreshments for sale, t-shirt sales, and fleur-de-lis handmade jewelry sales. The class divided into several groups to accomplish its goals for fundraising.

Writing for Media II's objectives were to create the look for the campaign. This included the design for advance tickets, audition posters, push flyers, the poster for the event itself, the donor thank-you board, "Showtime at Delgado" banner backdrop, the program for the show, and the thank-you cards. The class also produced a press release and media alert, which resulted in coverage the morning of the event on the local CBS affiliate, WWL-TV 4.

## THE CHALLENGES

Time was a challenge, especially the amount of lead time needed to process the paperwork for event approval. The talent show needed a stage for the performances and audio equipment, both of which were scarce, post-Katrina. Part of the challenge was also in the learning of who was in charge of what to obtain the permission needed.

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Another challenge was the communication with the community partner and the communication between SPCH 130 and MSCM 201 students who did not have the same scheduled class time to work on the project together. Communication within the groups working on different parts of the fundraiser was also a challenge. With all of the problems of small group dynamics in operation, this made for a real-world learning experience for all.

These two challenges added to the next constraint, no budget. Again, this only added to the real-world experience of the project, and students in SPCH 130 rallied to find monies to support their cause. They provided the food and drinks for the talent show and went to the Student Government Association to ask for their sponsorship of the t-shirts. They supplied the materials and labor for the fleur-de-lis jewelry, and they canvassed businesses from Metairie to the French Quarter to obtain the items for the silent auction. The student newspaper printed the publicity materials as an in-kind donation from its account, and the school's PR representative shared her media email list and offered her expertise to MSCM 201 students to send out the media alert.

## THE REWARDS

Student ownership of their service learning project increased as evidenced by their excitement and willingness to work outside of class. Students in SPCH 130 conducted the auditions, videotaped them, and made the final cuts for the talent. Other committees in the class spent hours soliciting donations from local businesses, making the food and jewelry, picking up the t-shirts, and selling advance tickets. On the day of the event, students from SPCH 130 and MSCM 201 came at 8:30 a.m. to prepare for the 11 a.m. show. Students from both classes created a word of mouth buzz for the event, especially since Grammy-winner Irma Thomas, a Delgado alum, agreed to perform as the opening act of the talent show.

The crowd of more than 250 students, administrators, faculty, staff and visitors stayed for the entire event from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. The Campus Provost Arnel Cosey was enthusiastic in her support and she mentioned the possibility of closing the campus so everyone could attend the next talent show which would coincide with the school's homecoming celebration. The school newspaper ran a front page story on the talent show. The event raised over \$1800 for the charter school. Student representatives from both classes went to MLK to present the check to the principal and tour the school. This was the most rewarding aspect, according to many of the students involved with the project. Students had this to say about the experience:

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***The event raised over \$1800 for the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Charter School.***

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“Getting people involved is hard at first, but once they realized what it’s for, they got interested. I thought it was just going to be another class where you read out of the textbook, not one where you put it into action.” —Lexie Guilbeau, SPCH 130 member

“Hands-on learning experience can outshine lectures and note-taking, especially when it’s giving back to a community knocked to its knees.” —Jaclyn Furlow, MSCM 201 member

“We would have been happy raising \$200. I couldn’t believe how much this exceeded our expectations.” —Nick Hunter, SPCH 130 member

“It made me more confident that I could talk with people and get things done, even if I was rejected at first, to not give up but to persist.” —Fadi Darwish, SPCH 130 member

“At first I did not want to do a service learning project...but when we went to the school and saw the smiles on the children’s faces, that someone from outside their school and in their community cared about them enough to do this for them, then I felt that connection and was glad that we had done it.” —Delores Marshall, MSCM 201 member

## SUGGESTIONS FOR THE FUTURE

To improve on the next service learning project, we suggest the following:

- Allow more time to communicate and coordinate with community partners.
- Get essential contact information from key community partner players.
- Be persistent with follow-up and follow-through.

- Ask questions regarding administrative procedures in advance to set an achievable timeline.
- Allow time for face-to-face networking as part of the project support.
- Coordinate with two classes at the same time if possible for combined class efforts.
- Research possible money streams and in-kind support available.
- Provide small group facilitator training for group members.
- Use peer evaluations for group member accountability.
- Discuss group member responsibilities and reach group agreement on rules before starting.

Why does service learning matter? Service learning projects offer both students and their faculty a real-world learning experience that is not controlled, predictable, or “safe.” This may be one of its greatest challenges and rewards. It gives both students and faculty a chance to connect more deeply with each other and the community in which they are serving, and brings an openness to that experience beyond the classroom.

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#### **ABOUT THE AUTHORS:**

**Jenny Louis** holds a Master of Arts Degree in Speech Communication, Performance Studies, from Louisiana State University (LSU). She worked as a full-time Instructor of Interpersonal Communication and Public Speaking at LSU for five years. She is currently an Assistant Professor in Performance and Media Arts at Delgado Community College. There she teaches Fundamentals of Speech Communication, Interpersonal Communication and Humanities through the Arts courses. Louis is also the faculty adviser for Delgado's Eta Chapter of Sigma Chi Eta Communication Honor Society.

**Susan Hague** has been with Delgado for 12 years, and as an Associate Professor of Communication, she also serves as advisor for the student newspaper, *The Dolphin*. Her background includes nine years in human service as associate director of the United Way of Acadiana in Lafayette, La., an M.S. in Communication from the University of La.-Lafayette, and an M.A. in English from the University of S. Alabama.

Delgado Community College Architecture students working on their Habitat for Humanity service learning project:

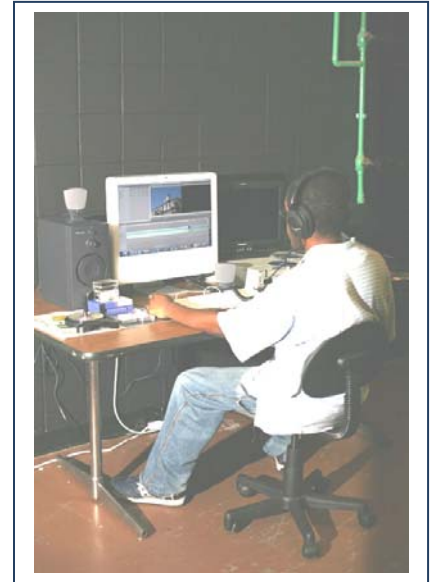


Delgado Community College students working on their Culinary Art service learning project:





Delgado Community College students working on a housing project for Katrina victims



Delgado Community College student Michael Celestine, a TV Production major, editing a video for service learning



Delgado Community College students from a Public Relations class working on a campaign and brochure targeting students to create an awareness of what service learning is and how they can get involved.