

CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES – WORKING WITH AT-RISK YOUTH

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Mesa Community College (MCC) is located in Mesa, Arizona, in the central part of the state, just east of Phoenix, the state’s capital. Mesa is Arizona’s third largest city after Phoenix and Tucson, with a population of over 500,000. Mesa Community College serves as a resource for students who wish to transfer to one of Arizona’s four-year universities, or another area or regional institution. MCC has a variety of career development programs and continuous learning programs, service learning being among them. The mission of Mesa Community College is to promote excellence in teaching and learning, preparing individuals for active citizenship in a diverse global society. Our ultimate purpose is to improve the quality of life in the community we serve. Student enrollment for all MCC campuses for fall 2007 was 25,167. The average age of MCC students is 26 years old, with 54% female enrollment, and 46% male. Students’ ethnicity at MCC is approximately 62% White, 16% Hispanic, 5% Black, 5% Asian, 4% American Indian/Alaskan Native and 7% other, and 5% not specified. The Average class load is 8 credits.

THE CENTER FOR SERVICE-LEARNING

Mesa Community College has a department dedicated specifically to service learning that connects our students with community partners to complete service learning hours. The Center for Service-Learning’s mission statement is “to promote excellence in teaching and learning through the integration of academic study with active service. We collaborate with the community, encourage civic engagement, promote personal growth, and foster social responsibility.” In the Center for Service-Learning, we employ full-time and part-time staff members in addition to student workers who help to facilitate the process of enrolling students in service learning classes as an in-course module or independent service learning module class at MCC.

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ASSETS GRANT

Through its participation in the Accent on Student Success: Engaged Together in Service (ASSETS) initiative, funded by the Community College National Center for Community Engagement (CCNCCE) through Learn and Serve America, MCC’s Center for Service-Learning has been developing and implementing a recruitment and enrollment plan to successfully engage REACH (Raising Expectations for Achievement and Community Service through Higher Education) students in community service. Students register and complete a one credit service learning class. Students partner with MCC service learning faculty to complete a one credit independent module service learning class. In addition, students are encouraged to participate in various service orientated activities offered on and around the campus that include the

Martin Luther King Jr. Day of Service, the Dr. Seuss Birthday Celebration, and the Scholastic Book Fair. The “C” in REACH stands for community service which was a service goal that was unfulfilled prior to the funding of the ASSETS grant.

REACH/ACE PROGRAM

Mesa Community College’s REACH (Raising Expectations for Achievement and Community Service through Higher Education) program is a Maricopa County Community College District (MCCCD) Achieving a College Education (ACE) program that allows students to earn community college credits while still in high school.

In 2003, REACH recruited students from two high schools (Mesa and Dobson High) via counselor referral (60 students). Today the program recruits its students from a pool of 11 schools and this translates to approximately 252 students. Students participating in the REACH program are specifically high school juniors and seniors from eight East Valley high schools, including six Mesa high schools and two schools from the Tempe Unified High School District. REACH enrollment figures are over 240.

Over the years, REACH has established close relationships with all the schools. Recruitment takes place either in class or in the auditorium at the high schools. REACH staff present directly to the students, providing them with a description of the program, application forms, deadlines, and instructions on completing forms. During some presentations, current or alumni ACE / REACH students share their stories and experiences as a participant. The goal of REACH is to support underrepresented or underprivileged students in completing a college education by assisting them in their transition from high school to the community college setting. The REACH program identifies underrepresented students exposed to various at-risk factors including:

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- First generation students to attend college
- Students who work 10-30 hours per week
- Students from a variety of groups including those in foster care, with a family member incarcerated, living in temporary housing, or those that are teen parents
- Physical and/or mental disabilities
- Single parent families
- Underrepresented groups

Approximately 86% of students graduate high school having already completed up to 24 college credits with the option of a one credit stand alone service learning course. Over 100 students have continued their educational endeavors at MCC (this includes all cohorts from 2003 to 2005). Many more students have continued to other MCCCD colleges and universities in Arizona. Through the Center for Service-Learning, students have the opportunity to integrate

their academic study with active community service while gaining many of the career skills necessary to assist them at the university and at the work place.

CHALLENGES OF WORKING WITH AT-RISK YOUTH

The program coordinator works closely with the REACH students and has identified that a majority of the students that wish to enroll in a service learning class require more support and supervision than mainstream students. The Center for Service-Learning has outlined some of the barriers and challenges it has encountered in its endeavor to incorporate a service learning component in the REACH program's agenda. These barriers and challenges include:

- Fostering MCC faculty interest and active participation in service learning
- Fostering student interest and active participation in service learning
- Students struggling to adapt to a college environment
- Low participation in service learning as the students are in school or at work during the week and attend college classes at MCC on Saturdays
- Students having little or no financial resources
- A majority of students are dependent on their parents for transportation

STRATEGIES FOR WORKING WITH AT-RISK YOUTH AT MCC: FACULTY DEVELOPMENT TRAINING ON RECOGNIZING STEREOTYPES

As mentioned in the previous section, at-risk youth have many barriers to overcome in their quest to achieving academic success. One barrier that can easily be overlooked is the stereotypes that faculty have of this sub group of students. These stereotypes must be acknowledged before students and faculty can create an active and successful learning environment. Stereotypes can include

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negative personal beliefs regarding ethnicity, socio-economic background, lack of academic preparation, and dysfunctional family dynamics. Service learning programs must recognize and acknowledge that faculty have personal biases and prejudices. A diversity module should be included within the service learning and civic engagement faculty training.

ACTIVE LEARNING AND AT-RISK YOUTH

As we know, students who are engaged in service learning learn by doing. They integrate theory from the classroom into real life experiences. Roland Tharp, director of the Center for Research on Education, Diversity and Excellence (CREDE) states "at-risk students do not need a different curriculum. What they need are the same qualities of teaching that most help mainstream kids." With this in mind, at-risk youth engaged in service learning are served well by faculty who practice active or cooperative learning techniques in their classrooms.

In its simplest form, cooperative learning gives students something to do other than listen. For instance, students can be asked to create a task (jigsaw puzzle, Jeopardy game, questions and

answers, etc.) that will demonstrate learning has taken place. Students can also be assigned a 'teaching moment.' They teach the class, formulate questions, and generate discussion. In addition, students can be broken into groups of various sizes with specific outcomes required, which again, demonstrates learning.

GET THEM EXCITED AND KEEP THEM EXCITED

Students need to feel comfortable. A good faculty member's role the first week of classes is to alleviate anxieties, such as:

- "I don't know anybody in my class."
- "What is my teacher going to be like?"
- "Is it going to be hard?"
- "Am I going to fit in?"

The first day of class, active learning strategies can be implemented to alleviate student anxieties. For instance, ice breaking games can be used such as Communication Bingo, Scavenger Hunt, and We are Alike and Different. Students exchange information about themselves and each other, which begins to break down anxieties.

The second day of class, invite community partners to give short presentations on their non-profit agencies. In addition, former service learning students could be invited to discuss how the service learning class has benefited them.

It is also important for students have a sense of ownership and accountability for their class. This is achieved by having the students write their own ground rules for the course and create their own expectations of what they want learn in class. One important ground rule that the faculty member can encourage is for students to sit in a different seat every class session to enhance class cohesion. Other ground rules could include cell phone use, tardiness, attendance, side-talking, respect for others, etc. It is important to note that students are told the faculty has the final say in ground rules. Expectations might include learning more about the community, actively participating in civic engagement, and taking advantage of service learning resources and programs. Students are required to sign a copy of the grounds rules, which demonstrates their acceptance of them. At the end of every semester expectations are reviewed.

Active learning concepts are used throughout the semester to enhance individual learning, group communication, critical thinking skills and community building. For example, students are required to complete a group service learning project. They self-select their group members, self-select and contact a community partner, and perform the service. Throughout the group project, students are required to write an individual reflection every week. This gives them an opportunity to reflect on their learning and on their service.

Each group is required to give an oral presentation, create a scrapbook, and design a display board which demonstrates their service project. The director of the Center for Service-Learning is invited to attend a service learning reflective showcase. At the end of the showcase he conducts the final individual reflection and facilitates a group discussion. This brings closure to the service learning project.

CONCLUSION

An active learning approach would be beneficial for working with at-risk youth. One of the main advantages of taking this approach is that students are engaged and taught the importance of being accountable because when they initially attend a service learning class they are allowed to establish their own rules and guidelines for performance, with the guidance of faculty member. Participation in service learning becomes a very active process. Furthermore, faculty are more familiar with the needs of the students and are also better able to adapt their teaching methodology to suit the interests and requirements of the students.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS:

Duane D. Oakes currently serves as the Faculty Director for the Center for Service-Learning at Mesa Community College where he also serves as the Chapter Advisor of Phi Theta Kappa International. In 1994 he and his colleagues at Chandler-Gilbert Community College were recognized with the “Innovation of the Year” Award for the service learning program he helped develop. He has worked in the higher education field since 1990, helping students to become better citizens through service and leadership. He is also a service learning and civic responsibility trainer for the American Association of Community Colleges. Duane received his AA Degree from Mesa Community College in 1986, and a BS and MA from Brigham Young University in 1989 and 1990 respectively.

Elise Sweet currently serves as the Program Coordinator for the Center for Service-Learning at Mesa Community College’s Red Mountain campus. She is also an adjunct faculty member in communication. She believes that communication and service learning are a perfect combination. Most of the classes Elise teaches include a service learning component. Elise earned a Masters of Liberal Arts from the University of Denver. Her bachelor’s degree is in Organizational Communication from Arizona State University.

Mutinkhe Kaunda served as the Program Coordinator of the ASSETS Grant at Mesa Community College’s Center for Service-Learning in 2007-2008. Mutinkhe supervised the placement process of ACE/REACH students enrolling into a one credit service learning class at MCC. The ACE/REACH program allows students to earn community college credits while still in high school. Prior to this, Mutinkhe served as Assistant to the Director of Programs of the Kenneth Kaunda Children of Africa Foundation. Mutinkhe has also worked for a business consultancy firm based in Mauritius. Mutinkhe obtained a Bachelor of Science Honors Degree in Social Psychology and Computer Science from the University of Kent at Canterbury, United Kingdom in 2003. She intends to pursue a Masters Degree in Journalism and Mass Communication.



**Mesa Community College student volunteers for the annual
Dr. Seuss' Birthday event on campus
March 2, 2009.**

Volunteers served local elementary school students, reading books with them, leading them on campus tours, doing crafts together, and enjoying a piece of birthday cake in honor of Dr. Seuss. These service-learning students were participating in this work through a variety of courses primarily in the disciplines of Education, Recreation, Communication, and Sociology. Several faculty and staff members also joined them in their efforts.



**Mesa Community College students take part in the
Mesa Martin Luther King Jr. Day Celebration Parade
January 19, 2009**

Mesa Community College students served at a breakfast, parade, and festival to honor the life of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Events took place in downtown Mesa. Students serving at the parade provided refreshments to the many parade participants as they waited for their opportunities to march with their school marching bands, clubs, teams, etc. And during the parade, students had the opportunity to carry banners to announce the different groups participating. Service-learning students helping with this activity came from a variety of courses and disciplines.



**A Mesa Community College student helps sort recycling from garbage at the
Special Olympics Summer Games
April 30 - May 2, 2009**

Mesa Community College students kept the Special Olympics Summer Games “green” by facilitating recycling and educating athletes and attendees of the event about the environment. Faculty, staff, and students served at this on-campus event from a variety of departments and disciplines. Service-learning students participated from disciplines such as Communication and Recreation.