

GIVING A FACE TO THE MOVEMENT: SERVICE LEARNING AND THE WALK AGAINST POVERTY

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INTRODUCTION

According to U.S. Census figures Milwaukee has the seventh highest poverty rate in the nation. More than one in four residents lives in poverty; over 62,000 of those living in poverty are children, 41.3% of all the children in the city.

Milwaukee Area Technical College took action! Partnering with a variety of community organizations, a three-day campaign was hosted to raise awareness of poverty in Milwaukee and southeastern Wisconsin. Over 300 service learning students from a variety of courses participated in the second annual *Walk Against Poverty Campaign*. This service learning event model included presentations, demonstrations, art displays, advocacy, education and a march put on by students, instructors, agency organizers and community members, to call attention to various causes, effects, and solutions to poverty.

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Passionate community members, K-16 instructors, and students from all across the greater Milwaukee area came together to join the movement of the *Walk Against Poverty Campaign*. It gave an opportunity for students to become involved with their community on many levels and through many venues. The campaign's goal was to raise awareness of poverty in Milwaukee and

southeastern Wisconsin and to rally citizens to make positive, sustainable change that leads to lasting solutions to all forms of poverty.

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

In 2006, just over 50 people walked the streets of downtown Milwaukee on a cold December evening, holding signs stating the vast poverty rate, related issue statistics, and calls to action. Signs were carried past restaurants, businesses, and through rush hour traffic. City political and grassroots leaders in the Milwaukee community also gave their voice, speaking to the participants before and after the walk.

In 2007, the campaign was expanded to offer a series of presentations, workshops, and events over the course of three days in December, with the focus on providing tools to get out of or stay out of poverty, exploring the face of poverty, and educating the public on the current status of poverty in the community.

The walk-turned-campaign rallied a dozen more active community organizations, including K-12 schools, higher education institutions, and major political support.

The 2007 campaign was an arena for all corners of our community to bring their greatest skills forward, a forum for all corners to bring to light their greatest needs, and a fundraiser for Hunger Task Force to collect “food for today while working towards no hunger tomorrow.”

To kick the campaign off, the *Walk Against Poverty Campaign* committee developed *Stocking Stuffers for Hope* in conjunction with Community Spirit Park, a tree decorating event for youth sponsored by Milwaukee Downtown. This event brought together college educators and students, community leaders, local elementary, middle and grade school children, and concerned citizens.

Over 1500 elementary and middle schools students from the Greater Milwaukee area participated; MATC and UW Milwaukee service learning students facilitated conversation around social justice issues in the students’ different communities.

Each student created a small *Stocking Stuffer for Hope* that depicted one of the issues they discussed and an action step that they will take in 2008 to help that issue. Every walker in the *Walk Against Poverty Campaign* received a *Stocking Stuffer for Hope*, symbolizing the voice of the community youth and reminding people that action needs to be taken today and every day.

The goal of visualizing the many faces of poverty was to erase preconceptions and show the reality of poverty.

The *Stocking Stuffers for Hope* were also displayed in *The Faces of Poverty: A Community Art Show*. This art show depicted poverty through the eyes of students and the youth of Milwaukee. The goal of visualizing the many faces of poverty was to erase preconceptions and show the reality of poverty. The art reception featured Ken Leinbach, local activist with the Urban Ecology Center; Akua, a regional spoken word artist; and Street Theater, performed by a group of homeless Milwaukee citizens from Repairers of the Breach (homeless advocacy shelter).

Understanding the lack of knowledge and financial literacy that exists within the most poverty stricken neighborhoods, concerned financial planners from a local community agency, KLM Mortgage Group, provided financial tools through a Personal Finance Workshop. This workshop taught basic finance skills to instructors, students, and community members.

The city of Milwaukee was once an industrial giant, but in the past 30 years, many of the central city businesses have closed shop. Thus, the lack of job opportunities is a major issue affecting those in poverty. To highlight this issue and to advise on the building blocks for change, the campaign featured a lunch-hour panel discussion on workforce development. The panelists represented major Milwaukee economic and social development movements and included MATC’s own economics expert. Students and local community members enthusiastically listened to issues and started conversations around building blocks to create sustainable change.

On two of the three days, Community Resource Fairs were set up at MATC Downtown campus and at MATC Oak Creek campus. These resource fairs heightened the awareness of issues being

face across the region and offered an opportunity for community members to get involved. Service learning students from a human relations and a general college course organized the resource fair; the students conducted the research of local organizations, collected resources, and developed brochures that highlighted programs which would be of interest to MATC students and surrounding community members. The students also staffed the resource fair to answer questions and provide assistance to participants.

The three days of events culminated in the 2nd Annual *Walk Against Poverty Campaign*. A crowd of community members walked through downtown Milwaukee on their lunch hour, including high school and college students, city political leaders, and more. The Mayor of Milwaukee, Tom Barrett, the President of Milwaukee Area Technical College, Dr. Darnell Cole, the Executive Director of Hunger Task Force (food bank and advocacy group), Sherrie Tussler, and the Executive Director of Repairers of the Breach (Milwaukee's only daytime shelter and 'homeless helping homeless' advocacy group), MacCanon Brown all spoke at the walk.

THE PROCESS FOR IMPLEMENTATION

The implementation of the 2007 campaign was made possible by MATC service learning students and volunteers. They provided the people-power and the face of active citizenship that drove this campaign. Students from ten MATC courses participated in the three day event; from planning and organizing to implementation and evaluation, service learning students diligently worked to pull off this major campaign.

Right after the mission, vision and goals were created by the city-wide planning committee, the MATC Service Learning Team drafted a list of service learning opportunities and sent it to known service learning faculty, providing enough planning time before the Fall 2007 semester so faculty could integrate this opportunity into their courses.

The planning process took place over the course of five months with participation and input from a dozen community organizations and schools. The city-wide planning committee met monthly to review campaign goals, initiatives, and action steps.

THE CURRICULUM

In a Life Span Development class the *Walk Against Poverty Campaign* provided for many curricula ties. Poverty is one of the most consistent and influential risk factors for problematic development across the life span; development relates to the multiple systems in which humans are nurtured and learn. The *Walk Against Poverty Campaign* provided a service learning opportunity that brought developmental theories surrounding the impact of poverty and family economic hardship on human development to life.

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Identified site placements and structured reflective activities further aided students' discovery regarding the impact poverty has on individual and family development. Students learned to identify at-risk, resilience and protective factors, in addition to articulating strategies for intervention, prevention and changing social policy. The rich pedagogy of service learning provided for a complex ecological systems theory to be understood in a framework that offered clarity and practical application; a pertinent goal within any higher education classroom.

For a few sociology instructors, the *Walk Against Poverty Campaign* provided a framework through which numerous sociological concepts, theories, and issues could be addressed throughout the semester. One instructor used the event to discuss the logic and political underpinnings of peaceful protests to a government class. Another instructor in a race-ethnicity course referenced the event to help shed light on the varying risks of poverty for specific urban ethnic groups. Yet another sociology instructor wove the event into his introductory sociology course to highlight the relationship between poverty and social class stratification and corporate capitalism.

No matter what the course, instructors used this service learning event model to provide structure and practical application of normally abstract, theoretical constructs. This model made it easy for new instructors to plug into an event that had purpose and meaning within the community. Students gained experiences through action and community participation. Rich discussion ensued in the classrooms not only broadening academic knowledge, but also connecting students to 21st century skills that so many employers are looking for in their new employees; skills like respecting diversity, working in teams, effective communication, organization, planning, and personal responsibility. The *Walk Against Poverty Campaign* service learning event model provided many avenues of engagement for instructors, students, and community members. Any campus event linked to the community could result in tremendous service and learning opportunities.

CONCLUSION

The *Walk Against Poverty Campaign* service learning event model lead to sustainable practices. The city-wide planning committee continues to meet monthly and take action throughout the city to help end poverty and alleviate the main issues that contribute to poverty in Milwaukee; education, job opportunities, and racism. The leading players in this movement are passionate and possess a wealth of background knowledge, expertise, and personal experience with the issue of poverty.

Milwaukee is a strong community with many assets and opportunities. We have potent organizations and the strength of every individual living in Milwaukee. This campaign continues to inspire citizens from across Milwaukee to work together each day to make the city brighter and "to make today a day of change."

Milwaukee Area Technical College (MATC) is committed to help eliminate poverty throughout the Greater Milwaukee community by offering a breadth of educational opportunities, programs and events. The largest technical college in the state, Milwaukee Area Technical

College is a key driver of the economy in southeastern Wisconsin. MATC offers 200 degrees, diplomas, certificates and apprenticeships, plus nearly 400 transfer options leading to bachelor's degrees. A large pre-college program enables people to complete high school and prepare for higher learning. The Office of Corporate Learning provides customized training to incumbent workers. About 53,000 students per year attend the college's four campuses, numerous evening centers and community-based sites, or learn online.

Service learning is a growing force within this institution of higher education. Service learning provides the opportunity to build a modern sustainable learning infrastructure which challenges all involved to learn something new and engages our students in a vision worth working toward; taking responsibility for themselves as well as the community in which they live.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS:

Suzanne Goodrich is a Psychology Instructor at Milwaukee Area Technical College. Suzanne earned her undergraduate and graduate degrees at Marquette University and has completed all of her coursework for a Ph.D. in Psychology. Suzanne has been involved in service-learning for the past 15 years. She brings a very unique perspective on service-learning to the MATC SL-Team; for 10 years she worked in the non-profit sector seeing first hand the many benefits service-learning could potentially bring to a CBO, as a Psychology instructor she has witnessed the transformation of young adults through the experience of serving and learning out in the "real world" and has seen confidence and knowledge expand by leaps and bounds for youth involved with service-learning at the local K-8 school district where she serves on the service-learning advisory board. She believes service-learning will be the foundation upon which transformative experiences will begin to shape our local and global communities. No matter what the educational opportunity looks like, traditional or virtual, service-learning is the bridge that will help to span the gaps in the cultural, social and psychological divide created in the places we call "home".

Courtney Marlaire, Ph.D., has been involved with community engaged learning for over ten years. As Milwaukee Area Technical College's liaison to the Wisconsin Campus Compact she has advanced the development of service-learning at MATC through the leadership of the Service Learning Team. Dr. Marlaire has also played a large role in representing higher education in SEWSLC. She received a B.A. in Political Science from Northwestern University and a Ph.D. in Sociology and Educational Policy from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She is currently an Associate Dean of Liberal Arts and Sciences at Milwaukee Area Technical College.

Jamie Racine serves as Service learning Coordinator at Milwaukee Area Technical College (MATC) for her 2-year AmeriCorps*VISTA service term. She began at MATC with the Service learning Team in August 2006 with the mission to institutionalize service learning from the ground up. Since that time, Ms. Racine and the MATC Service learning Team have established a Service learning Center and have been awarded multiple grants to fund community engagement projects, including the Walk Against Poverty (city-wide antipoverty movement) and R.I.S.E. Up Wisconsin! The Ride to Inspire Student Engagement (statewide bus tour to

engage youth in their communities). Ms. Racine coordinates service learning placements and projects for students and also co-facilitates a bi-annual professional development course for MATC faculty. She is an active member of the Southeastern Wisconsin Service learning Consortium (SEWSLC), a PK-16 service learning partnership. Jamie Racine received her Bachelors of Science in Journalism and History from the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh. She is a native of Milwaukee, WI.

Emily Adams is a Wisconsin Campus Compact AmeriCorps*VISTA working at Milwaukee Area Technical College to institutionalize service learning. In addition to working at MATC, Emily spends part of her time as a VISTA facilitating the Southeastern Wisconsin Service Learning Consortium (SEWSLC). She began her term as a VISTA in August 2006 after graduating from American University in Washington, DC. She received her degree in environmental studies, with a minor in chemistry. Emily is a Midwest native, having grown up in St. Louis, MO.

Pictures of Milwaukee Area Technical College students participating in their ***Walk Against Poverty*** service learning event:



Picture of Milwaukee Area Technical College students participating in their ***Environmental Survival Challenge*** service learning event:

