

## **SAFE Helps HCC.... A Lot!!**

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### **Reflections on the SAFE Grant Experience**

The Service Learning Program at Hillsborough Community College (HCC) in Tampa, FL was in its fledgling stage of development when the college was awarded a SAFE grant through the Community College National Center for Community Engagement. The focus of the grant was to support activities that fostered national security and domestic and emergency preparedness.

The SAFE grant has played a significant role in the growth of HCC's Service Learning Program. Specifically, thirty-seven courses related to this grant were taught during the past four years. Further, there was a wide variety of academic disciplines that incorporated a service learning component in their courses, e.g. radiation therapy, microbiology, child development, and interpreter training (sign language).

The SAFE grant further allowed for the expansion of the Service Learning Program to all four of the college's main campuses. This expansion had been a primary goal of the program since its inception. Since 2004, 730 students and twelve instructors were engaged in service learning under the SAFE grant at HCC.

One reason there was such a diversity of courses involved with SAFE was the focus of the grant. At first, we had some difficulty in relating the concept of national security and domestic and emergency preparedness to most courses. However, with the help of staff and trainers from CCNCCE, we found a definition that stimulated numerous projects. We worked with at-risk populations that would be particularly vulnerable during periods of turmoil. Our students and faculty addressed the following topics: Providing services to veterans; understanding and preventing bullying in the schools; and providing information to the elderly and people with severe chronic health conditions about accessing help during a community crisis, and about health-enhancing practices.

The variety of issues addressed by the SAFE grant provided the opportunity for the college to interact with a number of community agencies. This has led to a good working relationship between the college and many community partners, and this rapport will be the foundation for future service learning projects and activities. Likewise, this collaboration with agencies and institutions in the greater Tampa area is very much in line with the college's mission to be an engaged and visible community resource.

The SAFE grant has also allowed our college to interact professionally with a number of other community colleges that received funding under this grant. We learned a great deal about how service learning programs are administered at other colleges and about the projects in which the campuses were engaged. We brought back to our school many of the ideas we learned from sharing with our SAFE colleagues.

## **Lessons Learned from the SAFE Grant**

One of the important lessons we learned was that strong faculty leadership is needed to build a service learning program. At HCC, service learning has been faculty driven and is seen as a faculty initiative by both administrators and professors.

The fact that two well-known, senior faculty members were the coordinators of service learning was crucial in building credibility and interest in the program. It was frequently through personal contacts and conversations that faculty were recruited to service learning. Likewise, the faculty coordinators gave numerous in-service presentations about the mechanics and goals of service learning to other faculty.

Further, the projects undertaken by the faculty and their students were often highlighted in college publications, including the school newspaper, the internal college newsletter for faculty and staff, and college materials prepared for the community. This acknowledgement of faculty successes with service learning encouraged others to add a service learning component to their courses.

Another lesson we learned was the necessity to manage data regarding the SAFE grant. As with most grants, a quarterly reporting of activities and expenditures was required. Collecting and organizing relevant material, and anticipating which information will be useful, helped us to address the grant's reporting requirements in a timely and efficient manner.

A third valuable lesson has been the importance of evaluation and assessment in building a service learning program. Although getting good data requires creativity and time, this information is gathered most effectively by talking with both faculty and staff about the role of service learning in higher education. All service learning students at HCC complete an evaluation of this experience at the end of the term. Over the last four years, we have collected much information from many students in very diverse courses. This data has been overwhelmingly positive and supportive of the service learning experience. Students have consistently reported that their service learning activities contributed to their personal growth and their academic learning.

Supportive data has also been most helpful in maintaining the administration's dedication to service learning. The number of students participating in service learning, the variety of agencies collaborating with the college, and the enthusiasm of the faculty are factors that have impressed the college's leaders.

However, with regards to evaluation, there is one question that we have not yet answered with hard data: "Does service learning contribute to student retention?" The faculty feels that it does, but we need some persuasive quantitative data. We are investigating methods to address this question.

The support of the administration at all levels at HCC has been instrumental in building HCC's Service Learning Program. Although the initiative has been faculty driven, it was the Dean of Continuing Education and Community Programs, Dr. Sharon Miller, who initially recruited the

service learning faculty coordinators to learn more about this method of teaching. Likewise, it was Dean Miller who initially communicated with the college administration about the value of service learning and generated support for the program.

We have been most fortunate in building HCC's Service Learning Program that the college's president, the chief academic officer, and the many deans from the four campuses have enthusiastically endorsed service learning. It was with the help of these administrators that we have been provided with ongoing financial support, office space, a part-time administrative coordinator, help in collecting and interpreting evaluation data, and help with securing computer equipment.

A fourth lesson we have learned from the SAFE grant is the need to manage well the growth of our service learning program. As more and more faculty become interested in service learning, there is a need for quality control and some standardization of the process. A central office that assists faculty in developing ideas and contacting community resources is essential so that future efforts can benefit from past projects and experiences.

A coordinating office also serves to review the service learning projects proposed by faculty and to insure that adequate reflection activities are included in the courses. This tactful oversight helps to maintain the true philosophy of service learning, namely connecting experience with academic learning and meeting an identified community need.

Likewise, it is essential to develop a partnership with community agencies and local and regional institutions. It is necessary for faculty to have a dialogue with community partners about the goals of service learning and the needs and idiosyncrasies of the agency prior to starting a project. This connection serves to make sure that all parties are clear about their expectations related to the service learning activities. Further, it is essential that students are given an orientation to the agency or program prior to their engagement with the community partner.

Through experience, we have learned about the needs of various community partners and about the characteristics of these agencies. Further, the community partners become more adept at utilizing service learning students as they have more experience with the students, the faculty, and the coordinators of the service learning program. The collaboration and trust that is built with community resources over time very much contributes to the success of service learning projects.

The Service Learning Program at HCC is also indebted to the Florida Campus Compact (FCC) for the support and guidance that FCC has given us. Our first introduction to the philosophy of service learning was at a conference conducted by FCC. At this conference, we were taught how to build a service learning program at our institution and how to market the concept to administration and faculty. This training was invaluable in getting the program started at HCC.

Also, through our participation in Florida Campus Compact activities, we have met representatives from other service learning programs throughout the state. This networking has been most helpful in that we have learned from both the successes and the challenges of other programs. In particular, Miami-Dade College has provided us with much guidance in the

development of our program, and it was through FCC that we had our initial introduction to the managers of the service learning program at Miami-Dade.

### **The Vision for Service Learning at HCC**

A primary goal for the Service Learning Program at HCC is to become a part of the college's regular budget. To date, we have been funded through grants and faculty development money. In order for the program to have sustainability and to become truly institutionalized, it is essential that the program have reliable funding. It is all too easy for "soft money" to disappear.

The Service Learning Program at HCC continues to grow quickly. In order to manage this growth, a full-time administrative coordinator is needed. Currently, the program has a part-time administrator. However, this dedicated individual is working at maximum capacity at present. Continued growth will create an unreasonable burden for a part-time employee.

The program also needs to continue to secure grant funding. Although predictable college support is necessary, it is not sufficient. Outside funding will facilitate continued growth and will encourage further collaboration with diverse programs throughout the country. As noted previously, one of the benefits of the SAFE grant has been the opportunity to work with professionals from other colleges and universities.

The program will continue to maintain a high level of visibility within the college community. This is an effective way to recruit new faculty and to acknowledge current service learning faculty for work well done. New faculty will also be encouraged to consider service learning as a way to build their portfolios for tenure. Service learning fits well with several of the criteria used in awarding tenure, namely service to the college and service to the community.

Publicizing service learning within the college also stimulates interest among students, many of whom have engaged in service learning activities in high school. Reminding students that HCC has many service learning courses encourages them to investigate and to enroll in these courses. When service learning becomes student-driven, this is an important milestone on the road to institutionalization.

The Service Learning Program is dedicated to increasing the scope of service learning throughout the college. Although all campuses have been offering service learning courses, the bulk of these courses have been taught at the Dale Mabry campus, the largest of the four campuses. The program's administrative and faculty coordinators will continue to attend faculty meetings at all campuses to recruit faculty, but with special emphasis on the smaller campuses.

Likewise, the college is developing a fifth campus in the southern part of the county. It is hoped that service learning will be included in several courses from the very start of this campus' operation. It is anticipated that the college's president will be supportive of this initiative.

We are most optimistic about the future of the Service Learning Program at Hillsborough Community College, and we are seeing that success begets success. As word of the college's Service Learning Program has spread in the community, we are now getting requests from

agencies and programs to have service learning students at their sites. We have been approached by Meals on Wheels, the Florida Blood Bank, and the Boys & Girls Club about including them as service learning sites for our students and faculty.

We are enthusiastic about the growth of our Service Learning Program, and we are very appreciative of those who have helped us get to this point. We were most fortunate to have been awarded a SAFE grant, and we are indebted to the Community College National Center for Community Engagement for providing us with invaluable support and encouragement.

#### **About the Authors:**

**Dr. Cynthia Hawkins** and **Dr. William Day** are on the faculty at Hillsborough Community College (HCC) in Tampa, FL. Dr. Day is the Manager of the Counseling and Human Services Program, and Dr. Hawkins is a Professor of Sociology. They are faculty coordinators of service learning at HCC. Drs. Day and Hawkins were encouraged by Dr. Sharon Miller, Dean of Continuing Education, to investigate service learning by attending a Florida Campus Compact workshop in Orlando, FL in March of 2002. They returned from this conference with a concrete plan for implementing service learning at their college, and each began teaching service learning courses during fall semester of 2002. Drs. Day and Hawkins have made many presentations to administrators and faculty explaining service learning at HCC. In March, they presented a session titled, "Getting Started" at the National Service Learning Conference in Orlando, Florida. They recently co-presented "Healthcare, Mental Health, and Violence: A Look at Social Problems and Domestic Preparedness in Tampa, Florida and San Antonio, Texas" at the CCNCCE annual conference, "Adapting to the Paths of Change." They are also involved in a grant with the Florida Campus Compact that involves students and faculty from at least two of the college's four campuses. The grant is a collaboration between the college and the City of Tampa to begin the beautification of a blighted neighborhood located next to the Dale Mabry Campus of HCC. Cynthia Hawkins' **Phone:** 813-253-7368; **E-mail :** [chawkins@hccfl.edu](mailto:chawkins@hccfl.edu) ; Bill Day's **Phone :** 813-253-7414 ; **E-mail:** [bday@hccfl.edu](mailto:bday@hccfl.edu)

**Barbara Ritter** completed her Bachelor's Degree in Biology Education at University of West Florida. After several years of traveling as a military wife, she came to work for Hillsborough Community College. She spent more than fifteen years working for the Math Department before becoming the Program Coordinator for Service Learning at HCC in May, 2005.