

University civic education course

Community service/Service learning

February-April 2010

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Introduction

The course aims to promote greater university community involvement. The National Charter 2002 calls for university ‘openness’ on its environment be it social, economic or cultural. Since students are crucial elements in the University Reform and the educational system in Morocco in general, the course looks at ways where students can participate in some sort of service experience before they leave university. As a matter of fact, this will broaden their sense of serving their community, will boost their learning experience and will definitely add more value to their personal development and eventually make their curriculum vitae more attractive and interesting. Moreover, the course will earn the students essential civic competencies and skills necessary for community-engaged and responsible citizens.

What is service learning?

So, what is community service or service learning? The two terms are used relatively interchangeably. Some people use service learning, others use community service or community-based learning. In any case, university students engage in community service activities with intentional academic and learning goals and opportunities for reflection that connect to their academic disciplines. The activities in question are meant to meet community needs. In other words, service learning can be defined as an educational experience in which students (a) participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs, and (b) reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of personal values and civic responsibility. Bowling Green State University defines community service as, “a course that offers formal academic credit qualifies as a service learning course if: Students engage in service that is valuable to a community through activities that directly contribute to student achievement of the learning outcomes of the course. Documentation of the value and impact of the service on the community is obtained from the community.”

In this respect, students learn how they can actively contribute more effectively to a diverse, democratic society. This learning can take different forms; for instance:

- recognizing how a particular academic discipline or profession can meet important needs of society;
- fulfilling civic responsibility through community effort; or

- developing skills or understanding that will enhance students' contributions as responsible citizens and community members.

Unlike the USA where colleges and universities are increasingly including in their educational mission the preparation of graduates as future citizens, Moroccan universities have been struggling to teach traditional disciplines, do not fully implement a reform before they embark on another, which is the case of the National Charter (2002) and the Emergency Scheme/Plan (2009-2012). However, it is about time we did something. A starting point can be benefiting from our partners in terms of interesting ideas such as service learning or community service which we are trying to introduce and make good use of at Ben Msik.

This, of course, will lead us to ask the question: Why should service learning be adopted or integrated?

Service learning invites students to bring who they are, what they know, and what they can do into the classroom and beyond the classrooms walls. It is an excellent opportunity to prepare them for the real world and to instill in them some values which will make of them better citizens for their country and for the world.

Being civic-minded is more than just what students know. It is a combination of what students do with what they know. Universities and institutions of higher education are generally producing individuals who know without doing. What a country like ours needs is to increase our students' capacity of how to apply their knowledge and skills to civic issues. For this purpose, service learning is just a crucial element in the equation to have mindful individuals who deliberately choose to do good for their community and country.

Service learning offers a win-win situation for the parties involved in the operation i.e. the students, the institution and the community. In other words, the benefits are threefold:

1. For the students, service learning will enhance their academic learning and skills since they will have hands-on experience with the real world as they will be operating with people and community issues. This fact will definitely strengthen their understanding of relevance of learning regarding real-world situations. Since students will be meeting people and facing community issues, service learning is likely to boost their critical thinking skills, problem-solving skills and cognitive development. Moreover, they will develop their self-awareness, which will help them clarify values, beliefs and priorities. They will also improve their interpersonal skills and team spiritedness as they will most probably be working in groups. Finally, service learning is a golden opportunity for students to promote their life-long commitment to civic engagement and responsibility. This is, of course, the essence of service learning.

2. For the institution, service learning plays a significant role in providing the institution with a reputation locally, nationally and even internationally. The institution will be known and well-reputed if it promotes service learning and if its students show an in-

depth demonstration and understanding of service learning and eventually impact their community, at the national and even at the international level. This fact will earn the institution the respect and trust of the community, other institutions, and partners alike. Speaking of partners will lead us to talk about other benefits for the institution. During their service learning, students acquire building partnerships skills. Of course, because they represent an institution, and depending on their service projects, they will likely build partnerships with local authorities, the private sector, associations, etc. These partnerships will strengthen the position of the institution and will consequently be conducive to more partnerships with different types of organizations. In one way or another, the institution will be contributing to the career development of its students, improving its own reputation and that of its staff.

Concerning staff or faculty, the institution will benefit as there will be stronger faculty/staff involvement in the process. If teachers motivate their students to do well, the learning outcomes will be considerable and the former will also be motivated to give more, to motivate their students more and consequently to be somehow more involved somewhere in the service operation so that to give more credibility to the students, the institution and themselves.

Service learning can be seen as a win-win business situation where the students perform a service towards their community. In this respect, the community benefits, but the students, too, are beneficiaries since they not only apply but also demonstrate what they have learned in real life situations. What's more, they see the results of their learning right in front of their very eyes. As consequence, the community recognizes the efforts of the students and indirectly those of their institution. The community visibility becomes clearer vis-à-vis the service and the institution, and thus the latter gains the community's full support for the institution's successful mission.

Having succeeded in its institutional mission, the institution will have done its share regarding civic engagement. Of course, more service learning will be encouraged and more civic engagement will be adopted and generated. As university is an institution of higher education, more research will be triggered. Finally, having benefited their institution and themselves, the students will have a great deal of satisfaction since their university experience will be crowned by success at the level of studying (acquiring knowledge) and at the level of skills (life skills through serving their community and putting in practice what they have learned at university).

Last but not least are the benefits for the community.