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Why Service Learning is Important to Librarians

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“If colleges and universities become properly engaged with our communities, we can become the source of social capital for a new era.”

—Judith Ramaley, PSU President, 1990–1997

Service learning is an important and growing trend in higher education, and librarians need to become involved at their institutions. The attention service learning is getting in higher education is evidenced by the creation in 2006 of the Carnegie Classification on Community Engagement and the inclusion of service learning in the Association of American Colleges and Universities’ (AAC&U) high impact educational practices (Kuh, 2008).

What does service learning look like? An example from Oregon State University is the Writing Liaison (OWL) project. OWL integrates service learning and community outreach opportunities by pairing OSU undergraduates in Writing (WR) 121 courses with student writers at local middle and high schools. Under the guidance of their university instructors, the OSU students work with the middle and high school students to develop and revise a personal essay about an aspect of their educational experiences. The OSU students, having been trained in peer editing techniques, offer generative feedback to their mentee students. Afterward, the OSU students write a brief reflective paper about their experiences working with the students, themes, and texts. OSU’s Assistant Professor and Director of Writing, Susan Meyers, states that:

The OSU instructors reported that their students enjoyed this project as something that was more than “just another assignment” and that it gave them insight both into how much they have developed as writers, and how much more work they have ahead of them. They found it challenging to achieve both a positive, motivating tone in their letters to the high school writers while, at the same time, giving them specific, constructive feedback. In particular, participating OSU instructors mentioned that during the OWL project, their students were more articulate about WR 121 course concepts and more self-aware of the process that teachers go through when they are evaluating papers. Many instructors said they felt like their students are now paying more attention to the comments written on their own papers because they better understand the intention and process behind them.

So what is service learning? Essentially it is an “experiential learning pedagogy that balances the needs of student and community members involved, links the service and learning through reflective processes, and if skillfully managed leads to positive student personal, social or citizenship, career, and intellectual development” (Eyler, 2002). In other words, service learning uses what students learn in the classroom to solve real-life problems. Kuh writes of service learning:

In these programs, field-based “experiential learning” with community partners is an instructional strategy—and often a required part of the course. The idea is to give students direct experience with issues they are studying in the curriculum and with ongoing efforts to analyze and solve problems in the community. A key element in these programs is the opportunity students have to both apply what they are learning in



real-world settings and reflect in a classroom setting on their service experiences. These programs model the idea that giving something back to the community is an important college outcome, and that working with community partners is good preparation for citizenship, work, and life (Kuh, 2008).

There are three key elements of service learning. The first is reciprocity. This emphasizes the importance of service learning as a mutually beneficial partnership between the institution and the community organization. The second element is reflection. Structured reflection activities allow students to connect their service experience to particular learning outcomes. Reflection activities should occur regularly to allow students to explore, clarify, and alter values, and provide an opportunity for faculty feedback. Sample reflection activities include personal journals, directed writings, agency presentations, case studies, portfolios, and experiential research papers. The third key element of service learning is civic education. Among the goals of many institutions is to create civic-minded graduates. Service learning contributes to this goal by creating and strengthening the serving-to-learn and learning-to-serve ethic. The key is that service learning is more than volunteerism. With service learning, the community becomes an extension of the classroom and the service is a vehicle for students to reach their academic goals.

Librarians need to focus on the opportunities that service learning offers for engaging and connecting with students, faculty and the larger community. Here are five reasons why service learning is important to librarians and why librarians should get involved on their campuses. Service learning can:

1. Support and actualize the university's mission and strategic plan
2. Strengthen connections between librarians and the curriculum
3. Increase opportunities for faculty/librarian partnerships
4. Create ties with students
5. Foster connections between the library and the community


Each university's mission is unique, yet most, if not all, institutions strive to graduate students that are civically engaged and socially responsible. One way for universities to meet this goal is through service learning. Librarians can play a key role in creating civically engaged students by providing resources and instruction that allow students to explore local, national, and international issues such as food insecurity, education, homelessness, environmental sustainability and immigration.

Many campuses offer a central office to assist faculty and students in connecting to the community. These centers can also provide pedagogical support to faculty to strengthen the connection between the service experience and the course and assignments. By collaborating with faculty and service learning centers, librarians can strengthen their ties to the curriculum and their partnerships with faculty. As librarians work closely with faculty on course objectives that link assignments to the service experience, they learn more about why the faculty member chose to incorporate service learning and work with particular organizations. This knowledge can deepen the partnership as they develop a mutual understanding about the course that can be conveyed to students. New opportunities can also arise from these partnerships. Librarians could offer workshops on linking research and service, connect with faculty in other disciplines, and create higher visibility for information literacy on campus.



Service learning offers the opportunity for librarians to create and strengthen ties with students. But how does service learning benefit students? Articles in the service learning literature articulate that students in “service learning classes report higher gains in academic skills, life skills, and civic development than students who do not participate in service learning” (Campbell, 2010).

Librarians can assist students in recognizing and strengthening the connection between their service experience and their course assignment. One study which investigated if a student’s research process was affected by his or her service experience showed that service learning students were more motivated, used a wider variety of sources including numerical data and primary sources, were more knowledgeable in approaching and limiting topics, and recognized the potential for bias (Nutefall, 2009).

Along with the ties librarians can build with faculty and students, service learning can also foster engagement between librarians and the community. Librarians working with faculty and students in service learning courses become more knowledgeable about the local community and community organizations. While many librarians already volunteer in their community, service-learning courses offer an opportunity to foster additional connections in the community and help librarians realize how they can assist local organizations and businesses to help strengthen the community and economy. By becoming involved with service learning, librarians will strengthen ties with the institution, curriculum, faculty, students, and the local community. 

What can librarians do to connect with service learning initiatives?

- The first step is to learn more about service learning in higher education. Examples include the Association of American College & Universities LEAP initiative (2010), Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (2011), Campus Compact (2010), and the National Service-Learning Clearinghouse.
- The second step is reading through the library literature related to service learning. While there is still a paucity of research, a literature search reveals only ten articles in the library literature that highlight service learning in higher education with an additional six focusing specifically on its application to LIS education (see Further Reading for full citations).
- Finally, it is imperative for librarians to become involved in the service learning movement on their campuses and nationally. Opportunities for involvement include:
 - Serving on a campus-wide committee on service learning
 - Joint faculty/librarian research projects related to the impact of service learning on research
 - Conversations with faculty about incorporating service learning and its benefits
 - Contributing to the profession on the links between librarians and service learning through articles in the professional literature and presentations at national conferences.



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