## Service Learning in the Academic Setting: Benefits vs. Challenges

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Over the past five years, there has been a significant increase in faculty interest in service learning at Western Carolina University (WCU). Prompted by curricular reform embodied in the Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP), much of this interest has been translated into exemplary service learning-enhanced courses.

The implementation of the QEP – "Synthesis: A Pathway to Intentional Learning" – is already causing fundamental shifts in the approach to teaching and learning, with greater emphasis on active, integrative student learning and attention to holistic student development. The QEP (in which service learning as a major component) is designed to promote and support engaged learning. Service learning is an approach – and by no means the only one – to student engagement in the learning process, and engagement in the community beyond the campus.

At WCU, service learning is defined as "a teaching and learning strategy that integrates community service with academic instruction and structured reflection in such a way that students gain further understanding of course content, meet genuine community needs, develop career-related skills, and become responsible citizens." Here, service learning is broadly defined and includes such diverse experiences as a one-week community-based research project, a semester-long social work field practicum or engineering capstone, and a yearlong middle-grades education internship. However, to be regarded as service learning, the practicum, capstone, and internship should include a civic dimension – the element of the experience that is focused on addressing social problems or community issues.

The theoretical underpinnings of service learning are found in John Dewey's educational and social philosophy, which encompasses learning from experience, reflective activity, community, and democracy. Connection to the curriculum differentiates service learning from community service (i.e., voluntary or mandatory service). The community service project implemented as part of a service-learning experience should be relevant to the goals and content of the course, and ultimately should be meaningful to the student. High-quality service is desirable; high-quality learning is of paramount importance.

And that's where the role of faculty becomes crucial. Faculty members should see themselves as facilitators of learning and motivators of learners. In this regard, students taking courses that have a service-learning component should not be turned loose in a community and be left to their own devices. Rather, with guidance from faculty, students should be active learners while rendering valuable service to the community. Furthermore, faculty should stimulate deep reflection so that students intentionally make the connection between theory and application – between what they learn in the classroom and what they practice in the community. Accordingly, faculty should guide students in navigating the complexities of higher-order thinking and integrative learning inherent in effective service-learning pedagogy.

**Benefits for Stakeholders**

Demonstrable benefits accrue to all service-learning stakeholders – faculty, students, communities, and institutions of higher education. For faculty, service learning provides a good alternative to the traditional lecture-discussion format and makes a course of study more interactive and student-centered. Service learning enriches and enlivens pedagogical practice. It often "brings books to life and life to books," adding new insights and dimensions to class discussions. For students, service learning provides an avenue for the practical application of knowledge and skills in real-world settings. Many researchers have documented the contributions of service learning to students' cognitive and affective development. There is much evidence of the positive impact of service learning on the development of students' critical-thinking, problem-solving, and ethical decision-making skills. Several studies have provided evidence that students who complete thoughtfully organized service-learning projects are also more likely to feel positively about the course and the instructor. However, faculty should be aware that the academic advantages of service learning do not necessarily manifest themselves immediately.

Communities benefit by their access to university-based resources, including the time and energies that students contribute to help nonprofit organizations and small businesses achieve their goals. Indeed, at its best, service learning is an embodiment of Boyer's scholarship of engagement (interlocking the scholarships of discovery, integration, application, and teaching). Through the scholarship of engagement, the university makes its rich resources available for solving the pressing social, civic, and ethical problems faced by communities. The university obviously benefits by its positive image as an "engaged institution" and a good institutional citizen, responsive to the needs of the region and its constituent communities.

**Challenges for Faculty**

Despite a large body of evidence of the effectiveness of service learning as a pedagogical approach, faculty resistance remains.  For some faculty, the shift away from a traditional paradigm and epistemology is difficult. Bear in mind that service learning reflects a paradigm shift from teaching (delivery of instruction) to learning (discovery or construction of knowledge). It is easy to conclude that some faculty members are so set in their ways that they do not readily or willingly accept change and its challenges. What's more, many professors may fear loss of control when students venture into the community without their direct supervision. Understandably, some prefer to give lectures and offer simulations rather than let their students "take risks" in an authentic community context.

Now, let's be clear: Although it can be incorporated into any course, from anthropology to zoology, service learning is not appropriate for every course or every professor. For example, some courses require extensive classroom work to explore the theoretical foundations of a discipline. And, to be sure, faculty enamored with an "information-assimilation" style of teaching and learning could not care less about service learning.

A major complaint from professors is that service learning takes too much time – too much time for them and for their students. Clearly, the effective integration of service learning into a course is time-consuming and, in some respects, challenging. Service learning requires more effort than it typically takes to organize a "traditional" class. Coordinating and structuring service-learning activities, including reflections, demand much more attention to process. Building reciprocal relationships with community partners also takes time. No one said service-learning practice is easy or meant to be easy. In reality, it is not; nor is it meant to be. The same can be said for effective teaching and learning.

WCU has a variety of resources (see links below) to assist faculty in incorporating service learning into the curriculum. Faculty who care deeply about their students – and most WCU faculty do – should take advantage of opportunities to promote active, integrative learning by embracing service learning as a pedagogical approach. Through service learning, students can be better prepared for productive roles in the workplace and in society. In the final analysis,  the benefits of service learning far outweigh the challenges.

**Service-Learning Resources:**

- Center for Service Learning Homepage – http://www.wcu.edu/9815.asp
- Community Partners and Service Sites – http://www.wcu.edu/23004.asp
- Course Designation ("SLC") – http://www.wcu.edu/9843.asp
- Faculty Fellows and Liaisons – http://www.wcu.edu/9820.asp
- Publications and Presentations – http://www.wcu.edu/9840.asp
- Service-Learning FAQs – http://www.wcu.edu/9824.asp
- Service-Learning Forms and Resources – http://www.wcu.edu/9817.asp
- Symposium on Service Learning & Civic Engagement – http://www.wcu.edu/9818.asp

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**A Note From The Editor:**

We urge you to add your comments to Faculty Forum articles. It enriches the faculty dialogue about these many issues that concern us all. Comment to this article by clicking on this link then select the article under What's Hot on the right:
https://media.wcu.edu/groups/facultyforum/. The command requires you to use your email username and password to access the article. The Faculty Forum is a publication by and for WCU faculty, so this is our method of limiting access.

To access the article as a PDF, please select the article link at the following URL:
http://www.wcu.edu/24987.asp.

The direct link to the main Faculty Forum Webpage is: http://www.wcu.edu/7480.asp.

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# Coulter Faculty Center for Teaching and Learning
## Responses to ------- Faculty Forum article entitled

### The Future of Cullowhee:
### Staff and Faculty Voice Their Opinions

By Todd A. Collins, J.D., Ph.D.
Assistant Professor, Dept. of Political Science

`Hal Herzog, Psychology:`    *Todd -- great faculty forum.  Good data, beautifully written, and important!*

`Kyle Carter, Provost:`    *Todd, I just wanted you to know that I thought your forum piece was great.  I think the information is very valuable to the university and illustrates a very nice engagement activity for our students.  Nice job!*
*kc*

`Patty Johnson, IT Division:`    *It's a shame the survey included staff but only faculty are targeted in this article - I'm assuming that the limiting of access is to faculty*

*only (and admitting that I didn't try after reading the note about limiting access)??*

*In any case, I have only 2 comments:*

*1) WRT whether or not Cullowhee is attractive to new hires/students: I didn't have an option to indicate that it depends very much on the person in question. If a person prefers city life, nothing that can be done to the old Cullowhee area (or anywhere near campus) will matter to that person. So, the question doesn't take into consideration, so much, the people involved.*

*2) I admit to being embarrassed when asked by some visitors about eating establishments that the Cullowhee Café, I've heard, is a good place to eat but finding it is another question. I suggested they find the building shaped like a Pizza Hut but with no sign indicating what it is. Now, since I rarely venture out of my office for lunch and am guilty of taking the quicker route to/from work (although I admit I rather like the scenery along old 107 much better, in spite of its aging), I'll admit that I don't know whether/not any signage has been added. My instructions were based on the one time I joined a group there (Cullowhee Café).*

*THANKS for sharing this article - it's quite interesting! I've been attending/working at WCU since '82... have seen much change on campus, very little off campus.*
*pj*


**Vera Holland Guise:** *As a native of Cullowhee, I found Todd Collins survey results very intriguing. I lived and worked in Asheville many years and returned to Cullowhee 7 years ago to find it changed and at the same time, much the same. While the university grew by leaps and bounds, the village of Cullowhee as I knew it, declined with neglect. It pains me to see this, and I yearn to see it thriving once again as a busy and beloved mountain township, embraced and led by the people who live here. I would be very interested in seeing the results of a similar survey done by the local people.*

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## Disclaimer