

4-15-2014

Community Engagement Through Service-Learning

Maureen Barry

Wright State University - Main Campus, maureen.barry@wright.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://corescholar.libraries.wright.edu/ul_pub



Part of the [Information Literacy Commons](#)

Repository Citation

Barry, M. (2014). Community Engagement Through Service-Learning. *Strategic Library* (4), 5-7.
https://corescholar.libraries.wright.edu/ul_pub/166

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the University Libraries at CORE Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in University Libraries' Staff Publications by an authorized administrator of CORE Scholar. For more information, please contact corescholar@www.libraries.wright.edu, library-corescholar@wright.edu.

Barry Community Engagement

What can library administrators do to support service-learning initiatives?

- Seek support for library staff interested in contributing to or teaching service-learning (S-L) courses.*
- Connect librarians with potential community partners.
- Publicize library S-L and community engagement initiatives by reporting projects on monthly and annual reports to stakeholders across campus, particularly upper-level administrators.
- Collect and report S-L and other community engagement hours contributed by library staff to support applications for the President's Higher Education Community Service Honor Roll.
- Collect and report S-L and other community engagement hours contributed by library staff to support the Elective Carnegie Classification on Community Engagement.
- Demonstrate an interest in providing an S-L designation in the institution's course registration system and provide administrative support for submitting any paperwork needed to successfully achieve that designation.
- Encourage library marketing and communications staff to publish or share via media outlets or social media any S-L or community engagement efforts made by library staff.
- Provide support for professional development opportunities related to S-L instruction and assessment.
- Inform faculty and academic advisors on campus about S-L course offerings taught by library staff* to help recruit potential students.
- Support the possibility for the library to be the community partner for an S-L course on campus.

*While some librarians are not able to offer their own for-credit courses, they may have the opportunity to support faculty who teach service-learning courses.

by a faculty member or academic advisor who knows the student could benefit from the research skills taught in curriculum. Some join the class because they dropped a three- or four-credit class and need at least one more credit hour to retain their financial aid packages. In short, the students come from a variety of skill levels with varying levels of motivation.

The instructors partner with Project READ, a local literacy nonprofit, to generate a research question or questions for the students to investigate. Because of the time constraints associated with being a one-credit hour course that meets once a week, the instructors decided it would be best to handle the work of building a relationship with the community partner themselves to save as much time as possible for the students to focus on compiling a quality research portfolio.

While EDT1100 students work with one community partner, it is not unusual for some S-L classes to partner with multiple organizations, nor is it unusual for some instructors to allow students to choose their own partners. Instructors could also work with the WSU's Office of Service-Learning or Civic Engagement to connect with an existing community partner for an S-L course.

Relationships with community partners can develop in a variety of ways. The current partnership with Project READ began when the instructors sent an e-mail to its director. The message described the course

and outlined the expectations, including time commitments. Within an hour, Project READ's director replied and enthusiastically agreed because she saw the value in the information the students could provide for her and her staff, even without knowing the topic we would research at that point. The partnership has grown and evolved over time since then.

Months before each section of EDT1100 is taught, the instructors interview the Project READ staff to negotiate an appropriate research question. When deciding on the research question(s), it is important to balance the needs of the community partner with the abilities or capabilities of the students.

In the of Spring 2012, for example, Project READ wanted to know more about the latest fundraising trends for nonprofits, which seemed to be a good fit for the students. The instructors expected that students would find fundraising examples on the Internet and in consumer or trade publications and explore scholarly literature to find theories that explain why people make charitable donations. Fundraising wouldn't be too difficult a topic for the students to understand, either, as it is a fairly universal concept that most people have encountered at some point in their lives.

COURSE CONTENT

The instructors scaffold the syllabus so that students learn the research process throughout the semester, all the while

building a research portfolio for Project READ. Each assignment builds upon the last; students search for Web sites and statistics before moving on to newspapers, magazines, scholarly articles, and books. The lesson plans are hands-on and practical, focusing on research strategies and evaluating information as outlined by the ACRL IL Competency Standards.⁴

For example, in the first week or so, instructors teach lessons and conduct in-class activities that build student's keyword development skills. For homework, students are expected to find five to seven Web sites that are relevant to the research question.

A little later in the semester, after evaluation skills and criteria are introduced in class, students make decisions about which sources are the most appropriate to include in the research portfolio. The students gain practice with comparing and corroborating information as they select the best resources.

A similar process is used as the instructors guide students through using databases and other resources to find a variety of other formal, scholarly sources to address the research question at hand. The purpose and audience of the sources are considered when selecting the most appropriate ones.

Later in the semester, the instructors highlight strategies for reading and annotating scholarly articles. The instructors adapted a worksheet, borrowed with permission from a WSU faculty member,

that students fill in, which asks questions such as “What is the author’s thesis?” to empower students to complete a successful annotation. At this point, students begin to compile and synthesize the information into the research portfolio.

The students include annotations, complete with properly formatted citations, of the sources they have decided are the most useful for Project READ. They also write recommendations to include in the portfolio. These recommendations include trends or best practices found during the research process. The instructors supply guidelines for writing the recommendations.

While the research conducted throughout the semester is the primary means of service, it does not allow for direct and repeated interaction with Project READ staff. Without this interaction, students have expressed difficulty understanding how their service is going to help the non-profit.

To address this disconnect, students now participate in a book-sorting activity at least once during the semester to contribute to one of Project READ’s goals: to distribute books throughout the region. The students help select books in good condition with appropriate subjects from piles of donated texts at a local book warehouse, Look At A Book, which serves, in small part, as a benefactor for Project READ. The titles are set aside, and the Project READ staff distributes them at community events and in schools.

SERVICE-LEARNING OUTCOMES

New librarians, in particular, can be so focused on everyday tasks that they can lose sight of the fact that their work can support the institution’s mission in many ways. For example, in the beginning stages of transforming EDT1100 into an S-L course, it was not a strategic move to create a course that supported the WSU mission. The course was developed out of a desire to increase student motivation to learn and apply information literacy skills.

On the first day of class, however, when an S-L veteran came to explain service-learning to the students, it was a happy accident to learn that S-L supports Wright State’s institutional mission to “transform the lives of our students and the communities we serve” by “engaging in significant community service.”⁵

It became clear that the course would be meaningful for the students, the instructors, the community partner, and the university.

EDT1100 offers an opportunity for students to connect information to the “real world.” The instructors have traditionally used student reflections and assignments to assess how the learning objectives are being met. In their reflections, students indicate that they gain at least a basic understanding of how the information they collect ties to real community problems and solutions. In addition to naming or describing IL skills they have acquired throughout the course in their reflections, students also mention that they appreciate knowing that their research and recommendations are submitted directly to the community partner, and not solely to the instructors for a grade. One student shared the following sentiment during the group reflection activity on the last day of class: “Seeing everything come together in the end...it convinced me that our work was worthwhile; it wasn’t just busy work.”

Over the past couple of years, a few former students have shared with us that they still use the skills they learned in EDT1100. Most recently, a former EDT1100 student approached one of the instructors at the library’s reference desk and shared: “I really got a lot out of your class. Since then, I’ve had to teach my classmates what to do when we have research assignments.” While this informal evidence is anecdotal, it does provide proof that this student retained what he learned in the course and was able to apply it to other coursework during his WSU career.

The students also benefit from seeing the partnership between Look At a Book, a small business, and Project READ, a non-profit. They begin to understand how such partnerships can help solve community problems.

SERVICE-LEARNING OUTREACH

The opportunity to help solve a community problem while teaching the course has been extremely satisfying to the instructors. Personally, I have gained valuable S-L experience that translated into a liaison role with faculty who teach service-learning courses. I have since partnered with faculty who teach service-learning composition courses to explore additional methods to tie information literacy skills with service-learning experiences.

Perhaps the most obvious beneficiary of the service-learning experience is the community partner. Nonprofits are often short-staffed and have little time to conduct research in the midst of daily operations

and fundraising. Most do not have access to the subscription resources available at the University.

Even if the information collected doesn’t lead to a specific implementation or a new program, it is still valuable. The research portfolios may confirm for the nonprofit that they are already engaging in best practices and may not need to make improvements. Staff may be more willing to share their best practices with other local nonprofits when their programs are validated by the research.

The EDT1100 course outcomes achieved increased student motivation, in most cases, just as the instructors had hoped. In addition, the course provides a meaningful opportunity for students and librarians to engage together with the surrounding community.

While the primary focus of an academic library staff is serving the needs of students, faculty, and staff, academic libraries can bolster their relevance, value and vibrancy when they collaborate with the surrounding communities. In particular, if the institutional mission includes serving the community, service-learning is an emerging opportunity for libraries to support this mission. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Maureen Barry is First Year Experience Librarian at Wright State University Libraries. She can be reached by phone at 937-775-3515 or by e-mail at maureen.barry@wright.edu.

FOOTNOTES:

- ¹ Wright State University. (n.d.) Office of Service Learning and Civic Engagement. Retrieved from <http://www.wright.edu/academicaffairs/servicelearning/>.
- ² National Youth Leadership Council. (n.d.). What is service-learning? Retrieved from <http://www.nylc.org>.
- ³ Association of College and Research Libraries. (n.d.) Information literacy competency standards for higher education. Retrieved from <http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/informationliteracycompetency>.
- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ Wright State University. (n.d.). Mission Statement. Retrieved from <http://www.wright.edu/about/mission-statement>.