

Service and Research Corps at a Soup Kitchen

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Purpose

- Engages students in direct service and research, helping them develop critical thinking skills about their service work.
- Builds trusting, cooperative relationships between students and community partners, allowing partners to initiate research and other new projects together with students.
- Demonstrates to students that they have the potential to make a difference in their own communities through both academic work and service.

Background

Patrick Donohue, a professor of political science at Middlesex, wanted to help students consider the responsibilities of citizenship while developing advocacy skills. Donohue also wanted to be in authentic partnership with community agencies. Conversations with Bonner Foundation staff members and access to the Bonner network put these goals into a practical framework for implementation by linking service and research.

How It Works

Service and Research

Twenty-five to 30 students at Middlesex County Community College carry out direct service and research in small teams at three or four community sites. The program director and student leaders work closely with community partners to establish service and research goals each year.

Bonner Leader corps members have worked with an English professor at a homeless shelter to improve childhood literacy; assisted a sociology professor in providing service and research work at Elijah's Promise, a soup kitchen; mentored under a criminal justice professor; and tutored Middlesex students who need remedial courses.

At Elijah's Promise a team of seven to ten Bonner Leaders assisted with meal preparation and a food donation program. This service work grew into a community asset-mapping research project. After interviewing staff members to discern what resources were needed each month, Bonner Leaders conducted a building-by-building survey of the area. They developed a database of businesses and nonprofit organizations and solicited donations in a systematic fashion. The following year, the same students worked with a sociology professor and her students to conduct a second study to discern what additional services clients needed. The research concluded that patrons wanted a bag lunch program. Because of work conflicts, lack of school lunch programs, and transportation issues, adults and children were going hungry in the middle of the day. Bonner Leaders then designed and implemented a bag lunch program.

Student Training

Students participate in a two-day pre-service training on campus and at the Bonner Foundation during which they visit the community partners. During the year weekly meetings are held, with time to consider "big picture" issues as well as time to plan and reflect within service teams. Community partners attend the meetings every other week.

Compensation

Students do 300 hours of service in an AmeriCorps term over one academic year and earn an equivalent rate of \$6 to \$8 per hour, including the AmeriCorps education award, through stipends,

work-study funds, and institutional money. Returning students receive an equivalent rate of \$10 per hour. A minimum living allowance is set by AmeriCorps and supplemented by Middlesex and community partners. Because Middlesex is a two-year school, students who transfer to local colleges are often hired as site directors to offer continuity.

Funding from Community Partners

The first service program at Middlesex was supported by a grant from AmeriCorps in 1994. When the grant ended in 1996, the directors and the community partners were committed to continuing the program. Two community partners began donating \$6,000 to the service program each year. The \$12,000 of unrestricted funds gave the program much needed flexibility and funding. Neither the community partner nor the campus views this as a payment for services done but as a way to express their authentic partnership and their regard for the value of the work.

“Fee for Service” Research

The Woodbridge Housing Authority and Middlesex collaborated on a project in which the Housing Authority donated \$6,000 to the corps, and Middlesex executed a high-quality research project at Woodbridge. Comparison-shopping revealed that a private company would charge \$30,000 for a similar project, while a four-year private institution would charge \$15,000. One or two of these projects a year could generate substantial support for the service corps at Middlesex, contributing to a sustainable, mutually beneficial relationship between community and the corps.

What Makes The Project Unique

Linking service to students' academic work can help ease the strain on the already tight budgets of community partners. Bonner Leaders contribute a significant number of service hours over an extended period of time. There is less outside training time involved, because faculty members provide students with specific goals and objectives directed toward research. The combined work of the service and research is enhanced by the supervision of faculty members, and community partners enjoy a comprehensive package of support that is effective and easily managed.

By combining service and research at community agencies, student development is also maximized. Students understand the steps involved in advocacy, and critical thinking skills are developed as students are challenged to make these important connections. Additionally, because Middlesex students live in the communities they serve, they are easily inspired and empowered to create positive change.

Benefits

To Students

Bonner Leader corps members explore career options through their service and research. Several members have already changed their career paths to teaching and social work professions.

Being part of a community like the Bonner Leader corps is very important at this commuter college with open enrollment, where many students find it difficult to remain in school. Corps members rely on each other and their professors to help with problems, and being a corps member may increase their chances of graduating from Middlesex.

To Faculty

This program provides an alternative to the traditional classroom setting, giving faculty members an effective way to work more closely with a smaller number of students. Community service and research offer a living laboratory for faculty in which they can apply theory to practice. It is personally satisfying for many professors to develop close relationships with students. By teaming up with such a dedicated group of students, faculty members can accomplish a great deal and engage in work that is relevant to their communities. This work offers publishing opportunities for faculty members, both within their own disciplines and in service-learning journals.

To Community Partners

Community agencies benefit from direct service teams that provide a steady stream of labor. Elijah's Promise has had at least seven dedicated students a year serve with them since 1994, and as a result, they have been able to support ongoing programs and develop new services.

The partnership allows community agencies to think more strategically and develop a research and development department similar to a Fortune 500 company. Utilizing research results in fund-raising and grant proposals can greatly increase their chances of winning future funding. Many partners hire former student corps members as full-time paid staff members. These students are educated, trained, and knowledgeable about the work of the agency.

Resources And Partners

The Bonner Foundation

- The Bonner Leader corps and Research Center was allocated a large office space on campus with couches, a computer, phone, and fax, which provides students a sense of ownership of the program and a place to be in community with each other.

AmeriCorps

- Provides funding, additional training opportunities and a connection to a national service movement.

Community Partners

- Elijah's Promise, Amandla's Crossing, the English-as-a-second-language program, and the Woodbridge Housing Authority devote a great deal of time and energy into planning and working with students and faculty.

Middlesex County Community College

- The College contributes \$14,000 in work-study funds to the Bonner Leader corps.
- Student stipends are essential because the majority of the student body works and attends school full-time.
- Middlesex also does not charge any of the departments for the costs of running an office or administering grants. The school also releases the director from teaching two of the required five courses to run the Bonner Leader corps and the Research Center. In 2002-2003, four additional professors were released from teaching one course to engage in research and service.

How to Make it Grow

House the Corps

Plans are in the works to create Democracy House, a home for the corps and the Research Center for student training and faculty development.

Grow the Program Slowly

As administrative structure and support grow, more research and service teams can be added. Ideally, one administrative staff person would supervise two or three teams of faculty and students.

Name a Full-Time Director of the Corps

A director is needed to offer support to students and faculty members and to connect with Bonner Foundation and AmeriCorps resources most effectively.

Student Incentives

By increasing student stipends, corps members will be able to focus their efforts and not be forced to work another job. Offering students three independent study credits would benefit them financially and academically.

Increase Quality of Student Training

Training could be more effective with midyear and end-of-year retreats. A cross-training event at another Bonner school would add depth and richness to the program.

Logistical Support

Currently, the program has no vehicles for student use. Two vans would be a great asset to the program. Funds are also necessary for public relations brochures and the development of a web site.