

A L L E G H E N Y C O L L E G E

Bonner Scholar/Bonner Leader Program

BONNER CONGRESS



PROJECT PROPOSAL

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Recently Allegheny College has been facing some issues with their relationships of service in the Meadville community. While many students, professors, and organizations have sought volunteer positions in the area, sites have found that inconsistency of placement and lack of issue education has lead to some unsatisfactory service-based relationships. In a recent visit to The College of New Jersey I learned about how the implementation of the Issue-Based Model of Service could help alleviate some of these concerns. My big idea as a Bonner Congress Representative for Allegheny College would be to use my Congress experience to better understand and more smoothly implement this Issue-Based Service Model at Allegheny College.

History of College and Community

The Allegheny College Office of Community Service works with five main service organizations. The Bonner Program, which currently includes 40 students, The Davies Leader Program, which includes approximately ten students, the Allegheny Volunteer Service Leaders which includes six to eight students, the Allegheny Greek Community, which includes five fraternities and five sororities, and the Allegheny College Service Learning program. This means that there are around 150 student service leaders at any given time working to match students at different community partners.

Allegheny College was founded in 1815 and is set in the formerly resource and opportunity-rich town of Meadville, Pennsylvania. Once home to a booming industrial economy including Chancelock Tools and Dad's Dog Food, it also was a major railroad hub and boasted the invention of the zipper. However, by the late nineteen hundreds the area saw a steep decline in industry leaving Meadville and Crawford County in a severe economic slump. Today, the average household income in Meadville is around \$27,000, about \$21,000 below the state average¹. While there are literally dozens of community agencies seeking to meet the vast number needs of the area's residence, resources of time and money are limited.

Issue Symptoms

Allegheny College has many well-established relationships in the community, and has been encouraging and assisting students seeking to serve in the area for decades. In the ever-changing social and economic circumstances of the area today, several problems have developed in creating and sustaining good relationships with community partners. These have been brought to my attention gradually throughout my three years as a student at Allegheny College. Recently I have had the opportunity to serve simultaneously as part of three of the main service organizations on campus including the Bonner Program, the Greek Community, and the Service Learning program. Working to coordinate service projects with so many different students and community partners brought to my attention a considerable problem in the Allegheny service program- one that is imperceptible a far, but upon greater inspection seems to be a significant roadblock in the development of healthy, reciprocal relationships between the college and the community.

The incredible outpouring of support from Allegheny students and administrators in the last ten years has contributed to a dramatic increase of service organizations, projects, and indi-

¹ <http://www.city-data.com/city/Meadville-Pennsylvania.html>

vidual volunteers going into the community everyday. What has developed is a crippling lack of communication among service organizations at Allegheny, which has thus overwhelmed community partners with too many student volunteer coordinators seeking to do the same thing, which is to place students who desire to serve in the community. Essentially, there are too many people trying to accomplish the same goal in varying capacities at the same time. What seems like a simple problem actually contains many complexities. Because of the semester schedules with varying numbers of service leaders and service learning classes, agencies have reported having too many volunteers placed at their organization at some times while having none at other times. This has caused a breakdown in the college's relationship with the community stemming from frustration and miscommunication. At the core of this problem is the inconsistency of placement among student volunteers and leaders, which could potentially be remedied with better organization of student leadership and consistency of positions within the structure of student volunteer management. But what could this look like?

Potential Solution (The "Big Idea")

Last October I visited The College of New Jersey's Bonner Program. This visit came in the midst of having recently had two agencies turn down the placement of Allegheny service learning students due to an inability to manage so many untrained volunteers who were also undereducated on the issues the agencies served. What I learned during this visit was that the Issue-Based Model of Service offered a more cohesive structure of volunteer management, and more importantly a better way of learning about and working with the root-cause of the issues that existed in a community.

Allegheny's current service structure consists of about 31 community partners that can be categorized into addressing 12 issues (see diagrams 1-6). It is apparent that the placement of service leaders and volunteers among community partners has been inconsistent. Paired with a high-volunteer turnover rate in these positions, sometimes eliminating student presence at agencies for semesters at a time, the result is students with little knowledge of the root cause of issues and how to work within an agency to face them. My "big idea" to address this problem is implementing a version of the Issue Based Model of Service at Allegheny College (see diagram 7).

Implementation Steps

The process of implementing this model will include many of the community service directors at Allegheny as well as community partners seeking to improve volunteer placement and education. The process will include several individuals on Allegheny's campus such as:

- David Roncolato (Director of Community Service and Service Learning)
- Jamie Williams (Assistant Director of Community Service and Bonner Coordinator)
- Jessica Badach (Graduate Davies Leader)
- Jim Fitch (Associate Director of Career Services and Davies Leader Co-Director)
- Elizabeth Ozorak (Service Learning Professor and former VESA Director)
- Richard Schindler (Professor and current VESA department head)

Community partners in each issue group will also be involved. Some of these agencies have identified an interest in re-structuring volunteer placement, others will be sought out as key players. These agencies include, but are not limited to:

- Creating Landscapes
- Bethesda
- Crawford County Read
- The Redevelopment Authority
- The Crawford County School System
- Vines Farm, ARC
- The Meadville Area Free Clinic
- Center for Family Services
- The YMCA
- Active Aging
- Women's Services

I hope to use my congress experience to discuss the many assets and challenges that the implementation of this model presents. I plan on seeking the advice of The College of New Jersey in creating an effective issue-based model on my own campus. I am also hoping to discuss the transition with other schools who are currently also trying to implement this model such as Stetson University, Carson Newman College, and Ripon College. The implementation of the Issue Based service model at Allegheny will seek to address the following root causes of relationship breakdown between the college and the community:

- Volunteers with little knowledge of root causes that community partners are seeking to address
- Inconsistency of volunteer placements
- Lack of structure with volunteer management
- Lack of collaboration among similar agencies
- Lack of collaboration among service organizations
- Difficulty in finding agencies at which to place service-learning students
- Lack of student management within sites accepting short-term volunteers
- Low rates of long term commitment to a site or issue
- The untapped resource of experiential and service learning
- Perceived disinterest in community issues among college students
- Perceived lack of opportunity in serving in the community

Conclusion

Complex problems will likely always exist when trying to have successful, reciprocal, and sustained relationships among college service programs and community partners. Addressing these issues requires patience, commitment, and most importantly creativity. The College of New Jersey has demonstrated how, when implemented correctly, the Issue Based Service Model can seek to address some of these problems. My hope is that my congress experience will allow me to take the “big idea” of implementing this model on my campus and give me the resources and opportunities to draw on the experiences of Bonner School across the national network to succeed.
