

First Year Students' Perceptions of Service Learning Community Based Project: Are We Achieving Our Goals?

Karina M. Vernaza

Department of Mechanical Engineering
Gannon University
Erie, PA 16541
Email: vernaza001@gannon.edu

Abstract

Gannon University's culture of service is infused both in curricular and extra-curricular activities. Every freshman student is enrolled in a two-credit First-Year Seminar where they are oriented to the university and its culture, the Liberal Core requirements, amongst other topics. It is in this course where students will satisfy their first curricular service requirements. One of the common learning objectives for all the first-year seminars is that students must "demonstrate the ability to analyze what they have learned from their service learning experience"; in addition, the Liberal Core Curriculum requires that students enrolled in the first-year seminar participate in at least five hours of service learning activities. In the case of the engineering students, a semester long, community based, design project is the means by which the objective and the activity is realized. The selection of the project is a critical and key aspect of the seminar. The goal is for the students to apply basic design concepts to a problem with a high social impact in a team setting.

Besides the technical deliverables related to the engineering aspects of the project, the students are required to provide (1) an individual final reflection adapted from EPICS¹ and AAC&U Civic Engagement VALUE Rubric², and (2) a team final presentation. In the individual reflection, students are asked to critically reflect in three areas:

1. **Life Experiences:** What are the connections between your prior learning (past experiences inside and outside of classroom) and your service-learning project? Has the service-learning experience changed your perspectives about educational and life experiences? Explain how or how not.
2. **Social Impact:** What did you learn about the broader impacts of your work and how you and others can affect change locally and/or globally? Did you identify other needs that need to be met in order for your project to be successful?
3. **Academic Enhancement:** What did you learn related to your discipline and how was that enhanced by the service-learning context? How did you connect your discipline knowledge to the service-learning project?

In the team presentation, students are asked to summarize the lessons learned including remarks regarding this learning experience and how it relates to engineering in addition to the technical aspects of the project.

The individual reflections clearly outlined in students' words the importance of connecting engineering to the community in a local and global scale. On the other hand, the lessons learned presented in the team presentations focused more on team dynamics: communication, time management, organization, amongst others. It is clear that the goals of the project and the learning objective are met. On the other hand, only when prompted did most of the students

elaborate on the social aspects of engineering. For instance, only one out of six teams mentioned the social aspect of the project in their final presentation in the fall of 2015.

Bibliography

1. EPICS Purdue. [Online] Available: <https://engineering.purdue.edu/EPICS>
2. Association of American Colleges & Universities. [Online] Available: <https://www.aacu.org/civic-engagement-value-rubric>