

Using Service-Learning to Enhance Undergraduate Economics

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What is service-learning?

- Service-learning is a form of experiential learning that connects the classroom with the local community through service or community engagement activities. (Ziegert and McGoldrick 2008).
- Students are given the opportunity to apply and relate economic concepts and theories to real-world experiences within the community and to reflect on the relationship between theory and practice. Students are required to think critically about and grapple with the economic models and theories they study which creates a deep approach to learning economics.
- Students participating in service-learning projects are often encouraged to engage in ongoing reflection as a way to connect the service experience with their academic learning (economic concepts and theories).
- Service learning projects are connected to course content and are organized around clear learning goals.

Service-learning models

- Service-learning components can range from a short experience that accounts for a small portion of the course to a service-learning component that is the basis for the entire course. They can also occur with one community partner or multiple community partners.
- McGoldrick (2002) discusses several service-learning models that can be integrated into a course.
 - **Community service**
 - **Action research**
 - **Community problem solving**
 - **Student-based instruction**
- Additional ways to engage with the community and still create a learning experience for students are field trips or discussion panels where members of the community can attend a class or classes in order to engage in a discussion with students on problems within the community.

Examples for Economics Courses

- Economics of Race and Gender (Student-based instruction model)
 - Students worked in groups of 3 to prepare a 55-min interactive lesson on one of the topics listed on the syllabus and then taught the lessons to students taking Economics at a local high school in Los Angeles. Course goals included: 1) strengthening college students understanding of the course material; 2) increasing economic literacy among high school students; 3) encouraging students to think about human capital accumulation in a deeper way; and 4) engaging students of diverse backgrounds through an alternative active-learning pedagogy.

Examples for Economics Courses, continued

- Economics of Race and Gender (Student-based instruction model)
 - Each student was required to participate in a community-based learning project with the College's Neighborhood Partnership Program. In small groups, students prepared and delivered a 50-minute interactive workshop for 8th grade GEAR UP students attending "A Look at College", which the College hosted. Students also had a discussion with 8th graders about college readiness.

Examples for Economics Courses, continued

- Labor Economics (Community research model)
 - Students worked in small groups to produce a report for a career and job resource center serving a broad spectrum of women in the greater Los Angeles area in which they evaluated the effectiveness of vocational training in improving the labor market opportunities for non-college bound youths. Students were also able to interact with the organization's staff in order to learn more about the challenges that women face in the labor market. The report was used by the organization as a research guide to apply for future grants.

Examples for Economics Courses, continued

- Labor Economics, Economics of Race and Gender, Economics of Immigration (Field Trip, Community Panels, Community Service model)
 - Visit to the Los Angeles County GAIN office (welfare to work program) in order for students to get a better sense of the structure of the welfare system, the effectiveness of the system, how the structure of the system influences individual behavior, and the barriers that welfare participants face.
 - Panel of immigrant rights activists who discussed the working conditions that undocumented immigrants experience.
 - College students tutored high school students in ESL courses at a local high school with a large immigrant student population.

Examples for Economics Courses, continued

- Other examples include Caplan (2002) where Principles of Economics students administered a survey to identify the health needs of the local community and Hoyt (2002) where students in an Economics Statistics course analyzed data for local community agencies.

Benefits of Service-Learning

- Service learning may promote a greater level of learning than other active-learning techniques because service-learning takes students out of the classroom and offers them real-world, hands-on experience in applying and understanding economics (Ayers 2002).
- Service-learning engages the student on an emotional and an intellectual level (Ziegert 2002). Students believe they can make a difference at the community level.
- Service-learning provides students with an opportunity to better understand the complexity of the economic theories they study. This is useful for students who believe that the economic models they study are either not applicable in the real world or are perfect models of the real world. This strengthens analytical and critical thinking skills.
- Bartlett (1996) suggests that learning style is important and that women and minorities tend to be active learners who have a more effective learning experience when they are able to relate or connect the material to experiences from their own lives. This in turn could increase the student diversity in economics courses.

Benefits of Service-Learning, continued

- Banks et al. (2005) suggest that service-learning can result in a personal and social transformation for the student. Students may find themselves achieving tasks they never thought they could do before. They develop self-confidence in their understanding of economics.
- Students become experts through their own experiences (McGoldrick et al. 2000).
- Students work with diverse members of the communities which can facilitate cultural and racial understanding (Ziegert & McGoldrick 2008).
- Students can enhance their group and interpersonal skills. It enhances communication skills and leadership skills.
- Benefits also accrue to faculty, the academic institution, and the community.

Challenges of Service-Learning

- Ziegert and McGoldrick (2008) identify several common areas of concern among faculty developing service-learning projects.
 - Integration with course content
 - Can't apply it to a large class
 - Control over learning
 - Preparation time
 - Assessment
 - Students may also face challenges such as time constraints or dissatisfaction with the service work.

Steps to follow

- Prepare and design a service-learning component or course (What is the appropriate service-learning model for your class? Which organization will you partner with? What are your service-learning goals or objectives and how do they connect with the course? How will you prepare students?)
- Implement a service experience (How will you stay in close contact with the community partner? How will you ensure that both the student and the community partner benefit? How will you monitor students' academic and social progress?)
- Learn through reflection (What types of reflection activities will you incorporate?)
- Assessment of learning and service activities and outcomes (How will you determine if your goals or objectives have been met? Tools for assessment may include oral reflection, small group discussion, presentations, surveys, essays, reports, or research projects.
- See <http://serc.carleton.edu/econ/service/index.html> for detailed information on incorporating service-learning into an economics course.

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