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Does Service Learning Really Help?

By STEPHANIE STROM

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BETTY MEDINA LICHTENSTEIN used to dread the beginning of the school year, when students from colleges and universities around Holyoke, Mass., would descend on her tiny community organization, Enlace de Familias.



“Suddenly, droves of students were walking through my door, interrupting my day and asking, ‘What can I do here?’ ” she says. “A whole other crowd would send résumé after résumé after résumé expecting me to call them back. Still other ones would come in and say, ‘How about some research on X?’ in August and then show up in late October saying their thesis really needed to be about Y.

“It was total havoc.”

FOR THE GOOD. Betty Medina Lichtenstein explains her needs to a University of Massachusetts class; from left, Jason De Furia, Prof. Carol Soules, Ryan Roy, Mankin Yuen and Erica Sawyer, a grad. assistant.

This year, Ms. Medina Lichtenstein feels better about service learning. For their information technology capstone course at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, two students created a Web site and database management system that allow Ms. Medina Lichtenstein to complete in one day an annual report that used to take a week. Another two students embarked on an assessment of Enlace’s information technology system with the aim of making it better.

Working with the students required just a few hours of Ms. Medina Lichtenstein’s time. For the students, says Carol Soules, their professor, “it was a great practical experience, but a whole other aspect of it is that it helped them to see what the digital divide means in real life.”

Ms. Medina Lichtenstein’s experiences illustrate the good and the bad of service learning, loosely defined as community service that supplements and enhances what students learn in a classroom.

Volunteers, as any nonprofit leader will tell you (off the record, for fear of looking a gift horse...), can be as much a curse as a blessing, especially to an organization that lacks the administrative structure and money to train and supervise students. Some organizations pay a coordinator to direct volunteers, but most consider that a luxury they cannot afford.

“It’s not unusual for the task of supervising students to fall to someone who already has plenty of responsibilities,” says Elizabeth A. Tyron, the community learning coordinator at the Morgridge Center for Public Service at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. “If service learning is not well coordinated by the academic institution, it can place a lot of burden on the community partner.”

A positive experience usually requires a considerable investment of time and planning on the part of academic institutions and faculty. Ideally, service learning enriches a particular course of study, and students have the opportunity to reflect in the classroom on their experiences. In reality, service learning often seems unconnected to any curriculum — painting park benches, for example. At its most basic, it can be hard to distinguish from plain vanilla community service.

“The best service learning really involves a process something like old-fashioned matchmaking,” says Andrea Dolan-Potter, whose former job as assistant director of the East Madison Community Center in Wisconsin exposed her to service learning.

This town/gown divide is explored in “The Unheard Voices: Community Organizations and Service Learning,” published last summer by Temple University Press and mostly written by students at the University of Wisconsin who, as part of a research seminar, interviewed staff members of 64 nonprofit organizations.

Some community leaders spoke of student volunteers having too little time to get much meaningful experience or to justify a significant investment of time to train them. Others told of students arriving on their doorsteps with little guidance or preparation from their professors and expecting to change the world in 20 hours over a single semester. Some felt that their clients were guinea pigs for students doing research, without any return for them.

“Academic institutions are focused on making sure their students learn from the service-learning experience, but they aren’t always paying similar attention to the interests of the organizations that provide that experience, much less the clients they serve,” says Randy Stoecker, a professor at the University of Wisconsin, who edited the book with Ms. Tyron.

Arriving as the Obama administration is making volunteerism and other forms of civic engagement a cornerstone of its higher-education agenda, the book raises questions about how much benefit results from student efforts. That’s something that Karen Sánchez-Eppler, a professor at Amherst College, has wondered about. Two decades ago, Ms. Sánchez-Eppler made community service part of her syllabus for “Reading, Writing and Teaching,” a required English course. Every semester, some of her students spend 20 hours assisting teachers at Holyoke High School in Holyoke, Mass. They help struggling students, supervise a student group putting out a

poetry magazine and conduct writing workshops. Last year, 25 teachers applied for eight tutors from the class.

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When she arrived to take up her post at the University of Texas a year and a half ago, only three courses were listed as having service learning. "What I found was, we really are the land of orange tape," she says, referring to the school colors. Professors wanting to add service learning had to get approval from four different officials. Instead, the professors incorporated service learning informally, which made it harder for the university to track and assess programs.

After eliminating three of the four hurdles, the university quickly accumulated 45 courses that included service learning; in three of them students travel abroad. The goal is 100 such classes.



The university asks participating students and nonprofit groups to sign a contract that spells out dates and hours of service, what service will be provided, and a commitment by the nonprofit to evaluate the student at the conclusion of service. "It's a good way to solidify expectations on both sides," Dr. Aggrey says. "It helps the community partner understand that its needs may only be met to a certain extent, because students have limited time and other obligations, and it helps students understand they can't just blow off their service-learning commitments to go have pizza and beer."

TEACHING TO LEARN Anne Witt, a junior at Notre Dame, was a counselor for a Gwen's Girls summer camp.

CONSIDER what went into planning and executing Anne Witt's service learning experience in the summer of 2007. Now a junior at the University of Notre Dame, Ms. Witt worked as a counselor at a camp run by Gwen's Girls, which provides a range of services to at-risk girls in the Pittsburgh area.

The process of placing her began six months earlier when, under Notre Dame's Urban Plunge program, students made the rounds of social service agencies in Pittsburgh to see if they might find summer service. One student interested in medicine went to work for a health clinic; another considering a legal career got a position at an immigration office.

Ms. Witt chose Gwen's Girls. "I'm a political science major, so law school was what was on my radar," she says. "But after working with Gwen's Girls, I realize there are so many problems with education in Pittsburgh, and that's made me more interested in teaching." One girl, for instance, thought Jamaica was a state and Africa was just south of the United States. "These girls lived 20 minutes away from my home," Ms. Witt says, "but the disparity between what I got out of my education and what they had was huge."

Each week, Ms. Witt had relevant reading to do and papers to write. When she got back to school in the fall, she and other students in the program got together to discuss their experiences and the social issues involved.

The Notre Dame Club of Pittsburgh, an alumni group, hosted a breakfast for students doing service learning and the organizations they were working with. The club also awarded Ms. Witt a \$2,000 scholarship to compensate for a summer without income. A staff member from Notre Dame's Center for Social Concerns, which oversees the Urban Plunge program, dropped in, too, to see what the students were doing. "These people are so interested in supporting these kids and making sure they really get something out of this experience," says Lynn Knezevich, executive director of Gwen's Girls.

The organization also benefited. It got a volunteer camp counselor who ended up going back as a paid counselor this summer.

But just as important to Ms. Knezevich was the opportunity to expose her students to a broader world. "You're not necessarily learning this for your class credits," she says. "You may be doing this to learn about different and diverse population, which may not have anything to do with what your major is but will educate you as a person."