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Concurrent panel session 2: Service learning: Linking students and community

Daniel McLean
*University of Nevada, Las Vegas*

Jane Pike
*Clark County Department of Parks and Recreation*

Seth Pollack
*California State University Monterey Bay*

Fran Smith
*Volunteer Center of Southern Nevada*

Jean Whitney
*University of Nevada, Las Vegas*

*See next page for additional authors*

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Presenters
Daniel McLean, Jane Pike, Seth Pollack, Fran Smith, Jean Whitney, and Cheri Young

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The ultimate goal of the panel was to understand how service learning plays a key role in the sustainability of Nevada. Moderator Peg Rees noted the panel aimed to answer three questions: why and how service learning can be integrated into sustainable projects, what is the role of service learning in the university, and how can the university build a more participatory partnership with the community? In order to incorporate service learning into our community, faculty, students, and the community need to engage in projects for the future. Each panel member described his or her history, current position, and how they have been involved in service learning.

Fran Smith (Volunteer Center of Southern Nevada) strongly advocated service learning because those who volunteer at a young age will be lifelong volunteers, as opposed to those who participate occasionally. Smith also feels that in regards to those currently receiving an education, their schoolwork is book and classroom based, and it is not always clear to the student what he or she is learning. By implementing service learning into the educational process, relevance is brought to their service work and schoolwork. She felt that volunteering and service are essential to sustainable communities, and that they can facilitate partnerships between the university and the Las Vegas community. A recent report on volunteerism nationally found that
communities that volunteer more are more effective at solving communication problems and educating children.

Dr. Daniel McLean (UNLV Department of Recreation and Sport Management) felt that in order to change attitudes towards service, we need to help students and the community make better decisions. Previously, he aided in an alternative spring break program where students would work for Habitat for Humanity. He discussed how before Hurricane Katrina, there were only a few who volunteered, but after the hurricane the number rose. McLean feels that this helps student to discover that the business environment isn’t the only one they should be exploring.

Jane Pike (Clark County Parks and Recreation Department) noted that much of our land is being auctioned off for construction projects, so we need to preserve some lands for the public. The big question is where do we get funding for such large scale projects? The struggle in the world of parks and recreation exists because developers made housing communities with parks in areas where people don’t use them. Many of these people would rather stay at home than engage with others in their area. Some students are now participating in learning projects as volunteers, which encourages them to spread the word of need for funding. She stated that many don’t go to school with the dream of working for the city, so they want to change that image. She feels that service learning can succeed in doing so by working with the university and creating higher levels of involvement.

Jean Whitney (UNLV William S. Boyd School of Law) pointed out that all UNLV law students have to train for 40 hours on providing legal services for those who can’t afford it. Through this program, some practice being lawyers with real clients by working in a clinic. This develops new opportunities for students because those who volunteer have real experience to include in their resumes. She believes that almost every issue of sustainability involves law, and that as the community grows our citizens will need
access to legal services. We need to create students who graduate law school that are informed, vote, and will spread the word on such issues.

Dr. Seth Pollack (California State University-Monterey Bay) directs the Service Learning Institute at his university. He stated that in his town, jobs are low paying, yet it is expensive to live in the area. He has worked on many programs to improve the Monterey Bay area, such as the revitalization of Chinatown, a proposal to help build a new library, and help the homeless in finding jobs. Young students attending the library were even being helped with their homework by those from the university. Pollack believes a university that commits to engagement becomes a part of the community. He prompted the audience to imagine what UNLV could do if it wanted to build a community. The university in Monterey has embraced service learning as a part of its curriculum, and every student is required to take a course on community service. They also have service learning courses that are tailored to a student’s major. He feels that service learning is about interdependence and recognizing that interdependence systems are not in isolation.

Cheri Young (UNLV William F. Harrah College of Hotel Administration) described that when she first came to Las Vegas she was taken by how much wealth is in the city, yet is seemed like everything was so inaccessible. She didn’t like the ideas of hotel buffets throwing away their excess food, so she gathered a group of hotel management students to help change this. Young states that we need to have service learning woven into the fabric of our community and that our most sustainable resource is heart and spirit.

During the question and answer segment, Seth Pollack was asked how it was possible for CSU-Monterey Bay to implement a requirement of service learning in the curriculum. He stated that it is much easier to do something in a different way when you are starting a new campus. Service learning is becoming popular in the media, so it was
much easier to convince the university that it was necessary. The university is essentially making bridges with other groups. At CSU-Monterey Bay, service learning is seen as being scholarly and may be used towards faculty tenure and promotion. The faculty reward structure is just one of the ways that service learning is able to sustain itself on and off the campus.

An essential component of service learning is having multiple commitments and partners in order to keep the program going, because you don’t want a program to be done one time or to lose an important connection when a faculty member leaves. This is why implementation across the university is essential, so that projects don’t end when control has shifted.