Civic Engagement and Service Learning Partnerships

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**Service Learning and Civic Engagement**

Service learning is designed to promote volunteerism and civic awareness. Community engagement in higher education specifically involves university members partnering with local community organizations to address a need. Students engage with community partners through service learning and other activities (Moore & Mendez, 2014). Service learning is a practice that connects new knowledge and social responsibility through active learning (Benson & Younkin, 1996).

Our community partner was Silver State Service Dogs, founded and directed by the first and last authors for the benefit of UNLV students. Our students were members of our undergraduate Abnormal Psychology courses (Bickford & Reynolds, 2002). We partnered with the RSO UNLV Society for Service Dogs, which was enormously helpful in procuring space and resources for class projects. The social issue being addressed is suicidality and trauma recovery among veterans, first responders and private citizens.

**Student Reflections**

- "My favorite part of this experience was actually hosting the event with my fellow classes and engaging with other students. We were able to get a lot of donations for the Silver State Service Dogs, and it was fun to do so. We had games, giveaways, and baked goods. Aside from the fundraiser, my knowledge on service dogs and their purpose has greatly expanded. I’ve learned more about the regulations and restrictions as well as their uses."
- "Being able to participate in the Fall Festival that Dr. Diane Villa set up for us to present and talk about SSD as well as the larger picture of service dogs was extremely rewarding to me."
- "Researching the topic helped me understand more about what service dogs are and what they are meant to be trained for. At the beginning of the semester, I was completely oblivious to what service dogs were meant to be trained for and how much they benefit their owners and improve their lives."
- "The civic engagement project with Silver State Service Dogs allowed me to explore so much more. Just to briefly touch the surface of the knowledge I gained from this project, I learned about the human-animal bond as well as the effects of service dogs on all walks of life including people with learning disabilities, depression, and even veterans with PTSD. Not only are these just interesting topics in general, but they pair well with the overall course of abnormal psychology too. Learning about how service animals can help with those aspects of abnormal psychology allowed me to apply my psychology knowledge to real-life scenarios."
- "My experience in civic engagement taught me a lot more about responsibility and patience. I learned how important it is to be able to communicate effectively with the communities around us."
- "The Service Learning Program was very beneficial as a learning experience and as a social experience. I also had to step out of my comfort zone and use social media and reach out to others."

**To plan the Fall Festival we met with:**

- The Office of Student and Community Engagement who sponsored the pilot program and ran ongoing workshops
- The Service Learning Department representatives

**Psychology Subject librarian to develop assignments and workshops**

- Samantha Godbey samantha.godbey@unlv.edu
- Student Union and Event Services – To reserve a area for the festival

**The Fall Festival had two themes**

1. Disseminating the newly gathered information at the festival (students stood behind banners announcing their topics and “Ask Me” to encourage dialog among attendees).
2. Fundraising to support service dog clients. The ten hours of service were attained through planning and attending the festival.

**Thank You to The UNLV Office of Student and Community Engagement for their support in this project.**

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**Benefits**

Students’ interactions with their peers is a high impact practice; for both social and academic settings (Moore & Mendez, 2014). Interacting with others was often cited in reflection papers as a benefit of the course.

**Service-learning, could be a motivating force, driving research and participation (Gillis & Mentzell Ryder, 2016)**

**Student reflections indicated increased importance of applying knowledge to a cause.**

UNLV teachers may adapt this paradigm in their courses, finding a community partner that fits their subject matter or focus and assigning projects that support civic engagement and service learning.

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**Example of student work**

- COLA Student Showcase
- Thank You to The UNLV Office of Student and Community Engagement for their support in this project.