Liberty University
DigitalCommons@Liberty University

Faculty Publications and Presentations

School of Education

3-2010

Service Learning at a Faith-Based Institution

Beth Ackerman
Liberty University, mackerman@liberty.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/educ_fac_pubs

Part of the Education Commons

Recommended Citation
Ackerman, Beth, "Service Learning at a Faith-Based Institution" (2010). *Faculty Publications and Presentations.* Paper 186.
http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/educ_fac_pubs/186

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Education at DigitalCommons@Liberty University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications and Presentations by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Liberty University. For more information, please contact scholarlycommunication@liberty.edu.

03/31/2010
faith-based education
BETH ACKERMAN

Service Learning at a Faith-Based Institution

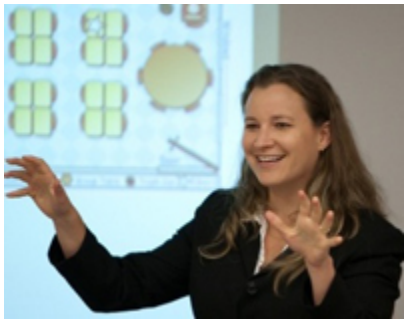
Multiple terms are used to describe the various field experiences and internships that are designed for students in higher education. In the preparation of school personnel these experiences have emerged as partnerships and the utilization of professional development schools. There has also been increasing awareness of "service-learning" in teacher education within the past decade. This article examines the five key elements of service learning in faith-based institutions using Liberty University as a model for best practices.

Schaffer (2004) examined unpublished materials from 90 Christian colleges and universities and interviewed educators at seven of the institutions to identify the best practices of service-learning in a Christian academic setting. Five key elements of best practices emerged from the study:

- Mission
- Definitions and guidelines
- Institutional support
- Academic validity
- Faith and learning tool.

Mission

An emphasis on the spiritual development of students is the distinguishing feature of Christian colleges and universities, which goes beyond the social-emotional aspects acknowledged by secular institutions of higher education. Certain attributes are common among Christian institutions that naturally foster the integration of service and learning. The primary attribute is the values-centered curriculum and co-curriculum at Christian colleges and universities, but their emphasis on teaching over research and smaller class sizes also facilitates service-learning.



At Liberty University, the School of Education's mission statement is to "develop competent professionals with a Biblical world view for Christian, public and private schools." The university's field experience requirements state that candidates must complete field experiences in a variety of K-12 classrooms, including both Christian and public school settings. The mission

of the university and the ScBahool of Education support service learning in a variety of settings while integrating faith into learning.

Definitions and Guidelines

To provide the various experiences that hold true to the mission of the School of Education, partnerships between our School of Education and a variety of K-12 settings were formed to increase the number of field experience opportunities in public, private and Christian school settings. As a result, the following partnerships were implemented:

- An Academic Coaching program at a local Christian school
- A tutor and testing center for all school age children,
- A partnership with a variety of special education teachers across the area
- A variety of other school partnerships

In each setting there are clearly defined roles and expectations for the university, K-12 school and the teacher candidates. The university teacher candidates gain practical teaching experience and exposure to a variety of settings with clearly defined guidelines.

Institutional Support

Each partnership had an initial planning meeting. Some of the partnerships involved support at the highest level of administration from the university and K-12 schools. The partnership meetings included representatives from the university (chancellor, vice chancellor, executive vice president, provost, vice provost, dean of Institute of Biblical Studies and dean of the School of Education) and by K-12 administrators (superintendent, lower school principal, upper school principal, vice principal, guidance counselor and central office directors). The director of Field Experience was designated as the primary university contact and each partnership has chosen the primary K-12 school contact, typically the building principal. Other participants included university education faculty and K-12 classroom teachers.

Academic Validity

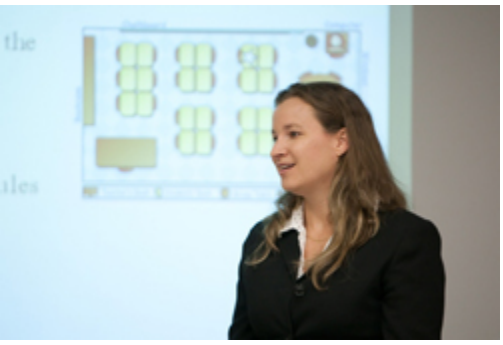
Every partnership requires surveys to be completed by the candidate and a K-12 partner for each candidate (typically the classroom teacher for which the candidate was assigned). Surveys were designed to assess competencies related to the learning objectives for each course as well as the competencies for being a successful teacher.

For example, in a special education partnership the candidates rated the impact of experience on their knowledge of the competencies, published by the Council for Exceptional Children. Surveys have always been quite positive, showing the valuable learning experience achieved by these partnerships.

Faith and Learning

In addition to these surveys, other questions are often asked and the comments are often very telling about our integration of faith in learning. For example, candidates who were placed in the Christian school were asked on their survey, “After your experience at this Christian school, would you now consider working in a Christian school after graduation?” It is encouraging to note that following the experience, there was a 30 percent increase in the number of academic coaches who would consider teaching in a Christian school after graduation.

Another example, the university instructor for the special education class commented that the greatest strength of the Academic Coaching Partnership at the K-12 school was “the exposure to Christian schools for our candidates, particularly, showing them a model of providing special education in a Christian school.



We teach that all Christian schools should do what they can to address students with disabilities in their schools, and for our candidates to see it in action is a wonderful opportunity.” Here is a comment from a student in a special education setting in the public, “After being at [this school], I am convinced that I did make the right choice and this is the field that God wants me in for the rest of my life. I absolutely loved it! I left almost without a care in the world and knowing and feeling like I could do that for the rest of my life!”

Service-learning is the outward manifestation of our mission as Christians. As Jesus commanded, “And whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant: Even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister” (Matthew 20:27-28 KJV). At Liberty University we believe these components are essential for a successful service-learning experience.

Beth Ackerman is Associate Dean at Liberty University. For information, visit www.luonline.com/seen.