

## SERVICE LEARNING IN A POST-KATRINA ENVIRONMENT

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Lynn Robertson, Warren Punecky, and Linda Kieffer  
Delgado Community College, New Orleans, Louisiana

### INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Founded in 1921, Delgado is Louisiana's oldest and largest community college and serves students throughout a five-parish region. The liberal arts comprehensive education provides the foundation for students with associate degrees to transfer to most Louisiana four-year universities. Degree and certificate programs of the college and the Louisiana Technical College with which it is linked, provide students with targeted and fast track training for available jobs in high demand industries including construction, shipbuilding, culinary arts, allied health, and more. It is also responsive to emerging marketplace needs in providing customized training that directly benefits area business, industry, and the community at large.

Although many of its structures and facilities suffered damage from Hurricane Katrina in the fall of 2005, the college was able to offer on-line courses during that semester and reestablish its traditional course offerings in the spring of 2006. Delgado's enrollment in fall 2006 made it the largest higher education institution in New Orleans with 11,927 students returning – more than sixty percent of its previous enrollment. This was also the semester that a small group of interested faculty and staff began to research service learning under the direction of Warren Punecky, Dean of Business and Technology. Since that time, a service learning committee, two part-time coordinators, Linda Kieffer and Lynn Robertson, and eight enthusiastic faculty members were recruited. In an effort to further develop the initiative, three college-wide training sessions were presented as well as a six week faculty seminar series to research and discuss ways to implement service learning. Seven projects in different disciplines were implemented in the spring 2007 semester through funding from the Community College National Center for Community Engagement's (CCNCCE) *Accent on Student Success: Engaged Together in Service* (ASSETS) grant, with the overall goal of enhancing student learning through community engagement. This goal not only supports the college's mission of preparing its students to be productive and responsible citizens, but also involves them in the rebuilding efforts that are so critical to the well-being of the New Orleans community.

### FIRST YEAR REFLECTIONS

As the first year of the service learning initiative of Delgado Community College in New Orleans, Louisiana has come to an end, the reflection process has begun. Through the many workshops, meetings, training sessions, and classes that were held, it is the people who stand out: the service learning college leaders, the community partners, the faculty, and, most of all, the students.

The relative merits of the service learning initiative are being discussed at every level of the college. Some of the questions are: the costs of service learning in both resources and time; whether students at an urban community college, given the extraordinary demands of a post-Katrina environment, will embrace service learning courses; whether faculty members will be able to juggle service learning along with rebuilding their homes; and how faculty will energize their programs, while restoring their lives.

Delgado Community College, both pre- and post-Katrina, has presented itself as a complex mosaic. It is diverse not only ethnically, but financially, culturally, and academically. Securing faculty buy-in for a project like service learning requires a deep knowledge of the institutional market, a vision of short and long-term goals, an organizational structure that draws broadly from the diverse elements of the college, and a salesperson's persistence, courage, and presentation skills. After all, service learning requires extra work, and extra work has taken on an elevated meaning in the post-Katrina world of New Orleans. But, like any other initiative placed on the plates of already overly satiated faculty members, service learning remains appetizing to those who are already interested.

The initial approach at Delgado was to toss out the bait to see who took it. Of course, those who were already interested in the concept grabbed the hook and ran with it. And that will be the focus of this article: the initial group of faculty members who gave up their Friday afternoons to engage in professional development. One can glean the sense of childhood friends taking the initial leap off of the ledge into the pool of service learning and how it changed their academic and perhaps their personal lives forever.

## **THE COMMITTEE**

An ad-hoc service learning committee was formed with representation from all areas of the college. Faculty, staff, and administration worked together to bring the service learning initiative to fruition. Several sub-committees were formed to address the issues of administrative tasks, marketing, faculty development, and community relations.

The college applied for and received the three-year ASSETS Learn and Serve America Grant of \$10,000 per year, which was matched by the college with \$20,000 per year. The monies were used to fund stipends and mini-grants for faculty training, as well as attendance at conferences such as those provided by the Gulf South Summit, Campus Compact, and the Community College National Center for Community Engagement.

## **THE MAGNIFICENT SEVEN**

Linda Kieffer and Bettie Abbate led the first faculty training series in the fall of 2006. The meetings were held on Friday afternoons - a difficult time at best, but the only time faculty schedules would permit. The group shared experiences and discussed readings on the topics of service learning in general, selection of community partners, syllabus

revision, methods of reflection, and assessment. These pioneer faculty members also met several times during the spring semester when the projects were being implemented, to compare triumphs, challenges, and lessons learned. Student surveys distributed in these initial service learning courses reflected success in terms of increasing civic engagement while achieving learning outcomes.

This first training class was represented by faculty from a variety of disciplines: Horticulture, Architectural Design, English, Marketing, Office Technology, Television Production, and Interior Design.

Horticulture classes took the lead by partnering with Habitat for Humanity. Extensive landscaping services were provided for 13 houses in the Musician's Village, a concept neighborhood to encourage musicians to return to New Orleans from the cities to which they were displaced after Hurricane Katrina. Students also received additional experience by leading Habitat's volunteers in the landscaping process. This forced the students to not only achieve their learning outcomes, but to teach the volunteers about soil, irrigation, and the choice of plant material. In addition to the work performed for Habitat for Humanity, the students built a butterfly garden for the Martin Luther King Charter School and are currently working on propagating plants for coastal restoration of the Southeast Louisiana coastline, whose already disturbing rate of erosion was exacerbated by the ravages of Hurricane Katrina.

The Architectural Design/Build class designed animal shelters in conjunction with Animal Rescue of New Orleans. Each student chose a specific breed of dog and then designed the shelter for it. A competition was held and the PETCO Foundation was supportive in these efforts. The architecture students were able to gain real world experience by working with animal rescuers and researching each kind of dog, their usual habitat, etc.

The English 102 class researched, developed, and produced a brochure for the National Audubon Society about the need for coastal restoration and support of the bird population in Louisiana. Speakers from various nature organizations were brought in to help educate the students about the importance of ecotourism. The final argumentative brochure was accepted by the Audubon Society for national distribution.

WWOZ, the local New Orleans Music Radio Station, and the Marketing 201 class worked together on several projects. Students competed in groups to design an invitation for a "Thank You" party for all those who assisted the station during recovery. They also assisted in a long-term advertising campaign to recruit more listeners, members, and donors. The staff at WWOZ was honored to be a part of this service learning initiative.

The Office Technology – Transcription Class was involved in one of our most vital activities in post-Katrina New Orleans. The transcription of Katrina survivor interviews were conducted by the Friends of Cabildo and the Louisiana State Museum for a permanent Katrina exhibit that provides an oral history of these tragic events. Students

transcribed the interviews to hard copies for archival purposes. Despite the difficulty of this task for students who carried their own stories of survival, they felt as though they were doing something very important for future generations.

The Corporate Television Class embarked on an ambitious project about Emergency Preparedness for the Elderly. They faced many challenges because their studio facility was housed in one of the hardest hit buildings on campus and they were relocated to temporary facilities at the Louisiana Technical College Campus. Despite these and other obstacles, the efforts of the class have resulted in a program that will be viewed by focus groups found by the Councils on Aging. Other businesses that deal with the elder population are going to sponsor the duplication of the DVD.

The Irma Thomas W.I.S.E. (Women In Search of Excellence) Women Center on the City Park Campus at Delgado worked with the Interior Design class in a design competition of their new small space in Building 1 on the main campus. They worked in groups and competed for their design to be chosen. Students interviewed the director of the center, who served as their real-life client.

## **THE CONCLUSION – VALUE ADDED**

The Friday afternoon sessions had outcomes that went beyond the scope of service learning training for all of those involved. Hopes, dreams, and ideas were shared. Best of all, bonds were formed and relationships were forged. When these pioneers of Delgado service learning meet in the hallway, they stop and ask each other's thoughts. As the Marketing instructor said in her first year of teaching full-time, the sessions gave her an opportunity to meet faculty across the academic discipline and curriculum divide, as well as teachers from other campuses, and that experience gave her a leg up in getting to know the college culture. The Office Technology faculty brought recognition to the college with their work. The English Class brochure will be distributed nationally. The Emergency Preparedness Video will be distributed regionally. The dog houses will be built and raffled off to help the PETCO Foundation distribute funds locally. One of the student designs was chosen for the W.I.S.E. Women Center so that their work will be seen by their peers on a daily basis. People of all ages and walks of life will be able to view the work of the Horticulture class in neighborhoods and schoolyards. Future generations will hopefully walk the beaches and coastline they helped to restore. All of this could not have been accomplished without the leadership of the team consisting of the director and coordinators of the service learning initiative, the service learning college-wide committee, interested community partners, and the willing and able faculty and students.

The faculty training sessions on Friday afternoons required a great commitment from the faculty, but the value of what they received far outweighed the sacrifice of time and resources to achieve the goal. This close-knit group of faculty came forward to share their experiences at Delgado's spring, 2007 convocation in order to recruit the next

group of trainees. They also attended the second group's final recognition/celebration session where they presented their courses to the committee. The faculty who courageously jumped into the pool of service learning are now urging those on the sidelines to take the initial leap, along with their students, and experience firsthand the pride that comes from helping to rebuild their homes, school, and community.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHORS:**

**Warren Punecky, Jr.** is the Dean of the Business and Technology Division of Delgado Community College and is currently directing the service learning initiative of the college. A graduate of Tulane University School of Law and a retired attorney, he served as a faculty member of the college for ten years prior to assuming his role as dean.

**Phone:** 504-915-8012; **E-mail:** [wpunek@dcc.edu](mailto:wpunek@dcc.edu)

**Lynn Robertson** has been with Delgado for 16 years and is currently an Associate Professor of Television Production and part-time coordinator of the service learning program. She has an M.F.A. in Video Production, an M.A. in Theatre, and a B.A. in Drama/Communications from the University of New Orleans.

**Linda Kieffer** is Associate Professor of Psychology and Department Chair of Arts and Humanities at Delgado Northshore. She has a B.A. from Louisiana State University and an M.A. in Industrial/Organizational Psychology from The University of West Florida. She is serving as part-time coordinator of the service learning program and has been on the faculty at Delgado for 15 years. **Phone:** 985-893-6286; **E-mail:** [lkief@dcc.edu](mailto:lkief@dcc.edu)