

Making Plans, Marking Progress, and Allowing the Future to Unfold: Reflections on the SAFE Grant Experience at Kenai Peninsula College

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Making Plans

Four years ago, “service learning” was simply a conversation on the Kenai Peninsula College (KPC) campuses. Several faculty members had attended a symposium on service learning at KPC’s main academic unit, the University of Alaska–Anchorage (UAA). Though UAA’s service learning program was developing at that time, KPC faculty had heard little of the concept or its practical application in the classroom. Though some faculty members were involved in service in their classes, few were aware of the theoretical and historical background of the pedagogy, the vast scholarly resources available on the subject, or even the practical avenues of reflection and integration for classroom activities.

But conversations are the beginning of action. Around cups of coffee and laptop computers, a few faculty members decided to map out a possible route of action for developing a service learning program at KPC, and the SAFE grant was the vehicle.

Diane Taylor, Coordinator of the Learning Center at Kenai Peninsula College and member of the first KPC service learning team, remembers the initial conversations about the program: “The idea of service learning wasn’t new to me, but the terminology was. I had done service activities to get into the community and see what it really looked like, or I brought people in.” Taylor reflects now, four years later, that service learning has changed her focus: “Getting more engaged is what service learning achieved for me, rather than standing back and watching.”

Taylor helped write KCC’s initial grant with CCNCCE. She knew the grant itself would be challenging work. Krista Timlin, Coordinator of Career Services at the time, echoes Diane’s sentiments. “Working with faculty, students and community partners to implement service learning and civic engagement has helped me to see ways to create links between programs (e.g., service learning and internships), to engage faculty, to inspire students, and to get community organizations excited about collaborating with KPC.” Krista took on the role of Service Learning and Civic-Engagement Program Lead.

As with any start-up initiative, the cost in time and energy to get started was extensive. Timlin who had (and still has) another full-time job, spent 30 – 40% of her time administering the SAFE grant in the first year, and faculty met with Diane at least once per month to plan and assess where the program was going. As more faculty, students and community partners have become involved in the program, the time it takes to administrate the program has not decreased, but Timlin believes the program is running more efficiently. When the program began, it took a lot of effort to coordinate and share the work of 3 faculty members; now Krista helps 8 - 16 faculty per semester share their work in the area of service learning. The proposal applications, orientations, evaluations, recognitions, and sharing time are becoming more stream-lined all the time. Learning

from trial and error, as well as Timlin garnering some administrative support from student employees, has helped.

Cheryl Davis, an adjunct instructor at KPC, also helped with the initial writing of the grant and served as the faculty facilitator for the first three years. Davis states that “the program has grown beyond what we imagined. It took a different direction than we thought it might. But faculty interests in service learning determined the course. That’s the way it should go.”

Kenai Peninsula’s small movement gained recognition in the university system. In 2006, the KPC Service Learning Team was selected for the “Exemplary Group Achievement” UAA Chancellor’s Award for Excellence. In addition, the program achieved national recognition by being chosen for the CCNCCE’s “Collaboration with Social Agencies” award. Most importantly, however, is KPC’s growing visibility in the community. In a community composed of small towns, positive community relationships are grown from interaction and recommendations. KPC’s service learning program has made a difference. Many new relationships with community organizations have been established, and already existing relationships have been solidified.

KPC’s approach to establishing a service learning program was three-fold. First, the team decided to gather information on community needs and assess student and faculty interest. The program needed to be designed to meet the interests and needs of all involved. Four pilot classes were offered as well as a round-table discussion with faculty and community members to assess interest and involvement. Secondly, emphasis was placed on education. Workshops were offered. Journals and books were supplied in a central office. More opportunities for faculty interaction were set up as more and more faculty implemented service learning projects in their classroom. A mentor was established for faculty new to the project. The goal was to foster the terminology and practice of service learning at KPC. As the final step, KPC wanted to take intentional steps to expand the program. The target was a sustainable program that would be well-established at the conclusion of a three-year grant.

Marking Progress

As the KPC service learning program grew and developed, participants formed a close networking relationship in order to exchange ideas, share successes, and commiserate over challenges. In addition, the design team members came together each spring to synthesize these anecdotal discussions into theme-based perspective papers, as mandated by the SAFE grant, for inclusion in the CCNCCE annual publication.

- Year One: “KPC Cares: Kenai Peninsula College – Community Awareness Relationships Enhance Service.”

In this report, we outlined our strategy for developing a successful service learning program at Kenai Peninsula College. While we were hopeful that the program would meet with success, we focused our report on identifying the core philosophic and practical goals that would guide us throughout the grant’s tenure and beyond.

- Year Two: “Bridging the Civic Divide”

In this report, we celebrated the program’s development. Besides increasing the number of faculty members offering course service learning components, we began developing a faculty mentoring strategy. In addition, we created a computerized database for current and potential community partners, and gathered information to create profiles on each community partner that would be available for faculty and students to review.

We increased the degree of involvement by the college administration by meeting quarterly with the College Directors. Students began engaging in larger scale projects such as painting a 24-foot mural for an outside wall of the local food bank and garnering the donation of a reader board to be used on a marquee that would better market the services of the food bank. Overall, we noted that communication and relationships were the cornerstones of the development of our overall service learning program structure.

- Year Three: “Sustainable Service Learning: Charting the Course at a Small Community College”

In this report, we reviewed our three-year path to success. Through a careful reading of service learning program best practices, we had tailored our program to adhere to the following: “A direct link with the college mission, objectives and planning; strong faculty buy-in; a celebratory and supportive climate for program development; intentional links to curriculum; and a special emphasis on the multicultural opportunities in the community and on the campus.” In this paper, we also noted the phenomenal growth of the KPC program. In the first semester of grant implementation, three full- and part-time faculty members in three disciplines (English, Communications, and Psychology) implemented service learning in four courses. That translated into a total of 82 students and 11 community partners. By the end of our third year, the numbers had grown to 11 full- and part-time faculty members in 9 disciplines (adding Art, Business Administration, Computer Information and Office Systems, Human Services, Journalism, and Welding) using service learning in 23 courses, incorporating 410 students and 53 community partners. And while we were very proud of our growth, we also acknowledged cautions... cautions which remain highly relevant even now: “Will the program continue to grow as substantially as it has in past years? Is administrative buy-in such that increased funding will follow after grant funds stop? Will faculty remain committed?” Sustainability is now our overarching concern, interest, and priority.

By the end of year three, we had engaged in three large-scale student projects, including one inter-disciplinary tag-team project. Art students drew and photographed portraits of local senior citizens and produced and held an exhibit of the portraits at a senior center and at KPC. Journalism students served as the exclusive reporting staff on the daily newspaper for the international circumpolar region’s sporting competition and cultural exchange event, the *Arctic Winter Games*, which was held on the Kenai Peninsula in March 2006. Art and Welding students took the torch from Business Administration students to complete the Food Bank marquee. The Food Bank Marquee Project was

instrumental in both strengthening KPC's relationship with the Kenai Peninsula Food Bank and garnering us the national award from CCNCCE for our ongoing collaboration with the Food Bank.

In years one and two, we had directed our efforts at KPC's larger Kenai River Campus, in Soldotna, with 21 full-time faculty. In year three, we provided outreach to the smaller Kachemak Bay Campus, with 5 full-time faculty. The Kachemak Bay Campus implemented service learning into two courses in year three. At the culmination of year three, in early September 2006, core service learning team members came together for a planning retreat. We made plans to further implement what we believed we had begun, with an emphasis in three areas of focus to lead us to sustainability: To Educate, Appreciate, and Expand/Refine.

Year 4: Our "Bonus Year" of the SAFE Grant

In year four (this year), Beginning Drawing students repeated the Portrait Project while additional classes worked with established community partners and developed relationships with new community partners, bringing the total number of KPC community partners for service learning (as of March 30, 2007) to 78. Civic engagement opportunities were developed in political science courses in which students participated in a variety of public meetings, and in English courses in which students interviewed community representatives about their views on highly relevant controversial issues. Large-scale projects were undertaken at the Kachemak Bay Campus: Advanced Composition students developed and performed a multi-media presentation on Women in Islam for high school history students who were covering a unit on Middle Eastern History; Sociology 101 students engaged with eight community partners to further their learning; and Fundamentals of Biology students engaged in complex ecological research – utilizing National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration facilities – in collaboration with four local community partners.

As of March 30, 2007, 16 KPC faculty and 611 KPC students had incorporated service learning and civic-engagement into 12 disciplines (adding Biology, Political Science, and Sociology), 32 courses, and 63 sections of those courses. In addition to all of the academic course collaborations, student clubs initiated co-curricular service projects that included organizing bake sales for a no-kill animal shelter and producing a full-scale music concert to raise funds to install electricity to the Food Bank marquee.

The service learning team began the development of a "Brown Bag Seminar Series" to be offered to faculty as an opportunity to provide informal professional development, mentoring, and resource/idea exchange on a periodic basis during a lunch hour. We offered the first Brown Bag in early April with tips for getting started in implementing service learning and civic engagement in existing courses. Next year, we plan to use the Brown Bags as a vehicle for enhancing faculty collaboration and developing a stronger collective focus on social justice, environmental sustainability, and awareness of a sense of place.

Year four was also a time of much strategic planning around our campuses. KPC's service learning and civic engagement program fared well through the process. Campus members and leaders decided that community engagement was enough of a priority that we were guaranteed \$6,000 per year to go toward establishing a faculty mentoring program aimed at helping faculty new to service learning and civic engagement to begin implementation in their courses – especially in General Ed. Requirement courses. Also, pending approval from our Borough government, we will receive \$38,000 per year that will fund a part-time assistant coordinator to help Krista as well as faculty mini-grants to assist with service learning and civic engagement curriculum development. Some of the experienced service learning faculty, students and key administrators will meet in a few days to assess the level at which KPC has institutionalized service learning and civic engagement. Our plan is to begin assessing and making plans to address challenges now; then have a follow-up meeting (that will also include community partners) to continue the process in the fall.

Allowing the Future to Unfold

We are now looking forward to a year that is totally driven by our own (KPC faculty, staff, students and community partner) energy and inclinations. We are excited about new and more solidified on-going funding, and administrative and campus-wide support. We will most likely place more emphasis on refining our educational and appreciation efforts, and be careful about trying to expand more than we can reasonably handle. We will also make stronger connections in what we do to overarching faculty development and student engagement/learning plans and efforts. Looking to connect more with overall faculty development plans will be in concert with a new focus of the UAA Center for Community Engagement and Learning (CCEL). The KPC community engagement program has slowly and steadily been developing a partnership with UAA's CCEL and we will continue to strengthen our ties with this ally.

Year four of the SAFE grant has challenged all KPC faculty and staff involved with service learning and civic engagement, both with unpredictable non-service learning demands that we needed to address, and with coming to terms with the complexity of addressing goals that we had developed for our community engagement program. Next year, and into the future, it will be important for us to pace ourselves, and to give ourselves time to reflect and think critically about where we are headed. At the same time, we are looking at our sustainability as a growing, living entity – which we are not able to fully envision now. We are excited about students increasingly taking ownership and internalizing the concepts of civic and community engagement. We expect that students will initiate more projects and become more involved with community engagement planning; and they will, no doubt, surprise us with their ideas.

Our upcoming challenge will be to strike a balance between careful planning and setting some limits, while being poised for serendipity and synergistic happenings. We anticipate this challenge with open hearts.

About the Authors:

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Krista Timlin is the Coordinator for Kenai Peninsula College's Career Services and Service Learning program. She has an M.S. in Industrial and Organizational Psychology from San Francisco State University. Her experience with community engagement activities spans over 17 years, including 3 years coordinating KPC's program, and more than 15 years coordinating and/or providing training and facilitation for numerous multicultural community, school, and workplace problem-solving initiatives. **Phone:** 907-262-0337; **Email:** inklt@uaa.alaska.edu

Janice High, a former radio-television journalist, is currently Assistant Professor of English at Kenai Peninsula College. She holds a Master's Degree in Journalism from Louisiana State University. In her three years at KPC, Janice has incorporated service learning components into her composition and journalism courses. The composition students have worked with the local food bank, while the journalism students have produced radio public service announcements and served as the credentialed reporters for the daily *Ulu News*, the official international publication of the Arctic Winter Games.