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Integrating University Service Learning Courses with Community Development Extension Programs

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Integrating University Service Learning Courses with Community Development Extension Programs

Abstract

We present a strategy for community development Extension delivery incorporating university service learning classes in the creation and implementation of community development activities. The process of an undergraduate rural development class assisting local community development Extension agents is examined. Results suggest students can be effective in providing research support that will assist local communities making important community development decisions. Extension faculty interested in incorporating university service learning classes into their programs should make sure that the types of activities fit the objectives of the course and the that atmosphere of communities is conducive to a shared learning environment.

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Introduction

Community development Extension professionals address a number of community issues that may require additional knowledge and expertise beyond their skill sets or those of individual community members. Service Learning can be effective in promoting public scholarship, which can affect the long-run sustainability of communities (Ehrlich, 2000). We introduce a strategy of combining participatory research activities from local residents with application of teaching methods and civic engagement by students from a nearby university. This strategy is based on outcomes from the application of a Rural Development Class at Louisiana State University to the relocation decision of a regional livestock show for a local community.

Identifying the Service Learning Opportunity

Residents of St. Tammany Parish, Louisiana, recently saw the Southeast District Junior Livestock moved to another parish due to the razing of its existing livestock show facility. Local stakeholders in the parish interested in the return of the livestock show faced an uphill battle convincing an increasingly urbanized community that had provided reduced financial and volunteer support for the show in recent years of its importance to the community. The regional community economic development Extension agent was contacted to assist stakeholders in increasing community awareness of the value of the show to the larger non-agricultural community.

The agent contacted an instructor in LSU's Agricultural Economics Department about ideas to support stakeholders' requests. Both the agent and instructor agreed that a good first step would be to show business leaders and politicians in the community the financial value of the show. The instructor suggested that he could restructure the rural development class as a service learning class that could assist the community stakeholders in assessing the financial value through a

participatory research approach. Community stakeholders agreed to the approach.

Integrating Responsibilities

The Extension agent, instructor, and community stakeholders agreed to share specific responsibilities in the participatory process. The agent recruited an advisory panel of stakeholders that in addition to livestock show families for and against the relocation, also included stakeholders from private business and local government. A small proposal was also written by the Extension agent and instructor to pay for the cost of mailing a questionnaire to each parent or guardian of an existing livestock exhibitor asking how much each family spent at the show.

The advisory panel steered the participatory process in three main areas. They (1) developed questions and edited wording of questions from a pre-test in order to minimize error in survey responses, (2) advertised by word-of-mouth the importance to exhibitor families of completing the survey, and (3) helped university students interpret and understand the local significance of the survey results and economic impacts they were receiving.

Students became involved in the process through application of one of three class periods each week devoted to the research. During that period, they followed the approach by Dillman (2000) and disseminated the mail survey through a five-contact procedure that included a pre-notice letter, initial questionnaire, a reminder postcard, a replacement questionnaire, and a second reminder postcard. Students codified survey responses, calculated detailed statistics from respondents, and applied survey results to an IMPLAN™ (Minnesota IMPLAN Group 2000) model to measure multiplier effects on the economy.

Results

The collaboration of academic survey methods applied by the students and local advertisement by the advisory panel resulted in a response rate exceeding 57%. The joint research activity resulted in advisory panel members and students learning from each other. Advisory panel members learned from student reports that financial impacts were larger than opponents of the relocation realized and smaller than many supporters expected. Students learned how to apply tacit knowledge from local stakeholders in interpreting economic data at monthly meetings. Further, they learned how economic data was used by opposing viewpoints and how it assisted communities in the decision-making process, which was a key objective of the rural development service learning course.

The active involvement of the advisory panel resulted in applications beyond the initial results of the research. The survey results indicated what exhibitor households wanted in their livestock show and guided the livestock show manager and volunteer leaders in developing plans for the future shows. Many members of the advisory panel were also selected for the district show board, which took on the task of raising funds and planning the awards program for the show.

Discussion

Extension faculty interested in involving teaching faculty and students in their work should consider several issues.

Examine Service Learning Opportunities

A good place to start is through a university's service learning or outreach office. Extension faculty can let instructors know what community initiatives they are involved in and identify faculty who may be interested in supporting that initiative through a service learning class.

Plan Ahead

Teaching faculty need several months to develop a course syllabus with a new service learning activity. Three to 6 months should be considered a minimum period of time to contact teaching faculty about your service learning opportunity.

Identify Suitable Support Activities for Students

Extension faculty should not expect freshman-level classes to perform advanced research activities in support of community initiatives. Including teaching faculty early in the planning process ensures that expected activities can be performed by students and fit the learning objectives of the class.

Identify Suitable Community Partners for Students

Some community issues may be too controversial for student involvement. Significant conflict between competing stakeholder groups may reduce stakeholder-student interaction and reduce student learning. Extension faculty should identify communities that are willing to allow students to learn through an interactive process between stakeholder and student.

Identify Appropriate Levels of Community Interaction

Depending on the nature of the initiative, there may be more or less interaction with community members. University faculty and/or service learning classes may be brought in to perform independent research as a "consultant," or they may share in the participatory research activities of the community or train stakeholders to conduct their own research as a "collaborator" (Stoecker, 1999).

Extension faculty should also recognize the constraints that distance places on service learning projects. In the LSU case, students interacted with faculty members during four monthly meetings, given that the community was an hour's drive from campus. Community initiatives further removed from campus may restrict the level of interaction between students and community.

Integrating university service learning courses with Extension programs can be an effective model creating and implementing community development initiatives. Extension faculty should consider all benefits and costs before implementing such a strategy.

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