Igniting Passion and Discovering Where the Heart Lies: The Building Blocks of a Successful
Service-Learning Community

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Brief overview of New Mexico State University’s Service Learning for Educational (SLED) office, including its conception, subsequent growing pains, and, through the pains, the discovery of commonalities between faculty, community agencies, and students. Explanation of the techniques used to inspire collaboration between the institution and community agencies will also be provided. Examples of how SLED students have transformed into imaginative and inspiring leaders who have ignited and unified individuals with the same passion for “paying it forward.”

In 2006, Dr. Rudy Garcia received a grant from the Corporation for National and Community Service and New Mexico State University (NMSU) was one of four sub-grantees with a budget of $30K a year for three years. Dr. Mary Prentice was the project director who was responsible for hiring a service-learning coordinator, who would be responsible for creating and overseeing a tutoring program for local elementary school children. Aggie Tutor Partnership (ATP) was created with three goals in mind: to provide trained tutors who would have a positive impact on elementary school children’s state test score, provide NMSU undergraduates with a meaningful service-learning experience, and provide a research-based model for effective tutoring. With those goals in mind, the service-learning program had to take the following steps: define service-learning, bring stake-holders to the table, find courses to incorporate the service-learning component, and assist faculty with connecting the service to the academic content for the course(s) with the outcome that the students would gain a better understanding of the of the course curriculum.

Gathering the Kindling

“To begin, service-learning is a form of experiential education. It is a marriage between occupational and/or academic learning and service to the community” (Prentice & Garcia, 2000,
Considering this definition, the first step was to bring together the stakeholders who would begin the collaborative effort of creating a successful tutoring program that would meet the needs of the NMSU students, teachers, administrators, and K-5th grade students’ academic needs. The service-learning coordinator began calling local principals (approved through Las Cruces public schools central administration) who suggested seasoned and/or federally certified teachers. We were also looking for teachers that would be willing to be part of the planning process outside of his or her contracted hours to become part of the ATP Committee. In late June of 2007, the service-learning coordinator started meeting with teachers who I would take to lunch, meet at their houses, help them set-up their classroom, or volunteer to put bulletin boards up to begin explaining the details of the program. To my surprise, teachers were the most enthusiastic about the idea of a tutoring program, which was evident by their willingness to contribute their expertise on how to begin building a successful partnership between the university and Las Cruces Public Schools (LCPS). “Successful initiatives require individuals who are comfortable in multiple domains and can facilitate meaningful dialogue and shared decision making across interprofessional, intraprofessional, and experiential boundaries” (Sanders, 2006, p. 18).

**Striking the Match**

The course that had been designated for the pilot of ATP was EDUC181, a field experience course in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction that was designed to introduce education majors to public school teaching, have students observe in schools, and have discussion seminars. It was important that ATP provided opportunities for students to critically think and to provide reflective assignments for students, while receiving feedback from the instructors, peers, and/or the non-profit agency. We struck the match in the Fall of 2007 to pilot ATP in two
sections of EDUC181 with 21 service-learning students, 27 teachers, and 5 elementary schools. Within ten weeks, this had provided 421 hours of service-learning tutoring to 27 classrooms, and 67 public school students who received tutoring in math and reading. The first semester was not without struggles; the service-learning students were instrumental in helping me to adjust how many hours was realistic, reduce the number of assignments without compromising rigor, how to provide feedback on the service-learning teachers, what training (or lack of) was needed, decide which reflective exercises were the most effective, and create incentives for students to continue. In December 2007, the ATP committee met and it was agreed that the service-learning hours would be reduced from 20 to 12 over the course of a 6 to 8 week period, course work would now include a reflective journal, teachers would provide service-learning tool kits for tutors, teachers agreed to meet with their tutor(s) before tutoring sessions were scheduled to begin, and service-learning students would be required to have training provided by LCPS. Ironically, one of my students was the daughter of the Staff Development Specialist for the LCPS Beginning Teacher Induction Program. She volunteered to train the service-learning students on Effective Tutoring Strategies. “Other Universities are engaged in intensive collaboration with school administrators and teachers in the creation of professional development schools (PDS). Successful PDSs create innovative coalitions of universities, schools of education, and public schools that support the preparation and ongoing professional development of teachers and encourage research related to educational” practices” (2006, p. 18).

**Igniting the Fire**

Over the course of two academic years, the word spread like wildfire that there was a tutoring program that was for pre-service teachers made by seasoned teachers and provided opportunities for trained tutors to be placed in a classroom as part of an academic course offered through the
College of Education (COE). Participating faculty were excited to see that students were engaged in class and that service-learning students were being able to immediately apply teaching techniques being taught in-class, making way for richer discussions while eliminating hypothetical scenarios. Students were excited to have the opportunity of a hands-on experience with a seasoned teacher who would also serve as a resource, and most importantly, a mentor who had achieved success in the field of teaching. As I visited classrooms, each teacher would share how he or she felt revitalized by the presence of the service-learning students and expressed how this type of program had given him or her the opportunity to be a leader, advocate, and resource for a future teacher. Teachers would invite service-learning students to continue to tutor past the end of the course and service-learning students expressed a need to continue working with their tutees in order to create consistency or see them through a project, test, assignment, or end of year. Unintentionally, the program created a triad of mentoring: teacher mentors service-learning students, and service-learning students mentoring K-5 grade students. Paulo Freire said it best, “The ability to reflect, to evaluate. To program, to investigate, and to transform is unique to human beings in the world and with the world. Life become existence and life support becomes world when the conscience of the self, emerges and establishes a dialectical relationship with the world” (2004, p. 34).

**Keeping the Flame Burning**

Closing on our sixth year there have been many changes. For instance, ATP is now know as Service Learning for Educational Distinction (SLED) and 21,907 hours of service-learning have been completed by 1,285 service-learning students. SLED has received $43,686.00 in grants for program expansion from Verizon, State Farm Youth Advisory Board (YAB), and Burlington Northern Sante Fe, which allowed recruitment of over 35 non-profits, 17 faculty/teaching staff
and expand the mentoring program into surrounding school districts. The SLED Office was able to utilize a small percentage of the funds to hire a 20 hour-a-week graduate assistant, which allowed the service-learning coordinator time to travel to potential agencies. Over the past six years, I have learned that service-learning is the way we can educate the heart of our communities because service-learning is the spark that ignites a person’s passion to give, to think outside of the box, be part of the solution, to experience life through someone else’s eyes, and to bridge the gap between the university and the local community. Gandhi reflected this when he said, “We must be the change we wish to see in the World” (Goodreads). The service-learning students who have participated in the SLED programs are a wonderful reflection of this statement.
References


