

# HELPING STUDENTS TO DEFINE THEIR LEARNING GOALS

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SIMPLY LIVING is not learning, nor should anyone receive academic recognition for just being alive. However, sustained intellectual participation in an off-campus experience might well deserve academic credit. Generally, working requires intellectual participation, but you can perform a job day after day and, after learning the fundamental tasks involved, learn very little—if anything—additional about that job. A person who continues to learn is one who seeks to understand the meaning and purpose of the job in the broader world of work. Similarly, a student volunteer learns by relating the tasks he performs on the job to larger issues, such as concepts of bureaucratic organization and behavior. In short, he attempts to meld action and theory; to integrate

service and learning in one job.

Many schools and colleges now provide avenues for academic recognition of service-learning internships, and students should explore all possibilities for receiving such recognition. Similarly, it is hoped that academic staff will investigate the learning potential of service-learning and institute measures for recognizing it. Agency personnel currently hosting students might encourage local academic institutions in the same manner.

## Inventory Skills

A learning contract is basic to the formulation of a service-learning program. The first step in drawing up a learning contract is to identify specific learning opportunities that an internship affords. This is a two-part process: a "counting up"

and a "counting down." The "counting up" process is an inventory of an individual student's skills, knowledge, and competences that are relevant to the proposed field experience. This inventory should speak both to the range of skills and the degree of expertise or level of achievement that the student has attained.

Let us assume that a student has an opportunity to serve an internship in a community facility working with handicapped children. Included in his counting up inventory would be related academic courses, such as psychology and early childhood education. However, he should not overlook less obviously related one, such as physical education courses in swimming or modern dance. These courses would be relevant to the



internship because they provided a student volunteer with movement skills useful in therapy sessions with a handicapped child.

### Student Expertise

Certainly certificates awarded for specific expertise, such as an advanced first aid card or a senior life saving certification, should be listed in the inventory. Other achievements that the student had already attained—artistic, musical, athletic, or leadership—help to provide a more complete personal profile. A list of readings that the student has done that would aid in performing the job, though perhaps not academically recognized, demonstrates background related to the field experience.

Past internships, employment, and/or volunteer service should be counted; in this example, those experiences that have involved working with children or the physically handicapped would be included in the inventory. Past volunteer positions can be as important as paid jobs, for they serve as indicators of breadth or depth in a particular skill or competence. Finally, it is important for the student to indicate his level of competence in each area. Put together, these form a complete profile of a student's current skills, competences, and knowledge.

### Attaining Skills

The "counting down" process involves understanding the opportunities that an off-campus assignment offers the student to attain *new* or *improved* skills, knowledge, or competence. This requires finding out in greater detail the specific tasks and responsibilities to be assumed in the proposed volunteer assignment and analyzing them prior to establishing specific learning objectives.

For what reasons might a student select a particular service-learning internship? To gain preprofessional experience before entering a professional position or educational

program might be one reason. An example of this would be working with handicapped children prior to enrolling in a special education program. Exploring a possible career to see if one really would enjoy doing that type of activity for the rest of one's life, e.g., working as a nurse's aide before entering nursing school, is another reason. Social action or community involvement as a way of working out one's humanitarian concerns might be a third reason. Affective development, focusing on personal growth and improving interpersonal skills, is also a valid reason.

Additional reasons could be basic work experience to acquire new or improved job skills or a field research setting to test theory and practice. In the latter case, a student might seek to gain a deeper understanding of an academic area such as learning theory. Each of these reasons offers a somewhat different set of basic learning objectives, but being clear about why one wants to work, as in the example of working with physically handicapped children, helps to clarify the specific learning opportunities that the prospective assignment offers.

## SAMPLE CONTRACT

### Internship Description

Host Agency: Agricultural Extension Service, Desert Rock, Cal.

Assignment: To form a youth club for urban teenagers in a *barrio* neighborhood who do not respond to the regular 4-H program; to introduce nutrition information to club members.

Time Commitment: Ten hours per week for one semester

Agency Supervisor: Ernie Powers, Youth Liaison Officer

Faculty Advisor: Dan Gibson, Professor of Psychology

### Inventory of Skills, Competences, & Knowledge

- Worked with housing project youth in an after-school art program for one semester. (Paid)
- Worked as a part-time teacher's aide for one semester. (Volunteer)
- Fluent in Spanish.
- I am considering a career in youth outreach work.

### Service Objectives

- To form a club of young people under 15 years old from the Northside neighborhood.
- To plan and implement a nutrition education program for the club.

### Service Procedures

1. To become familiar with the Agricultural Extension Service, especially its youth outreach program.
2. To become acquainted with the Desert Rock community, especially young people, their parents, and teachers at the Casa Loma School.
3. To help draw up club by-laws; elect officers; establish a committee system.
4. To introduce club members to recreational activities and audio-visual materials giving nutrition information.

### Learning Objectives

- To understand the impact of *barrio* environment on teenage development.



•To test a variety of organizational techniques that I studied last year in a Social Psychology course.

#### **Learning Procedures**

1. To keep a journal about my expectations and observations of the teenagers; their responses to different organizational techniques; how they change and how I change during the course of the semester.
2. To read ten selected books on adolescent development.
3. To compile an annotated bibliography of my reading list.

#### **Involvement of Agency**

1. Ernie Powers will give me four hours of on-site orientation.
2. I will have access to the reference library of the Extension Service.
3. I will attend Extension Service staff meetings once a month.
4. I will meet with Ernie Powers once a week to:
  - a. Discuss problems and ask questions related to my assignment.
  - b. Receive verbal feedback from him about my progress.

#### **Involvement of Faculty**

1. Prof. Gibson will meet with me once every two weeks to discuss the assigned readings.
2. I will submit my journal to him once a month and upon completion of my assignment.

#### **Evaluation Procedures**

1. Upon completion of my assignment, I will have an exit interview with Ernie Powers. There will be no written evaluation from the host agency.
2. I shall write a short self-evaluation for Prof. Gibson, consisting of excerpts from my journal, my readings, and from the feedback that I receive from Ernie Powers during the semester.

Approved: \_\_\_\_\_

Student      Agency Representative      Faculty Member

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

After a student has catalogued his or her personal skills and knowledge and has developed a clear rationale for the internship, a learning contract may be prepared. Up to this point, the main actor has been the student. However, in a learning contract for an off-campus community service assignment, there are three parties involved—the student, a faculty mentor or advisor, and a representative of the agency to which the student will be assigned. There is an analogy between a learning contract and a three-legged stool. A stool with two legs is at best a

precarious arrangement and, unless one is quite careful, it falls over. The work either becomes largely an academic exercise or just a job. An experiential learning contract needs all three parties to “sit” well.

#### **Specific Tasks**

The student needs to express in writing his learning agenda and the specific tasks or responsibilities to be accomplished. The faculty member needs to indicate that if these tasks are accomplished and documented, the learning gained from doing them has academic cre-

ditability. The agency representative needs to indicate agreement with the student's job activities and his or her learning objectives. Of course, a learning contract could be written solely for a student's use as a means to further his or her intellectual growth, or personal development apart from school or college sanctioned activity.

#### **Formulating Objectives**

How should service and learning objectives be written? First it is essential to have a description of what the student volunteer will do on the job. In the example shown, this is the part labelled, “Internship Description.” Ideally, it should spell out the duties and responsibilities of the student, much like a standard job description.

The learning objectives should be described next. It is desirable that the learning objectives be written in such a way that they might be easily measured or evaluated upon completion of the experience. For example, “to learn more about handicapped children” does not tell anyone much about the state of the student's knowledge, either before or after the internship. “To plan and implement a 20-minute physical therapy program for physically handicapped children” is more specific.

There are different points of view with respect to writing learning objectives. Some people prefer to describe behavioral outcomes, i.e., tasks that the student will be able to perform upon completion of his volunteer assignment. No matter what terms are used to describe them, service and learning objectives should list new skills or knowledge to be attained by the student as a result of his community service assignment.

Another consideration is the amount of time allotted to the experience, either in terms of hours (per day, week, or whatever) or proportion of time in relation to time spent on other activities. Further, specific procedures to be



followed should be spelled out. For example, will the student give periodic written or oral reports, write a final paper (and for whom—faculty or agency), keep a journal, or read books? How will the learning be documented?

### **Stating Responsibility**

Responsibility to the agency in which the experience will occur needs to be clearly stated. By incorporating such a statement, the host agency's personnel can review a student's learning expectations and perhaps include the student in staff activities not otherwise contemplated. Furthermore, attention should be given to the nature of the involvement of both faculty and the agency personnel with whom a student will work. For example, to what extent does a student expect his faculty sponsor to be involved—occasional site visits, regular campus meetings, etc. Similarly, it is appropriate to indicate the kind of support, beyond routine supervision, that the student expects from agency personnel, particularly in areas of involvement that might not be available to student volunteers (staff meetings or access to files).

Finally, the methods proposed for evaluation of the internship should be stated in order that all concerned have a clear understanding of how the experience will be reviewed upon completion. Once completed, the contract should be signed by the student, the faculty member, and the agency supervisor.

### **Monitoring the Contract**

Now that a contract is on file, what are some ways to monitor it? Periodic monitoring by any of the parties involved is one way to check on the congruence of the contract with the student's unfolding and therefore changing experience. The first and most obvious way is to review periodically a student's performance or activity in the context of the specific terms of the contract. Is the student achieving

the stated goals or is he making progress toward fulfilling them? If not, what are the obstacles? How can they be overcome? Are the student's expectations unrealistic? Is there need to renegotiate the contract? This should always be an option. A biweekly review that results in a written summary or evaluation of activities in relation to the student's learning goals may serve as a progress report to the academic sponsor.

### **Feedback**

Seeking verbal feedback from supervisors, fellow workers, or faculty mentors allows for occasional, informal evaluation of a student's activities. On a more formal level, feedback may occur in a seminar setting where a skilled faculty or agency person poses questions that facilitate critical analysis of situations or events and pushes a student's observations to broader concepts. Situations that raise questions concerning a person's values are often the beginning of the reflective phase of experiential learning.

### **Utilizing Workshops**

Another way to monitor a student's learning during an internship is to ask him to take advantage of any workshops or seminars related to the internship, such as a weekend psychodrama workshop.

How do you help a student to document what he or she learned in the field—to document the fact that the learning objectives were fulfilled? Specifying job activities, duties, and responsibilities, and what new knowledge, skill, or competence was acquired as a result of the internship, is a beginning. How do these correspond to those stated in the contract? Also, were new or additional duties or responsibilities assigned and performed? Keeping a journal of daily activities, questions, new insights, newspaper clippings, and photographs is a useful device that facilitates later reconstruction.

Some experiential education programs require students to select from their journals a specific number of "critical incidents" and write essays that reflect more fully upon those incidents, especially about how a particular incident was resolved. This "critical incident" approach typically uses the term to distinguish events or situations that challenge a student's existing values, such as the need for public assistance, cultural differences in interpersonal communication, or legal equality.

### **Evaluation**

Several forms of evaluation might be used to document learning. An exit interview with the agency supervisor or, if feasible, an evaluation by a student's peers or clients, incorporates several evaluative methods. An evaluation should be done critically and from a learning perspective. A brief general letter serves no purpose. An oral evaluation session that includes agency personnel, faculty mentor, and student, focused on the learning contract, is another approach. Finally, a self-evaluation that requires a student to speak to his accomplishments as well as his failures is another device.

Each method of evaluation selected (and preferably more than one will be used) should reexamine the contract and assess the degree to which it was fulfilled.

To summarize, making a service-learning internship a self-conscious learning experience requires five steps: an initial *inventory* of the student's personal skills and knowledge prior to the assignment; *identification* of new skills and knowledge that the internship might provide; *negotiating* a three-party contract or statement of specific learning objectives available through the internship; *monitoring* the student's activities to see if the learning contract is being fulfilled; and, finally, *documenting* the learning acquired in the off-campus setting. □