



Putting Education to Good Use: Undergraduate Volunteering at a Non-Profit Organization

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The design and merchandising fields lend themselves to an array of extracurricular opportunities for undergraduate students. These extracurricular activities often highlight students' abilities in design and merchandising such as: student-run fashion shows, life and style concept publications, intern/externships, and freelance design work. Motivated, hardworking undergraduate students who seek employment in design and merchandising often take advantage of these opportunities. There is however, a key area of experience often missing from design and merchandising education, community service engagement. A unique opportunity presents itself to fill the gap of service learning among undergraduate design and merchandising students. In design and merchandising degree programs typical majors include: fashion design, merchandising management, interior design, and housing studies. In this distinctive consortium of majors students have the opportunity to apply educational competencies to the non-profit organization, Habitat for Humanity (H4H).

Using Enos and Troppe's (1998) *Service-Learning in the Curriculum* as an initial guide, I created a service-learning project that was successfully integrated into an existing course curriculum. There were three major goals of the project 1) employ educational competencies 2) engage with the local community and 3) develop teamwork and leadership abilities. Students identified the completion of these goals through a reflective writing process completed in peer groups. The following narrative will explain the successes and next steps of the H4H service-learning project in a social psychology of appearance course offered through a design and merchandising program.

From June 25 – August 16, 2013, 19 undergraduate students were enrolled in a social psychology of appearance course. The undergraduate students enrolled in the course came primarily from design and merchandising majors. In an eight-week, four-credit course students were required to attend class two days per week for one hour and fifty minutes. Additionally, they needed to volunteer 12 total hours to H4H over the eight-week course. Students voluntarily choose partners who would become their "work buddies." Partner selection was based on major, desired volunteer interest with H4H (i.e. design, housing, interiors, merchandising, etc.), and schedule compatibility. In this group there were 15 students who had no prior knowledge of H4H. The executive director of the local branch of H4H came to speak to the class on Wednesday June 27, 2013. In a 50 minute seminar the executive director outlined the mission and goals of the local branch of H4H and explained where they needed the most volunteer assistance. Notably, the local office and Habitat ReStore were expanding and moving locations during August, 2013. The executive director highlighted the imminent need for skilled expertise in the area of design and merchandising. These skills were necessary for a successful H4H main office relocation and the completion of two home builds in the community.

The project officially began on Saturday July 7, 2013 with the entire class working together at a Habitat for Humanity build site earning six hours toward their 12-hour requirement.

Page 1 of 2

Students worked side-by-side with community volunteers in an array of construction, design, labor, and organization activities. The purpose of the first Saturday working together was to provide the entire group some exposure to a H4H build. Tuesday July 3, 2013 students returned to the classroom to reflect on their first H4H experience. In a class-discussion format students vetted their first workday. A broad range of initial reactions were discussed and students worked together on solutions. For example, a female student expressed that she felt “under utilized” at the work site. The class-provided solution was for this particular student to request a list of duties at the beginning of her next volunteer experience. Similarly, another female student stated she wished to use more merchandising skills and found the labor work to be tedious and boring. The class solution was for this student to complete her remaining volunteer hours at the H4H ReStore where her merchandising background could be better utilized.

After completing 12 volunteer hours, students wrote a paper highlighting their experiences both positive and negative. Aligning with the three major goals for the project students had to cover three major topics in the paper: 1) inventory of student experiences, 2) a connection to course concepts, and 3) a reflection/conclusion. On the last day of class, August 16, 2013 students discussed their papers and overall service-learning project experience with the entire class. Student reactions to the project varied. Two definitive results surfaced from the project, the first was that design students had a more positive experience than the merchandisers at the build site and with the project overall. As a group they felt more inclusion with the community volunteers and were able to clearly articulate where and how their educational competencies were applied, for example assisting in color choice for painting both interior and exterior spaces. This group also felt as though they developed teamwork skills with their “work buddy.” The second definitive result was that the merchandising students had an overall negative experience with the project. As a group they described difficulty in applying merchandising skills to the ReStore because it is donation based. However, the merchandising students were able to more clearly articulate improvements for future volunteer experiences. They noted that future merchandising volunteers can create a comprehensive inventory database to effectively budget, monitor, and develop the ReStore. This information was given directly to the executive director to improve future volunteer experiences in this partnership.

This project is a starting point for future service-learning projects between design and merchandising departments with H4H. As an international non-profit organization the volunteer opportunities are boundless. In the next iteration of this project students will engage in a more comprehensive H4H seminar, outline their own volunteer initiatives/goals, and spend more time outside of the class volunteering. Partnerships with H4H can provide internships and work experience for students in design and merchandising majors. This unique combination of applied educational competencies and service learning will better situate an undergraduate student for future employment.

References

- Enos, S. L., & Troppe, M. L. (1998). Service learning in the curriculum. In B. Jacoby (Ed.), *Service-Learning in Higher Education: Concepts and Practices* (pp. 156-181). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.