

Service Learning

Service learning focuses on the connections between service in the community and what one learns in an academic setting. The University of North Carolina provides a representative definition of service learning as programs that engage students, faculty, and community agencies in active partnerships to foster socially aware and civically involved students through participation and hands-on experiences that address the needs of local communities. Such programs are contrasted against traditional community service by college students which, while certainly worthwhile, does not have any structural ties to academic curricula.

UTD has mounted a service learning program for a number of years although it serves primarily as a vehicle to organize student volunteer efforts in the community. Administered by an Assistant Dean of Students and managed by a student Service Learning Coordinator, the program provides a web site and a monthly newsletter to keep students informed of volunteer opportunities in the community. Students participate in community activities ranging from the 'Sounds of Class Carnival' held on this campus to the Dallas Children's Museum and Parkland Hospital. The program has a long history of involvement in the national alternate spring break program where college students from across the country work in community settings during their traditional spring vacation. Thirty-three UTD students were involved in the spring 2004 alternate spring break program. The 2003-2004 Service Learning Annual Report lists between 150 and 200 students involved in community service activities.

This subcommittee is of the opinion that we must make the transition from providing community service opportunities to providing service learning opportunities for our students. The key to this effort rests largely with the faculty and their design or adaptation of courses to include service learning components. A brief review of service learning at other institutions reveals the wide range of options available to us. Most universities include service learning components in their teacher education programs while social and behavioral science programs include experiences in community agencies as an adjunct to classroom instruction. Language instruction often requires students to volunteer as translators or tutors serving children in their native language while promoting the acquisition of English. Engineering and computer science courses have students volunteer their time to community agencies as information technology consultants who help upgrade the technical capabilities of those organizations. Arts & Humanities classes require students to volunteer services to area museums and art galleries.

We recommend that the Faculty Senate create a new committee on service learning tasked to recommend both a structure and an incentive system for faculty to increase the role of service learning in our undergraduate curriculum. The Office of Student Life should also be congratulated on its efforts to promote community volunteerism on the part of undergraduate students and invited to participate in faculty discussions on the expansion of the program.