

Living Learning Program Coursework: Connecting Classroom and Experiential Learning

Housing professionals are broadly and enthusiastically embracing living-learning programs and communities to blur the lines between the residence hall and the formal classroom. Often these efforts have been designed to meet the unique needs of first-year students in support of the challenges they face in the transition to college. The Beyond the Classroom Living and Learning Program (BTC) at the University of Maryland is a unique program developed for upper class students. This two-year academic/student affairs collaboration for juniors and seniors focuses on the transitional nature of the second half of the undergraduate experience. Outcomes include students' engagement in civic life, real world experience, and professional and personal development.

Like many living learning communities, BTC extends the learning environment beyond the classroom into the residence hall environment. The BTC and residence hall staff members collaborate to provide personal and professional programs designed to meet the specific needs of juniors and seniors preparing for life after graduation. The program supports students' development by not only extending the learning environment to the residence halls but also encouraging experiential learning through research, internships, and community-service on campus and in the greater Washington D.C. area. The community fostered in the residence hall environment provides a space to make connections between their academics, co-curricular experiences, and future goals with peers. But the learning is not just left to the informal peer interactions. This article

highlights the diverse yet complementary coursework adding meaning and context to the students' experience, which is at the heart of this learning environment for upper-class students.

Eyler & Giles (1999) found that students rarely transferred knowledge and principles learned in the classroom to new problems and that this can lead to the “active construction of knowledge” (Bransford & Vye, 1989, p. 169). Komives (2000) suggested that many times “our systematic processes too often stop at the acquisition of knowledge. The much harder and more meaningful process is to facilitate understanding and wisdom, leading to intentional self-authorship inherent in informed thought and action.” (p. 31). Komives referred to the “void” created from the lack of knowledge to practice opportunities as “a gap” and “part of our role as a teaching community is to help students inhabit the gap” (p. 31). At the University of Maryland one way in which we “inhabit the gap” is with a program called the Beyond the Classroom (BTC) Living & Learning Program.

Nationally, student involvement in research, internships, and service-learning has expanded tremendously (Campus Compact, 2002; Kezar, 2002; Gordon, 2002). These experiences serve to complement campus-based learning and strengthen students' educational development by connecting students' cognitive learning inside the classroom with their affective learning in the lab, on the job, or at the service site. The residence hall environment provides the space for students to make connections between the two. These experiential learning activities begin to shape or enhance the young adult's culture

of professionalism in her/his field of study while still a student. For example, a young finance and marketing major can get experience in an accounting firm to see if this major matches her career goals and personal and professional organizational fit. In doing so this student can begin to translate knowledge into action and research into practice.

Onsite supervisors guide the students through the experiential learning activities and there is a corresponding course taught by on-campus faculty or staff members that is parallel to the semester-long activity. What sets the “learn by doing” experiences (experiential learning) apart in higher education are that these environments include the requirement to observe and reflect on current actions in order to formulate future practice within an institutional context. Eyler and Giles (1999) noted that experiential learning occurs through a cycle of action and reflection, and not simply being able to recount what has been learned through the reading and lecture material. The BTC courses are designed to help guide students through this important part of the process. By participating in the program and taking the companion course, students can benefit from the conceptual framework needed to maximize their experiential learning activity and an opportunity to discuss the issues that arise during the semester with peers in similar experiential learning activities.

Credit bearing and non-credit bearing academic courses are offered at many campuses to help make meaning out of the internship experience. Many of the courses are specific to the distinct academic majors but some of the courses are more multidisciplinary in nature. In the Beyond the Classroom program the “Seminar in

Research Experiences” course was set up similar to a graduate seminar allowing students the opportunity to reflect on their breakthroughs, fears, and frustrations of the research process. The twofold objective of the course was to assist students in understanding the culture of research as well as understanding the human component in the research journey. Course topics include ethical issues in research; research funding; understanding the research process; and research for whose benefit. Some of the recent research topics included African Burial Ground Project in New York City’s lower Manhattan, the Shakespeare Globe Centre renovation with the US Archives and song patterns of crickets in a campus biology laboratory. In order to extend this vision of inquiry, we need to help faculty members expand the definition of research, identify connections for curricular-based research opportunities, and provide experiences that are developmentally appropriate for our students. Sharing practices between disciplines will help this happen. For example, a student doing research on insects at the National Institute of Health would attend class to discuss the purpose of research in the generation of knowledge and might find an opportunity to discuss with others the emotional connection they are developing with their research topic, often an unexpected outcome of their research experience.

The “Seminar in Internship Experience” course at the University of Maryland offers a wide variety of topics that help prepare students become more comfortable with the corporate/business culture. Some of the course topics include: how to look for a mentor/coach; the importance of networking; sexual harassment prevention; diversity and what it means; and values and ethics in the workplace. For instance, the internship course allows a student to discuss the struggles she is having with a supervisor with

classmates while also learning some strategies to address the issue appropriately through the course section on conflict and communication.

Service-learning engages faculty in new and creative ways, offers much needed assistance to local organizations and students gain valuable skills and expertise. But what are the outcomes for service-learning and why has so much attention being given to this pedagogy? Kezar (2002) suggested that involvement in community is directly related to higher education's mission of producing good citizens. The service-learning course in the Beyond the Classroom Program is a multi-disciplinary service-centered course. Course topics include ethics in service-learning; experiential learning theory; and transformational and transactional approaches to community service. The service course provides a powerful framework to help a student explain and describe, both cognitively and affectively, his lived experience in a soup kitchen vs. reading about a soup kitchen in class. Some of the most powerful stories we have heard about learning beyond the classroom have come from students and faculty who have participated in service learning projects. A communications faculty member took a group of students to Ground Zero as a service project and to pay homage to the volunteers. Dillon and Van Ryper's study of college graduates also concluded that the students' service-learning experiences had been among their most valuable learning experiences they had in their college career (in Kezar, 2002).

Conclusion

Students in the Beyond the Classroom Living & Learning Program and others like it share the intellectual responsibility of the learning environment or as Maynard “Sandy” Mack, Director of the Honors Program at Maryland coined; students help “captain their own ship”. The faculty members and instructors challenge students to conceptualize the situation or problem, help students act upon it in appropriate manner given the professional culture and environment, and assist students to reflect on their work and enhance or modify their current behavior. These expanded learning environments beyond the classroom augment the students’ in-class work and prepare them to take on the challenges for life after college. Collaborative residence hall programs like BTC provide students with a connected view of learning that integrates their real world experiences with the formal classroom lecture and discussion setting to create a structured, powerful learning environment.

References

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