

International Service Learning Successfully Engaging Adult Students

Denise Gifford, Bernard J. Strenecky,
and Henry R. Cunningham

Abstract

A commonly held misconception is that adult working students with multiple demands on their time will resist the idea of community-based learning or service learning because they can't fit it in their schedule. The experience of the University of Louisville International Service-Learning Program proves the opposite. Adult students find out-of-the-classroom learning, when well designed, to be compatible with their learning goals and objectives. Eight years of experience in involving adult students in international service-learning reveals that adult students crave the opportunity to apply their knowledge, experience different cultures, and gain academic and personal confidence from doing work that makes a difference for others.

Metropolitan universities are environments that attract older adult students. Patricia Cross in 1971 initially identified the “new students” as those who are working class commuters who face adult responsibilities with full- or part- time jobs and family obligations. In the last 30 years, adult students have increased dramatically in both absolute number and in the percentage of the student population in relation to younger students. Adult students increased from 28 percent to 43 percent of total undergraduate enrollment, currently representing four million students. (National Center of Education Statistics, 1995, 2002a).

Typically, the multiple roles of adult students as worker, parent, and community participant leave little time to engage in campus activities or out-of-the-classroom learning opportunities. While involved in their academic course work, adult students are often unengaged in other aspects of campus life. Most adult students attend school part-time, do not live on campus, and are not involved in campus activities (Bradley and Graham, 2000). Although they juggle multiple responsibilities adult students strongly value opportunities to integrate academic learning with life and work experiences (Graham and Donaldson, 1999).

Older students who attend metropolitan universities attend part-time, are employed, and their enrollment is recurrent and spread out (Lynton and Elman, 1987). Additionally, these mature students demand both different teaching approaches and learning environments to engage their interest in the academic process. Adult students have been found to respond more effectively to interactive teaching methods and

especially those that resemble real-world situations (Lynton and Elman, 1987). Combining the practical and the theoretical provides meaning to the learning experience (Tonkin, 1993), and is most effective with older students.

Addressing practical and real-world problems in surrounding communities has been a role of metropolitan universities for many years. Academic resources, including faculty and staff time and effort have been dedicated to solving issues and problems in adjacent communities (Harkavy and Wiewel, 1995). Astin (1993) cites that increased student involvement has followed faculty engagement in the community and learning has been enhanced when clear and applicable links between the classroom and out-of-class experiences are present. Interaction between the student and the community provide that important bridge between the theoretical work in the classroom and the practical issues that business, organizations and government grapple with daily. Often these off-campus practical experiences enhance the personal development of students and encourage active and successful learning for the adult student (Bok, 1982). Additionally, involvement in out-of-classroom activities encourages the development that keeps students in school, thus fostering retention (Astin, 1993).

Metropolitan universities have long been expected to contribute their collective expertise to solving societal problems, but effective problem solving comes with the application of real-world solutions to issues inherent in communities (Hathaway, Mullholland and White, 1995). Thus the practical experience of analyzing an issue and application of solutions is a most effective learning approach for the adult student. Barnett and Phares (1995), implore metropolitan universities to be diligent in seeking various avenues for student participation in the community, recognizing the rich learning opportunities inherent in these practical applications of learning theory. One of these avenues is service-learning, which combines community service with a learning component and typically is supervised by a faculty member or a student affairs professional with academic credit or is part of a course requirement or option (Barnett and Phares, 1995)

Service learning addresses both functions so important for adult student: providing learning focused on real-world issues, and developing the important linkage between the student and the community. Service learning is a deliberate connection between academic coursework and service, and injects a seriousness of purpose into the learning process. This approach is attractive to the older mature student, by providing the real world experience linkage that fosters engaged learning. Through service-learning students go beyond simplistic notions of society and human conditions. When this service is combined with an international focus, the value of the experience becomes even greater. Service-learning programs are characterized by components that explicitly “foster participants” learning about the larger social issues behind the human needs to which they are responding. This includes understanding the historical, sociological, cultural, and political contexts of the need or issue being addressed (Kendall, 1990, as cited in Rhodes, 1997).

Two primary benefits of service-learning were outlined by Astin (1999):

- It serves as a “powerful means of preparing students to become more caring and responsible parents and citizens and of helping colleges and universities to make good on their pledge to ‘serve society’” (p. xi) and,
- It has great potential for enhancing the learning process, both cognitively and affectively.

Part of the power of service-learning is its capacity to “engage students’ hearts as well as their heads” (Eyler and Giles, 1999) and to provide opportunities for students to understand the complexity of what they are studying by applying what they have learned while thinking critically about assumptions they may have never before questioned. Service learning can also be a powerful motivator that compels students to want to know more (Eyler and Giles, 1999). The service is enhanced by the learning, and the learning acquires depth well beyond the classroom (Berry, 2002). How do we know that service learning provides effective learning enriched by meaning? How do we quantify the effectiveness of this learning approach?

Research in the service-learning area is often qualitative, as the outcome of engaged and involved learning is the best described in the participants’ own words in their journals or other reflective writing. The following are excerpts from reflective writing assignments submitted by adult students from an international service-learning project in which participants are primarily adult students.

Student I

I believe I am starting to realize that participating in experiences like International service learning takes sacrifice. As an adult student I have a heavy work schedule and many family responsibilities, but this semester I am going to have to focus much more heavily on my studies, my research, and preparing myself to be a qualified international professional, and to participate and apply my academic knowledge. In some ways that is frustrating, as my number of differing responsibilities is daunting but in other ways exciting because I believe the experiences and learning that take place this semester are going to knock my socks off, and I am excited about being a part of it all. Another feeling that I felt throughout the early parts of the meeting was uncomfortable. I am a quiet person, and as I sat there and listened to all the people and how they have traveled and experienced much more than I; I felt that I was in the wrong place. It will be hard to reintegrate with society. All of the hustle and bustle of city life seems pointless when put in perspective with the rest of the world. While I have realized that my part in the world is so small, I also realize that I have much to learn in the years ahead.

Student II

The feeling was somewhat somber at tonight’s meeting because this was our last student management team meeting on our trip. The people sitting around me at the table are people that I have grown really close to in just a week’s time, and I am not looking forward to going back to school and all the stress that goes with midterms and seems so much less applicable. Our team has made it through resolutions of many

serious issues, as well as numerous bug bites, and it has truly been a bonding experience. I have learned that I don't share the same views as the other members on the team. We are from different cultures and have different religious beliefs. But an effective management team brings diverse perspectives together and focuses on the success of the entire group. I have read this in textbooks but this was the real experience. We were a team that worked together to pull off one heck of a learning experience for a group of approximately 60 people. Yes, some things did not go the way we expected, but we worked through the problems and came out more experienced in international leadership and nursing or business or justice administration. I feel I have learned so much in just one week, and yet there is still so much I have still to learn about different cultures and different countries. This trip has definitely opened my eyes to the joys of service and cross-cultural and inter-disciplinary learning, but it has also made me hunger for more opportunities to utilize my academic learning to serve others because it is such a fulfilling process. I hope my future includes many more experiences like this where I have the chance to stretch myself, serve, and learn about other countries and their cultures.

Student III – Reflection

We went to the U.S. Embassy so that I could conduct an interview for my thesis with the Economic and Political Officer. Though much of the information that he gave me was information I had already found in my research, the interview gave me a first person description of similarities between this border dispute and other Latin American border disputes and how politics within Latin American countries tend to affect these conflicts. I was able to take what I had learned in my research and talk to a person who had personal experience regarding the conflicts and politics described in my textbook.

In applying what took place at the meeting to international service learning, I have come to the conclusion that the leaders of such a team must be prepared for anything. Organization is a must. Planning ahead, based on past circumstances, for possible issues that might arise is a must. Being able to grasp the problem at hand and present a solution is a must. Staying calm and reflecting a positive attitude to everyone else in the group is a must. None of these different aspects of international leadership can be taken lightly and I realize now how much work I need in these different areas. I look forward to the coming weeks and the many things that I will continue to learn, I just hope that I will be able to do my part in making sure everything runs smoothly.

Student IV

This trip was definitely a life changing experience for me. I hope to never get too caught up again in the materialism in the U.S. I also hope that I get to the point where doing some sort of service project is second hand and where I am constantly involved in some form of service to the community. Human life has been so busy focused on work and school and making enough money to set back in school, or study in school. Ultimate meaning for me anymore is not finding the best job, making the most money, living in the nicest house, or driving the coolest car. Ultimate meaning for me is

serving others, whether that is through a service organization or with my, hopefully, future law degree. Thank you, faculty members, for the chance to be a part of such an awesome experience. I am forever indebted to you both because you gave me the opportunity to go outside the classroom, outside the country for that matter, and apply what I have studied to a society's real problem. Thank you.

Program Description: A Metropolitan University's International Service-Learning Project

Over the last eight years, the University of Louisville's International Service-Learning Program (ISLP) has provided an environment for over 300 students to apply their classroom experiences to work in real-world, intercultural projects. The average age of these students is 29, with many mature and older students participating. Over half of the students were 22 or older with many indicating they had not been previously involved in out-of-the-classroom activities. The ISLP is often a series of inaugural experiences for the adult student: the first out-of-the-classroom learning experience, the first service project, the first experience in another country and often the first long distance airline flight. All students undertake a service project related to the course subject, and must serve the community as well. Students reflect upon their service experience within the context of the course. For example, an early ISLP project involved students from a variety of disciplines working with local officials in a Caribbean country to develop marketing strategies to promote tourism in that country.

Since that first year all ISLP experiences have been held in a small Central American country. Students worked together to develop a five-year sustainable community-based ecotourism marketing plan a small intercostal Central American community. As an interdisciplinary project, students were combined from the Business School, Justice Administration, Health Promotions, Physical Education and Sports Studies (HPES), Social Work, Law and Pan- African Studies. In the last few years, the program continued its interdisciplinary focus while adding students and faculty and has worked with local officials in Dangriga to improve public safety and reduce the potential of crime for visiting tourists. Since crime and delinquency involve a number of variables, the students worked closely with those involved in Belize's institutions of social control and the mental health community. Disciplines involved were Justice Administration, HPES, Education, Medicine, and Pan-African Studies.

The focus on interdisciplinary service learning includes an undergraduate or graduate interdisciplinary academic course that combines pre-departure preparation with an examination of topics, theories, and constructs related to the country, culture, and particular academic focus of the service-learning project. An additional course at the graduate level enables the participation of graduate students from one primary program but is open to graduate students in other areas. Students in this course form the International Development Team, which is designed to introduce students to project management of an interdisciplinary international service program. This process includes the pre-departure coordination of all interdisciplinary activities, management of the program at the international site and evaluation of the program effectiveness.

All students are required to write a reflective log after every class and at the end of each day's activities in the host country. This pedagogical modality provides a systematic way for students to think and process their learning experiences. This enables students to examine what they learn and what effect the experience has on them, their colleagues, professors and host country residents.

The pre-departure preparation is detailed and extensive. It includes weekly three-hour class sessions for seven weeks prior to the international experience held for a 10-day period during spring break. Follow up project report completion sessions are held. Additionally, a post experience session is conducted with students to review and process their experiences after their return.

Engaging the Adult Student in International Service-Learning: Lessons Learned

The metropolitan university of 20,000 students with an average student age of 26 embarked on this international service-learning program after experiencing what the research literature reports about older students; adult students are less participatory in out-of-the-classroom learning. Indeed, the work and school schedule managed by most adult students assures that there is little time left over for the traditional clubs and organizations, or even infrequent attendance at a social event on campus.

How, then, did this university recruit and engage so many busy adult students in an experience that required extensive time for preparation, a commitment of fund-raising to cover costs, and a 10-day international excursion as well as numerous follow-up sessions and finalization of class projects after returning home. The student and academic affairs professionals leading this project have experienced a long learning process over the past years with each year building upon the successes and failures of the year before.

The following are simple lessons learned by the organizers regarding techniques and approaches used to effectively recruit and engage adult students in an arduous international service-learning experience.

Recruitment

Faculty, faculty, faculty – faculty serve as the key recruiters for adult students. An enthusiastic faculty member who identifies a student in class and invites him/her to participate in a life changing service-learning project is almost impossible to resist. Over the years, more than 30 faculty members have participated in the project and have become resolute supporters of the experience. A faculty member attends the first year of ISLP without a student cohort to evaluate the experience and make professional and academic contacts for the next year's project. Often, an adult student attends the first evaluation year with a faculty member to assist in assessment for future year participation. In subsequent years each faculty member takes five to eight students from their academic specialty.

Key allies of the program, including administrators, faculty and staff have all become deeply committed to the program. In the eight years of its existence, many have garnered or earned funds to participate and have worked as part of the group both through the preparation stages and during the trip. They serve as cheerleaders and supporters and often identify adult students and refer them to us for consideration.

The lure of a service project where a student can apply practical learning skills to real-world issues is particularly inviting to adult students who yearn for this experience. They find ISLP to be a perfect fit. "I was able to teach seminars in maternal/child health, even though I was just beginning my nursing studies," related one older returning to school student. Other Justice Administration students were able to pool their still new expertise in crime prevention as they worked in development of a tourism plan for a small Caribbean country. A plan for sustainable ecotourism for an area in Central America was the task for a Business Administration subgroup. When completed, the report was presented to the mayor for his review and comments. Adult students revel in the experience of applying their academic learning to real issues.

Normal student recruitment methods, such as advertisement in the school newspaper or flyers advertising an "alternate spring break" are much less effective with adult students. Most students busy with work and home life are much less regularly tuned into the communication avenues for campus activities. Their most regular contact is the classroom, and the faculty member is the key link to the program.

As the years go on, the number of students over the age of 22 participating continues to steadily increase. This reflects the informal network of students talking to other students about their "life-changing" and real life learning experience as an ISLP member. While less in tune with the traditional student newspaper and advertisements, adult students regularly communicate with other adult students and hear of the ISLP from their fellow students.

While initially appearing daunting, the fund-raising aspects of the program seem to be actually easier for the adult student than the traditionally aged student. Adult students have current and past employers, both full- and part-time, who can be trapped for funding or donations. For example, many of our students who work the nighttime package-handling shift for UPS have been assisted by their employer with funding to cover their costs. Adult students also have more community contacts, and longer relationship with, for example, churches and neighborhood groups that can be tapped for help. One adult student used his part-time job at a pharmacy to acquire funding as well as free sample medication to take to the project site.

A Unique Experience

Adult students seem to revere the opportunity to apply themselves to an experience that may never come again. Older students relish the uniqueness of an opportunity like ISLP, albeit attained through hard work and sacrifice. "I had never left the country, and hardly the state, but I knew to work as a dental assistant in a developing country was a

chance I couldn't pass up. With my family responsibilities and my kids, I may never have this chance again," one student explained to us.

A tireless and relentless faculty project coordinator and cheerleader are integral to identifying adult students and transforming what appear to be insurmountable obstacles into small achievable challenges. As with most effective student affairs programs, the tireless devotion of a dedicated leader provides the encouragement needed to pull a reluctant and overwhelmed adult student on board for an ISLP experience of a lifetime. We have a few of these, and their impact has been immeasurable.

Conclusion

Learning focused on real-world issues and the deliberate link between the coursework and the practical application is of special interest to adult students who demand different teaching approaches and learning environments to engage their interest in the academic process. Service learning is the perfect solution to involving adult students in the application of classroom knowledge to real-world issues. Through persistence, commitment and recruitment led by committed faculty, an ISLP program which recruits and engages otherwise less than actively involved adult students has been most successful in engaging adult students in the academic process. Through an exciting learning experience tailored for their specific needs, even busy adult students can be enthusiastically involved in out-of-the classroom learning.

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Author Information

Denise Gifford is vice president of student affairs at the University of Louisville. She holds an Ed.D. in higher education administration from the University of Kentucky, a master's in student personnel administration, and a bachelor's degree in hearing and speech science. Dr. Gifford is responsible for the administration of 14 departments organized within four units that serve all students: Student Life; Student Services; Counseling & Career Services and Diversity, and Research & Assessment. She has published research articles and focuses on diversity and student retention.

Bernard J. Strenecky is a professor at the University of Louisville in the College of Education and Human Development, where he teaches courses in the areas of literacy learning and international leadership. He is the director of the university's International Service Learning Program, one of the largest international interdisciplinary service learning programs within the country, coordinating the activities of 13 academic disciplines and managing 28 service learning projects.

Henry R. Cunningham is an adjunct faculty member in the College of Education and Human Development at the University of Louisville. He also serves as an administrator for the university's International Service Learning Program. In this capacity, he is the liaison between the University of Louisville and the country of Belize. Dr. Cunningham's research interest is international service learning and community.

Denise Gifford, Vice President
Student Affairs
MS01-01 Grawemeyer Hall
University of Louisville
Louisville, KY 40292
Telephone: 502-852-6933
Email: d.gifford@louisville.edu

Bernard J. Strenecky, Professor
Education and Human Development
MS02-84
University of Louisville
Louisville, KY 40292
Telephone: 502-852-0574
Email: bernies@louisville.edu

Henry R. Cunningham, Lecturer
Education and Human Development
MS02-84
University of Louisville
Louisville, Y 40292
Telephone: 502-852-0357
Email: hrcunn01@louisville.edu