The Innovative Instructor

Center for Educational Resources

Pedagogy Forum

Beyond the Classroom, Into the Community

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What this is

The Innovative Instructor is a forum that publishes articles related to teaching excellence at Johns Hopkins

About the CER

The Center for Educational Resources partners with faculty and graduate students to extend instructional impact by connecting innovative teaching strategies and instructional technologies

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The Issue

Although learning by doing has always been an important pedagogical tool, it may be difficult to implement in courses where the active learning takes place outside of the classroom or lab. Creating course projects that involve the community gives students a chance to affect positive social change, but working outside of a controlled environment involves unpredictable variables that can hamper the active learning experience.

In the course, "Baltimore and The Wire," taught by Dr. Peter Beilenson, students were asked to write about community issues framed in the HBO show, "The Wire." Eva Smith, a former student in that course, realized that by directly engaging the community, students would benefit from active and meaningful involvement. Ms. Smith proposed a new course, "Community Engineering: Interdisciplinary Problem-solving," which was created in spring 2012 with Ms. Smith as the teaching assistant. The course allowed students to undertake interdisciplinary problem solving around real issues in the community.

Why does it matter

Social problem solving necessitates resourceful solutions. Opening these discussions to a diverse group of thinkers, such as a class of students from a variety of disciplines, can lead to creative results. Moreover, incorporation of Community Based Learning (CBL) projects in cross-discipline courses increases opportunities for mutual benefit. CBL projects and cross-disciplinary problem solving can facilitate doing social good, supporting the environment, improving the economic climate, and providing educational experiences. There are two primary constituents in a CBL course: the students and the community organizations. The potential impact of community based projects is significant, but such projects can be difficult to balance. If successful, students will become more engaged in the course objectives, obtain real life experiences, improve their communication skills, and be more likely to continue to work in the community. The community organization will likely benefit from obtaining an outside perspective for addressing the issues they face without depleting resources.

The Challenges

In the past, courses focused on theoretical approaches to addressing community issues. Engaging the community is desirable, but real world challenges are likely to make it difficult to guarantee a positive outcome for both students and the community organizations.

Real world challenges can include the cultural differences between students and clients, which can hamper communication. A student can be fired by the client, or changes in the client's priorities can lead to abandoning the project. Timing presents another challenge for example, when the semester and the clients' implementation dates do not align or resources are not available when needed. There is also the difficulty of identifying a client to pair with a student's idea or a situation in which the client is not committed to the project outcome. From the instructional perspective, there may be inequitable work carried out by the various student groups or within a specific group. It may be impossible to ensure work hour/experiential equity across projects since the projects and clients will differ. Grading such disparate projects can prove challenging; management of and an understanding for group-based activities is essential.

Approach

"Community Engineering: Interdisciplinary Problem-solving" was cross listed between the Schools of Engineering and Arts & Sciences. Each student brought unique knowledge to class, ranging from engineering, sociology, public health, and other majors. This allowed for a diverse group of students with a variety of skill sets to help solve problems in the community.

To help frame the issues, President Daniels and members of different organizations were invited to discuss issues facing the Baltimore City community. For the first assignment, each student conducted an in depth analysis of a broad problem (e.g., health, food, crime, homelessness, poverty, etc.). This involved identifying the issue within its current context, investigating the evidence and instruments used for dealing with the problems, and conducting research on the institutions involved.

The class discussed these issues and worked together to identify a specific set of problems. Each student then presented to the class an innovative solution to a problem and identified organizations that would be interested in the idea. After considering their peers' ideas, students formed teams with compatible interests around a theme, such as nutrition or education. The teams then collaborated to tie their ideas to a project or program that they would eventually pitch to a community organization. As this was the first time the course was taught, finding the right formula for implementing the community-based class concept was challenging. Working with a single community organization would have resolved some of these challenges as it would have been easier to manage communication and have guaranteed organization/project pairings. Unfortunately, it was not possible to identify an organization that could accommodate eight different concurrent projects. Despite this, most student teams were able to find an organization interested in their projects. Some ideas required revision, so alternate projects and organizations were identified as a backup to ensure that each team had an organizational match.

After each team had successfully pitched its business plan to its selected organization, students spent the rest of the semester implementing their projects. As an example, one group worked on a nutrition curriculum for the public schools to improve students' knowledge of nutrition, producing pre- and post- knowledge assessments. Another group identified a "food desert" and presented a plan to start a grocery store providing healthy produce, adding liveable wage jobs for the area. They did a marketing analysis and community outreach to find ways to bring in customers.

Frequent meetings with clients are required to keep them abreast of the activities and encourage collaboration. This gives both the students and the clients a sense of shared ownership.

Results

It was encouraging to see students engaged in community problem solving. They applied the methods and skills learned in class to the real world to bring about positive change in the community.

Students gained an understanding of the roles and responsibilities involved in teamwork. Working with the community organizations increased their understanding of the role of empathy, understanding, and appropriate support for their clients.

The course provided an opportunity for students to become better communicators. They had to consider the best approach for delivering ideas to people they had never worked with before. Understanding their target constituencies and their community organizations was paramount for communicating their ideas.

While some projects may not produce long-lasting community programs, student experience outside the classroom is valuable. Students understand that they are gaining skills that they can take into the workplace. Moreover, students have the opportunity to see whether or not they want to work in a particular field. Additional benefits include the connections they gain in the community and potential for internships through these networks.

Additional Resources

- Center for Social Concern provides additional resources for developing CBL projects: http://www.jhu.edu/csc/cbl.shtml

Authors' Backgrounds

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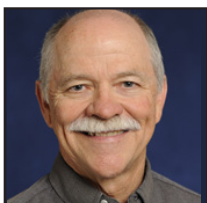
Eric Rice has 25 years of experience in consulting and teaching communication skills. Students in his classes have performed dozens of projects for organizations that have helped the organizations grow and the students find jobs.

Dr. Peter Beilenson, Lecturer
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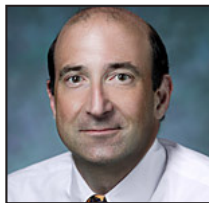
Dr. Beilenson is a former Baltimore county Health Commissioner and currently serves as Howard county's Health Officer. He has taught the course, "Baltimore and the Wire," in Public Health Studies, focusing on the major issues Baltimore and other urban centers.

Eva Smith, Teaching Assistant
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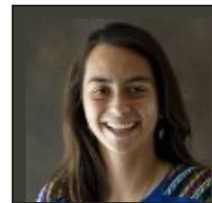
Eva Smith is an undergraduate in International Studies at Johns Hopkins University. She was the teaching assistant for the "Baltimore and the Wire" course. She co-developed the "Community Engineering" course and served as its teaching assistant.