

## **A SERVICE-LEARNING PROJECT THAT INCLUDED MULTIPLE SERVICE OPPORTUNITIES INCLUDING THE MENTORING OF YOUNGER AT-RISK STUDENTS**

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### **Abstract**

This paper documents a service-learning program involving both college level landscape architecture students and students from a local alternative school for juvenile delinquents. It documents how both groups benefited from the service-learning experience that included opportunities for college students to mentor younger, at-risk students. Information gathered from a variety of sources including student journals, teacher interviews and a survey of landscape architecture graduates who participated in the program. Indications are that mentoring greatly enhances the service-learning experience and that critical evaluation of such a program can be measured using a variety of qualitative and quantitative data sources.

### **Introduction**

What do college students and juvenile delinquents have in common? In this particular case, it was a service-learning project that helped college students learn while mentoring to at-risk youth. Every one involved learned much more than they bargained for. This paper describes a service-learning experience that resulted in a unique opportunity for college-aged students to mentor at-risk youth, all of whom were participating in a community service project. It analyzes responses from a survey of former landscape architecture (LA) students who participated in the program, interviews with the teachers of the at-risk youth and the youth's own journal entries. The survey offered the opportunity to determine the LA student's initial and subsequent attitudes about the project. The response rate was exceptional (81.25%; n=16) and overwhelming, the students agreed that the project was one of the most valuable studio experiences they had undertaken while in college. The study results also suggest that mentoring can enhance the service-learning experience for both groups.

Landscape Architecture students in a Materials and Details class in the College of Agriculture and Natural Resources were recruited to design the layout, construction details and restoration plantings for a nature trail. The request came from a local alternative school for juvenile delinquents ages 10 – 17yrs. old known as JJAEP (Juvenile Justice Alternative Education Program). The school had received a service-learning grant to construct the Liberty Nature Trail with their students. Although they had the funds to purchase materials and services, they needed help with the design of the trail in an environmentally sensitive area located behind the school. Three graduate and thirteen undergraduate LA students were teamed with JJAEP students for a site visit in early November. After a brief introduction and orientation,

teams of students toured the site and discussed possibilities for the location and various elements of the nature trail. The LA students then developed a group layout and individually developed specific details, materials lists and cost estimate. A rendered plan, representative pictures of proposed features and the construction details were presented to JJAEP students at a meeting at their school.

The project, as it developed, provided an additional benefit not usually found in most service-learning projects. Along with the “real-world” project with “actual clients” the LA students had the added benefit of becoming mentors to the JJAEP students. In addition to offering their design services, the LA students were able to explain what the profession involves, the importance of the natural setting and native plants they were working with, assist with the development a cost estimate and other aspects that interested the JJAEP students. According to interviews of the JJAEP teachers, their students were very receptive to the college students and more willing, and even excited about working with them. Additionally, a great majority of the LA students felt that the opportunity to mentor the younger, at-risk students enhanced the experience. This program went beyond the traditional community service program due to the mentoring aspect, which helped emphasize the civic responsibilities aspect of the service-learning pedagogy.

### **Purpose of the Study**

This study was undertaken to examine three aspects of this particular service-learning program; the benefits of the service-learning program in general, the benefits of including opportunities to mentor as a significant part of the program, and the subsequent assessment techniques for evaluating the program and determining the benefits.

From the landscape architecture perspective, it was important to determine the benefits of including a service-learning project as a part of a standard, required courses. Additionally, the study was undertaken to determine the benefit of mentoring to younger, at-risk students to see if it enhanced the experience and help develop a greater sense of citizenship that is paramount to the service-learning pedagogy.

In almost every aspect of a landscape architect’s professional practice, the designs and projects they develop ultimately serve to enhance the surrounding community. This is inherently the goal of public sector projects such as a neighborhood park, urban streetscape or community revitalization project. But it is also the case when the client is from the private sector, such as a design for a new town or a commercial business park for a private developer. For both the private developer and the public at large, the designs created by the landscape architect ultimately become an integral part of the community fabric for years to come. Sharkey (1994) notes that “Landscape architects are committed to improving the condition of the community and society while maintaining the intrinsic values of environmental resources” (p. 20). Rogers (1997) goes on to say that “landscape architects are expected more and more to involve the user in the design process.”

Students of landscape architecture, in conjunction with their environmental stewardship, need to develop civic responsibility, to better serve the public at large. Service-learning is an ideal method for promoting and instilling a sense of civic responsibility. Erlich (2000 as quoted by Billig and Welch, 2004) terms this concept “civic engagement” and defines it as “working to make a difference in the civic life of our communities and developing the knowledge, skills, values and motivation to make the difference” (p. vi). In fact one of Erlich’s four goals for civic education is “increasing students’ participation in communities either through membership or through service as a way of addressing cultural, political, social and/or religious interests and beliefs” (p. 224). Billig and Welch (2004) emphasize that service-learning offers an extremely powerful tool to promote civic engagement and help students understand and become knowledgeable of community needs. Additionally, as with other college courses, many landscape architecture design assignments are of mock situations that students often find difficult to associate with future real experiences. Students often put less effort in their class because once the project is completed and grades are earned, it is over (Bullard and Maloney, 1997) and there is no consequence associated with their efforts. Consequently, an important goal for the LA students was to have an opportunity to work on a real civic project with very real civic responsibilities.

These same goals were a part of the original purpose of the Liberty Nature Trail project for JJAEP. The idea was to provide students who have little social or civic responsibility with the opportunity to apply basic as well as formative interactive personal skills. Becoming fully engaged in a project with the LA students as mentors, who were not perceived as authority figures, would encourage the younger students and enhance the overall experience. In a thesis study, McGuinn (1999) found indications that a vocational

horticulture program may be helpful in improving social bonding among juvenile offenders. That same study also utilized mentors as an integral part of the program.

In an article by Schmidt and Robby (2002), school-aged students in a primarily lower-socio economic neighborhood, expressed that they learned more from their college student tutors. Furthermore, they wanted to keep the same tutor when he or she valued diversity. Therefore the college students were to play a very important role as mentors in the development of the JJAEP students.

Through this project, one of the goals of staff and faculty of both groups of students was to help those students develop personal skills they would use the rest of their lives. Just as important was the goal of teaching them the importance of giving back to the community.

The final aspect of this study was to analyze the assessment techniques used to collect and interpret the data from the various sources incorporated in the study. Little assessment evidence has been developed to fully understand how different methods can be used for research (Gelmon, 2000). With few projects connecting service-learning and mentoring, it was difficult to determine the most appropriate assessment techniques. Therefore, this study utilized a Mixed Paradigm Design, as described by Shumer (2000) in order to collect and analyze a variety of qualitative and quantitative information from several participant groups. This method combines methods from the physical sciences with interpretive approaches and can provide a broader, more complete study of multiple perspectives (Shumer, 2000). The sources included reflective writing journals completed by JJAEP students, interviews with JJAEP teachers and administrators, and a survey of former LA students that solicited responses to specific questions and prompts for open-ended written responses.

## **Methods**

In 2001, the JJAEP principal and staff applied for and received a Title IV grant from the state to conduct a service-learning on their campus. The project consisted of the planning and constructing a nature trail as an extension of a park that had been constructed the year before. The trail site itself was at the edge of Yellow House Canyon within the city limits and is owned by the county who gave permission for the use of the land. It is an environmentally significant and unique ecological zone at the edge of what is known as the cap rock. Many species of plants are found only in this zone and was therefore an ideal area for teaching and learning about the local natural landscape that is a part of the Lubbock community.

However, no one at the school knew how to design or even construct such a large scale project in such an important and sensitive environment. The school decided to contact the Landscape Architecture Department for assistance. The instructor for a class studying building materials and methods for developing construction documents envisioned a wonderful opportunity for his students to learn more than just how to draw plans for a theoretical, non-descript studio project. In the past, students had responded well to actual projects and the opportunity to work with actual clients. They could learn on the job experience by having the JJAEP students as clients while working on a project that would actually be constructed.

Nineteen college students and 44 JJAEP students participated in the design development of the nature trail project. Each college student was paired with two or three JJAEP students who would become their clients. The groups were matched according to personalities, age appropriateness, and the college students' experience in working with kids. Both sets of students were briefed about the program before they met at the school.

During the initial meeting, the student teams were introduced to each other for the first time and toured the site together. The LA students solicited preliminary ideas for the trail from the JJAEP students and offered additional suggestions. They discussed various aspects of the project from the unique natural setting to specific plant species and what it was like to be a college student. The landscape architect students then prepared conceptual plans for the trail in their design studio for presentation to the JJAEP students. The plans included a layout with images of similar structures such as a deck, steps, bridges and arbors as well as photos of proposed restoration plants. Based on comments from the JJAEP students, the LA students then developed more complete construction documents and presented them again to the JJAEP students. At the final meeting the teams of students worked together to develop and materials list and cost estimate for the project.

## **Results and Discussion**

All of the forty-four JJAEP youth who participated in the program were considered at-risk students because of their expulsion from mainstream schools. About half have been adjudicated through juvenile judicial court for offenses ranging from substance abuse through sexual offences. All but three are minority, while eight of the forty-four were girls. Throughout the course of the design of the Liberty Nature Trail project the JJAEP student clients were required to keep journals with periodic entries about their experiences. These entries included their ideas, how they felt about doing community service, preserving nature, working with college students, and any academic improvements in their class work. It was vital that they keep up with the journals because it helped them gain the full value of the experience ( Bullard and Maloney 1997).

A recurrent theme found throughout the students journals was the bond the JJAEP students felt with their college age mentor. This is consistent with the findings of Schmidt and Robby (2002), concerning the increase in learning by school-aged students from lower-socio economic neighborhoods due to the involvement of the tutors. This same service-learning project found that this type of tutoring significantly changed lives in a positive manner. The student journals kept by the JJAEP students were consistent with these findings. For example, many expressed that they felt empowered because they were consulted for their ideas and that such an experience was totally new to them.

Many of the JJAEP students took pride in their work of planning and working on the design of the nature trail. Their journal entries expressed how they could actually see their ideas incorporated in to the final design of the project. They also felt good about the purpose behind the trail and were excited that the trail could also be used to educate elementary aged children. The trail, which is very close to a city park, is also open to the general public. The feeling of contributing something to the community was a different yet good feeling for youngsters. Most of them had never participated in a program that others benefits from their labor. Below are a few comments written by students in their journal entries:

*“It feels good that others can learn from what I did on the project.”* (15 year old girl)

*“I like that little kids will come here and learn about nature like I did while working on the project.”* (13 year old boy)

*“I hope a lot of people come through the trail. We did a lot of work planning and making it. I hope they like it as much as I do.”* (14 year old boy)

The students also learned how every one and every thing interacts. As one sixteen year old girl put it, *“I would be extremely mad if somebody messed up our trail on purpose. Now I know what it feels like, so I’ll be more careful about not messing up other people’s stuff.”*

Before the project, the students had difficulty understanding how the community is intertwined and how everyone must work together to make something happen. The lesson learned was that everyone has a say in the matter and everyone needs to take a certain amount of responsibility for their community.

One of the most interesting aspects of the apparent benefits to the JJAEP students was that overall, students grades improved significantly throughout the course of the project. One reason for this was because the faculty and staff made it a privilege to work on the project. At the start of the project, many of the students were not passing some or most of their classes. In order to be allowed to work on the project with their mentor the students had to be passing all of their classes. In their journals, the students expressed how they worked harder to pass their classes just so they could have the privilege to work on the project and be with their mentor. A few students, however, did see it as a means of getting out of classes. Of the 44 students who participated in the project, 39 were passing all of their classes by the end of the project. About a third of the 44 were classified as special education.

Interviews with teachers and administrators provided some of the most revealing information concerning the benefits that mentoring had for the JJAEP students. Everyone involved expressed how all the students greatly enhanced not only their academics, but also community awareness, self-esteem, diversity, social justice, and positive attitudes.

Generally, the interviews revealed that, during the project, the college students guided, assisted and observed the younger students but did not become over-bearing and were very encouraging of the younger students. The faculty noticed that the JJAEP students often talked with their mentor about his or her backgrounds, college life, how they paid for their education, and other topics that they were curious about

or that were foreign to them. The college students were limited as to what they could ask their clients due to privacy laws, but they were encouraged to be open and create an inviting working relationship. They did not have to be encouraged to discuss the importance of education because it was clear to them that the younger students needed to be convinced of the value of a good education.

It was surprising to observe that the college students did not shy away from the youth even though the behaviors attached to them was not positive. The college students were briefed before they came to JJAEP about the possible reasons why kids are assigned to the campus. The college students understood that these kids had many difficult issues yet they proceeded to interact with them at ease. It was in the briefing that helped curb any prejudices that they may have had about the stereotyping that is attached to at-risk kids. All questions and issues were addressed during the briefing that allowed the college students better understand how to work with this population of youths. It is vital that students understand the importance of not having any preconceived notions while working with kids of any population (Fox, 1994).

Some of the more specific examples of the benefit to the JJAEP students of working with the college students included an observation by one of the teachers that many of the students became more outgoing and gained confidence as they worked with their college mentor because they had a voice in the design of the project. The math teacher noted that the JJAEP students were readily accepting of the college students and were more willing to engage them than they ever were with the adult teachers. She was also impressed with one student who, while working on the cost estimate, discussed with his college mentor how the same system could be used to develop a household budget.

Since the LA students who had participated in the project had already graduated at the time this study was compiled, an internet based survey was developed in order to incorporate their experiences and information into the research. The survey included specific questions as well as open ended questions that solicited a written response.

Nineteen respondents were recruited and thirteen completed the online questionnaire; the response rate for the survey was 68%. All but one of the respondents is practicing landscape architecture at a professional firm; eight are currently employed in the private sector as consultants; four work as designers or builders; one is attending graduate school. The average age for the respondents who completed the questionnaire was 26 years; eight of the thirteen were male; none are publicly employed, and none had yet been licensed as landscape architects.

All of the respondents indicated they recalled their participation in the Juvenile Justice Alternative Education Project. Ten of the thirteen respondents indicated that they included their participation in the project in their employment portfolios, presumably regarding this work as an asset when presenting their credentials to prospective employers. Furthermore, one third placed even greater importance in the project by including it in their cover letter or mentioning it in a job interview.

All respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that their participation in the JJAEP Liberty Nature Trail project was “one of the more valuable learning experiences” they had in college. All also agreed or strongly agreed that the value of their experience related directly to their work with JJAEP students as clients. And all but two respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the opportunity to mentor these clients improved the respondents’ learning experience. Moreover, nine of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that, in retrospect, their work on the project turned out to be more important to them than they thought at the outset.

These sentiments were reinforced by the qualitative narratives that were submitted in response to three open-ended writing prompts:

“Please describe your thoughts about the value of the project as a studio exercise when you were working on the project in school.”

“Please describe your thoughts about the value of the project now, in retrospect.”

“Please feel free to provide any additional comments.”

Respondents’ thoughts on the value of the project focused on how unique the experience turned out to be compared to other college work. Further, respondents appreciated the opportunity to work on a “real world” project with real clients and a real site. One respondent summarized these themes as follows:

*“I was very excited about it because it was extremely different than anything we had ever worked on previously in school. The idea of working with the actual students at JJAEP and the ultimate outcome we were striving for was a definite attention grabber. It as a “real world” exercise which is always the most helpful. And, we were working outdoors and away from campus which I felt was an added incentive and motivation to do a great job.”*

Another respondent reported:

*“The project was a good opportunity for us to get out of the studio and interact with the actual end users of a project. As well as see an actual site that development would occur. This helped in terms of analysis and inventory.”*

The respondents also gave a retrospective analysis of their experience with JJAEP. Again, the major theme of these responses highlighted the real-life feel of the process, especially with regard to working with adjudicated juveniles. A comprehensive analysis was given by one respondent as follows:

*“Looking back, I feel I took a lot of the project for granted. I wish I would have done even more for the JJAEP students. I absolutely loved the whole project idea at the time. I just wish now I could have spent more hours on the project. Other class work seemed to take my time away. However, looking back, it was still one of the more beneficial classes, especially for the materials and details side of things. When drawing up details, it is really hard to totally understand what is actually going into the ground because you are just drawing things on paper. In classes most of the time we never really went out and saw things put into the ground the way you drew them. Things always come out so different it seems. I feel to see things in front of you on site the way you drew them teaches you better than any one class can do. ... The JJAEP project however allowed us the opportunity to draw up details and designs and then actually see those details in real life, actually being built.”*

Many of the responses to the narratives provided insight from the perspective of working with the JJAEP students and the opportunity to mentor them. Some examples included:

*“As a studio project, I think it gave my classmates a new understanding of what can happen at a young age. I don’t think any of them have ever been around kids like the kids at the JJAEP. It gave us another view to look at when dealing with clients, of all ages/backgrounds.”*

*“One of the most memorable aspects of the project was when the students were asked to describe how they felt working with us. The kids were there because they had done something against the law to send them there. The introduction to nature and the outdoors helped them to open up and describe how they believed they could help and become productive citizens.”*

*“The ability to see what a client wants and what a client thinks they want. Sometimes this is very different. JJAEP was a great example because the kids just wanted to have typical activities until they were introduced to what a nature walk consists of and this triggered areas in their lives that had never been touched.”*

Moreover, two of the respondents succinctly put the landscape architecture component of the project into perspective:

*“I think more attention should have been paid to mentoring the students, which would have taken away from the landscape architecture but could have changed a kid’s life.”*

*“I greatly appreciate participating in the project. It reminded me a lot of high school and brought [me] back down to ground level. I look at it now and realize that we probably did some good for the kids; hopefully one or two will become better.”*

In sum, these survey respondents recognized and reported the value of the JJAEP project in terms of both personal and public interest. It was a unique enhancement to their study of the field, but also an

opportunity for their work in landscape architecture to develop life-skills and enhance citizenship, both for the student-respondents, and the adjudicated juvenile clients, especially since the clients themselves were also part of the unique learning experience

## Summary

As expected, the results of the study indicate that the service-learning project was a very beneficial learning experience for both groups: the at-risk youth and the college age students. Both groups felt a tremendous sense of accomplishment and pride in their work and showed a greater understanding of the value of community. Additionally, the student journals, teacher interviews and the survey of the college participants indicated that combining community service-learning with a program of mentoring opportunities, significantly enhanced the project's learning outcomes.

One concern with this project was that not enough time was spent between the mentors with their assigned youth. The college students in their survey, the JJAEP youth in their journals, and faculty in their interviews all agreed that more contact time would have been beneficial. At most, mentors spent on average a total of 10-12 hours with their clients. Scheduling was a difficulty due to the university's studio schedule and JJAEP's academic requirements. If a project were to be implemented that allowed for more contact hours, issues of adjusting academic priorities, logistics and allocation of resources, including staff hours, would need to be addressed. However, DuBois and Neville (1997) found that increased contact between mentors and students increased the benefits to both groups. Additionally, the college students, who worked only on developing the design of the trail, said that they would have liked to have been involved in the construction of the trail with the JJAEP students. It is natural then, to expand this program into a semester long or multi-semester program. This should increase the benefits for both groups.

Although this project represents a very small sampling, it is representative of the positive benefits of both service-learning and mentoring programs. During a very short time period, LA students were affected to the point that many considered it one of the most important projects of their college career. Interviews with the teachers consistently referenced the positive affect working with the college students had on the JJAEP students. This was echoed in the student journals and the student survey. The use of the mixed paradigm to evaluate the program in a more holistic manner as described by Shumer (2000) is a logical and viable approach. Additional sources of information could also be included. For example, the college students were not necessarily formally involved in the project as true service-learning participants since they did not have a structured element of reflection. (The author does not consider the presentations made by the college students a true reflection activity as such activities are a part of the normal curriculum requirements for LA students) Including more formal reflection activities, such as journaling, would enhance their learning experience and provide an additional data source for evaluation. This notion is supported by Boyd, Dooley and Felton (2006) who found that descriptive reflection provided an appropriate method of assessment for affective learning. Their research into the evaluation of writing in the affective domain could also be incorporated to provide additional insight and assessment. This would also extend the dialog of experiences and opportunities that Shumer (2000) feels is an increasingly important part of the service-learning pedagogy. This program showed once again the many positive values service-learning provides students of all ages. Those positive outcomes can be multiplied by bringing those age groups together in a supportive mentoring situation.

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