

# Reviews / Comptes rendus

## Social Responsibility and Sustainability: Multidisciplinary Perspectives Through Service Learning

*edited by Tracy McDonald*

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This excellent addition to the Service Learning for Civic Engagement series is the fifth and final collection of articles in a series organized around specific community issues. The previous topics were social justice, gender inequity, community health, and political engagement. Twenty-five years after sustainability was succinctly defined by the Brundtland Commission as “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs,” it is a topic that has risen to the forefront of business, political, and academic discourse. A growing focus for higher education programming, sustainability was the theme for major continuing education conferences in Toronto (CAUCE 2011) and Portland (UPCEA 2012), while the issue of social responsibility (Higher Education for Social Good) was addressed by the annual conference of the United Kingdom’s Universities Association for Lifelong Learning (UALL 2012) in Cambridge, England.

The series itself, we are told in the introduction, was the result of discussions among faculty whose practice included service learning as a pedagogy and who recognized its effectiveness not only for teaching and learning but also for civic engagement. Practical, well-documented, and clearly articulated examples of a variety of service-learning initiatives, from a number of American institutions and one Canadian university, provide methodologies and suggestions that could be adapted by other institutions or incorporated into existing service-learning programs. The book is divided into three sections. The first, focusing on environmental awareness, consists of three examples, including one from the University of Alberta (the only Canadian school featured). The second, entitled “Increasing Civic Engagement,” features five programs, each one aligned to reflect both the mission and vision of the school and the needs of the community in which it is located. The third section, “Sustainability Concepts in Business and Economics,” contains three very practical examples of the ways in which service learning can be incorporated into business courses to enhance the social awareness of future business leaders and entrepreneurs.

In almost every case, the authors describing the programs emphasize the importance of student reflection on the way in which the service activity enhances not only student learning but also provides a real value to the community. At Green Mountain College in Vermont, for example, science students engaged in short projects with very specific community goals, including using non-toxic, non-polluting dyes made from wildflowers to dye infant attire. Students noted that it was “cool to be dyeing something for a reason” and it “felt more purposeful than other labs.” What became clear was that student reflection on the service projects and on the ways in which esoteric knowledge can be applied to civic responsibility led to innovation and to student engagement in sustainability initiatives both on and off campus.

While distinctive in focus and subject matter, several of the featured programs are interdisciplinary and have no prerequisites or corequisites. The Solutions to Environmental Problems, or “STEP: Biodiesel,” program at Loyola University Chicago takes its direction from a recognition that “the traditional narrow disciplinary approach to teaching in institutions of higher education may not be adequate to educate future environmental leaders” (Cortese, 2003; Orr, 2003). Authors Varty, Lishawa, and Tuchman point out that political, social, and ecological spheres interact in a complex manner and that solutions to environmental problems must come from individuals who understand their interplay. Accordingly, students from a variety of majors (science, geography, sociology, philosophy, and even English literature) are attracted to these programs and benefit from the service-learning component that enables them to move beyond theoretical understandings to meaningful engagement and transformative activity. A project at Whittier College, a small, private residential liberal arts college serving a Hispanic population in Los Angeles, was interesting in that it was not only interdisciplinary but multiyear in its focus. Using service learning (an assessment of food waste on campus) to link two courses, a freshman writing seminar and a compulsory basic science course that included both freshmen and seniors from a variety of majors, instructors Cheryl Swift and Sal Johnston noted that the analysis and reflection required in both the reading and writing section (Freshman Writing Seminar) and the experiential (service) component of the science section contributed to the success of this hybrid teaching model and led to greater environmental awareness and commitment to sustainability.

What becomes clear in reading the program examples is that instructors have had to reeducate themselves and “stretch their own knowledge and understanding of the world” (p.79). Flexibility and creativity are the hallmarks of service-learning programs, which closely resemble award-winning lifelong learning opportunities offered through continuing education units. Because mentoring, coaching, and self-directed projects are integral to the success of service learning, class size is typically capped at between 15 and 20 participants, a number that has also proven optimal for the certificate program in Corporate Social Responsibility offered through continuing education to business professionals at the University of St. Michael’s College, University of Toronto.

The book is a valuable resource for program designers in that each example offers clearly articulated goals, outcomes, methods of assessment, and recommendations for improvement. Several include both a course calendar description and a detailed syllabus with timelines and resources provided. Examples are helpfully summarized in an Activity/Methodology Table at the beginning of the book with each program described under the following headings: Discipline, Service Activity, Methodology, Application, Type of Partner, and Size of Class. Although Canadian higher education professionals can no doubt benefit from the examples found in this book, it underscores the potential benefit of a similarly structured volume featuring examples drawn from a Canadian context.

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