

**Embedded Literacy Programs within a First-Year Service Learning Course:
Opportunities for Library Outreach and Instruction**

Susan A. Hall, Mississippi State University

Abstract

Library faculty participating in first-year experience courses have an opportunity to engage with students and collaborate with departmental faculty across many disciplines in ways that can strengthen library programs already in place. At Mississippi State University, a successful service learning course for freshmen is in its fifth year, aimed at improving retention rates, developing personal connections with new students, and helping them hone leadership skills and citizenship through service to their local community. In collaborations with administrators in student affairs and public libraries, information literacy components were embedded within the service learning projects to create new relationships and new partners in outreach and instruction efforts.

Keywords: first-year experience; service learning; information literacy; library outreach; freshmen retention; mentoring; leadership; multi-culturalism

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The First-Year Experience and Service Learning

The first year for students attending a large research university can become overwhelming, especially for those who are community college transfers, first-generation college students, or those who live in rural environments. With significant numbers in each of these categories, Mississippi State University's Day One Leadership Program has been developed as a strategy and curriculum to address some of the problems that affect student retention and to help connect freshmen in meaningful ways with their new environment. The course focus is building leadership skills while actively engaging in service to others. In my role as a faculty mentor to the student groups in this program, it was important to build into service projects some new opportunities for library outreach. As well, the chance to highlight our public and academic library missions and to develop information literacy skills were not overlooked.

Service learning as it is employed in the Day One program is a way of teaching and learning that allows students, faculty, and community organizations to work toward project goals through volunteerism. Service through volunteering is one aspect of service learning, with critical thinking skills, writing exercises, and reflection as other major components. Students receive questions each week after their classroom lectures and post a short essay on the campus course management system. Team mentors evaluate the essays, which range in length from one paragraph to one page, and then provide feedback to generate further discussion. More than a weekly grammar and writing exercise (which has value in itself), it is also an ongoing conversation about leadership skills, about

problems encountered, and lessons learned during the course of the semester. The online component is one part of a multi-faceted educational experience, very different from the auditorium lecture that many freshman courses entail.

Project Background

The Day One Leadership Program is in its fifth year at Mississippi State University and is organized and administered through personnel in the division of student affairs. The course is intended to develop leadership potential by exposing new students to needs in their community and give them an opportunity to volunteer. As part of the weekly assignments, students reflect upon and write about their experiences as they engage in small group projects to accomplish their goals. Each of the service learning projects within Mississippi State's Day One program involves some common elements. The students hear classroom discussions given by noted speakers who are in leadership roles and work with faculty and professionals from various University departments who serve as team mentors to the small groups of 5 to 7 students. In many cases there is a shared interest or academic focus among the students selected in groups. A team might share a common interest as theatre majors, outdoor enthusiasts, animal science or engineering majors.

The course is populated by incoming freshmen and is promoted in tandem with the registration process. Of the 509 students who applied in 2011 for enrollment in the Day One program, 444 were invited to participate. More than 60% of those invited completed the enrollment process. This is a relatively high rate of engagement considering other factors such as required course sequencing and scheduling issues. While the course is administered through Student Affairs, the weekly lectures that are

delivered include noted faculty across many disciplines. Thus students may hear from professors in English about writing as a critical skill, professors in business administration regarding work force expectations and markets, or faculty in philosophy and religion discussing ethics and integrity.

An important factor in the program's success is the students' connections to diverse volunteers who serve as team mentors. Since my first team project in 2008, this program has provided a personal opportunity to make a difference in how students interact with their new environment. The team mentors work with students in their service projects and provide a connection to campus resources and networks that might be beneficial to students. Team mentors serve as the liaison for community organizations needing volunteers, the students learning how to give their time, and the university as a structure for the course requirements. Over the course of a semester, a team mentor may help students understand the significant role of their community partner. They may explain budget constraints and procedures; emphasize project safety concerns; refer students to needed resources or help with scheduling and interpersonal difficulties. The team mentors receive training in group format over the summer. Important documentation is distributed in written manuals that are very well designed and comprehensive. Team mentor training topics include issues with FERPA, contacts within student affairs or counseling, emergency procedures and incident reporting. The team mentors keep in touch with the community partner throughout the course and assist in organizing student volunteer hours. They move the group projects forward when necessary. Because the focus is a student-driven project, the team mentor's volunteer time is very manageable, and can average less than 3 hours per week in most cases.

In recent years, MSU's Day One community partners have included a very wide array of organizations: parks, Habitat for Humanity, libraries, food pantries, Boy Scouts, public schools, hospice providers, performing arts groups, day care providers, the community market, elder care and senior enrichment centers, to name a few. New community partners receive information and attend the training sessions mentioned above as provided by Day One administrators before classes begin in the fall. In this way, reasonable expectations can be established and special circumstances receive time and effort for troubleshooting, where necessary. As classes begin in the fall, students begin attending lectures, meet within their team for project planning, and post short essays via the campus course management system.

Opportunities for Library Outreach

Two of the projects assigned to my teams have involved work with the local public library as our community partner. Although any number of ideas for projects could have been acceptable, information literacy and library outreach goals were intended as part of the project design. In 2008, volunteering with the Starkville / Oktibbeha County Public Library, our student group concentrated on a themed event for young readers that would include activities for a range of ages. The first decision point was to select our common reading project. After evaluating many possibilities and favorites, the students settled on the *Chronicles of Narnia*. In ongoing discussions with the children's librarian, students received information as to what the children would enjoy and the event parameters available to them. Despite a number of limiting factors and difficulty in scheduling, the students kept their focus on serving the children's reading circle, and their

imaginations ran with it. There was a costume party with judges for different age groups, a scavenger hunt within the library stacks based on Narnia trivia clues, and activities for very young siblings.

During the semester, each of the students logged several hours per week in volunteer time at the public library, helping with bulletin boards, shelving, and some data entry. Throughout the team meetings, the students learned the various roles that the public library serves in providing after-school homework time, group reading events, assistance to job seekers, entertainment in media collections, and free computer time for those without Internet access at home. This team did not initially understand the vital support that public libraries offer across small towns in Mississippi. By the end of the semester, through their work and volunteer time, students were able to articulate the tangible benefits their library provided, and most students planned to continue time volunteering.

Building Literacy Skills and Multi-cultural Awareness

More recently, a second project at the public library involved expanding the collection of children's titles to include multi-cultural readings. All of the benefits outlined in the previous project were also part of the second team's group experience. Again, most students were unfamiliar with library programs for career and professional development, reader services, children's activities and learning, and resources to complete homework and school projects. This team assignment was unique in that a new focus area was identified: understanding how books from different perspectives and reflecting different cultures were important. Even more unique, the process of collection

development was planned and completed by student team members after receiving training sessions and instruction in WorldCat and library searching within our consortium, as well as resources for book reviews, pricing, and purchasing books. Upon realizing the need for these titles, our team of freshman worked with me on some collection development decisions, such as comparing regional availability via interlibrary loan, or finding different editions suitable and affordable for purchase. They learned online databases and search refinements so that they could produce a list of needed titles not widely available within our region, providing new perspectives for readers and building a multi-cultural children's collection. Some selections were made for very young readers, while others were fact books useful for homework assignments and term papers on different cultures of the world.

This team also organized a celebratory event, formally presenting the new titles to the public library. Community children and parents were invited to a festival highlighting non-western cultures. Again, students in this volunteer group expressed great appreciation for what they gained from their volunteer time and their intention to continue volunteer work in the future.

Experiential Learning

This type of experiential learning involves developing all of the time management and interpersonal skills associated with any long-range plan. The very real benefits of service learning were made apparent as student groups progressed and matured in their thinking and their interpersonal skills. Team members understood and appreciated the work of organizations serving the community. They learned to work through the chaotic

brainstorming process, balancing issues of respect and taking turns listening, leading and following the recommendations of others. Of course, there were limitations, rules and parameters to negotiate. Students dealt with some frustrations and the occasional lack of focus that slowed projects. Possibly the hardest challenge for students was working within budget rules to accomplish their project goals. Because of special funding parameters, each purchase plan had to be itemized, costs estimated, and approvals obtained prior to purchase. However, negotiating this challenge gave students very practical, real world experience and an understanding of how to function in creative projects involving budgets, time constraints, material limitations, and the required approvals.

Future Partnerships

Library instruction has taken many forms with a wide array of useful approaches. Once focusing on walk-through, overview tours, and carts overloaded with reference materials, instruction roles now encompass a range of options. The one-shot lecture on information resources is very useful, but can pack too much into one session resulting in glazed-over expressions and not much retention. More interesting and engaging proposals for team teaching alongside classroom faculty are needed. In discussions with departmental faculty, information literacy goals include the student's ability to evaluate resources for reliability, authentication, and peer-review. This ability relies upon students engaging in critical thinking and reflection, an area of major emphasis in the design of service learning projects at Mississippi State's Day One Leadership Program. In my library, course design for library instruction and information literacy has most recently

included short work-sheet assignments that are graded; reference consultations assigned for students to discuss research projects; and full lectures on copyright, search strategies, citation analysis, and the literature review process for dissertation candidates. In some cases, several of these components are built into customized requests for library instruction. It is the instruction style that is linked with active participation that has been most successful for achieving information literacy goals, and bringing students back to the reference services for further work and information.

In four years of volunteer work with MSU's Day One Leadership Program, it is clear that the opportunities for maximizing library outreach efforts to the campus and building information literacy programs can be developed, resulting in new partnerships and projects. Throughout this period, taking the opportunity to highlight the work of academic and public libraries and to create new instruction roles has been beneficial for team members as well as community partners. As universities examine alternative approaches to student retention through service learning, experiential learning, and learning communities, these practices supplement the traditional classroom setting and open doors for library involvement in these programs. With creative approaches to engaging students in their campus environment, universities offer academic librarians a chance to branch outside the traditional library. Programs already in place for outreach, instruction, and literacy can be supplemented with a more prominent role for academic librarians as they build on the array of learning environments as opportunities.

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