

University of Miami
Excellence in Teaching Awards
Teaching Practice Description

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Since joining the faculty at UM in 1990, I have taken a “service-learning” approach to teaching many of my classes – from skills-based to more theoretical courses and from the undergraduate to the graduate level – as I believe that engaging students in “active learning” and “cooperative learning” in the service of the community and their University more fully prepares them professionally for the challenges that lie ahead while fostering a greater sense of civic responsibility.

My experience has been that “taking the classroom into the world” is a practical as well as a valuable approach to teaching; practical in the sense that student work can be evaluated and graded in a way that is manageable, measurable and fair, and valuable in that it integrates academic material with application to real-life situations, and reinforces learning in the process. Service learning, moreover, is appreciated by students as my course evaluations indicate as well as by community nonprofit and campus-based clients, many of whom have expressed their heartfelt appreciation of my students’ assistance.

Finding projects, structuring coursework

Community clients for service-learning projects can be found by partnering with other higher education institutions in coalition-like consortiums, or contacting UM’s Butler Volunteer Services Center or the United Way of Miami-Dade County for suggestions on reputable local nonprofits in need of assistance. Campus clients can be found through the Smith-Tucker Student Involvement Center – ie. Student Government – or through a faculty member’s “home base” (department, School or College). My classroom clients have ranged from the YMCA to Special Olympics to UM Student Government and, most recently, Iron Arrow, UM Libraries and the Alumni Association. For purposes of control (and sanity), it’s best to work with only one client per class;

projects in which students select their own client fracture class unity and make evaluation of student work difficult. Moreover, given the need for an occasional client visit to class – as well as a final class presentation to the client – a single client project is best. My service-learning projects have ranged from preparing volunteer recruiting materials for the American Red Cross (in English and Spanish) to organizing special events for the YMCA and UM Student Government to tutoring/mentoring at the English Center.

Actively engaging students in their learning – and developing theoretical and professional skills in the process – can be structured in a formal way on syllabi with course requirements that include a service-learning project constituting a specific percentage of the overall grade and by crafting various subcomponents of measurement in assessing student performance and assigning a total grade for the project. While students can work solely on an individual basis, organizing students into teams to tackle specific components of a project encourages cooperative learning and readies students for future on-the-job situations; such an approach can be structured to require both individual and team work and to measure the quality and quantity of each. A team-based project, for example, could be weighted to constitute 40 percent of a final class grade given the time and effort involved; the project grade could be further subdivided to include an individual component (20%) representing the quantity/quality of the student's work (graded on creativity, composition, completeness, etc.), a project written report (10%) summarizing the student's efforts and contribution to the overall project and critiquing both individual and team work, an individual oral presentation (5%) as part of a team presentation (graded on organization, content, etc.), and a team evaluation (5%) of an individual's performance (using a variety of criteria, such as accuracy of work, on a Likert Scale).

Such a system provides a number of built-in checks and balances and allows for a full assessment of a student's work on a team project. Teams can be organized by project subgroup (ie. employees, clients, general public) or by function (research, planning, evaluation) and should have no more than five students per team headed by a "captain" chosen by the team. Teams should make periodic in-class reports on their progress, and a mid-term evaluation form can be used for further assessment. Class time also can be provided for the students to work in their teams. I have used this approach successfully for freshman-level "lecture" courses, sophomore and senior-level skills-based courses, senior-level theoretical courses, and graduate-level courses (see last page).

Service-learning projects also can be structured as individual assignments even as students work for the same client. In the Fall of 1998, I was selected with six other UM faculty to participate in a diversity-related, service-learning project funded by the Ford Foundation and directed by the Central and South Florida Higher Education Diversity Coalition; the project was one of 40 selected nationally by the President's Initiative on Race. I chose to engage my freshman-level Public Relations class (20 students) in assisting with adult education and publicity at the English Center, which was on the Coalition's list of recommended clients; the Center provides offers a full schedule of classes to the non-English-speaking community. The project, which represented 25 percent of the course grade, required students to spend 20 documented hours tutoring clients (20%) as required by the Coalition, discuss their experiences during class (20%), prepare five essay questions on the project for a final exam (30%), and keep a weekly journal that they later used to write a 10-page paper (30%), reflecting on their experiences, the challenges facing the community, the use of service learning in public

relations education, and the results of an audit they did of the Center's communication with clients, employees, and the general public. Three Coalition objectives – knowledge, service, and diversity – further defined to demonstrate student competencies guided the project. Additional course requirements were developed for Honors students.

Results

While not all of the fruits of good teaching can be seen immediately inasmuch as the profession “touches the future”, certain service-learning projects can demonstrate some tangible results even before the close of the semester. Projects that include skills-based objectives – ie. writing a news release, designing a brochure, etc. – provide easily measurable components to evaluate progress. For example, students working on the UM-Iron Arrow Hurricanes Heritage Campaign last semester – the first-ever University effort to solicit UM memorabilia – were charged with producing various materials for their UM clients and organizing a reception at Richter Library to honor the donor of a special UM archives collection. At semester's end, the University had a walking guide to historical sites on campus, the Alumni Association a new brochure, and the Library hosted 60 alumni, students, staff, and faculty in the Roberto C. Goizueta Pavilion to celebrate the first gift to the University. Student efforts also generated news stories in all major campus media plus front-page coverage in *The Miami Herald's Neighbors*, prompting a further archives donation and inquiries by several prospective donors to Library staff.

In other service-learning projects, the effects are implied or self-reported. For example, a freshmen-level Public Relations class project to “rock the vote” for UM Student Government elections in Spring 2000 and Spring 1999 generated major campus media coverage. Voter turnout in the 1999 election increased 23 percent with 1,085

students voting, reversing several years of declining turnout, and 2000 election voter participation increased 14 percent with 1,238 students voting. While the results cannot be attributed solely to the project's publicity, students and SG were elated nonetheless. English Center project students – who worked with a total of 640 clients – reported in a post-survey acquiring interpersonal communication, teaching/tutoring, and organizational service skills, and their journals and class discussions reflected an increased knowledge and appreciation of other cultures; student satisfaction was a 3.8 on a five-point scale.

Clients are most appreciative of student efforts and often publicly honor them (and their faculty) for a job well done. For example, the Sudden Infant Death Syndrome organization presented its national award for the Most Outstanding Public Relations Campaign to my Spring 1994 class project for the South Florida SIDS Chapter. That campaign generated major local media coverage and raised several thousand dollars for SIDS research. Miami-based Little Acorns, which works with disadvantaged public elementary school youth, donated \$2,000 from its Miami Beach Kite Festival sponsorship proceeds to the School of Communication in appreciation for successful student campaigns over a 1997-1998 period; the monies were used for student projects, teaching materials and faculty development by Public Relations faculty. In Spring 2001, *Florida Leader* magazine presented its "Best of Florida Schools" award for the Best Religious Mixer Public Relations Campaign for UM's Religious Diversity Week. Personally, I have received the American Red Cross Greater Miami Chapter Award and the Special Olympics of Dade County Award for Public Relations Service in appreciation of my class projects for the charities. I was selected as UM's Student Government 1999-2000 and 1998-1999 Professor of the Year for leading class campaigns to boost voter turnout.

In Spring 2003, the Miami Chapter Little Brothers Friends of the Elderly honored me and my students with its Community Service Award for our various campaigns.

Service-learning projects as research material

Service-learning projects also can provide research material for faculty. In January 1999, I was invited to address UM's Creating Synergy for Learning Conference on "Linking Diversity and Service Learning on the University Campus", and the following year, I presented a refereed paper on the English Center project with Steven Clark (UM Multicultural Student Affairs), Michael-Anne Rubenstien (UM Volunteer Student Services), and Maria E. Stallions (Barry University) at the annual conference of the American College Personnel Association in Washington, D.C. That Fall, I published an article, "Civic Public Relations Education: Integrating Skills-Based Learning and Citizenship Formation," in *Teaching Public Relations*, the journal of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication's Public Relations Division. In Spring 2003 I was interviewed by Harvard Graduate School of Education researchers preparing a "best practices" study on diversity and service learning for dissemination nationally.

Conclusion

Classroom-based service-learning projects, if structured and directed properly, can enhance teaching and promote learning. Such an approach can further develop a variety of student skills – from problem-solving, oral/written communication, technical and managerial to social and consensus-building – while, more important, instilling a sense of commitment to service of the community. In the final analysis, developing students into professionals who value civic involvement ultimately may be a teacher's greatest contribution not only to education but to society.

UM Courses (Donn Tilson) with a Service-Learning Project Component

CAP 116 – Introduction to Public Relations in Society

Fall 1997 – University of Miami campus communication audits (various)

Fall 1998 – English Center (Miami)

Spring 1999 – University of Miami Student Government

Spring 2000 – University of Miami Student Government

CAP 232 – Advanced Promotional Writing

Spring 2001 – Little Brothers Friends of the Elderly (Miami)

CAP 436 – Public Relations Campaigns

Spring 1993 – American Red Cross (South Florida Chapter)

Fall 1993 – Special Olympics of Dade County

Spring 1994 – Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) – South Florida Chapter

Fall 1994 – WVUM/UM Vision

Spring 1997 – Little Acorns of Miami-Dade County

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1st Sum. 1998 – Little Acorns of Miami-Dade County

Fall 1998 – YMCA (Greater Miami) Youth in Government

Spring 1999 – University of Miami/Greater Miami National Conference for
Community and Justice Religious Diversity Week

Fall 1999 – YMCA (Greater Miami) Youth in Government

Spring 2000 – Miami Children's Hospital VACC Camp

Fall 2000 – YMCA (Greater Miami) Youth in Government

Spring 2001 – Miami Children's Hospital VACC Camp

Fall 2001 – YMCA (Greater Miami) Youth in Government

Fall 2002 – YMCA (Greater Miami) Youth in Government

Spring 2003 – Little Brothers Friends of the Elderly (Miami)

Fall 2003 – Butler Basketball (Miami Killian High School)

Spring 2004 – University of Miami Presidential Debate

Fall 2004 – University of Miami-Iron Arrow Hurricanes Heritage Campaign

Spring 2005 – University of Miami-Iron Arrow Hurricanes Heritage Campaign

CAP 582 – International Advertising and Public Relations

Fall 2002 – University of Miami European Union Center

CAP 584 – Advertising and Public Relations Management

Spring 2003 – Butler Basketball (Miami Killian High School)

CAP 620 – Public Relations Fundamentals

Fall 2000 – Community Partnership for the Homeless/UM School of Nursing

Fall 2001 – The Media and American Democracy Project (Harvard)

Fall 2002 – Valparaiso (Chile) Community Preservation Project

Fall 2003 – Early Childhood Initiative Foundation