

YouthConnect!

A Youth-Led Community Service Initiative

Service Learning

As a supplemental resource to PASE's YouthConnect! Manual for Youth-Led Community Service, we offer a series of Profiles on Youth-Led Community Service Projects. The local projects profiled were planned, executed and documented by the staff and young people involved with the YouthConnect! Initiative in 2003-2004. The MONY Foundation and the AOL-Time Warner Foundation supported this collaborative initiative.

The PASE Profiles of Youth-Led Community Service Series provides concrete examples of youth-led projects in seven different categories: Intergenerational Service, Youth Councils, Environmental Stewardship, Peer Education, Arts- and Media-Based Service, Advocacy, and Service Learning. Of course, there are other categories of community service but these have been selected to illustrate to the reader the breadth and scope of this youth development modality.

project profiles



P A S E PARTNERSHIP FOR AFTER SCHOOL EDUCATION



service learning

“Service-learning is based on a reciprocal relationship in which the service reinforces and strengthens the learning, and the learning reinforces and strengthens the service.”

--Rachel Cohen, New York City Program Officer, Young Citizens, Inc.

WHAT IS SERVICE LEARNING?

According to the National Commission on Service-Learning, “Service-learning is a teaching and learning approach that integrates community service with academic study to enrich learning, teach civic responsibility and strengthen communities.” In short, service learning provides a way to use community service as a way of teaching and reinforcing academic and life lessons.

Service Learning provides structured time for students to reflect on their service and learning experiences through a mix of writing, reading, speaking, listening, and creating, both individually and in small and large groups.

A number of youth service organizations have integrated community service into their after-school academic programming. In this context, learning and reflection frame the service activities in clear and deliberate ways even though there is no formal link to school curricula.

WHY CHOOSE SERVICE LEARNING AS A COMMUNITY SERVICE MODALITY?

Service Learning uses community service as a vehicle for students to attain their academic goals and objectives. Youth engaged in Service Learning examine society, the future, and themselves and have opportunities to use newly acquired skills and knowledge in real-life situations.

THE FOLLOWING PROJECT PROFILE OFFERS CONCRETE ILLUSTRATIONS FOR HOW SERVICE LEARNING CAN HELP DEVELOP THESE PARTICULAR DEVELOPMENTAL ASSETS* AND SKILLS IN YOUTH:

Sense of purpose: Youth see themselves as contributors and resources to improving not only their lives but the lives of those around them.

Cultural competency: Participants experience the diverse perspectives that people bring to a common experience.

Commitment to Learning: Although its not necessarily directly related to school work, service learning engages young people in formal study, research, and reflection.

service learning

PROJECT PROFILE

HARLEM EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITIES FUND, INC.'S (HEAF) "PROJECT MISSISSIPPI"

DESCRIPTION:

Project Mississippi involved a series of activities led by youth in Harlem—including securing donations of clothing and school supplies and learning about the Mississippi Delta—with the goal of addressing the needs of rural students whom they would later visit.

GOALS:

1. To promote the value of human rights
2. To encourage leadership and collaborative work
3. To broaden youths' self-concept through service, while conveying the value of goal setting

ACTIVITIES:

The Harlem Educational Activities Fund, Inc. is a supplemental education and youth development program designed to prepare students for competitive colleges and universities. Project Mississippi represents the agency's first concerted attempt at using Service Learning. Staff worked with the Youth Leadership Council to recruit students for the project. Recruitment consisted of screenings and discussion on Lalee's Kin: The Legacy of Cotton, an award-winning documentary about a family in rural Mississippi living in extreme poverty. The film recounts the family's relationship to cotton and its legacy. Paralleling Lalee's struggle is a school administrator's effort to try to meet state-mandated school standards. After seeing the documentary, the students were asked, "What can you do about what you've just seen?" Their reply: "Help!"

"We came to Mississippi to do better in the world with one small step and an act of kindness."

—Justina F., 17-year-old student
Harlem Educational Activities Fund, Inc.

At the Project Mississippi orientation session, youth discussed the purpose of the project, outlined expectations, and participated in community building activities. Participants then began learning about the history and economics of the Mississippi Delta and the impact cotton has had on the region. Using texts and videos, youth examined slavery as an economic, political, and social system and studied the middle passage, the Jim Crow era, racism and segregation, as well as current race relations.

In addition to academic learning, youth participated in leadership development workshops on topics such as public speaking, fundraising, writing, and diversity. The students used these skills for presentations to potential funders, monthly project update meetings, peer recruitment, letter-writing campaigns, event planning, and their trip to Mississippi.

service learning

Youth exchanged letters and e-mails with their Mississippi peers and created a photo collage about Harlem to share with them. The “My NYC” photo collage project allowed students to examine and reflect on their perceptions of their own community and to compare and contrast city and rural life.

Youth led the fundraising efforts for the project via soliciting family, community members, and peers for support. They wrote passionate letters seeking support from commercial designers and successfully raised \$10,000 in clothing. Students also participated in an organizational event “Health and Hoops” where they collected donated food items.

“It is our obligation to contribute to the broader global community; it should be an integral part of how we live our lives – an internalized experience – that of giving back.”

--Merle McGee, Vice President of Programs
Harlem Educational Activities Fund, Inc.

For their trip to Mississippi, students planned key components, forming committees and meeting outside weekly meetings to research historical sites, service opportunities, points of interest, restaurants, and activities. During their visit to Mississippi, students delivered clothing, food, and school supplies. Participants visited all their community partners, met pen pals, canoed, swam in the Mississippi River, visited local museums, and went sightseeing. Additionally, students went to a Blues Festival, tasted southern style cooking, and attended a church service to explore and experience southern culture.

Youth were shocked by rural life (“there’s not anything to do at night”). Simultaneously, they learned from their southern peers about gang-related violence (the town movie theater was closed for over a year as a result of the town’s gang problem). The youth concluded that this social problem was spurred by a lack of ample afterschool activities and support services for young people in the town. “The children here [in rural Mississippi] don’t have a lot of options for recreation and afterschool programming...I have ample opportunity to do things and be a part of something,” reflected a 17-year-old student. Youth returned to NYC with a greater appreciation for both their afterschool program and the opportunities that come with living in an urban metropolis.

Students documented their project by photographing and writing about their experiences. As a culminating event, youth presented their photo collage and a Power Point presentation to funders and parents, followed by thank-you letters to contributors and partner organizations in Mississippi. A video of their project was also produced and edited by a volunteer filmmaker for archival and promotional purposes.

CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS:

The greatest challenge participants faced during the program was remaining connected to the community they served. The community outreach in Mississippi was done primarily through letters and a photo collage, and students did not meet their peers until the very end of the project.

One challenge the staff encountered was solidifying and deepening the collaboration

service learning

between the West Tallahatchie school district and partner community-based organizations in Mississippi. As the year progressed, the rigors of providing increased services and education to their youth sometimes left partnering staff in Mississippi too overwhelmed to immediately respond to communication with HEAF. Project staff and students responded to these challenges by maintaining their commitment, completing tasks and being persistent with outreach.

OUTCOMES:

Staff observed and documented the impact on the youth participants. Student reflections included: “I learned I like helping people”; “How many people can say they canoed down the Mississippi River?”; and “I learned to be more accepting...to let go of stereotypes and misconceptions.”

The project connected historical learning and skill development to service.

Youth learned about the Mississippi Delta’s history and culture and gained a greater appreciation for the opportunities available to them in their urban environment.

Student fundraising efforts yielded \$5,000 in program support; \$10,000 of in-kind clothing donations from commercial designers; 150 units of school supplies; \$200 in donations from community members; 100 cans of food; and 15 bags of clothing.

***Narrative contributions for the above profiles were made by the following youth practitioners:
Merle McGee, Roland Guevara & Kristine Rivera (HEAF)
Rachel Cohen (as introduction contributor)***