

Guest column: Giving back to the community, service learning plays a part in higher education

BY JOHN O'BRIEN - GUEST COLUMNIST

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Most people think the "community" in Community College primarily reflects the fact that we are conveniently located around the state to serve local needs. There's no doubt that affordability and convenience are part of our mission, but community colleges are more than just a destination.

What links colleges like North Hennepin to our communities is not just the large number of students from the area who walk through our doors each year - but those who volunteer at local organizations as part of their learning experience.

This connection between classroom and community - known as service learning - is an important part of community college life for many students. Since the service learning program's inception at North Hennepin Community College in 2006, more than 4,000 students have worked 33,000+ hours with more than 200 partners in the community - generating more than \$600,000 in economic value.

Troy Nellis, NHCC Service Learning Director, says more and more professors are including some kind of service learning project into their courses.

"Our students are going out into our neighborhoods, doing meaningful work and helping people," says Nellis. "There is no better way to learn than by doing. Service learning projects give students real-life, hands-on experience - making classroom concepts more tangible and relevant."

According to a study by George Kuh, service learning is one of the most effective educational strategies to create deep learning and is rated as one of the highest impact activities a college can offer to achieve meaningful learning and retention.

For example, NHCC student Henrik Petaisto completed his service learning class project at a senior care facility. At first he was skeptical about how volunteer work would contribute to his learning goals, but eventually the work made him feel more engaged in learning "than any essay I would possibly type up late into the night."

In some cases, service learning can lead to internship opportunities and long-term employment for student participants. NHCC student Emma Granberry completed her service learning project with the African American Action Committee and was then hired as a community outreach specialist intern, while Mieso Koji volunteered at Ebenezer Care Center and was later hired on as a nursing assistant and promoted to trained medication aide.

Aside from increased student retention, positive impact on the local economy, and powerful personal stories, there is another more subtle benefit of service learning. Service learning creates and encourages an impulse to serve and a commitment to civic engagement. For some students, service learning may be the first volunteer experience they have. For many, it is not their last.

Community organizations interested in hosting a NHCC service learning project are encouraged to call 763-424-0752 or email servicelearning@nhcc.edu.

O'Brien is the President of North Hennepin Community College.