

Art and Service Learning Go Hand in Hand

BY SUSAN DAVIS PATT

A primary objective of service learning at La Sierra University (LSU) in Riverside, California, is to learn about our community and its needs, and to provide students with meaningful service opportunities that help meet those needs. A major challenge is to match community needs with the goals of specific academic courses in such a way that the students' service activities both benefit the community and enrich classroom and lab experiences. Because of its belief in the benefits of service learning, the Art Department at La Sierra University has integrated it into three current course offerings.

Philharmonic Art Project

Collaboration between the LSU Art Department and the nearby Riverside County Philharmonic became the first departmental service-learning project. Recognizing that their performances attracted few children or young adults, the philharmonic staff planned a new initiative: a concert with works by well-known American composers, called "Good Ol' American Music," during which images of original paintings would be projected on a large screen in the auditorium. The philharmonic staff contacted LSU painting professor, Beatriz Mejia-Krumbein, for advice and assistance.

After discussing the project with Philharmonic Director Pat Korzec, Mejia-Krumbein decided to incorporate this project into the syllabus for her painting class. She provided background by discussing the composers and music styles with her painting students. The students then listened to the compositions that would be performed during the concert and created original paintings based on their interpretations of the music.

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In February of 2005, 31 student paintings were projected on a large screen during the philharmonic performance. This new visual element was enthusiastically received by the philharmonic staff, those attending the concert, and by the students themselves, and has become a regular event.

Art Capstone Course

A component of LSU's University Studies Program is the senior capstone course called "Religious, Moral, and Social Aspects of the Academic Discipline," which is tailored to each department or program. Many of these courses include an opportunity for students to serve others in the context of their major field of study.

I regularly teach the capstone class, "Religious, Moral, and Social Aspects of Art." The students enrolled in one section produced a group of art books in collaboration with community partners from La Mirada Elementary School and the Janet Goeske Senior Center, both in Riverside, California. The book project, *Memories From Childhood/What I Want to Be . . .* involved a large group of LSU art students. They met weekly with senior citizens at the Goeske Center to help them create pages filled with memories from their younger days. The art students encouraged their senior partners to bring photos, letters, and other cherished memorabilia to be copied and attached to their individual pages in the book. At the same time, a smaller group of art students helped grade school children produce artwork illustrating what they would like to be when they grew up.

Despite the careful planning that had gone into this project, both LSU student groups quickly found themselves challenged by a variety of problems. Not all of the senior partners attended each weekly session. At the elementary school, the children present for the art sessions varied from week to week. Never-



One of the children's drawings that depicted dreams for the future, which was included in the large collaborative book, *Memories From Childhood/What I Want to Be...*

A La Sierra University (LSU) student instructs and assists adult daycare participants in a painting project.

theless, by the last week of the quarter, all of the art students were in the studio, combining the two sets of images to create the finished project. One side of the large book featured collages of the senior partner's memories; the opposite side showcased the elementary children's hopes and dreams for the future. Small editions of the large book, *Memories From Childhood/What I Want to Be . . .* were given to each senior partner.

Because of scheduling conflicts, some art students were unable to work on the large book project. As a result, several of them developed independent book projects with children from the elementary school and seniors from the Goeske Center.

The students discovered that service learning was less about making great art, and more about making new friends. They learned to adapt to the needs of their younger and older community partners, sometimes even modifying the project expectations and outcomes. As one student observed: "This experience showed me service learning at its best. I saw progression through the quarter. I saw an after-school system stressed to the max, getting our help. I saw students who needed that little extra assistance. Mostly, I saw a child who might be seen as hyper, annoying, and different open up under the right situation. With a chance to do art, in a sense to tell stories and let his imagination run wild, he was able to express himself in a way that I think he could not do normally. What's more, for me it opened up more of what art is—that it's not just a means to attain popularity, but a means to create, a



An LSU art student and an elementary student bridged the age gap by collaborating on an altered book—a form of mixed-media art that takes an existing book and modifies it to create a new project.

means to share and express in a universal way. The age gap, religious gap and socio-economic gap, was bridged between us via art, and that was valuable for both of us."

Web Design

The LSU Art Department's newest course to incorporate service learning is "Web Design" taught by Assistant Professor Terrill Thomas. In the spring 2007 quarter, graphic-design students began a collaborative project that created Websites for local non-profit organizations. The project helped them to develop professional practices and design skills that will flow naturally into their future graphic design careers. Engaging a client through the service-learning process mirrored the type of business activity they will experience as professional Web designers, reinforcing and validating the educational principles

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they learn in the classroom. Applying what they have learned helps students retain the software skills and design principles they acquire in class.

Each student or pair of students took their project through the professional Web design steps of research, competitive analysis, messaging, navigation, information design, concept development, and beta testing all the way to final site launch. In addition, they became involved in the business and communication side of Web design, including how to prepare estimates and timelines, client communication, and how to set milestones.

Community partners for this collaboration included a variety of local non-profit organizations including Short Term Missions, Girl Scouts of San Bernardino, and the LSU Women's Resource Center. Brandon Grainger, who worked on the Girl Scouts of San Bernardino Website said, "Doing service learning in the Web Design class helped me learn what it will be like working with real clients. It also helped me learn how I can give back to the community when I become a graphic designer."

LSU Art Department faculty members have been impressed by both the response of the community and the impact of service learning on the students. "We're excited that our students can experience firsthand that the practice of Web design is much more than promoting a product or service. Web design can be used as a powerful communication tool to build community and expand the reach of non-profit organizations that have limited budgets. By partnering with LSU, clients will have access to high-end Web design services utilizing flash animation, video encoding, and search engine optimization," stated Terrill Thomas.



Elementary students stand beside their collaborative assembled sculpture prior to its display at the Riverside Philharmonic concert.



Collage pages created by senior community members for the collaborative book.



A book of funny faces, assembled from images of food and flowers, was created by elementary children with help from LSU art students.

More Service-Learning Projects

During the 2007-2008 academic year, art students had more service-learning opportunities, including collaborating with a middle school fashion club to create silk-screened T-shirts, teaching pottery to seniors at the Inland Empire Adult Day Health Care Center, and developing logos and brochures for

Service Learning at La Sierra University

The service-learning activities of the La Sierra University Art Department described in this article represent only a sampling of the numerous and varied projects that are underway on campus. In the 2007-2008 academic year:

- The university offered 46 service-learning courses in partnership with more than 30 community organizations;
- 35 percent of faculty taught service-learning courses;
- 861 students (more than 60 percent of all students) engaged in service-learning, for a total of more than 12,000 hours;
- 1,043 students contributed 45,635 hours of service to the community;
- More than three-quarters of students who engaged in required service-learning courses reported that the experience was personally rewarding.

Specific class and university service-learning activities:

- Last year, students in a history class were paired with residents of Mt. Rubidoux Manor and throughout the quarter, recorded either their life history or their personal account of a significant historical event.

- During Thanksgiving break 2008, a group of students from a university studies course, "Childhood in Global Perspective," joined AMOR Ministries (a non-profit community-service ministry based in San Diego) to build a house for a single-parent family in Tijuana, Mexico.

- "Jesus and the Gospels" students worked with the marginalized of society to put into practice the methods of Jesus in dealing with the afflicted, aged, and rejected individuals.

- An innovative new program called IGNITE combines community service (eliminating graffiti, planting rosebushes, tutoring kids, and teaching recycling-oriented crafts) with team-building in training student-leadership teams (http://www.lasierra.edu/news/2008/september/ignite_service.html)

- La Sierra University was recently awarded the Carnegie Foundation's *Community Engagement Classification for Curricular Engagement* for 2008, "where the teaching, learning, and scholarship engage faculty, students, and community in mutually beneficial and respectful collaboration" (<http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/classifications/index.asp?key=1213>), in addition to once again being among *The President's Higher Education Community Service Honor Roll With Distinction* for 2008.

More information about service learning at La Sierra University can be found on the Office of Service-Learning Website (<http://www.lasierra.edu/service>).



An LSU graphic-design student works on a Website for her community partner.

The LSU Art Department's newest course to incorporate service learning is "Web Design."

a small local non-profit agency, Arlington Temporary Assistance. In addition, the painting students expanded their collaboration with the Riverside Philharmonic to include working with local middle school students to create mixed media artwork, which was then exhibited during a concert attended by La Sierra's art students as well as many middle school children and their families. This three-way collaboration proved to be one of the most successful events yet for the painting class.

Each of these service-learning experiences provides art students with the opportunity to contribute their own talent and creativity within the immediate community. It also makes them aware of genuine needs in the community and in many cases, inspires them to continue this type of service in the future. ✍



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