

Respectfully Entering Diverse Communities

Through many community-based learning experiences, there are issues of difference and "the other" that surface and need to be addressed. Although while we learn about others, we also learn about ourselves, distancing oneself by focusing on "the other" rather than "the self" when in a new environment is often the easy way out.

As service-learning participants working in diverse urban communities, you will be confronted with the issues of power and privilege. Providing students with opportunities to examine their own cultural identities, and their deeply held values and beliefs, is a necessary first step when working in multicultural communities.

Developing skills to respectfully negotiate diverse settings is especially important to service-learning programs. Be respectful of the people you are working with, while they may be different from you in appearance, language, custom, religion, socioeconomic status, ability, etc., people are people and you may have more in common than you ever imagined possible.

It's not trespassing when the boundaries you are crossing are your own.

~ *Anonymous*

Ask yourself these questions when entering into any community site:

- Why am I the way I am?
- Why do I see the world the way I do?
- How might my view of the world be limited, skewed, or mistaken?
- Do I see myself as a prejudiced person?
- Do I identify myself with a particular socioeconomic class?
- Do I hold stereotypes about people who are of a different gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, or socioeconomic class?
- How am I similar to all other people?

"We don't see things as they are; we see things as we are." ~ Anais Nin

A student working in a homeless shelter, for Sociology 1001, wrote this journal entry describing her first day at her site. For many students, service-learning experiences are new, challenging, and often intimidating because students may be entering into a community that is different from what they are use to encountering.

Journal Entry #2

"Today was my first day at the shelter and I'm surprised to realize how nervous I was with the thought of dealing with 250 homeless men, as well as workers who were also complete strangers to me. After finding the shelter and the entrance, I soon discovered that it was locked. Outside of the shelter with me were about twenty men also waiting to get inside and I have to admit that I was really uncomfortable waiting outside with them. So I went next door and asked the woman at the Salvation Army if she could let me into the shelter because I was a volunteer and the door was locked. She then told me to go back to the shelter and ring the doorbell so I headed back feeling as though all eyes were on me. I was so uncomfortable and all I wanted to do was get into the building. However, my reaction to these men is making me realize that this service-learning experience is going to be really hard.

How am I going to work with a group of men when I am afraid to wait outside with them?"

After weeks of working at the shelter this student from Sociology 1001 was able to overcome her anxiety about working with homeless individuals. In the case of this particular student, she was able to gain more insight into who she was and why she might have thought some of her past beliefs. As this student learned through her community involvement there are many benefits and skills that can be obtained simply by being open to the initial uncertainty that can exist when entering into new situations and environments.

Journal Entry #5

"In the following weeks I have noticed that many of the regular men who come to the shelter are very friendly to one another and have formed a social group. As a volunteer I have begun to learn peoples' names, which is slowly earning me some sort of connection. I have become more comfortable and look forward to seeing some of the guys who I talk to regularly. Jim, one of the regulars, and I have had some great conversations and I have really begun to question some of my past belief about homeless people. Before I might have believed that the majority of homeless individuals are lazy, addicts, and jobless. However, Jim (like many of the men who come into the shelter) was laid off from work, couldn't afford his apartment and soon found he was homeless. He has now found a job, but the minimum wage is barely enough to save up for a security deposit, not to mention his family. I have also observed that the men at the shelter respect the staff members who are receptive to them and who show them genuine interests and respect. I realized that knowing names, asking the men about their day and just talking about news and sports really makes a world of difference in how I am accepted. Also I have realized that I am now much less judgmental of the men who come into the shelter because I am getting to know them. In time I have come to understand that there is no reason to judge these individuals based on how they may appear or because they have found themselves in situations that have led them into homelessness. I now understand that it is incredibly difficult to overcome the poverty that got them in their situations in the first place."

If someone listens, or stretches out a hand, or whispers a kind word of encouragement, or attempts to understand a lonely person, extraordinary things begin to happen. ~ Loretta Girzartis