How IU Students Help Nonprofits (and Vice Versa)

Take a community with many underfunded, understaffed nonprofit agencies and mix it with a major university committed to education through experience and what do you get? In Bloomington, the answer is a very active Office of Service-Learning (OSL).

According to OSL Director Nicole Schönenmann, this is a win-win situation. The services provided by IU students fill real needs in the Bloomington nonprofit sector. Likewise, studies indicate the experiential learning opportunity provided by the nonprofits is one of the most effective avenues for students to learn. "It is a way that the university is a resource for the community and the community is a resource for the university," she says.

The OSL works with more than 100 nonprofit agencies in Bloomington and the surrounding area. During the spring 2009 semester, IU is offering nearly 70 service-learning courses. In some instances students provide direct service, for example packing food boxes at a food bank to enrich their understanding of a course on poverty. Students also provide project-based service, perhaps coordinating a fundraising event as part of a marketing class.

A key person in each program is the Advocate for Community Engagement (ACE), a student who serves as the primary liaison between the school and a particular agency. An ACE is often responsible for orientation, training, and supervision of service-learning students. Bryce Winingar, a senior pre-med student, is the ACE for Volunteers in Medicine, a free clinic in Bloomington. "We also regularly spend time reflecting with students to make sure they are processing what they’ve seen and done so they walk away with the best experience possible," he says.

Service-learning can also impact students far beyond the classes they are taking. Schönenmann notes that students who feel connected to the community in which they live tend to adjust better socially and perform better in school. "Getting involved in the community really transformed my college experience, transformed my life here," says senior Jennifer Jameson, the ACE for Hoosier Hills Food Bank. And service-learning sometimes clarifies career goals. Heydi Correa-Encarnacion, who'd like to go to law school, has developed a passion for immigrant, civil, and human rights through her work with the ACE for Monroe County Community School Corporation’s English as a Second Language program. "It's really helped me focus on what it is I want to do when I graduate," she says. "That's the area I'd like to specialize in with law."

Bet Savich, who has been director of the City of Bloomington Volunteer Network for 13 years, says area nonprofits have always had a great need for assistance and there has always been great interest among IU students. However, she says it was often difficult for the two to connect before the creation of the OSL in 1998. "Now we have a door, a door that is for us," she says. "I have been saying ‘Hooray!’ ever since the OSL was formed."

—Lou Getman