National Philanthropy Day: Service Learning Teaches Students About Their Community and Makes Them Better Writers in the Process

IDAHO FALLS, Idaho — Dr. Steve Harrison, the Written Communications Course Lead and an English faculty member at College of Eastern Idaho (CEI), has a unique twist to teaching writing skills—community service. Service-learning is a teaching and learning strategy that connects academic curriculum to community problem-solving.

National Philanthropy Day is Wednesday, November 15. The day celebrates the charitable work that everyone does to make a difference and create impact in their communities. “We want to not only help students learn how to write, but how to be good citizens who care about their communities,” said Dr. Harrison. Over the last two years his students have donated hundreds of hours to understand and help the communities in which they live.

Amy Pluim, a student in Dr. Harrison’s writing class, has been volunteering at DWI this semester. DWI is a community rehabilitation program, providing vocational and independent living training and assistance in securing employment to individuals with disabilities or to those who are disadvantaged. Amy volunteers in the LIFE program there and helps with their philosophy that social skills are best learned in a social environment.

“It has been a really great experience,” said Pluim. “I am a passionate writer, but put me in an English class, and I crumble. But in this class, I’m not only learning about my community but am able to write in more of a manner that I connect with.”

In his 20+ years of teaching, Dr. Harrison has always looked for innovative ways to teach writing and pique the students’ interest in caring about their subject matter. He challenges his students to go out in to the community to study something they haven’t explored before, and what better way to learn something new than by doing it. Students research a community problem, introduce a group that helps with that problem, and details their experience with this organization. “In most writing classes instructors ask students to write about a specific issue. Students would write about a problem but not give a solution or understand how community can become a part of the solutions,” said Dr. Harrison.

Pluim’s experience at DWI taught her that services like that are so important to the success of people with developmental disabilities. “They are a phenomenal company,” Exclaimed Pluim. “I met an individual with down-syndrome at DWI, they did not speak to many the first 3 years they were in the program, but through the gentle coaching of the team at DWI they have come out of their shell and now considers them family. It is amazing to see that level of commitment and caring from the staff. It is a unique and great opportunity to be able to be there and write about my experiences.”

"The primary challenge faced by instructors is our uncertainty regarding how to elicit reflective elements within students' written work," explained Dr. Harrison. In response to this challenge, he integrated reflection as a component of the course, aiming to emphasize the practical value of the knowledge gained. He pondered on the
course’s potential to provide students with skills they could apply in their future endeavors and posed the question: "How can the writing acquired in this course be directly relevant to their lives?” Dr. Harrison has received feedback from students who have expressed that the ability to comprehend complex problems and articulate effective solutions, which they acquired in the course, has proven more beneficial in their professional lives than anything else.

“Dr. Harrison doesn't just ask us to stretch ourselves by participating in service-learning, but he does these things himself,” explained Pluim. “He volunteers in his community. He lives by this.”

Some students come into his class that think they can’t accomplish big things, or can’t make a difference, Dr. Harrison explained. “Overall I am hoping that I give my students a memorable experience. That they are a valued member of the community. They can be a part of the solution.”

Pluim is just one of the students who is happy to have engaged in this experience and thankful for the guidance of Dr. Harrison. “He is watchful and perceptive of the students he teaches and how this experience affects them.” said Pluim. “I feel more well-rounded as a student and individual by this experience.”

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