Applications of the Service Learning Model to a Distance Education Environment

Abstract: This presentation will discuss the Service Learning Model developed by the online Master of Arts in Rehabilitation Counseling (MRC) program at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock (UALR) as well as other Service Learning approaches and strategies. The presentation will also discuss how attendees can develop a Service Learning Model development and implementation stratagem that is tailored to meet their own needs. Service Learning combines community service with academic instruction as it focuses on critical, reflective thinking and civic responsibility. In Service Learning course experiences, students engage in an organized service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility. There must be a clear connection between course objectives and service. Applying the Service learning Model in a distance education setting presents unique challenges and opportunities.

Overview

The Master of Arts in Rehabilitation Counseling (MRC) program at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock (UALR) is experienced in online education. The MRC program at UALR, begun in 2000, was the first completely online degree program in the state of Arkansas and is currently the largest MRC program in the world. Rehabilitation counselor educators, who teach online, have to be creative in developing ways to teach key Rehabilitation Counseling concepts at a distance. Service Learning is a vital experiential teaching tool in the development of competent Rehabilitation Counselors

Service Learning combines community service with academic instruction as it focuses on critical, reflective thinking and civic responsibility. In Service Learning course experiences, students engage in an organized service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility. There must be a clear connection between course objectives and service. Services provided must enhance the course content. Otherwise it’s volunteerism.

The key elements of the Service Learning Model are: 1) Meaningful service to the community; 2) Clear connection between course objectives and service activities; and 3) Structured opportunities for reflection. Services provided must meet a need identified primarily by the community-based organization in conjunction with the instructor.

Applying the Service learning Model in a distance education setting presents unique challenges and opportunities. The UALR-MRC program is a nationwide program. New students often reside in geographic areas where the program has had no previous students. The challenge to develop service learning opportunities in those communities, previously unknown to UALR-MRC, requires development of a close working relationship between the student, the faculty member, and the local community. The professional affiliations, that development from this process, are valuable not only to the student but advantageous in marketing and presenting a positive image of the UALR-MRC program.

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