

ENGAGING WITH THE COMMUNITY: AN INTRODUCTION TO COMMUNITY SERVICE LEARNING

Hunger and Community Food Security - Fall 2009
Register for both H292S-A (seminar 34167) and H292S-AL01 (lab 39587)

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BRIEF DESCRIPTION

This course introduces students to *Community Service Learning* through in-depth community experiences accompanied by challenging reflection, reading, discussion, and writing. The course aims to integrate academic, civic, and personal learning. Key course questions include: How can we learn effectively from community experiences? How can we at UMass engage with the community so that everyone benefits? What role do social and cultural diversity play in public issues and our own lives? What can the disciplines of history and social sciences contribute to this learning?

For the Fall 09 semester, the course explores hunger and community food security issues in Amherst and surrounding communities.

This course

- meets **General Education requirements for Interdisciplinary and US Diversity credits.**
- is a **4 credit** course. It requires more time than normal 3 credit courses.
- meets **most Tuesdays 1:00 - 3:45** (this longer class meeting time is for field trips) and **every Thursday 1:00 - 2:15.**
- requires **approximately 3 hours of volunteer time in the community every week outside of class time**
- involves some **Saturday field trips** (to be scheduled).

KEY COURSE EXPERIENCES

- You will be asked to take charge of your own learning. The course emphasizes thinking critically about how we can learn from experience and from each other, and how we assess our own learning. You will develop skills and habits of mind for experiential, self-directed learning and civic engagement that will enrich your education at UMass and beyond.
- The course aims to help you grow personally and to strengthen your capacity to engage in community service from a standpoint of mutuality and respect for the people whose efforts you are joining. You will develop a better understanding of your own social identity, and gain insight into the ways that you can contribute to a diverse community. A major purpose of the course is for you to encounter and learn from people who have different experiences, opinions, and racial or ethnic and social class backgrounds from your own.

- We will look at how the food system in the Connecticut River valley today, and how it came to be that way. We will focus both on the problem of hunger and on the potential for community food security -- from emergency food programs to nutrition education, from community gardens to community supported agriculture. You will consider the nature of your own participation in the food system, and the role of the land grant university in the community.
- You will engage in a variety of kinds of writing about your course experiences, for audiences such as your classmates, the UMass community, a hometown newspaper. You will NOT just be producing papers for the instructor!

COURSE LEARNING TOOLS

Experiences in the community, rather than lectures and readings, are the “textbook” for this course.

You will be asked to make time in your schedule -- in addition to class time -- for a variety of group and individual experiences. You will have choices and options for ways to meet these course expectations.

Time set aside for recording your experiences and reflecting on them in writing is also key to this learning process. You will be asked to share this writing with the rest of the class.

The following are key elements of the learning experience.

Community Placement

The heart of the community engagement experience is your volunteer work with a particular community organization, getting to know its people and its issues, over the course of the semester. A central goal of this experience is to find a way that you can be of service! A second important goal is to bring the perspective of the organization to share with the class.

The course requires that you spend a minimum of 30 hours outside of class time in this placement over the course of the semester. In most cases, you will arrange a 3 hour block of time every week that you can devote to this placement.

Field Trips and Group Service Projects

A variety of community experiences -- some required and some optional -- will be a second major source of raw material for learning in the course. To make the most of these experiences, we will draw on the skills of *observation* and *interviewing* from the social sciences.

The course requires you to develop your own plan for at least 10 diverse community experiences to round out your experiential knowledge of hunger and food security.

Learning Circles, etc.

Class time that is not spent on field trips will be spent experimenting with several techniques for learning with and from each other, such as learning circles, writing exercises, and small group discussions. Often students will take a leadership role.

The course requires everyone to prepare for, and participate in, all Thursday classes and some many Tuesday classes. For the course to succeed, everyone will need to take responsibility for the class experience.

Key Writing Assignments

Writing is the essential tool for capturing experiences and clarifying what we learn from them. You will be writing for several audiences in addition to the instructor: yourself, others in the class, the UMass community, and the wider public. Prepare to put a lot of effort into writing as well as experiencing!

-- *Your Own Journal.* Keeping a journal -- a detailed record of events and experiences and your reflections upon them -- is an essential element of this course. Your journal is the primary way of recording your experiences and turning them into deeper learning that is useful for you. We will experiment with ways to make a journal work for your learning. Always bring your journal to class meetings, as we may read from them or write in them.

-- *Reflections and Responses on SPARK.* Your journal will provide the raw material for “reports from the field” that you will post on the course website approximately every two weeks. The audience is the class as a whole. These are not polished essays. They are thoughtful letters to friends -- a place to clarify ideas and reflections, a place to develop and refine questions, a place to describe in detail your experiences and your feelings about them. We will not all have the same experiences during the semester, so this kind of documentation and communication is essential. It will allow us to develop a shared understanding of hunger and community food security. On alternate weeks you will also post responses to others’ field reports. These are not evaluation comments. They are not critiques of writing style. Think of them as a further contribution to class discussion -- your thoughts, questions, ideas, and arguments spurred by reading others’ reports. Both field reports and responses will be essential raw material for the final project (see below).

-- *Letter to the Editor.* Developing well-informed opinions and expressing them persuasively to a larger public audience is a key element of civic literacy in a democratic society. Letters to the editor are a powerful way to reach a public audience on an issue that matters to you. Opinions are taken more seriously when they are grounded in first hand experience. This assignment asks you to construct a succinct, compelling letter on an issue that relates to your experience in this course.

-- *Final Project.* What should others in the UMass community know about hunger and community food security in the communities around Amherst? What are the best ways to communicate this? The final design and content of this synthesis/presentation/project will be up to the class to decide.

-- *Final “Examination.”* This exercise will consist of brief, thoughtful responses to questions. It will be an open book (open journal) opportunity for critical reflection on your learning process in the course -- what you learned, how well you learned it, and how you contributed to the class as a learning community. It will be an “examination” of your own work and of the course as a learning experience.

Topics for Reading and Discussion

Short selections from a variety of books, articles, historical documents, and web sites will be important supplementary resources for class discussions and writing assignments. Topics will include some combination of the following, depending on the experiences and interests that develop during the semester:

- the nature of service
- discovering our social identities
- skills and habits for journaling
- skills and habits for observation and interviewing
- historical perspectives on agriculture and community in the Connecticut River valley
- effects of state and federal food policy on local communities
- issues in nutrition education
- the nature of community development
- hunger, food security, and sustainability - locally and globally
- what does UMass have to do with hunger and community food security?

GRADING

To succeed in this course, you will have to stretch. You will need to venture beyond your comfort zone and challenge yourself. There are some basic objective requirements (e.g. completion of work at the service site, participation in a number of field experiences, posting written work on time). However, evaluation will also require judgment and an honest, ongoing appraisal of your work (e.g. Are you challenging yourself?) by both you and the instructor. Assigning letter grades for individual assignments will not be normal practice. However, you are welcome to ask to meet with the instructor at any time to check in on how you are doing.

A course grade of “A” will be based on the following:

- fulfilled all basic participation requirements
- contributed consistently to the class as a learning community
- took on challenges and sought genuine new experiences outside the comfort zone, and shared them
- written work shows a push through to new understanding of self, community issues, and service

COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

The following organizations within reasonable travel distance from campus have agreed to provide community service opportunities, field trips, and other learning experiences for the course. This list continues to grow.

Amherst Survival Center
 Not Bread Alone (community meal)
 Food Bank of Western Massachusetts
 Food Bank Farm (community supported agriculture)
 UMass Extension Nutrition Education Program
 Nuestras Raices (farm and community gardens)
 Community Involved in Sustaining Agriculture (CISA)
 Amherst Senior Center
 Holyoke Food & Fitness Policy Council