Integrating Service Learning with EMCC’s Learning Philosophy

I piloted service learning into my three CPD 150 classes (“Strategies for College Success”) Fall 2016 with hopes of integrating authentic educational experiences with real life applications by meeting the needs of both students and volunteer agencies in our community. Each student (N=91 beginning of the semester) was required to complete 20 hours of service learning during the semester. They chose from a list of 100+ agencies who partner with EMCC through our Center for Service Learning and Civic Engagement. I worked closely with Landis Elliott in establishing an innovative way to bring service learning into the CPD curriculum while fulfilling EMCC’s “Learning College” philosophy including:

1) Creating substantive change in individual learners

2) Engaging learners…as full partners who assume primary responsibility for their own learning

3) Creating and offering as many options for learning as possible

4) …participating in collaborative learning activities

In concentrating on those four specific philosophy statements, I concluded through a pre- and post- assessment that adding service learning into the curriculum resulted in more students volunteering in the community. The biggest take-away was that before commencing service learning, 29 students of the 91 (32%) had not previously volunteered in the community. After completing the semester (N= 67 those completing the semester), only 8 students (12%) declined any further volunteering in the community. This “substantive change” in learners’ actions came as a result of the service learning experience. An additional take-away is that being primarily “responsible for their own learning” meant that these students needed to choose very carefully the agencies that they worked with in order to have the best possible “collaborative learning activity.” The students who had the best match of agency to career field had the best sense of fulfillment and satisfaction.

Despite the difference in students originally enrolled (91) and those successfully completing the course (67), no one withdrew from the course because of the service learning requirement. Generally, withdrawals occurred due to attendance, not service learning. Every student who started service learning in all three sections completed their 20 hours. Service learning was worth 23% of their final grade; it was possible NOT to complete the service learning requirement, yet still pass the course. Not one single student chose NOT to participate!

In conclusion, by adding service learning to the CPD learning objectives, students applied in-class learning (communication skills, time management, critical thinking skills, career networking, leadership skills, etc.) to authentic practice in the community. At the end of the semester each student created a Prezi oral presentation to class members and guests where they reflected in words and photographs the contribution they had made to the agency in their service learning experience. I will continue to implement service learning into future CPD classes and will work to make the experience even more valuable by channeling students’ agency choice as much as possible toward their career field. To be most effective, it is critical that the service learning relate closely to students’ career interests.