

# Working Smart Through Community Service Learning



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By Gretchen Werle

**PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA RECENTLY KICKED OFF AN INITIATIVE CALLED UNITED WE SERVE**, a rallying call to all Americans to serve in their communities. He also has set a goal for all middle and high school students to perform 50 hours of community service per year. What does this mean to those involved in career and technical education (CTE)? Rather than view this as yet another responsibility to add to the hefty list faced by educators, CTE teachers can capitalize and expand upon what they may, in fact, already be doing.

“Working smart” means using personal energy, resources and time efficiently. Many CTE educators facilitate learning through student participation in hands-on community-based projects. For example, carpentry students may volunteer to help build a Habitat for Humanity house, or health technology students may volunteer at a local nursing facility by helping with

participants’ care. In both these instances, students are learning by doing and providing a service to the community at the same time.

The National Commission on Service Learning defines service learning as a teaching and learning approach that integrates community service with academic study to enrich learning, teach civic responsibility and strengthen communities. According to the California Department of Education, service learning projects should contain the following five key elements:

- Meet a real community need
- Integrate into and enhance the curriculum
- Coordinate with a community agency, another school, or the community at large
- Help foster civic responsibility
- Provide structured time for reflection

Equipped with a greater understanding of the concepts behind service learning, educators can capitalize on the learning potential in community-based projects, while at the same time helping students to meet requirements for community service hours. In this scenario, the teacher and students need not work harder, but smarter. The following case study illustrates how the five components of an effective service-learning project have been incorporated by students at Franklin County Technical School in Turners Falls, Massachusetts.

## “Wii Can Do It!”— Students Bring Technology to an Adult Day Health Center

*Coordinate with a community agency, another school, or the community at large:*

Health technology students at Franklin County Technical spend two hours a week working with participants at the Franklin Adult Day Health Center (ADHC), located in the nearby town of Greenfield. The center is an affiliated program of a local nursing facility and provides nursing and recreational day services to adults of all ages.

Students have developed and led a variety of activities for participants, such as card and table games, bingo and word puzzles, as well as providing nail care and measuring participants’ weight and vital signs. With grant funding from the National Education Association, the project has been expanded to include:

- The development of activity stations which put the students’ technology skills to use (Wii and PC): The Wii

has been utilized in rehabilitation settings because this interactive video game has been found to increase flexibility, promote physical activity, and is seen as fun rather than therapy (Sutter, C. 2008). Further, using a computer for games, Internet searches, music, slide shows and other purposes will introduce participants to new skills and resources.

- The design and creation of a sensory room for people with sensory deficits and dementia: Health technology students receive training and certification in Alzheimer’s disease care. Creating a space and developing activities for people with dementia and sensory deficits allows students to put their knowledge to practical use, thereby reinforcing concepts learned in the classroom.

**Meet a real community need:**

The adult day health program model is an important one for the following reasons:

- As the average lifespan increases, people are living for longer periods of time with chronic illnesses.
- Effective adult day programs may extend a person’s ability to live at home, thereby decreasing the need for expensive institutional care.
- Preventing premature institutionalized care is emerging as a major public health and social goal (Clarenbach, S. 2009).

The ADHC serves as a service-learning site for students because it helps them develop communication skills, understand models of health care, and participate in therapeutic recreation while they serve their community.

**Help foster civic responsibility:**

Both the students and program participants have benefited from the partner-

ship, as evidenced by adult day health program staff reports that, “The participants love having the students come in!” One student said, “The only thing I didn’t like was having to leave!”

**Integrate into and enhances the curriculum:**

The following learning standards from the Massachusetts Vocational and Technical Education Standards for Health Assisting are addressed through this community service-learning project:

- Apply strategies to enhance the effectiveness of all types of communication in the workplace
- Activity assistant
- Demonstrate safety techniques used in caring for cognitively impaired clients
- Describe behavior interventions used in caring for cognitively impaired client
- Demonstrate introductory resident/client identification
- Identify the organizational structure of the health care team
- Illustrate ways to encourage independence in personal care for the client
- Demonstrate respect for diverse orientations
- List strategies used to maintain client dignity at all time
- Successfully complete a supervised student practicum

**Provide structured time for reflection:**

Ongoing reflection and processing is a critical element of a community service-learning project. Following each ADHC visit, a teacher-led discussion is held focusing on highlights of the day, as well as problems and questions that arose. Students also complete a structured journal entry in which they are asked to connect their experiences at the ADHC to classroom content, as well as to specific learning standards.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, CTE is way ahead of the curve in terms of President Obama’s timely call for all Americans to serve in their communities. Learning through doing is inherent in the CTE model of hands-on, experiential teaching and learning, as is service to the community. CTE administrators and educators can make these connections explicit and clear by understanding, embracing and promoting the community service-learning model in their schools and institutions. That’s called working smart. **I**

**Resources:**

“Community Involvement and Service Learning”  
University of Minnesota  
[www.servicelearning.umn.edu](http://www.servicelearning.umn.edu)

“Key Elements of Service Learning”  
California Department of Education  
[www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/sl/overview.asp](http://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/sl/overview.asp)

Massachusetts Vocational and Technical Education Framework  
Health Assisting  
[www.goe.mass.edu](http://www.goe.mass.edu)

National Commission on Service Learning  
[www.service-learningpartnership.org](http://www.service-learningpartnership.org)

“Playing with a Purpose: Wii can Help in Rehabilitation”  
[www.dailycamera.com/news/2008/jul/08/no-headline---08pcov/](http://www.dailycamera.com/news/2008/jul/08/no-headline---08pcov/)

“The Adult Day Health Care Domino Effect”  
[http://news.santacruz.com/2009/06/11/the\\_adult\\_day\\_health\\_care\\_domino\\_effect](http://news.santacruz.com/2009/06/11/the_adult_day_health_care_domino_effect)

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