

Community Engagement Fellows Project Report

Develop a lab course for Visual Communications Program students in which they create design solutions for non-profit organizations.

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When I agreed to be part of the Community Engagement Fellows Program, I believed, that in working with other Fellows, I would be able to seek advice from other instructors and community members on how to best connect our students to the community. The insights gained from attending the meetings this year have been invaluable and they have not only informed my work on this project but have also informed other work that I am doing where my work at Whatcom Community College intersects with the community at large. Overall, it has been a very rewarding experience.

This year I have been working on the development of a proposal for a two-credit hour lab course for second year Visual Communications students at Whatcom Community College. I will be proposing the course and curriculum change for the Fall of 2018. The course is meant to help students gain the experience of working for a client while providing print or web design services for non-profit organizations that serve the wider community. The organizations will need to be non-profit so that the students are not in competition with local design firms for clients who can pay. The organizations will also need to be local to fit into WCC's mission to serve the wider community. The organizations will need to be small so that students will be providing services to organizations that will likely be unable to afford professional design services.

In the lab course, students will be assigned print or web design problems to solve. The problems will be provided by area non-profits. Students will complete the projects within a specific timeframe in consultation with those clients. The clients will receive the digital files from the student so that the organization can then produce or launch the work.

The goal of the lab is to help make the transition from school to the workplace easier by allowing students to gain needed experience while they are still in school. Substantial work experience and solid academic performance are found to be the two most common denominators in a successful transition. As it stands now, students are not required to do an internship as part of the Visual Communications Program at WCC. The internship is an elective and currently only about a third of the students complete an internship prior to graduation. This proposed lab would be required and would guarantee that every student from our program would be graduating with practical experience.

Small non-profit organizations often run a number of community programs with little funding to pay for professional design services to promote their programs. Though sometimes an organization can get a designer to donate their services, usually the designs are created by the organization's staff. It serves the community at large if we work toward a better visual environment so there is a benefit to improving promotional materials that are poorly designed. A design student can use the lab course to create better promotional materials than those created by most organization staff. The result will be that the organization's promotional materials will likely be better received by the community and therefore the event may be more successful.

As part of the Fellows Program I learned how other instructors have created projects that involved members of the community and from community leaders how to manage expectations and best interact with them. I was given information that has helped in identifying potential clients. As part of a Fellow recommendation, I changed the project by having a team of students responsible for the work rather than having a single student assigned to a client. This would not only give them the opportunity to create as part of a team but also would alleviate the issue of a single point of failure for the completion of the project. One of the Fellows served as a client for a service-learning project this winter from which I learned valuable lessons that I can apply to the course procedures and policies.

I found that I learned as much from the workshopping of other projects that were discussed at Fellows meetings as I did from the workshopping of my own project. I established relationships in the meetings with other Fellows that will likely last well beyond the creation of this course. I have a better understanding of how local academic institutions are regarded by members of the community and that has impacted how I conduct business in my dealings with community members. I also gained an understanding of how other disciplines or programs differ from my own and how our local educational institutions differ from each other. This experience has also heightened my awareness of the importance of and reaffirmed my commitment to service-learning.

Like most working professionals, there are a lot of demands on my time but I never regretted making the time to go to one of the Fellows meetings. I would often leave the meetings energized and deep in thought about important issues that are not usually in the forefront of my mind. Now I see this community as a whole organism not just as the part for which I am a contributor. I am truly grateful to have had this experience and highly recommend it to others.