

**Linkages: A Program of
Service-Learning
Virginia Commonwealth University
Community Nursing Organization**

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PROJECT OVERVIEW

Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) is a large, urban, research institution with a health sciences campus and an academic campus. The School of Nursing (SON) Community Nursing Organization (CNO) was the funding recipient for the Health Professions Schools in Service to the Nation (HPSISN) grant; both the project director and SL coordinator worked out of the CNO. The overall focus of the CNO's HPSISN project, Linkages, was to develop programs of SL across the health professional schools at VCU.

The environment of VCU supports the tripartite mission of teaching, scholarship, and service. Faculty members are expected to maintain accomplishment in all three areas. The CNO was established in 1992, with the initial plan to provide the structure for faculty practice and/or service. The CNO does not develop a focus, but rather supports faculty work. There is no clinic and no identified geographic location, as found in some other nursing education schools, but rather a mission and a structure to support community collaboration and grant writing. This philosophy provides freedom for the dean and CNO director to evaluate the results of various approaches to service.

Project Objectives

- Develop an interdisciplinary model in the health professions schools for SL for students as a part of required courses and extracurricular experiences;
- Document the impact of the SL project on students, faculty, community, and the health status of clients served from the vulnerable groups—homeless individuals and families and persons with HIV/AIDS; and
- Demonstrate the institutionalization of SL in the participant program.

SL Defined

Linkages adopted the Wingspread

Conference Principles for Combining Service and Learning. The principles describe how an effective program that combines service and learning:

- Engages people in responsible and challenging actions for the common good;
- Provides structured opportunities for people to reflect critically on their service experience;
- Articulates clear service and learning goals for everyone involved;
- Allows for those with needs to define those needs;
- Clarifies the responsibilities of each person and organization involved;

- Matches service providers and service needs through a process that recognizes changing circumstances;
- Expects genuine, active, and sustained organizational commitment;
- Includes training, supervision, monitoring, support, recognition, and evaluation to meet service and learning goals;
- Insures that the time commitment for service and learning is flexible, appropriate, and in the best interests of all involved; and
- Is committed to program participation by and with diverse populations (Honnet & Poulsen, 1989).

The two parts of the definition that take the most effort:

- Clarifying the players' responsibilities as related to the development of partnerships on campus; and
- The monitoring, support, recognition, and evaluation required to meet service and learning goals, because of the time- and labor-intensive nature.

Faculty Development

Before receiving the HPSISN grant, no faculty or students in the SON, or at VCU, for that matter, had engaged in SL. For assistance, the project director contacted Dr. Richard Cuoto and Virginia COOL at the University of Richmond (U of R). At around the same time of the HPSISN funding, SON faculty attended a SL workshop at U of R sponsored by Dr. Cuoto. The VA COOL executive director at the time invited two of our students to be on a

workshop student panel, to tell of their experiences in our first SL efforts. That experience was a positive one for both students and faculty. Learning what U of R had done in SL was very helpful for our SL coordinator.

Advisory Board

While advisory board members have provided helpful suggestions that we have implemented, the board has been a weak link in our project. It may hold promise for us as we continue SL activities. We had two annual meetings and attendance was faculty-heavy. The community partners were engaged in struggles at their own agencies, and it seemed that involving them in our fledgling efforts was an awkward imposition. Scheduling convenient meeting times and places was challenging. Motivation for agencies to work together, even to advise us, has sometimes been lacking. We wonder if this is because the agencies often compete for the same funding sources.

In lieu of the advisory board format, we have chosen to nurture our relationships with individual community agencies. We stay in regular telephone contact with agencies with which we have ongoing relationships. We work hard at the beginning of each semester to lay necessary groundwork for the students. Together, agency contacts, the SL coordinator, and course faculty have learned how to help students fit into the working of the agencies.

PROJECT PERFORMANCE

Curricular Integration of SL

School of Nursing (SON)

At first, the SL coordinator was very unsure of how to develop SL courses and activities, but she did know that this new approach to service would not be a traditional clinical lab. Faculty would have to listen to the needs of community agencies; they would have to be community partners. How could she convince faculty to send students out with the instruction to listen and respond to what community partners said their needs were, and “then we’ll make sense of it somehow back here at school”? When she talked about her new responsibilities, her faculty peers muttered to each other, “What’s SL?” Who would take a chance on trying this new approach? Faculty reward and advancement in the university traditionally come from a formal program of research, not service.

Dr. Laura Festa agreed to integrate SL in Concepts of Nursing (NUR 201). It is the first theory course in the undergraduate curriculum and does not have a clinical component. What she and the SL coordinator did not realize was that the students were already involved with service activities and desired to continue them while in nursing school. Students were concerned they would not have the opportunity to do so. The confluence of all these factors, along with Dr. Festa’s ability to encourage almost anyone into action, made for a successful initial effort.

SL Course Requirements

SL in the first nursing course is voluntary. It is required in both the

psychiatric nursing practicum and senior community health nursing courses.

Student Participation

Of the 80 undergraduate nursing students in the first class (the class of 1997) that participated in Linkages, 26 elected the SL component in their first nursing class, a handful served in their psychiatric nursing practicum’s SL pilot program, and all developed SL projects in their senior level community health nursing course. The two subsequent classes also participated in SL activities. Two hundred and forty nursing students have participated in Linkages in the three years of the HPSISN project.

School of Medicine

Initially, nursing student leaders from the class of 1997 worked with second-year medical students in some extracurricular activities, generally involving a transitional housing program for homeless individuals. When the medical student who had helped to organize these activities was no longer available, due to the growing demands of her third year, the interdisciplinary work between nursing and medical students ceased. No further extracurricular work with the medical school has transpired.

However, in the spring of 1996, SL was integrated into the month-long elective course Humanistic Medicine, taught by Russell Binder. Dr. Binder, having heard of the nursing school’s outreach programs, asked our SL coordinator for help in setting up SL experiences for that course. We placed his students in community agencies that we hoped could provide transformative learning. Student feedback, although mixed, generally has been positive. Reflection takes place only at the end of the course,

and then in an oral session that is not focused specifically on community-based learning.

School of Pharmacy

The School of Pharmacy faculty also has expressed interest in integrating a SL component into their curriculum. Faculty member David Ruffin attended the SL annual meeting and learned a great deal about SL that he wanted to include in his teaching. Subsequently, he enrolled in the VCU Service Associates Program and has been developing SL options in the School of Pharmacy. He integrated SL into his course for sophomore pharmacy students. Our SL coordinator provided course consultation and evaluation materials.

School of Public Health

Graduate students in the School of Public Health course Survey of Public Health Behavior have served in some of the same agencies in which undergraduate nursing students have served. Our SL coordinator assisted in placing these students. Numbers were small, but feedback was positive.

Nurse Practitioner Program

Sadly, the faculty of our own graduate nurse practitioner program has yet to consider integrating SL into the curriculum. The program underwent some curricular revision and faculty turnover soon after Linkages began. Although practicum experiences usually take place in the community, preceptors closely supervise the graduate students; in addition, the students focus their care on individuals, not families or communities.

SL Activities

This year, after three years of trying to connect students with clients in the community who have HIV, we finally

smoothed out the landing. Eight students worked in a free clinic's HIV Buddy Program, and this spring everything went right. This clinic was finally glad to have students, and oriented them nicely. The students faced their fears and stereotypes as they met their "buddies" and established caring relationships with them. They made phone calls and home visits, went out to eat, and spent hours meeting with their buddies, not even realizing how time flew by. Eris listened as her buddy described fractured family relationships, but was amazed at his hope. Elizabeth's elderly buddy opened her eyes to her own prejudices by his kindness and anticipation of her visits, but who also, ironically, tried to engage her in a conversation about his own racial biases. Another Elizabeth found the edge between her insight and her judgment after she met her buddy for the first time. "He does not deserve this. I came home tonight and cried because I felt so terrible for him." In a later log she writes, "This has been a great experience for me so far and I am finally not afraid of HIV anymore. I have realized that someone with the virus is just like me...thank you for giving me this wonderful opportunity."

Direct service to clients has not been the only SL activity that students have provided. Projects that students did in the agencies where they had their community health practicum fulfilled formal course requirements and met agency needs. Many students have worked on agency projects in Concepts of Nursing, in which SL is voluntary, and in their psychiatric nursing course. Students have:

- Investigated the success of denture programs through the Capital Area

Agency on Aging;

- Created handouts for AIDS patients that provide information about the newer AIDS drugs;
- Created information packets for parents of children with mental illness;
- Answered the telephone and supported lobbying efforts at the local office of the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill (NAMI);
- Presented ways to increase self-

esteem to senior citizens at noontime meal program sites; and

- Researched violence in the workplace for a nurse researcher at MCV Hospitals.

Some students have continued their volunteer efforts they began in their first course.

PROGRAM ACHIEVEMENTS

Interdisciplinary SL

While SL has been integrated in several courses throughout the health professions schools, our primary objective, to have Linkages be an interdisciplinary experience on the health sciences campus, has not been realized. We have tried to involve other health discipline faculty, but we all continue to work separately. We seem to be experiencing what Seifer and Connors (1997) describe as the parallel play or side-by-side companionship of a multidisciplinary effort, which is how toddlers play, establishing their autonomy and control over the environment. They cannot yet share or work together, collaboratively. According to Siegler and Whitney (1994), a multidisciplinary team has members from more than one discipline; an interdisciplinary team also has *collaborative* interaction between members of different disciplines. Perhaps some of the reasons interdisciplinary work has not yet taken place are issues of timing, the considerable amount of time faculty must devote to their research efforts, and the rigid structure for labeling curricular offerings. In retrospect, we may have been overly ambitious in wording the

objective.

The interdisciplinary initiative is in stage II of the university's strategic plan, and the SON Executive Committee is discussing how to develop an interdisciplinary SL program involving all the health professions schools.

Document the Impact of the Program on Students, Faculty, Community, and Clients

We have succeeded in our second objective. The impact on students is measured by the hours of service they provide, logs they keep, feedback from small group reflection sessions, and an evaluation of the content and quality of projects they complete for the community agencies. The logs and reflections sessions, in particular, have been rich sources of information regarding the impact SL has had on the students. (See the appendix following this case study for examples of students' comments.)

Documentation of the impact on faculty is varied. The spring 1998 issue of *Connections*, the SON report to alumnae, focused on service and included descriptions by Linkages faculty of their attitudes to service. The SL coordinator presented her

experiences in the project at a departmental meeting and SL is part of her work plan. Community health faculty continue to require SL projects from students. In addition, two faculty have made presentations and submitted articles describing their experiences in SL.

The effect of Linkages on the community is beginning to unfold. Several community partners have either written or called the school to describe how happy they were with their students and their work. It is particularly gratifying to receive this feedback.

Demonstrate the Institutionalization of SL in the Participant Program

We also have succeeded in our third objective. SL developed on VCU's academic campus at the same time that Linkages was funded. Since one initiative in the university's strategic plan focused on service to the community, Catherine Howard, director of the Office of Community Programs, led the development of this new learning modality. She organized the first university-sponsored conference on SL, inviting community partners as well as faculty and students from across the university. With the support of Linkages, the Faculty Service Associates Program was developed, in which

funding was made available to help faculty implement SL courses. Faculty took advantage of the program, and six service associate faculty taught seven SL courses in 1997. Seven faculty have been selected as service associates this year. Collaboration with Linkages was important in creating the nucleus for growth, and shows the emerging institutionalization of SL at VCU.

SL Scholarship Materials

Several scholarship projects have come from the effort of Linkages. Two posters and two presentations were given in 1996 APHA and NSEE conferences. The CNO and Linkages were described in Henry's 1997 *JOGNN* article. Clinical faculty who are currently teaching NUR 355, the psychiatric nursing course, are writing about their experiences with agencies that provide psychiatric services. Susan White and Anne Boyle are working with students to help them actualize the class mission they wrote in spring of 1997, and they presented a poster at a national nursing education conference in June 1998. A physician whom students worked with to collect data from homeless women in a shelter program has completed a manuscript, and will acknowledge the students in it.

COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

Partnership Development

When Linkages began, relationships between a few School of Nursing faculty and community partners were already in place. In particular, Barbie Dunn and Sandy Graves, both nurse practitioners, and JoAnne Henry, the CNO director, had community contacts and, more importantly, a spirit of responsibility to

the underserved of our community, which provided a strong base for the project. Their commitment to service encouraged other faculty and students to move out the front door of the school into the city we did not know very well. The initial networking that took place to set up SL activities resulted in some new relationships that continue even now.

Many partnerships were initiated in response to requests by students, who wanted to continue to work with agencies with which they already had been volunteering.

Partnership Maintenance

Faculty on the health sciences campus continue to nurture community partnerships that have been established. One of the “philosophical admonitions” Farley (1994) gives for the founding of partnerships is to “remember that community development and partnerships are not an event.” We hope that we have not just shown up for the event, but that we have developed reciprocal relationships with our partners; we will continue to seek feedback from them. The partnerships are not static, evolving through faculty and student interaction and the changing needs of the agencies. The fact that the agencies have offered spontaneous positive feedback and express a desire to continue working together speaks to ongoing partnership. Service opportunities are numerous and diverse, and we have rising expectations for student service within the SON.

Community Partner Participation

Community agencies offer students orientation to their sites. The agencies also serve as facilitators of the reflections session in the sophomore nursing course. They are able to bring community perspectives to students in the educational setting and assist students to see the perspectives of others.

Community Agency Partners

- Stephen Lenton, a licensed professional counselor active in the local

gay community, agreed to become a member of our advisory board. Since 1995, he has been a reflection group leader and a very interested advisor. He has offered community contacts and insight into student participation and issues related to people living with HIV/AIDS.

- Manny Andrede worked for Richmond AIDS Ministry (RAM) until it underwent some reorganization, and now continues to help us at the Fan Free Clinic.

- Barbara Fleming, the executive director of the Children’s Health Involving Parents Program (CHIP), has been involved in Linkages from the beginning. She has met with classes, provided input about ways to implement SL in the least disruptive way for agencies, responded to student and faculty feedback on how to make orientation to her agency more “student-friendly,” and attended two national workshops with Linkages faculty.

- The relationship between St. Joseph’s Villa staff and VCU students and faculty has been mutually beneficial. Community health nursing and nurse practitioner students, and now pharmacy students, have SL experiences on the St. Joseph’s Villa campus working with the residents of the school, the shelters, and the day care center. Dr. Marty Maguira attended the annual meeting in San Francisco to learn more about community partnerships.

- Keith Eddy, of Churches around Richmond Involved to Assure Shelter (CARITAS), has been a member of our advisory board, and has offered his agency for student placement on a continuing basis.

PROJECT EVALUATION

Linkages has used the evaluation process outlined in the original grant proposal, which included the gathering of faculty, student, and community feedback. At first, we simply counted activities. As the HPSISN project evaluation evolved, the evaluation expanded and we continually updated data in the table format required by the HPSISN project. The HPSISN evaluation requirements gently pressured us to create systems for data analysis and evaluation.

Evaluation Methods

Various methods have been used to gather data. Course faculty received an evaluation instrument developed by the SL coordinator. During the first year, end-of-semester data were collected informally from students. In the second year, the VCU Office of Community Programs (OCP) developed a formal instrument for students across the university to evaluate service-learning courses. Student logs and reflection activities also have served as data points.

More recently, a revised instrument was distributed to students and community partners, to assess the impact of student service activities upon their agencies and client population; the response rate of both groups was good. Periodic discussions with community partners also yield significant data. Formalizing community partner input will produce important information.

Focus Groups

Focus groups are a valuable data source, but only one has taken place thus far. A second one was canceled when only one participant could attend. Scheduling focus groups is a challenge because of multiple demands on community partners and the very mundane issue of there being a lack of parking on the campus. We are searching for a more accessible site at which to hold these groups. Initially, the SL coordinator was unfamiliar with focus groups, but she has worked with university experts to develop the needed skills.

PROJECT SUSTAINABILITY

The SL efforts of both campuses here at VCU have facilitated the Linkages project. Our work has been both supported by and supportive of the SL. Dr. Howard, director of the Office of Community Programs, is developing at the university. It is encouraging and helpful that service to the community and interdisciplinary work are included in the university's strategic plan. Although School of Nursing faculty and administration have talked of interdisciplinary teamwork, little has materialized. What has changed is the increase in the joint research efforts of

the Schools of Nursing and Medicine, and Dr. Binder's quiet, consistent interest in working with nursing and medical students. He has taught a nursing elective course for students twice, and the nursing faculty assembly recently formally approved it. The last step is for it to go through the University Curriculum Committee.

The SON Undergraduate Curriculum Committee has charged a subgroup to examine how students with service interests could link to faculty in their scholarship activities. The SON Department of Nursing Systems,

Community, and Psychiatric/Mental Health Nursing has just revised its departmental mission so that faculty and students will look at how various systems interface and how the concept of community can stimulate service as an ongoing health professional responsibility.

The teaching model in the SON has come under serious scrutiny recently. After much spirited discussion, the role of collateral (non-tenure) track faculty is emerging as a dynamic one, in which scholarship efforts can take directions that do not normally reward those in tenure tracks. Community service is one such direction.

The success of Linkages is due not only to the HPSISN grant, but also to the university's commitment to service-learning. The aid offered through the OCP created the nucleus of faculty from across campus who worked together to develop courses, identify community partners, and struggle with the issues of how students learn in communities. Linkages also sustained the development of university-wide evaluation. The support of colleagues has been vital to the growth of the program both within the SON and across the university.

The SL Associates Programs, established to ensure support for the outreach mission of VCU, will continue. Backed by the provost's office, these programs provide financial and peer support for faculty who wish to expand their work into the community. Their focus is somewhat different, but they do encourage service and teaching. This institutional support will continue, and the Linkages project will continue to recruit faculty into these programs. As the number of graduates of these programs grows, the institutionalization

of service-learning will be strengthened.

The other support has been the annual Service-Learning Institute for faculty and community. The first institute focused on educating faculty about service-learning; the second on institutionalization and curriculum-building; the third on instructional strategies, specifically reflection; and the fourth on research from SL. The institute will remain an integral part of VCU's commitment to service and learning.

The original goal of Linkages was to integrate SL into ongoing courses, and not to build a separate structure that would be hard to maintain. In large measure, we have been successful. Courses in the junior and senior years of the nursing programs now require service-learning experiences and have developed the community linkages to sustain these activities. The sophomore course continues to require additional assistance for the course faculty. It is a large class, and the course focuses on broad community service rather than community service through clinical experiences. It may be possible to maintain this with a teaching assistant.

The support of the provost's office is the major factor that will sustain the work of Linkages. The availability of the Service-Learning Associates Program and centralized support for evaluation will decrease the need for specifically designated school support structures. Service-learning is part of the five-year plan for VCU—it will be supported, evaluated, and reported.

The lasting impact of Linkages will be strong vital links to the community not only for the School of Nursing, but also for the entire university. Partnerships

will change, and faculty will modify their activities, but the institutional

commitment has been established.

LESSONS LEARNED

Demands on Faculty Time. An obstacle to the project's complete success has been the multiple demands of faculty in a research-intensive university, which can limit commitment to service. Teaching is one of three responsibilities (teaching, scholarship, and service) and faculty must integrate their work in order to be successful. Tenure track faculty are particularly challenged. Thus far, SL has been seen as a mechanism that can link two areas—teaching and service. Assisting faculty to link scholarship to SL in ways where measured outcomes hold value for the academy may eliminate this obstacle.

Lack of Interdisciplinary Work. The lack of interdisciplinary work on the academic campus also was an obstacle to Linkages' objectives. The observation made earlier, about the "parallel play" of faculty, is one to ponder for future work. "Interdisciplinary" is now a word in the university's strategic plan, which is useful for this project. Developmentally speaking, however, a reciprocal, collaborative model's success may come when all players are able to appreciate the delivery of interdisciplinary care—where, as Siegler and Whitney (1994) describe, the combination of perspectives makes for a unique service valued by everyone.

Go Beyond Promises. A good lesson to learn was to follow Farley's (1994) philosophical advice to "go beyond promises." Being available to help community partners and ensuring that students listen to what the partners need are responsibilities we as faculty assume.

We have shared our talents as advanced practice nurses, faculty, and policy specialists when needed. We have tried to participate in the social events and celebrations that community partners hold. Faculty and agency staff are all citizens of the Richmond community, and when we can meet at functions outside of a formal work setting, we learn more about each other and strengthen our partnerships.

We have worked with a core of agencies for several years now, and we have become familiar with them. In a small number of agencies, we have faculty, former faculty, or friends who work as a part of the agency staff. They serve as links for student learning and the agency mission. These relationships also strengthen the ties of community, school, and students. It is often through these relationships that we learn about the values of those partners.

Engage the Community Partners in Student Education. Farley also reminds us to focus on issues that matter. Student orientation to community agencies is one such issue. Initially, instead of asking the agencies to help in student orientation, we invited the United Way volunteer coordinator to speak to the students on "volunteer etiquette" in the community. Since community agencies are generally small, with staff who have multiple demands on their time, we were reluctant to ask community agency staff to work with students in addition to their agency work. As we have established a track record with successful student

experiences, the agencies have reciprocated with increasingly flexible orientation programs and pleasant student-staff relations. We would offer this experience as an important lesson: It was hard to ask for help, but in doing so, we advocated for our students and the agencies have worked to help the students have rewarding volunteer experiences.

The reflection component of SL assists students to see the demands placed on the community agencies, and not just their own learning needs. This has helped students be less judgmental in their evaluation of the community experience. Community agency staff and Linkages advisory board members serve as facilitators of the reflection sessions in the sophomore nursing course. They are able to bring community perspectives to students in the educational setting and assist students to see the perspectives of

others.

Collaborate with the Community. The project required a shift in attitude toward collaboration with the community; it forced us to relinquish some control over how we place students in the greater Richmond area community. This shift in thinking occurred when we approached the community to learn, not just to teach.

Allow Students to Choose their SL Activity. We also have allowed students to experience service-learning in agencies in which they have been active. This compels the students to shift their focus in order to achieve the course learning objectives. This may not necessarily build organizational links for SL, but it maximizes the student's impact as a health professional in the community. It also broadens the base for SL since it has been more popular with students than we had anticipated.

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APPENDIX

The Responses of Students to SL Experiences

Students learned through their SL activities the value of understanding different views of life and community. As one of the three research universities in the state, and one of two state teaching hospitals, tuition and other funding provide modern classrooms, tidy hospital units and high-tech emergency room services. However, as SL has shown us, education outside the university boundaries can be priceless.

Two white students—Katy, who worked in an agency that provides parenting classes for teenage mothers, and Rosalind, who worked as a mentor for a teenage mother—both talked about how their SL activities placed them in the “color minority” for the first time. They discussed their own anxieties at wanting to be liked by the black groups in which they worked. They wanted the teen mothers to have the same advantages they enjoyed. They talked about the teens’ poverty, their broken appointments, and the violence that was a frequent part of the teens’ lives. Katy and Rosalind both questioned whether

they actually helped, but both commented on learning about a culture different than theirs.

Each year of the project a group of students worked for Habitat for Humanity, and they seemed to catch the spirit of HFH wholeheartedly. They expressed joy for the family who would be the owner of the house, and they loved the feeling of teamwork that emerged in the very concrete job of house building. They were proud of all the tasks they accomplished. Teddy summed it up: “Every little job counts and there are lots of little jobs that have to be done.” One of the site supervisors, Barry, won the admiration of each student, as seen in their logs. This man had given up his job as a professional house builder to work for HFH. Kelly asked him why he did this, and he said he was “tired of working with other professionals who griped and complained about what they were doing.” Tina said that Barry “looked at every one of us like we each had something to donate to this house.”