

Reflective Piece:
The Value of Service Learning: Preparedness for the Future

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CORE 589.02

The Value of Service Learning: Preparedness for the Future

As a transfer student, I've had the opportunity to experience what other programs have to offer. While it is not unusual to find programs that offer practicum component at the College level, it is rare to find a university-level education that appreciates the value of service learning through a practicum setting. The Community Rehabilitation and Disability Studies program at the University of Calgary does just that.

With three levels of practica integrated in the 4-year program, students are presented with the opportunity to gain experience in the workplace and connect with their community while working on exciting projects and learning about areas of the field that interest them. Students learn skills grounded in theory, and are able to apply them directly in practice. They have a chance to get their feet wet in the working world, and are able to expand their skills and working knowledge of different occupations through practice. They learn to connect theory learned in class to the real life experiences they apply to, expanding their resumes and their perspectives.

Students learn that while their practicums require time, energy and a dedication to the work they are doing, practica are a fun way for students to build networking skills with professionals while developing a deep appreciation for the work that professionals do in their community, often proving to be the highpoint of their education. Students gain confidence as well as course content, practical skills,

and experience in the professional field, giving them an added experience and familiarity with professional working environments that many other undergraduates have not had the opportunity to hone during their studies. Through their experience and coursework, students emerge from the program as critical thinkers who are prepared and experienced in the field, equipped with the tools they need to be an asset to the working field. Students acquire values at their placements that they will keep for future experiences in the workplace and educational learning settings. Students learn respect for themselves and others, including all opinions and ways of life. They learn to be punctual and professional, respecting policies and procedures and putting in maximum effort to task completion. Additionally, they learn to ask questions and become self-initiating learners, essentially valuing the learning potential available from the practicum experiences beyond that of an assigned grade.

As the field has such a great component of human interaction, it is essential that that human element be incorporated into education and training. Each practicum offers its own unique learning experience and students are encouraged to explore different sectors of the field to help them decide where they would like to pursue a career after graduation. They are offered the opportunity to work with professionals in the field who recognize the value of trained professionals who will be entering the disability and rehabilitation sectors in the future. Students learn how to apply skills learned in the classroom and gain a deeper understanding of course content through practice. They are both challenged and rewarded with their

practicum experience as they develop “real world” skills to help them prepare for after graduation.

Through learning with an interdisciplinary team in a professional setting, students learn different techniques and strategies that will help them develop their own style in the workplace. Moreover, students have the opportunity for personal development and often find that their practicum is the place where they develop their values, beliefs, and attitudes, by which to guide their personal practice in the field. In fact, this is an aspect of learning that the program encourages by asking students to develop personal goals at the beginning of each semester, and reviewing them at the mid term mark and again at the end of the semester with their practicum supervisor to see what they have accomplished. This helps gain confidence in their own skills and they are able to see how far they have come during their practicum term. They are able to develop and practice leadership skills, independent learning, and teambuilding skills, while learning practical skills that apply to their position at practicum. The practicum component works in conjunction with course work and interesting lecture material to offer proper training and experience that traditional university courses may not allow.

Accommodating staff help tailor the learning experience, helping students decide which practicum setting is best for you through their knowledge of community resources and longstanding relationships with professionals in the field. The Community Rehabilitation and Disability Studies program offers practicums at

some of the most well-respected organizations in Calgary and area, including inclusive education settings, vocational placements with adults, development of case histories and rehabilitation plans, day programs for seniors with dementia, and agencies developing new programming for community supports. Students are able to mold their education to reflect their interests and try out new and interesting areas of the field. They can work directly to their own strengths and learn to develop skills in their weaker areas. Staff ensure that students are supported and safe at all times during their practicum, while pushing them to explore new avenues and grow as individuals.

Students also have the opportunity to give back to their community through completion of a research project in their final practicum. This acts not only as a learning opportunity for the students, but also as a practical contribution to the organizations they have worked with, many of which become valued tools for both clients and professionals alike. It fosters community building and self advocacy while enhancing the student's appreciation for the work that professionals do for their community on a regular basis.

One such program, the Peer Mentoring internship, is offered at in the CRDS program and is available as a yearlong practicum option. The peer mentoring program offers senior students the chance to share their own knowledge and advice for success in the program by mentoring one of the junior level courses. Students learn more about the role of educators by managing students practicums,

developing tutorials and tutorial assignments, and grading the assignments as a part of their own final practicum component. In turn, they are able to give back to the program and the students by divulging their own tips for success, developing tools and assignments as a part of a professional team, and developing a tool for those involved in the program in the future, such as a peer mentor handbook with suggestions and advice on the peer mentoring experience, or suggested materials to augment course content. This type of service allows the CRDS program at the University of Calgary strives to stay current in their knowledge offered, constantly innovating and augmenting course material. Students are taught throughout the program how essential it is to come full circle and give back to the program through enrichment of its courses and services. Additionally many of these projects can introduce students to research development and data collection, which may help prepare them for graduate studies if they choose to continue their post-graduate education. In any case, the practicum component in the CRDS program offers maximum learning potential that truly puts the student in control of designing their path. It is a program that fits you and your desires for education that is both thorough and current while individualized in nature.