

Community Outreach— Benefiting both Town and Gown

I run a K–12 international outreach program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel-Hill (UNC) called Carolina Navigators. The program aims to enrich the education of both UNC and K–12 students through engaged international learning. We provide cultural resources and interactive classroom presentations by North Carolina students who have international expertise. This guest speaker program is highly successful, serving 15,154 K–12 students with 523 presentations last year alone. In the past five years, we have strengthened the program by building a presenter training program, a service-learning class for students, and a resource library of cultural artifacts. Teachers give us great feedback, students love going to the schools, and our volume of requests for school visits grows larger each year.

The whole community benefits if children are getting excited about global learning, engaged in their classrooms, and motivated to continue learning. And all this comes to the schools without it costing an additional dime to the local community. A university with a good reputation in the community becomes a community asset rather than a drain.

Yet, despite all of this, the value of such outreach programs is still habitually called into question. Are these programs actually teaching kids anything? How do these programs benefit the university's mission? What results can we really expect from an outreach program for K–12 kids? What returns does the university and its constituents receive from this investment?

I see the value of these programs very clearly. They may not be major contributors to the standard university and faculty goals of academic research or scholarly publications, but they benefit our stakeholders nonetheless and in ways that may not be apparent at first glance.

For example, Carolina Navigators is aligned with two of UNC's top priorities: internationalization and community engagement, two priorities that have also been added to the agendas of many other institutions in recent years. K–12 outreach programs easily lend themselves to the campus conversation on internationalization. For instance, the mission of the Carolina Navigators program is to prepare *all* North Carolina students to become informed and effective members of our global community. In the past this program was primarily thought to focus this preparation for global citizenship on the K–12 population. However, we are now realizing that our own university students are receiving a lion's share of the benefit. The program encourages discussion and reflection among our presenters on their level of cultural awareness, language

ability, and knowledge of current world events. The affiliated service-learning class delves deeper into these topics and causes students to question their perceived level of intercultural understanding while working on building their skills and critically analyzing their experiences. Students have the opportunity to incorporate real-world, hands-on learning from outside the classroom with intercultural communication and education theory discussed in class. The program is part of a global experience we want every Carolina student to have.

The most obvious benefit of outreach programs is also one of the most discounted: community engagement and town-gown relations. Too often, locals come to think of universities as property-hogging, traffic-causing, money-wasting institutions that are gobbling up tax-payer dollars with little return on the investment and not so much as a thank-you card to boot. In the eyes of the local community, the university becomes "holier than thou" with their academic arguments and omnipresent know-how over community concerns. It can be easy for the locals to come to believe that the university thinks that without its help the town would surely be stuck doing things backwards for eternity.

So, what better way to give back some of those tax payer dollars than by reinvesting them in the public schools? K–12 international outreach programs offer a tangible way for the community to receive benefits by sending university students into classrooms that have requested a guest speaker from a particular



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country or on a specific international topic. K–12 students get exposed to the idea of going to college, learning another language, and perhaps traveling or studying abroad one day. They benefit from mingling with international students and interacting with diverse populations in an educational and informative setting. The teachers benefit by receiving a guest who can provide some additional expertise on the subject being taught, taking the burden off already overwhelmed teachers to know everything about every area of the world. In fact, with the lack of global education in the pre-service training that teachers receive from our schools of education, it unreasonable to expect them to have any global knowledge.

The whole community benefits if children are getting excited about global learning, engaged in their classrooms, and motivated to continue learning. And all this comes to the schools without it costing an additional dime to the local community. A university with a good reputation in the community becomes a community asset rather than a drain. Programs that provide tangible impacts that can be quantified through numbers and visualized through pictures and stories are an important way for the community to see state allocations at work.

Academically, offering an opportunity for community service to university students benefits the university. By becoming guest speakers, the students develop skills and experience personal growth, which helps the university churn out a better end-product.

It gives returning education abroad students a chance to reflect on their experiences and make sense of their trip. Some universities are very lacking when it comes to helping students with reentry transition and figuring out the point of their time abroad. What exactly did they learn? What can they take away from the experience? How has their world view changed? How has their sense of self as an American been altered?

Having an outreach program in which students reflect on their experiences in order to design a presentation appropriate for K–12 students helps the returning university students take this much needed step in

completing their education abroad journey. What stereotypes did they have of the country and people before their trip? How was this image altered during their stay? What are the similarities and differences between cultures? How can I best explain my experience as a guest speaker? How will I engage my audience and interact with them to share the knowledge I gained? The university students learn as much about themselves, their experiences, and how to teach and develop their public speaking skills as they are share their experiences with the K–12 students.

Indeed the naming of these programs as “outreach” is a misnomer. The helping

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hand reaching out is not limited to a one-way stretch. What we're taking about is really "engagement." Arms on both sides are extending in giving. The learning in this engagement equation is happening through the interaction. It takes parties on all sides to make it happen, and the rewards produced are equally distributed.

Returning education abroad students are not the only student constituency reaping rewards. International students also stand to gain by their participation. For many, the opportunity to visit a "real" community and K-12 school outside university walls is a great way to obtain exposure to the real United States they have come to explore. During classroom visits, international students have the chance to be the expert, to feel competent, and to put forward the image of their country that is not warped by media representations or stereotypes. They can build confidence in their English skills and overcome the natural fears of public speaking in a second language—a wonderful skill for twenty-first century graduates.

Building a Toolkit for Evaluation

What about those twenty-first century skills we hear so much about? The NC Center for International Understanding has identified four global competencies for future-ready students: cultural awareness, awareness of world events and global dynamics, effective communication skills across cultures, and the ability to work as collaborative members on multicultural teams. I would argue that our K-12 programs are one resource that helps students reach these goals.

To bolster our claims to success beyond the anecdotal, the Center for Global Initiatives at UNC proposed a grant that was accepted by the U.S. Department of Education to examine how effective K-12 international outreach programs are. As an end result of the three-year project, we devised an evaluation toolkit to allow program coordinators to collect evidence of learning from the programs and investigate ways to improve presentations in the future. Included in the toolkit, an evaluation manual provides step-by-step

instruction on performing proper program evaluations, and database templates help to improve administrative organization and provide quantifiable data. This evaluation toolkit is available free of charge and accessible online at <http://gi.unc.edu/research/k-12-toolkit/index.html>.

Using this toolkit, our program was able to determine that over two-thirds of third through twelfth grade students sampled reported they had been influenced by the presentation they received. The students were encouraged in their desire to continue learning, to learn a language or help others learn a language (15.84 percent), to travel (14.85 percent), to be open-minded or change their perspective (9.90 percent), and to increase their knowledge and awareness of an issue (6.93 percent). Others commented on the positive affect they felt by simply having someone from the university or another country take the time to visit them (4.95 percent).

When teachers were asked how they directly benefited from the presentations, they responded with general appreciation and positive feelings directed toward the program and the university (35.29 percent). Many commented on new ideas or inspirations for teaching as a result (26.47 percent), indicated that they had personally learned information from the presentation (23.53 percent), and were encouraged to travel more and continue learning about the culture or country presented (14.71 percent).

Carolina student presenters also reported many benefits to participation in our outreach program. Benefits cited included developing public speaking or teaching skills (20.63 percent), enjoyment from interacting with kids (17.46 percent), developing skills to work better with kids (14.29 percent), learning about U.S. culture and schools (9.52 percent), satisfaction from teaching kids (9.52 percent), the opportunity to share their experiences (9.52

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percent), raising awareness about issues they find important (7.94 percent), general positive experiences (6.35 percent), and financial gain (3.17 percent). More information is accessible in our program's full evaluation report available on the program Web site (<http://cgi.unc.edu/programs/k-12-program/program-evaluation.html>).

Answering the Critics

In spite of this evidence, there is still the prevailing argument from the nay-sayers who believe that a one-time guest speaker visit from such outreach programs does nothing to permanently affect the world

view or international education of K-16 students. I would counter that the first seed of international education and developing global competencies for a twenty-first century work force must be planted somewhere, and programs such as these are a great start for sparking student interest and motivation. It is up to the teachers, parents, communities, and universities to continue the learning cycle and provide opportunities for future growth and development in this area.

But perhaps the critics have a point. If we could provide more substantial outreach involving continued engagement with classrooms beyond a one-time visit, it is conceivable that more substantial, measurable learning could occur. Instead of a presenter making only one visit to a classroom, perhaps he or she could visit with the class once a month to share on a variety of cultural topics, delve below the surface of the topics, answer latent questions, and develop a relationship with the students. We are currently working on ways to offer multiple classroom visits to teachers that meet their required curriculum and match the time restrictions of both the presenters and schools.

Since completing our program evaluation, we have also found service-learning to be an effective way to build program capacity and

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enhance international learning for both K–12 and university students. One example is a course I am teaching through our curriculum in international and area studies called “Intercultural Education in K–12 Classrooms.” It was designed to fill the needs of returned study abroad and international students who are continuing to explore their sojourning experiences and are interested in continuing the development of their intercultural communication skills while also learning how international education is accomplished in North Carolina schools. We examine case studies of schools that are doing extraordinary things and do our part to add to the available resources for schools by contributing service hours to the Carolina Navigators program. The class allows for better, more thoughtful presenters and for university students who have really used their study abroad or international experience both to their benefit and the benefit of the community.

The next step is allowing pre-service teachers the flexibility in their course schedules to study abroad and take a reflective class such as this one to make the most of their overseas learning to make sure the experiences are incorporated positively into their world view and brought to the forefront during their lesson planning. What if all teachers were required to have an international experience and bring their knowledge from these experiences into K–12 classrooms? What an enriching, amplified impact this could have on our future global leaders.

Even though K–12 outreach programs may often be positioned at the bottom of the totem pole when it comes to recognized university priorities and funding allocations, I still find the work to be meaningful, the power for impact strong, and the rewards great. **IE**

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