

# Libraries

## *Partners in Linking College Students and Their Communities Through Service Learning*

*With decreased funding and personnel reductions in many libraries across the United States, local librarians are searching for innovative methods to create sustainable partnerships in the community. Using Mississippi State University's Day One Leadership Community as a case study, this article illustrates how service-learning provides a dynamic connection between a public library and a local university. Establishing such a partnership proved beneficial for student learning, helpful in accomplishing projects in a local library, and through the resulting publicity provided greater interest in and access to library materials for the local community. Program components, personal experiences, and ideas for program replication are shared.*

**H**igher education institutions are often described as ivory towers because their work is conducted away from what is happening in their local environments. Students who attend these institutions of higher learning are kept busy with academic coursework and may have neither time nor opportunity to learn about the surrounding community in which they live. This being the case, some students may graduate from college with a lack of understanding of the greater world they inhabit or even a failure to appreciate the local community.

Administrators within higher education institutions are seeking ways to link students with their local communities. Some students, including the majority of first-year students coming to campus, are more civically involved than their predecessors. The Corporation for National and Community Service found that "the number of college students volunteering grew by nearly 600,000 from 2.7 million in 2002 to 3.3 million in 2005."<sup>1</sup> These incoming students are more likely to continue community service activities when given opportunities to do so in their classes or via university-sponsored activities. Service-learning provides a link between community needs and academic objectives. Survey data from the Corporation for National and Community Service indicates that the creation of service-learning projects is on the rise. In fact, "at least a quarter of all higher education institutions and more than half of all community colleges have adopted service-learning programs."<sup>2</sup>

A number of researchers have shown that service-learning is beneficial for college students both in the short and the long term.<sup>3</sup> Students who participate in service-learning may reap many benefits including enhanced personal skills, increased awareness of global issues, and motivation to learn.<sup>4</sup>

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Astin, Sax, and Avalos found that these short-term effects of service became long-term effects that continue to benefit students as much as nine years after the service has been conducted.<sup>5</sup> Further, a study conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) in 2000 confirmed these findings and added that service-learning particularly benefits students when conducted as part of an academic course that includes reflection of some type.<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, service-learning creates connections between the “ivory towers” of higher education and the surrounding community.

Additional research has been conducted comparing students who take service-learning courses with those who do not.<sup>7</sup> Armstrong compared various types of service-learning, including service-learning linked to an academic course, service-learning as part of an alternative spring break trip, cocurricular service-learning, and a control group of students who did not participate in service-learning. From the study, Armstrong determined that there were different effects on the students’ psychosocial development. Of note were the students who participated in the more intensive service-learning experience of the spring break activity—they exhibited greater increases in psychosocial development as compared with the other types of service-learning experiences and the control group.

Armstrong’s study in particular gave way to understanding that students who are participating in an intensive program have more intimate relationships with the community and are truly engaged in the experience. The students in the academic service-learning courses may not have exhibited increases in psychosocial development because some faculty members may have only included the community service experience within their syllabus and not truly incorporated it into the course with reflection and opportunities to engage the students in class. Across all types of service-learning experiences, it was determined that there is great importance in student reflection.

Critical reflection provides students

with opportunities to question their beliefs about the world and its cultures, communities, and peoples. It allows students in service-learning courses to focus on their community-service experience and relate it to what is being learned in context of their course objectives. The HERI study supported the idea that students must be given an opportunity to make connections between their service experiences and their academic coursework. Astin stated that although he had assumptions that students would reflect on their experiences and make connections to course material, it takes faculty members to assist in helping the students make those connections.<sup>8</sup>

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## SERVICE-LEARNING AND THE COMMUNITY

Service-learning provides students with a greater understanding of their local communities. To understand how this service affects students, there is a need to define the term *service-learning*. Service-learning is a teaching and learning method that combines community service with academic instruction as it focuses on critical, reflective thinking and civic responsibility. Service-learning programs involve students in organized community service that addresses local needs while developing the student’s academic skills and community commitment. As the students participate in the service experience, it is through service-learning that they are provided with an opportunity to connect their service with what they are learning in the classroom. Through service-learning students critically reflect, discuss, and create links between their personal lives and the world around them.<sup>9</sup>

Boyer illustrates the connection between service and learning: “Service is concerned with helping others but above all it is concerned with improved learning.”<sup>10</sup> Moreover, Rhoads and Neururer state that “learning cannot occur without a social dimension.”<sup>11</sup> The act of giving service is a social experience through which students formulate and shape their identities.<sup>12</sup> As a result,

service-learning programs provide students with opportunities to exhibit critical thinking and to participate in activities that promote civic engagement.<sup>13</sup>

Academicians within higher education institutions need to find ways to engage the community in order to nurture and educate their students.<sup>14</sup> Service-learning is one way to benefit both students and the community. As students develop projects that address local needs, community agencies gain the opportunity to participate in an educational partnership. Presenting students with service-learning experiences provides a community with substantial human resources to meet educational, human, and environmental needs. Service-learning also benefits faculty as it enriches and enlivens classroom teaching. As faculty engage the community with the curriculum, they become more aware of current societal issues and relate these to areas of academic interest.

When considering the use of service-learning, faculty must also address some of the challenges with the use of this teaching pedagogy. Some faculty members feel that employing service-learning may be too time-consuming, thus not providing them enough time to fulfill their other duties. Along with the lack of time comes a lack of funding to design service-learning curriculum. Faculty members also have felt the lack of consideration given to service-learning as scholarly work, especially when related to tenure pursuits.<sup>15</sup> However, Kezar and Rhoads argue that service-learning should be considered as a pedagogy that incorporates all three areas of a university mission, including teaching, research, and service, and should be considered as such.<sup>16</sup> Not only have faculty felt some of the challenges to service-learning, but the community may struggle as well if service-learning is not employed correctly.

Community partners have indicated that in some instances, uninformed students can do more harm than good in service-learning projects. For example, some students may take on a superior attitude informing the community that they are in charge and therefore know what’s best.<sup>17</sup> This lack of understanding

may lead the student to believe that entire communities are deficient and require outside assistance to solve their problems. Moreover, students may enter communities very different from their own and may reflect racism in ways that may be dangerous.<sup>18</sup> Students may also become too personally involved with those they serve, leading to harmful relationships.<sup>19</sup> Accordingly, it takes both a community partner who can provide students with guidance and learning experiences and a faculty member who is willing to take the time to teach the students about how to make connections between their work in the classroom and their work in the community to make service-learning effective.

In connecting the on- and off-campus communities, higher education administrators need to start with their newest members: the freshmen. There is an immediate desire to connect these students with the institution because the more a student feels a sense of belonging, the greater the chance he or she will remain until graduation.<sup>20</sup> Ways in which colleges and universities assist first-year students in making these connections include a variety of ideas such as the participation in living-learning communities, offering first-year experience (FYE) courses, and creating opportunities for involvement in service-learning.

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## SERVICE-LEARNING AND LIBRARIES

Literature on the relationship between service-learning and libraries has proliferated in recent years, with a number of leaders in the field calling for graduate-level programs in library information and science (LIS) to renew their activities in civic education.<sup>21</sup> It has also been suggested that academic libraries play a more central role in providing service-learning opportunities in their communities.<sup>22</sup> A number of LIS programs have developed a service-learning component for their curricula over the past two decades, believing it to be an important part of librarianship. Specific service-learning projects have

included LIS students at the University of Denver working with the library in a center for gifted children to better organize and display their materials, students in a multimedia/user education class at the University of Iowa working with public libraries in the state on Web design projects, and the work of the Jail Library Group at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, which consists of LIS students who provide educational, recreational, and community resource reading materials to the residents of jail facilities in the state.<sup>23</sup>

LIS departments and their students have been involved with a variety of service-learning projects at their own academic libraries.<sup>24</sup> While such service-learning programs have proven beneficial to LIS departments, their students, and libraries, less has been seen in the literature in regards to service-learning programs providing assistance to public libraries in areas without a nearby LIS department. Instead of service-learning programs, some of these libraries have established volunteer programs in their communities and recruited teenage volunteers through high schools, junior high schools, churches, and scouting organizations. Local judicial systems have also been a source of library volunteers, primarily through court-mandated community service. Volunteers have assisted in tasks such as shelving books, reading to patrons, organizing and processing library materials, creating displays, and assisting patrons with using library computers.<sup>25</sup> While these volunteer programs have benefited a number of libraries, the development of additional methods and resources may be helpful to better link service-learning to public libraries at the local level.

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## THE DAY ONE LEADERSHIP COMMUNITY

The need to unite first-year students with their surrounding community fueled the creation of a first-year leadership experience at Mississippi State University (MSU). MSU is a land-grant institution situated in a small southeastern town of 25,000 residents. The uni-

versity enrolls approximately 17,000 students, including 75 percent undergraduate students.<sup>26</sup> Sixty-eight percent of MSU students are white and 19 percent are African American. All other ethnicities make up less than 1 percent of the student populous. The number of freshman students attending MSU during the 2007 fall semester was 3,164.<sup>27</sup>

In 2006, realizing that the first year of college is a critical developmental point for emerging leaders, MSU President Robert “Doc” Foglesong enlisted faculty members in creating a first-year leadership living-learning community called Day One. President Foglesong wanted to build the character and leadership skills of MSU students, and planned to have MSU function as a beacon in attracting and developing leaders throughout Mississippi and the nation. The Day One program accepted 225 students in its inaugural year, with plans to accept 300 in 2008.

The Day One Leadership Community is a semester-long, first-year experience program that requires students to live together in the same residence hall, attend at least one coenrolled general education course with other Day One students, and take Global Leadership Continuum (GLC) 1002: Day One Leadership Community, a leadership class that has a foundational service-learning component. During the 2007 fall semester, the two-credit class met twice a week. Once a week, the students met as an entire 200+ member community and were taught about leadership from four professors from three academic colleges. In the second class meeting of the week, students met in smaller groups of 24 to 28 students called “pods.” Each pod was directed by a faculty or staff member called a Day One Fellow and three additional faculty or staff members called Action Team Leaders (ATLs).

Because pods of students were too large to take into one community service-learning site on a weekly basis, each pod was divided into “action teams” consisting of 6 to 7 students (see figure 1). Each action team was led by an ATL and was assigned a

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service-learning theme and a community partner with whom to participate. Further, as a part of the course, each action team had to create a sustainable service-learning (or “legacy”) project to give to their community partner at the end of the semester in order to continue the partnership between the university and the community partner.

### CREATING THE LIBRARY-MSU PARTNERSHIP

Service-learning in the Day One Leadership Community included linking action teams with community partners and ATLS. As MSU did not have a service-learning center, a member of the Day One team, April Heiselt, took on the role of Day One Service-Learning Coordinator. Heiselt visited with more

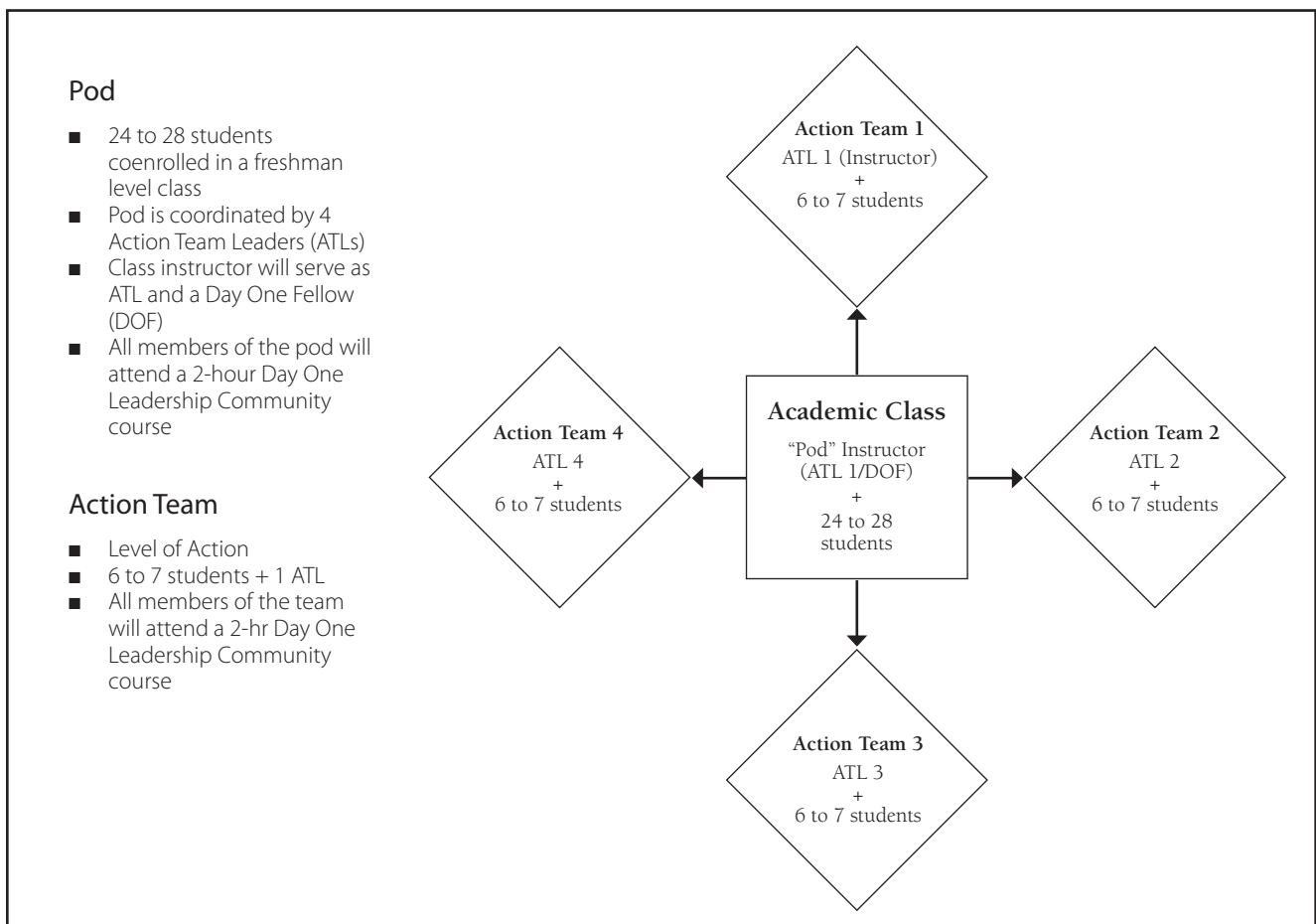
than fifty community agencies about partnering with the Day One program. While several of these agencies could not partner with the Day One program because of limited staff or limited hours of operation, many desired a connection with MSU and decided to commit to being a community partner.

In her discussions with community agencies, Heiselt was looking for groups that could use extra volunteers, groups that could provide rich, detailed ideas for projects, and groups that would provide the Day One students with a positive learning experience. She specifically targeted the Starkville Public Library because she felt that it would make an excellent community partner for first-year students. She illustrates:

Helping students learn about their local community through

the library’s Annex services provided an opportunity to assist students in learning about the city in a very unique way. Getting students excited now about library services at this early stage in their lives will ideally plant a seed, and perhaps develop a desire in these students to use library facilities both now and in the future.

Heiselt spoke with Carolyn Reed, the Christopher Randolph Stark and Annie Reynolds Stark Annex (Stark Annex) librarian, to discuss the creation of a Day One service-learning project. Both Reed and her colleague Perian Kerr were thrilled to have the Day One students work in the library because they felt it was a good way for freshmen to gain a greater interest in history—



**Figure 1.** Breakdown of Day One Leadership Community Pod. Figure credited to the Day One Team: Dr. Cade Smith, Dr. Allison Pearson, Dr. Melissa Moore, and Dr. April Heiselt



both their own family and the history of their local community.

Reed shared with Heiselt several projects in which the Day One students could participate. Assured that the project and community partner were in place, Heiselt then found the right ATL to work with the assigned Day One action team. Heiselt chose Bob Wolverton Jr. as the ATL to work with the Starkville Public Library because he had extensive library experience (via his current position at the MSU Mitchell Memorial Library), was an avid supporter of students, and saw the potential a college-library partnership could offer.

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## THE LIBRARY TO CAMPUS CONNECTION

Once invited to serve as an ATL for the Day One program, Wolverton attended a Day One orientation meeting for ATLs. During the meeting, the objectives of Day One were discussed in detail by Heiselt and her colleagues. A week later, community partners and ATLs were invited to a kick-off luncheon to meet each other and learn more about the Day One program. During the luncheon Wolverton met briefly with Reed and Kerr from the Starkville Public Library, and a planning meeting was set to discuss in more detail the work in which the Day One students would participate at the library.

During the planning meeting, Reed talked about the needs of her unit, the Stark Annex. The Stark Annex provides extensive information about the history of Starkville and the Oktibbeha County area as well as genealogical information on area residents. Because there is only one staff member to assist Reed, it is difficult to keep up with organizing and displaying the historical information so library patrons can easily access these resources. While many materials in the collection had been organized for public accessibility, there was a backlog of additional information that needed attention.

Reed was enthusiastic about the prospect of having Day One students assist her unit in their work, and she outlined projects involving preserva-

tion, research, and public relations for them. In the preservation component, students would work with obituary notices in newspapers that had been kept in shoeboxes and donated to the library; perform scrapbook maintenance, which would involve inter-leaving with acid-free paper, copying newspaper entries, extracting names, and documenting contents; and photocopy local high school newspapers from the 1930s and 50s. In the research component, students would locate and photocopy historical articles and research academic theses and dissertations held by the MSU Libraries that dealt with individuals, times, or places in Oktibbeha County. The extraction and indexing part of the project would involve students locating names and dates in early high school yearbooks and finding births, marriages, and deaths with page numbers from local newspapers. In the public relations part of the project, students would write articles for the city newspaper describing the work and materials in the Annex and how the librarians could assist them with their genealogical and historical research; write articles for the local newspaper geared to the young adult population that would generate interest in locating and documenting their own family history; create activities for children ages 8–12 that would help stimulate their interest in learning about their own family history; and create a display for the Stark Annex.

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## DAY ONE STUDENTS AND THEIR WORK AT THE STARK ANNEX

Six freshman students in the Day One program were assigned to work in the Stark Annex at the Starkville Public Library in the 2007 fall semester. An orientation meeting was held in August at the library with Kerr, Wolverton, and the students. Following a presentation regarding the purpose of the Stark Annex and its materials, the students were told that they could work on the specific projects that interested them. A volunteer sign-in form was subsequently developed to record the dates, times, and projects the students worked

on during each visit. Reed and Kerr agreed to train the students in each task and monitor their progress.

As part of the Day One program, the students were asked to develop an action team name to reflect the work they would perform with their community partner. After much discussion, the team christened themselves as “Bully’s Bookworms” in honor of “Bully,” the MSU bulldog mascot. To fulfill part of the Day One course requirements, the students were to work in the Stark Annex for at least twenty hours during the semester. In addition, they were asked to post weekly personal reflections on their work experiences on the Day One website for review by Wolverton. They also contributed regularly to a team blog that was used to share information about their work experiences as well as photographs of them on the job.

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## DEVELOPING THE STARK ANNEX SERVICE-LEARNING PROJECT

In addition to their regular service-learning work in the Stark Annex over the course of the semester, the Day One students were also required to develop a service-learning project (also referred to as a legacy project) that would identify and address a specific issue relevant to the needs of the Stark Annex. The project was to be developed by the action team in consultation with the ATL and community partner and would ideally be of benefit to the Stark Annex beyond the semester’s worth of work done by the Day One students. Determining the legacy project proved to be challenging. The team wanted to develop a greater awareness of the Stark Annex materials among younger people and do it in a way that would encourage active use of Stark Annex resources. After much group discussion, the students decided to develop a historical essay contest for high school students in the Starkville/Oktibbeha County area that would have as a requirement the use of at least two resources housed in the Stark Annex. This contest required contestants to submit a typed, 3–5 page single-spaced report on a historical person, place,

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or event important to the Starkville/Oktibbeha County community. Readers interested in learning more details of the contest may contact the authors for specifics.

Once the decision was made to offer the historical essay contest, the Bully's Bookworms team had to determine the specifics and rewards of the contest. Because each Day One Action Team was given a budget of \$500 to use as needed over the course of the fall semester, the Bookworms decided to use \$400 for rewarding first place and second place contest winners, with the remaining \$100 devoted to publicizing the contest. Publicity efforts included working with area high schools to visit classes and give a brief overview of the contest, posting flyers with local businesses, placing an announcement about the contest on the public library's website and with the local newspaper, and running ads on local television announcement boards and radio stations.

The number of entries in the historical essay contest turned out lower than desired because of the late implementation of the contest. However, the judges were pleased with the overall quality of the essays that were submitted. All of the contest winners attended the Day One Showcase at the end of the fall semester, which showcased the work of each Day One team to the MSU and Starkville/Oktibbeha County community through table displays, work samples, videos, and photographs.

During the Day One Showcase, the historical essay contest winners and their parents met the Bully's Bookworms team and received their rewards and certificates of achievement.

Following the Day One Showcase event, the winning essays were put on display in the Stark Annex at the Starkville Public Library, where they will be accessible in the future as additional historical resources related to the Starkville/Oktibbeha County area.

### BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES OF THE PARTNERSHIP

The service-learning work performed by the Bully's Bookworms Day One

Action Team over the course of the fall semester proved to be highly successful. The students made measurable progress in organizing much of the information in the Stark Annex during their service-learning work hours. The information in the Stark Annex was better organized through the use of databases and spreadsheets. This organization and identification made information more accessible for library patrons. Reed was extremely pleased with the results of the students' work and expressed great interest in Day One students continuing to work at the library in the future. Additionally, the team's work on their Legacy Project resulted in local high school students learning about the Stark Annex and how to use the materials effectively as part of their research for the historical essay contest. Ultimately, the research done by the high school students became part of the Stark Annex collection, where the essays may prove useful to future patrons of the Starkville Public Library.

The Day One students illustrated what they learned through their work at the library via an online journal and blog. Each week, the students posted two reflections where they discussed their work at the library, the project, and other aspects of the first-year experience. The students also acknowledged their learning through the blog that they kept each week. The blogs were commented on by other Day One students, faculty, and staff members. The reflections were reviewed and commented upon by Wolverton.

Initially, some of the students did not understand the significance of the library or their work in the historical and genealogical section of the Stark Annex. This was illustrated in the reflections written by Action Team members like Jennifer ("At first I thought that our project would not be so important") and John ("I really don't see how obituaries relate to community service"). Wolverton used his responses to the student reflections as well as Action Team meetings to discuss the importance of the students' effort to the community. As a result, the students better understood the ultimate goal of their

work and how it could benefit library patrons. Sarah's comment illustrates:

I have realized how important it is to correctly document and index each and every single name, date, detail, etc. Every name that I type into that computer is a relative of someone who might be trying to research their family history. With that said, if I mess up just one little letter or phrase, I could skew someone's research attempts entirely. I am vowing to do my absolute best when it comes to documenting this vital information so that others will have easy and speedy access to the information that they seek.

Elizabeth also related her experience with Day One:

I didn't realize how important the library was to the community. My parents always took me there growing up, but it wasn't until now I understand why. Libraries hold a lot of important things for the community. My parents always referred it as the house of knowledge. Since it is sometimes the only place to find answers, then it is of importance that it is decent and in order. People constantly go to libraries to find not only books but family members, school records, and even long lost classmates.

Several of the students were so intrigued with their experience that they expressed the desire to explore their own family history as a result of having worked in the Stark Annex. Sarah commented, "I hate to admit it, but after working [at the library] Thursday, I wouldn't mind digging up some dirt concerning my own family history."

On a personal level, Reed noted that the students learned how to become valuable employees because they had to follow directions, complete work competently, and behave in a professional manner. She was impressed by the way these students were willing to "sacrifice

for the good of the whole rather than just for their own benefit.” In fact, a number of the students mentioned that they would like to volunteer their time to the Stark Annex in the future in order to continue the work they had started.

There are benefits and challenges to every new project, and this project was no exception. At a follow-up interview with Reed, Kerr, and Wolverton, it was determined that the Day One students took too long to create the idea for their service-learning project. This challenge can easily be overcome by assisting the students in ideas for their project prior to the start of the project itself. If the essay contest idea had been suggested earlier in the semester, the students would have had additional time for contest publicity. Another challenge was the consistency of student volunteer hours. College students have hectic schedules. This challenge can be overcome by having the students create a regular volunteer schedule to be kept by both the library and the college student. Sometimes too many choices can prove difficult. Students also had a difficult time sharing their thoughts on the types of work they would like to assist with at the library. To overcome this challenge, providing students with a few projects rather than many can make things a bit less confusing. Despite the challenges, Reed said, “The Day One students are like the ‘Cadillac’ of volunteers because of their computer experience and knowledge. We would gratefully welcome more students next year.” During the 2008 fall semester, two action teams of Day One students will work in the library. One team will work with the Stark Annex, and the other team will work in the children and youth services area of the library.

### CREATING A SERVICE-LEARNING PARTNERSHIP

There are a variety of programs that are similar to the Day One program on college campuses nationwide. Should a librarian want to create a service-learning partnership between a library and students from a nearby university or high-school, the following issues

should be explored. Librarians should determine the goals to be accomplished in their library. For example, are there certain tasks in which a group of freshman students could assist? What types of projects could you identify to make this partnership a success? Once you have your goals in mind and specific tasks outlined, there would need to be a willing coordinator to meet with college or university officials regarding service-learning opportunities.

Service-learning is evident in K–12 settings as well as community colleges and universities, so there are a variety of paths to explore in regard to finding a potential partnership. Within a university, for example, there may be a service-learning center, or perhaps there are faculty or student affairs staff who have created service-learning projects in which you could connect. These projects are often posted on university websites.

Not only are colleges and universities good places to look when thinking about developing partnerships, but high schools should also be explored. Nationwide, several high schools have teachers who require community service hours for their classes.<sup>28</sup> While this community service may not be service-learning per se, it does provide the beginnings of a potential partnership that may lead to service-learning in the future. Additionally, many high schools now require a community service component in order for students to graduate.<sup>29</sup> Contacting local high school principals could begin the dialogue for potential partnerships. Finally, flexibility and tenacity are important to creating educational partnerships. If at first you do not succeed with your partnership, try, try, again. It can take time to find the right partnership.

### CONCLUSION

With many libraries facing reductions in budgets and personnel, the Day One model of service-learning represents an approach that might be successfully adapted in a number of settings. Formal or informal programs of service to local public libraries could be established,

making use of students in community colleges, colleges, universities, or high schools. Additional research regarding service-learning and libraries needs to be conducted to help further understand the links that can be made between our libraries and universities. Public libraries are an essential part of any community, and innovative ways to sustain their services and foster growth must be explored to help ensure their survival. The Day One Leadership Community program represents one such approach, with the library, university students, and the community all reaping the benefits as a result.

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