

Beyond the Screen: Service-Learning in WSU Global Human Development Course



WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY

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BACKGROUND

Human Development 403, Families in Poverty, is a WSU Global Campus course that includes a service-learning component. Service-learning connects students to real-world experiences through partnerships with community organizations addressing poverty-related challenges. The service-learning component is coordinated through the **Center for Civic Engagement (CCE)**, which supports community partnerships, assists students in identifying volunteer opportunities within their local communities, and provides materials for critical reflection throughout the learning process. Service-learning has been identified as an effective approach for promoting learning, retention, and student connection to course content, even in virtual learning environments (Bowe et al., 2023; Brunson-Pitt, 2021; Sweet et al., 2023). Research also suggests that community-engaged learning strengthens students' sense of belonging and academic persistence, particularly in nontraditional learning settings (Ho et al., 2025; York & Fernandez, 2018).

CREATIVE ACTIVITY AND PURPOSE

In Global HD 403, Families in Poverty, students engage in service-learning by designing and producing creative deliverables—such as infographics, community resource guides, outreach materials, and program support tools—based on what they observed and learned through their volunteering experience and from the input of community partners on their needs and goals. These projects give students the opportunity to apply course concepts on family systems, structural inequality, and community support networks while providing practical resources to community organizations and enhancing applied learning in human development. These student-created resources form the creative component of the course by linking theory, practice, and applied problem-solving. Service-learning has been shown to enhance student engagement, retention, and civic development by promoting experiential learning and the active application of knowledge (Astin & Sax, 1998; Brunson-Pitt, 2021; Kuh, 2008).

METHODS

Students engage in 10 hours of volunteer projects of their choice in their local communities and online that addresses issues such as food insecurity, housing instability, and access to essential resources. As a final reflection assignment, students develop an infographic linking course concepts and what they learned through their volunteering to promote the organization's goals, services, or community impact.

Students explore how course concepts relate to systemic issues they witnessed through their volunteering that affect families experiencing poverty. This process helps them critically connect their experiences with what they are learning in class. Throughout the learning process, the Center for Civic Engagement provides ongoing logistical, instructional, and partnership support to students, faculty, and community partners so that all groups feel connected and successful.

OUTCOMES

Through the thoughtful inclusion of service-learning, students develop professional skills, confidence, communication, critical thinking, and gain a deeper understanding of poverty and family systems. Community partners benefit from practical resources, expanded outreach, and stronger connections with the university. Including service-learning in online courses is important because it fosters a sense of connection to peers and the local community, enhancing engagement and belonging. The discipline gains evidence that creative service-learning projects can effectively link theory and practice, even in online learning environments.

PROBLEMS ADDRESSED

Online courses often limit opportunities for students to apply theory to real-world contexts. Without thoughtful service-learning and reflection, students may struggle to understand societal challenges, clarify their values, develop professional and soft skills, and gain confidence to take meaningful action after graduation. Service-learning addresses these gaps by letting students apply academic knowledge in real-world settings, enhancing learning, engagement, and retention (Brunson-Pitt, 2021; Celio et al., 2011).

Project 1

HD 403: Families in Poverty
WSU SERVICE LEARNING

THURSTON COUNTY FOOD BANK

"Neighbor Helping Neighbor" since 1972

This organization has been around for over 50 years and serves many within the Thurston County community. It offers various programs such as food banks, farm stands, and different food resource programs for children in need. Employees, volunteers and donators are all working together to end hunger within the community.

As a volunteer for TCFB Olympia Food Pantry, there are many different tasks you can do. I was assigned to sort and prepare produce for clients, help guide clients with the shopping process, maintain a welcoming environment, and help clean at the end of the shift.

Populations
This organization helps everyone who needs help accessing food, from the children to the elderly. In 2023, 40% of clients were under 18 and 20% were 60 or older. (TCFB, 2023).

Volunteering has helped me to see how important having access to resources like this are for people in need. It was humbling and I am glad I was able to be the one to lend a helping hand at a place I once received help from.

My community needs more people who are willing to volunteer, as organizations such as TCFB rely heavily on volunteer work. From what I have witnessed, everyone who works there, genuinely wants to be there. They love what they do and helping those in their community.

Did this help me? Yes!

- My communication skills improved as I had to interact with many different people during each shift.
- My value of finding a meaningful career has strengthened due to this experience.

Along with volunteers, this organization needs the help of donations. It is a non-profit organization. Even if they receive grants or funding from contracts for certain programs, they need community support in order to continue their mission.

You Can Help!
Every county in the U.S. is experiencing food insecurity. Look into your local food programs to donate or volunteer!

Why This Matters

According to Feeding America (2023), 13.1% of the population in Thurston County, WA was food insecure. That would be 38,790 people.

Food Insecure 13.1%
Food Secure 86.9%

Project 2

COURSE CONTENT AWARENESS

FOOD INSECURITY

Volunteering at a food bank has allowed me to see more of the course content in reality which helped me to understand how poverty is more than just being lazy. It is a complex issue that impacts people in every part of their life despite effort to escape it.

Core Problem
We learn about how food insecurity is a common problem that is faced in low-income families (Miller-Smith, 2020). As a volunteer, I witnessed firsthand how many families rely on these resources when they do not have the money to afford groceries.

Structural Barriers
This experience reinforces how poverty is not because of failure. Working parents couldn't afford food for their children. Seniors and college students couldn't afford food for themselves. Clients are impacted by many things: housing costs, bills, unlivable wages, and even lack of assistance. Poverty is a systemic issue leading to food insecurity for many people.

Family Impact
Families living in poverty struggle with stress, functioning, even child development. As a volunteer, I was able to see many families who were impacted by food insecurity which shows why this course content (e.g. stress, ACEs, and child development) is important to understand.

Civic Engagement
Through volunteering, I was able to see the reality of how important food banks and community support is, especially when families run out or unable to receive federal aid. Food banks and other non-profit organizations can be safety nets.

Debunking Myths
This course educated us on myths and stereotypes surrounding poverty. This experience helped to highlight many misconceptions people may have of low-income families that are only harming them more. Learning this information and educating others can help to reduce stigma and provide community support. We should empower those fighting this battle against poverty and promote neighbor helping neighbor.

References

Miller-Smith, M. (2020). Families and Children Living in Poverty. Cognella, Inc. <https://reader2.yuzu.com/books/82050-1A>
Feeding America. (2022). Food Insecurity among the Overall Population in Thurston County. <https://map.feedingamerica.org/county/2023/overall/washington/county/thurston>
Thurston County Food Bank (TCFB). (2023). News. <https://tcfb.org/#news>

WARM CLOTHES DRIVE
Service Learning Reflection
Lucia Gonzalez

SERVICE PROJECT OVERVIEW

Organization & Mission
The Warm Clothes Drive supports students who attend the Toppenish Early Learning Center by providing winter clothing to help keep children warm during cold weather.

Population served and community need addressed
Low-income families and children who face financial hardship and limited access to warm winter clothing. The drive met an essential need for coats, jackets, and other warm items to support family well-being and safety.

Service Hours

Role & Responsibilities

- Organized and coordinated the clothing drive
- Reached out to local businesses for support
- Collected, sorted, and distributed donated clothing
- Communicated with families and staff about needs
- Ensured items reached families most in need

PERSONAL GROWTH & REFLECTION

Key lessons

- I learned that I am persistent, even when facing rejection.
- I step naturally into leadership when supporting families.
- I am motivated by community connection and service.

Changes

- I better understand how deeply poverty impacts daily needs.
- I now see how essential community-led support is.
- I value small acts of service more than ever.

Skills developed or strengthened

- Communication with diverse families
- Project organization and planning
- Cultural sensitivity and empathy
- Problem-solving with limited resources

significant personal takeaway
Helping someone feel seen, cared for, and supported is powerful, and it's something I want to continue doing in my community.

COMMUNITY INSIGHTS

What I learned

- Many families quietly struggle with basic winter clothing needs.
- Community members rely heavily on small, grassroots efforts.
- Larger systems don't always provide enough support.
- The need for warm clothing is ongoing, not seasonal.

Observations

- Families were grateful but often hesitant to ask for help.
- Dignity and respect mattered deeply in every interaction.
- Staff and teachers acted as connectors between families and resources.

Analysis of resource impact

- Limited donations and funding reduce the reach of services.
- When resources are available, family stress decreases noticeably.
- Scarce resources force families to make difficult choices.

Connections

- Poverty affects daily life
- Community systems shape outcomes
- Cultural sensitivity strengthens service

CRITICAL ANALYSIS

My service experience was really connected to what we learned in class, especially seeing firsthand how poverty and limited resources make everyday life harder for families. I noticed that most of the decisions being made depended on whatever donations were available. It became clear that without steady funding and consistent resources, it's hard to reach every family that truly needs support. I believe the program could grow by partnering with local nonprofits, applying for small grants, and offering more reliable, year-round options for families to get the clothing they need.

BEHIND THE SCENES

The flyer that I created and shared on several social media platforms. There is a Spanish version as well.

I ensured that all the donated items were washed before setting up the "Wildcat Den"

The donations that were given by the church members.

Link to my Donors Choose project <https://www.donorschoose.org/lucia-gonzalez>