

Chapter 38

Community Service Learning: Preparing Female Students in the United Arab Emirates for the Workplace

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ABSTRACT

A learning community where students develop the knowledge, skills and abilities needed for meaningful and successful 21st century work and life is the vision for higher education programs in the Middle East. A successful learning community of faculty members, students, and site supervisors in a variety of community programs are working together to achieve this objective, and are jointly engaged in the pursuit of excellence and the development of human potential. It is Zayed University's goal to assure that students develop the higher-order intellectual capacities and technological skills they will need to succeed in a rapidly changing and increasingly complex world. This chapter describes the model used to meet the challenges faced by first generation female college graduates in the United Arab Emirates, a model that emphasizes community service learning placements and undergraduate research projects. These first generation graduates are also those who are expected to transition into a very conservative work environment. For the majority, community placements provided through this model is the first opportunity through which they are able to have any level of workplace experience. In this chapter we will report on this innovative community service program model experienced by students and will ad-

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dress challenges and successes of this program model which utilizes undergraduate student research, community involvement and the integration of female graduates into the workforce. We will share how this model provided insights into the work experience, as reported in students' journal reflections. An effective service learning program and undergraduate research involvement allowed these graduates to put theory into practice, develop habits of self analysis and reflective thinking, and contribute towards a greater understanding of organizational structures.

INTRODUCTION

United Arab Emirates is located on the northeast coast of the Arabian Peninsula. It is bordered by Saudi Arabia to the west and south, and by Oman to the East. UAE is made up of a federation of seven independent states and is governed by a central council. Abu Dhabi, the capital of the nation is centrally located on the coast. Dubai is the largest city of the UAE, and is the center of commerce and tourism. The population is estimated at 2.58 million, of which less than 19% are citizens of the UAE, with a per capita income of US\$ 17,400. With an expatriate population of over 80%, there is great diversity with 20% being other Arab or Iranian, 50% Asian and 8% East Asian or Western. The population is 96% Muslim and more than 90% of those living in the UAE live in the cities (United Nations Statistics Division, 2002).

Zayed University, a government- sponsored institution in the United Arab Emirates, was founded in 1998 to prepare women leaders who will identify the possibilities and capture the opportunities that will create the future of the United Arab Emirates. It currently also serves male students on segregated campuses. Although it is a young nation, less than 30 years old, the UAE is destined to command a significant position in the Middle East because of its strategic location, the forward thinking and far-sighted vision of the leaders, and quality of its modern infrastructure.

It is Zayed University's goal to assure that students develop the intellectual capacities and technological skills they will need to succeed in a rapidly changing, increasingly complex world, as

well as understand the world of work. Therefore to achieve this goal, all academic programs provide experiences for students through field experiences in the form of practicum and internships. Workplace issues emerged as more women graduated from Zayed University and began searching for employment positions. There were concerns and questions about appropriate female workplace environments and the entire career development process for graduates.

In this chapter, we describe the model used to meet the challenges initially faced by first generation female college graduates in the United Arab Emirates as they move toward employment. We discuss the challenges and successes of a community service program, provide selected comments from student reflections on these experiences, and demonstrate how student research into local needs provided for them an introduction to the world of work.

BACKGROUND

Service learning has been around for many years, however it was not until the mid 1980's that the term "service learning" established its roots (Stanton, Giles, & Cruz, 1999). To label a learning activity service learning, it must be associated with a learning goal or objective that pertains to the curriculum. This type of educational activity incorporates an interdisciplinary, student-centered, collaborative focus, and is integrated with real-world issues and practices (Bradford, 2005). Service learning is closely

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