



Service Learning for University Students:
Convergence of Fashion Coursework and Community Service to Develop Leadership and
Management Skills Through the Planet Style Project

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Introduction

Even with the economic hard times of this decade, the number of Americans who volunteer grew in 2009 at the fastest rate in six years, according to information provided in the recent report from the Corporation for National and Community Service (2010). Nearly 27% of the United States population, 63.4 million adult Americans, volunteered to help charitable causes at least once between September 2008 and September 2009, which included 8.1 billion hours of service (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2010). Through volunteerism, groups and individuals are supporting our many of our nation's populations that were hurt during the weak economic times by working to build a better future.

For future generations, volunteerism provides planning experience, leadership experience, and teamwork experience. Community-mindedness and civic responsibility are characteristics that many companies have on their list of desirable traits for employees, university students preparing to enter the workforce must gain an understanding of the importance of engaging in community service. Therefore, in order to connect university students to the community, a service learning activity was designed to allow students to improve future leadership skills by executing a project that was created to promote awareness of Earth Day and also the Fashion and Textiles Program on a university campus. Ultimately, this activity provided upper-level, undergraduate fashion design and fashion merchandising majors enrolled in a career development course with immediate experience in project management through an experiential learning project that would prepare future graduates for the workplace by developing leadership and management skills.

Project Design and Implementation

Prior to the beginning of the semester, the instructor contacted the director of an on campus educational enrichment program that was designed for school age children between the ages of 5 and 12 of enrolled university students. The project was designed not only to allow the students to participate in a meaningful service project and experience the element of community service, but also to create an event that would ultimately help raise self-confidence of and provide enjoyment to the children involved in the project while promoting Earth Day and the importance of recycling and sustainability. For project proposal and development, each team was required to create a written proposal and an exhibition/presentation board with details of all materials, creative name for the project, and a timeline that would highlight an event that would provide an enjoyable experience for the children. In class, all four proposals were presented to the instructor and class by each team. The four group submissions were the *Recycled Craft Project*, *Sustainable Art Project*, *Fashion Relay Project*, and *Planet Style Project*.

The best plan, entitled *Planet Style*, was selected by the instructor and class majority as the project to be executed by the entire class. This project was the most comprehensive strategy and incorporated many of the elements from other suggested projects. This strategy divided the class into teams as follows: the Recycled Crafts/Games Team, Earth Day Mural Team, T-Shirt Design Team, and Fashion Show Team. Planning was emphasized strongly for each team, and timing was critical for the event to be a success. To promote leadership abilities, this community service event ultimately was planned and organized by the students.

To execute the *Planet Style* event, students worked with their committee throughout the semester to develop and plan an afternoon of creative activities that were designed to encourage strength and self-confidence for the children. At the beginning of the day of the event, all teams arrived at the facility at noon, and the children were greeted by members of the Recycled Crafts/Game team that had decorated the facility with Earth Day decorations including Earth Day themed items and signage for each station. The first step in the day's activities was for children to visit a work station set up by the team where they created recycled bottle cap caterpillars and recycled water bottle planters. Next, children took part in fun, confidence-boosting activities with members of the Earth Day Mural Team, to create a mural that allowed them to express themselves through art. After that, children participated in a T-shirt design competition, with key elements for assessing entries including organization, execution, and creativity based on selected themes. Then, the children worked with members of the Fashion Show Team to learn modeling and styling for the end-of-day fashion show, titled *Secret Garden*, followed by an awards program with a keepsake award that highlighted their success.

Effectiveness and Continuation of the Activity

The project outcome exceeded the expectations of the initial plan. The coordination of projects throughout the semester proved to be successful based on instructor analysis, positive comments from agency directors, sustained interest of the students, development of leadership skills, and the evident happiness brought to the children in the center. The students felt that the project was a great opportunity for them to put fashion design and merchandising skills into practice while helping the community and growing together as a class. One student stated, "This was such a fun class project and nothing feels better than giving back to the community and seeing the smiles of the kids that were a part of this event." Finally, students achieved real world experience in a very short period of time, an element often lacking in classroom situations. This project will be used in future classes to allow students to gain valuable leadership and management skills while increasing an understanding of the importance of community service.

Corporation for National and Community Service, Office of Research and Policy Development.
Volunteering in America 2010: National, state and city information, Washington, DC.