

Senior Government Social Issues

By Michael Daniel

This service-learning project, which continually produces outstanding reactions from students, is the soup kitchen portion of the social issues project in my senior government classes. Students select an issue, research the topic, and then carry out a service project on the topic.

Best Practice 1: Students address various community needs through individual or group projects. Students who choose poverty or hunger as a topic go to a nearby soup kitchen to help prepare and serve lunch. I can take four students on the first Wednesday of each month. I then ask the students to extend the activity in some way. Frequently the students organize a collection drive of some sort. In addition to receiving lunch, each "customer" of the soup kitchen is invited to take home a bag of groceries. Students collect things to supplement this (i.e. seasonal clothing items, personal care items, or a type of food not often donated).

Best Practice 2: Each student in my government class chooses a social issue to research. The focus of the project is on the way laws and government programs meet (or do not meet) community needs. I then work with the students to find a service opportunity that will give them a real world perspective of the problem they are studying.

Best Practice 3: Throughout the project, the students keep a journal of their activities. When the students return to class after their service, they share their experience. In the class discussion, we talk about who needs the kitchen's services and why. We also discuss government's role and why private groups such as churches are often involved. Prior to the experience, the students usually have very strong stereotypes about the appearance and personality of a poor person. Watching their reactions as the stereotypes start to break down is always rewarding. Even students with unusually broad experiences gain a new perspective about poverty in one of the richest countries in the world. Most importantly, the students begin to understand that if a relatively wealthy county like ours has a significant need, the scope of the problem nationally is much larger than they ever imagined.

Best Practice 4: Students are responsible for most aspects of this project. They must select their research topics and service experiences. They are required to report on their progress.

Best Practice 5: Various community agencies are partners in the project during the research and service phases (e.g. the local soup kitchen).

Best Practice 6: This experience is built into my curriculum and planned for accordingly.

Best Practice 7: As noted above, students research the social issue before they begin their service projects. Before we go to the soup kitchen, I give the students a short explanation of how the program works and what their duties will be that day. At the end of the semester, students write an essay summarizing their efforts.

