



Strategies for Transformative Change

OFFICE OF COMMUNITY COLLEGE RESEARCH AND LEADERSHIP

Transformative Change Initiative Overview

The Transformative Change Initiative (TCI) is dedicated to assisting community colleges to scale-up innovations that improve student outcomes and program, organization, and system performance.

Transformative Change Definition

Raising the individual, organizational and system performance of community colleges to unprecedented levels without sacrificing their historic commitment to access and equity.



WAUKESHA
COUNTY TECHNICAL
COLLEGE

SERVICE LEARNING FOR ENGAGED WORK-BASED LEARNING

All 16 Wisconsin Technical College System (WTCS) colleges are committed to creating Intentional Networks Transforming Effective and Rigorous Facilitation of Assessment, Collaboration, and Education (INTERFACE). INTERFACE received a Round Three TAACCCT grant from the U.S. Department of Labor. INTERFACE is a strategic alignment between colleges, nationally-recognized leaders in education, state-wide educational systems, workforce development systems, current TAACCCT grant recipients, and businesses to strengthen computer skill competencies, and expand pathways in information technology-related programs to TAA-eligible, veterans, and other adult learners.

One of the strategies being implemented by INTERFACE is work-based learning. This brief focuses on the service learning program developed by Waukesha County Technical College (WCTC) to provide its students with hands-on work-based learning. Beyond the usual focus on building students' technical and professional skills, service learning provides an opportunity for students to build a sense of civic engagement with a focus on serving their community through newly acquired skills. WCTC defines service learning as a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities. Students benefit from the program by gaining professional real-world experiences, developing project management skills, learning about business practices, and engaging in self-assessment. Students build their professional network and gain the opportunity to earn a reference or professional recommendation. Community based organizations receive free, high-quality technical assistance and gain access to students with information technology (IT) skills.

Key Factors that Facilitated the Development of a Service Learning Program

- **A Culture of Project-based Learning.** The culture at WCTC was receptive to implementing service learning. Many IT courses had already incorporated project-based instruction. Instructors valued learning that reflected real-world environments. Partnering with nonprofit organizations, rather than using theoretical situations, was viewed as a more authentic learning environment. At the same time, employer partners were expressing the importance of soft-skill development, including problem solving, communication, team collaboration and leadership, and WCTC saw the opportunity to use project-based and work-based learning to teach these skills. WCTC has found that focusing on work-based training early in a student's enrollment allows for more opportunity and time to hone their professional and technical skills. Initiating service learning allowed WCTC to expand its range of partnerships and work-based learning without competing with existing internship opportunities. One partner shared, "Service learning has trumped my experiences with interns in that it allowed for focused project and task-based work, with short timelines, and allowed me to quickly see individuals working under pressure to solve issues as a team. It also required individuals to step forward as leaders."
- **Limited Resources Available to Nonprofit Organizations.** The nonprofit organizations partnering with WCTC strive to meet their mission with constrained resources. While they are receptive to building partnerships, they have limited time for identifying and planning a service learning project. This was especially true where the organization did not employ technical support staff. Some of the most enthusiastic partners who identified multiple IT needs early in the project have been unable to actualize a service learning project because of time and resource restrictions. WCTC learned that it is crucial to set expectations early, including communication response times for both students and partners. Partners commit to providing students with a brief orientation, moderate supervision, and timely feedback. Equally important is managing expectations throughout the project and ensuring that the project stays within with the original project scope. These measures reduce stress on both the partner and student, build partner and student commitment to the process, and assist in the identification of future projects.
- **Soliciting Partner Input Early in the Process.** WCTC recognized that their service learning program would require the development of lasting relationships with nonprofit partners. WCTC held an initial focus group of potential nonprofit partners that focused on identifying a low-risk project that would provide an immediate value and opportunity for students to come on-site and prove their skillset and commitment. WCTC set up processes to closely monitor project progress, meet deliverables, and exceed partner expectations. This required fully preparing students and reviewing skills they would need to apply and staying in close communication with both students and partners to address concerns as soon as they arose. WCTC's partners provide feedback on the service learning program at bi-annual Business and Industry Leadership Team (BILT) meetings. Including service learning partners in these meetings serves four purposes: an avenue for partners to offer guidance for the program; opportunities to hear about the experiences of existing partners; venues for partners to network; and opportunities for WCTC to identify areas of common concern or need among partners.

LEARNING THROUGH DOING AND REFLECTION

The goal of WCTC's service learning projects is to push students out of their comfort zone and to emulate real-world situations. With support from a subject matter expert, students are matched with projects where they have the necessary technical knowledge to provide valuable service and complete the task; these projects must also support students' professional growth. Nonprofit partners play the key role of supporting students' learning and development process. In return, the partners see a gain in productivity that results from the students' application of an IT solution.

A crucial element of service learning projects is reflective learning that is interwoven into students' service learning experiences. At WCTC service learning is integrated into a one-credit Service Learning Course that is a required part of the Network Enterprise Administrator INTERFACE Accelerated Pathway. The course kicks off with a session that incorporates a review of professional and technical skills needed for each upcoming project. From there, the students complete a pre-service reflection to explore their current connection to their community, beliefs related to civic engagement, and an exploration of the organization with which they will be working. Through the project, students are focused on the technical elements but are regularly asked to reflect on how their technical work impacts the mission of the organization. Once students complete their service learning project, they are evaluated on local engagement, social responsibility, professional skills, and technical aptitude. Students complete the course with a post-service reflection that asks them to explore the impact the project had on them.

IT NEEDS ASSESSMENT

WCTC solicits regular feedback from partners. This feedback has helped WCTC to understand barriers that have impacted potential projects, explore potential changes to the program, and better address partner needs. For example, partners shared in a BILT meeting that they needed support with identifying and planning service learning projects. In response, the college developed an IT needs assessment that includes an IT site survey, an inventory of existing IT resources, a review of processes, and a general needs assessment. The IT needs assessment provides a starting point for building relationships with new partners. Students use this toolkit in conjunction with partners to identify potential IT solutions for improving the efficacy and efficiency of partners' business practices. This process provides partners with a low-risk opportunity to assess both their needs and students' capabilities.

Coordination of projects requires a preparatory workshop to review past coursework and technical skills that would be applied in upcoming projects, with a focus on research and technical report writing. Completing the assessment provides an immediate benefit to the partner and helps to position them to engage WCTC students in future projects. This first step builds trust and rapport with the partners, helps position them to seek funding for implementation of IT solutions, and initiates a discussion around enhanced infrastructure for capacity building. Partners can also use the IT needs assessment report as a tool to solicit resources to support implementation of IT solutions that can help them to further their missions.



STUDENT EXPERIENCES AND PERSPECTIVES

WCTC students recorded a series of videos highlighting their experiences participating in service learning projects:

- Video 1. Their projects and learning experiences <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kTyG9ATMLmE>,
- Video 2. The impact of service learning on their community <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pEroFfIUEQ0>,
- Video 3. Benefits for partners engaged in service learning <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J0kGxkSoPCU>,
- Video 4. How service learning contributed to their personal growth <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oLF8CGZAWZ0>.

"I have done quite a bit of soul-searching about what this act of extending myself beyond my normal identity and community means to me and for me. I learned that I enjoyed a greater sense of purpose, worthiness, happiness, and hopefulness as a result of empathetically participating in a broader family. I have found myself desiring more experiences that connect me to other people and to goals and purposes bigger than myself. I uncovered that I do have a passion for helping others achieve big goals." --WCTC INTERFACE student

SHOWCASING STUDENTS' ACCOMPLISHMENTS

In the first three semesters of a fully implemented service learning program, 60 students have participated in providing 3,092 hours of service to their community. The program facilitated 23 completed service learning projects with 19 community based organizational partners. The program has also established an annual showcase of student work. WCTC invites its student body and partners from community-based organizations, businesses, and campus, to learn about students' service learning projects. The event reinforces students' connection to the community and helps students practice their networking and public speaking skills.

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