

# Ensure Students Are Learning: Faculty Descriptions of Innovative Teaching Practices

## Analyzing Local Social Service Systems to Reinforce Classroom Learning

### Innovative Teaching Practice Description:

In this community-based project, students critically analyze existing social services and identify areas of need within a local neighborhood. This activity's purpose is to increase student civic engagement by providing opportunities to apply learning in practical contexts.

Students begin by selecting a local neighborhood. Working in groups of three, students evaluate their chosen service system by answering the following questions: 1) what services are currently offered in this neighborhood?, 2) who is served or targeted by these services?, 3) who qualifies to receive services?, 4) what challenges or barriers exist?, 5) who benefits?, and 6) what needs are not being met by current services? Examples of social services include substance abuse services, educational programs, and law enforcement.

Groups then conduct informal interviews with local workers at different neighborhood agencies to gain a broad understanding of existing social problems and the services necessary to address such needs. Students synthesize demographic data, academic sources, and interview data to situate their research within the larger historical, political, and cultural context and present their findings in a 15- to 20-minute presentation.

Each presentation starts with an introduction to the neighborhood's existing services and unmet needs.

In this section, groups analyze what necessities are prioritized over others and discuss research-based explanations. In the next section, students present an in-depth overview of current neighborhood services. Students describe the types of services offered, populations served, eligibility criteria, and exclusion criteria. Groups then evaluate the current social service system's efficacy and equity. Presentations conclude with a section devoted to student solutions to alleviate urgent social problems. For example, a team identified a need for affordable prenatal health services upon discovering that local mothers were unaware of existing health clinics offering free prenatal care. Their solution involved creating flyers and a website to disseminate information of this service to the community.

Students are graded on the content and quality of their presentations. Rubric items include 1) summarize a community's social problems by identifying factors involved in the problem, 2) identify and consider the influence of context (political, historical, and cultural), and 3) demonstrate speech elements (eye contact, body language, voice quality).

Through this project, engagement increases as students generalized learning to their local community. Students formulate questions, find solutions, and demonstrate higher-level thinking by asking why. In this human services course, students push beyond passive listening to actively participate in the practical implications of their knowledge.