

Community Engagement Fellows Project Report

Chris Perkins: Building a garden at Windward High School to provide fresh produce for the Ferndale Foodbank.

My experience this year with the Community Engagement Fellows has exceeded any expectations I came into the program with. I initially expected to learn about service learning and the kinds of work that other educators are doing in Whatcom County. I leave with rich and interesting relationships that will propel my work as a service learning teacher at Windward High School and diverse relationships with many local college and university faculty as well as many community partners from a diverse array of local organizations.

The monthly work sessions were well organized, with useful reflection and instructive material. However, the most meaningful experiences were the relationships I developed with new colleagues that are passionate about building community connections and committed to positive change in our county. The monthly forums, organized by the Center for Service Learning at WWU, were such an unexpected bonus. At these roundtable meetings I was able to see the work of community engagement in action. As a high school teacher in a rural school district it was exciting to see the bigger picture of service and community engagement throughout our diverse county.

In the spring of 2016 the Ferndale School District won a grant to develop service learning as a teaching and learning strategy at all levels. Our initial goal was to start a service learning summer school program, called Summer Trek, for middle school students as they transition to high school. Additionally, Windward High School, where I teach social studies and visual art, is transitioning to a service learning school for the 2017-2018 school year. I viewed my work with the CEF, and the relationships I built, as an important and useful part of my service learning work.

Initially I planned to start a food waste composting program with my students. This program would educate students about the benefits of composting their food wastes and make them aware of the effects of sending waste to landfills, and increase their awareness of the amount of food they eat and that they dispose of. Students at Windward are interested in gardening and setting up our composting seemed like a great first step that we could accomplish in the winter.

During the time we were planning the compost project one of my students and I applied for, and won, a small grant to build a garden structure. In the grant application we spelled out our plan to grow vegetables to donate to our local foodbank. Once we received the grant the project took on a life of its own.

I realized that a \$250 grant would not be nearly enough to build a raised bed structure, repair our greenhouse, and fill the raised bed with soil and plants.

Students from my class approached local businesses and received donations totaling over \$500, growing our small seed money into a vibrant garden. Students were also able to request additional funds from our boosters.

Students in my course researched food insecurity at a global and local level. They discovered that, while this is an overwhelming problem, there are local solutions that benefit people we know in our community and in our classrooms. Students were also excited to blend their desire to create a garden on campus with their classroom work on global and local issues.

From this project students learned how to engage with our local community to complete a complex project. They designed their raised bed then secured the resources to build it. They reached out to the foodbank to build a relationship that will continue into the future. Most of all students learned that they can turn a good idea into reality with the help of their community. This project will serve as a model and an inspiration for other students and teachers as we transition to more service learning in our courses.

The CEF motivated me to get a real-world project off the ground. It is easy to fall into a pattern of classroom teaching that never results in work that is relevant and useful outside of the institution. Students have grown to expect a routine in which they complete the assignments, collect their grades, and move on. I have found that students who participated in this project now expect more from me and from their classes. They were moved and motivated by their community engagement and want more of it.

I was motivated by the monthly conversations with Travis and my cadre. I enjoyed the insights I gained from both the college and university professors and the community partners I worked with. Travis provided useful and relevant conversation starters and the group provided the rest.

I will definitely pick up my work with the composting project. In fact I have a student who really wants to see it get off the ground.

I would also like to recommend the monthly forums put together by Travis and the Center for Service Learning at WWU. At these events I was able to connect with even more community members, from local artists, to government officials, and farmers and foresters. I was able to invite administrators from my school district to attend this event which has added an even deeper dimension to the work my school and school district is doing with service learning and community engagement.