Q & A with Dr. Steven Bolduc

Q. Could you please provide some basic information, your name, department, courses taught that have a service-learning component, how many years teaching at MSUM)

A. Name: Steven Bolduc, Ph.D.

Department: Economics, Law, and Politics

Courses taught with ASL component: ECON/WS 305—The Economics of Poverty, Discrimination, and Inequality (This is also a writing-intensive course.)

Years teaching at MSUM: I am starting my 15th year.

Q. What is your background in service-learning (mention any courses you have taken as a student that has a SL component, research done, etc.)

1. My involvement with Academic Service Learning began with my serving on the MSUM Academic Service Learning Advisory Board from 2004 to 2010. I was drawn to ASL because of my belief that civic engagement should be a part of an undergraduate education and ASL is one avenue toward that aim. For over ten years now, I have incorporated ASL in my Econ/WS 305: Poverty, Discrimination, and Inequality course. That experience also fueled my interest in researching pedagogical and curricular issues associated with ASL and that lead to a research project culminating in a publication last year with former MSUM faculty members Amy Phillips and Michael Gallo, “Curricular Placement of Academic Service-Learning in Higher Education.” *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement 17(4)*. 2013.

Q. Why do you continue to incorporate service-learning into some (or all) of your courses?

1. I continue to incorporate ASL in my Econ/WS 305 class because it helps me to fulfill some specific learning objectives for the course and to contribute to the university-wide learning outcomes and because, though many students are initially resistant to the idea, nearly all students report a transformative experience with their ASL project.

Q. What do you think are the major benefits for students by having them participate in service-learning?

1. In Econ/WS 305, we explore theory, data, and policy related to issues of poverty, discrimination, and inequality with a parallel instructional narrative about epistemological and methodological issues in economics. When examining tables of data and trying to make sense of competing theoretical perspectives, one can lose sight of the essential fact that policy sciences are concerned with the lived experience of real people. The ASL project allows students to see the data and the theory for the tools or lenses they should be, and not as ends in themselves. Furthermore, I have found—through practice and research—that a well-thought-out ASL project or projects can contribute to the cognitive, moral, spiritual, psychosocial, identity and career development of students.

Q. What do (one or two) of your service-learning projects look like? (Explain the course it is linked to and what part of the curriculum you believe the students would learn best through their service experience, hours of service, expectations you have for the students i.e., reflective journals or final reflective essay or other)

1. As noted above, I have an ASL component in my Econ/WS305 class—Poverty, Discrimination and Inequality. I ask students to complete 20 hours of community service at one of the many social or human service agencies in the community. My expectation for the students’ service hours is that they have “face time” with clients or have exposure to the administrative matters at the agency. The service hours at the agency provide students with firsthand, concrete experience with which they can frame the classroom discussions and readings of abstract theory, detached data, or seemingly remote policies. Quite simply, the ASL component allows us to close the gap between theory and reality with additional developmental benefits. In order to assess whether students are able to make these connections, they are required to write two reflection essays (after 10 hours and again after 20 hours) and are also required to incorporate the ASL experience as a source of evidence in other integrative essay assignments.

Q. What is some advice for someone who is considering adding service-learning into their courses?

A. My advice for someone considering an ASL component for a course is two-fold: think about (1) the learning objectives for the course and (2) the time commitment for yourself and for students in organizing, implementing, and completing the ASL project. The learning objectives of the course should guide one’s thinking about whether to implement an ASL project and what type of project to implement. While volunteering and other types of civic engagement are potentially valuable experiences, academic service-learning projects should always be tied to the specific academic goals of a course, or of a program if that is the level at which the ASL requirement is being considered.

The time constraints for oneself and for students should also be a factor in deciding whether to implement a service learning project. The organizational effort required of me for the type of project I have adopted is rather low since students are helping with something the agencies are already doing—serving meals, helping at an after-school tutor program, etc. This “low-effort” project also fulfills learning objective for the course so I consider it a reasonable investment of my and the students’ time. I also use class time early in the semester to discuss possible sites for service opportunities and the types of work they may be doing at difference sites. As we move through the semester, I am able to check in with students about their service in the context of course material or topics; again, students can better understand course content in light of their direct and personal ASL experiences. This is all time well spent in the classroom because of the strong linkages with course objectives and student learning—learning about course content, about their community and about themselves.