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By Madeline Patton, Published September 7, 2012

As its federal funding for service learning expired last month, the [American Association of Community Colleges](#) (AACC) brought to a close its service learning initiatives as part of the association's work.

AACC's national service learning program—[Community Colleges Broadening Horizons through Service Learning](#)—received more than \$5.5 million from the [Corporation for National and Community Service](#) and its [Learn and Serve America](#) program since 1994. Congress eliminated funding for Learn and Serve America in 2011.

For 18 years, AACC distributed the majority of its service learning funds through modest competitive grants to community colleges to help them start or expand service learning programs. In its role as a leadership facilitator and meeting convener, AACC also cultivated a network of community college educators who lead efforts that incorporate service learning in multiple disciplines.

Service learning meshes course context with activities that address genuine community needs. AACC's research indicates that this pedagogy teaches workforce skills, improves student engagement, increases student learning outcomes and retention, and fosters civic responsibility.

About two-thirds of the nation's 1,200 community colleges offer service learning in their curricular programs.

"The success of the Horizons program is due to the incredible work our grantee colleges have done with their communities," explains Gail Robinson, AACC director of service learning. "We were also fortunate that the federal funds allowed us to provide free resources and training for nearly 900 other community colleges over the years."

## Mentoring and collaboration

To achieve its goals, AACC used a mentor-mentee model that provided programmatic guidance from experienced community college educators, as well as additional funds and other resources to launch or expand service learning efforts.

"The mentor-mentee model is very effective: sharing best practices and lessons learned really helps to establish your program and not make mistakes," says Cathleen Doyle, director of the [Sarbanes Center for Public and Community Service](#) at [Anne Arundel Community College](#) (Maryland).

Individual faculty members at Anne Arundel used service learning prior to the college receiving its Horizons grant in 2000, and the college had AmeriCorps funding to encourage the teaching and learning strategy throughout Maryland. However, it did not have a coordinated, college-wide effort.

The Horizons grant "really helped us at the right time," Doyle says.

The institution has sustained a college-wide program and maintained partner relationships with 120 nonprofit organizations for more than 10 years. In the 2012 academic year, Anne Arundel had 84 faculty members in various disciplines involving 800 students in service learning projects.

[Miami Dade College](#) (MDC) in Florida started service learning in 1994, but skepticism lingered until the college received a Horizons grant in 1997, according to Josh Young, director of the college's [Institute for Civic Engagement and Democracy](#).

"Horizons gave validity to what became a national movement and provided so much evidence of the impacts, provided so many resources. [It was] a clearinghouse and a place of encouragement for community colleges to get involved, to institutionalize it and to sustain it," Young said.

For him the meetings that AACC convened for its service learning grantees provided opportunities to learn from other community college educators involved in service learning. When MDC's provost attended an AACC Horizons meeting for chief academic officers, he returned with a new appreciation of what service learning does and was even more supportive of the college's service learning programs.

Service learning has been a priority at MDC since 2000 when the college began its commitment to fund it internally. Each year, about 8,000 students guided by nearly 300 faculty members interact with hundreds of community partners. MDC students contribute 175,000 hours of service annually.

Entire programs have service learning components. For instance, each year more than 700 nursing students complete a community health nursing course that includes a forum on civic responsibility and a minimum of 20 hours of service at places like the health clinic the college operates with the [Miami Rescue Mission](#).

## Opportunities to network

Gail Jessen, director of the [Thayne Center for Service & Learning](#) at [Salt Lake Community College](#) (SLCC) in Utah, concurs that AACC's imprimatur added credibility to her college's service learning efforts and connected SLCC to the movement that existed beyond its campuses. She also liked the dual direction of sharing between mentors and mentees. Mentoring visits always led to new insights for SLCC's programs.

"We definitely were able to up our own game even though we came in as mentors," Jessen said.

She added: "Nationally, over these 18 years, now there's this rich network of professionals who ultimately are doing their job better... What that means for us is that there are opportunities for the faculty to make their curriculum come alive, and there's opportunity for them to reinvigorate their teaching, and there's research that supports the motivation of faculty to use service learning."

Jessen also pointed to the opportunities that service learning creates for students to engage with the community in relevant ways that invigorate learning and lead to positive changes in communities.

The funding that [Western Technical College](#) (WTC) in Wisconsin received in 2003 was instrumental in helping the college start service learning.

"The Horizons grant surrounded us with experts, people we could contact at any time to help us ... people standing behind us who would not let us fail," said Mary Ann Herlitzke, dean of teaching and learning at WTC.

Service learning became part of the college's Vision 2020 strategic goal, and the college is developing plans to broaden its use. Most of the instructors who attended Horizons workshops have continued to use it.

"If a faculty member is interested in service learning, that person will be hooked forever. It is part of what's important to them in terms of the experience to give to students," Herlitzke said.

## A career and civic component

"One of the great benefits [of service learning] is that you could get a job or network," said Andrew Deibert, [service learning and civic engagement](#) coordinator at [Brookhaven College](#) (Texas).

The most recent hires occurred during Brookhaven's Horizons project that focused on fighting childhood obesity. As a result of its experiences with two Brookhaven students during their service learning project, the local YMCA hired them as healthy lifestyle coaches.

"They are getting jobs ... because of the things they are bringing to the table: the academic side, the knowledge they bring and the real-world experience," Deibert said.

Rudy Garcia, dean of students at [Central New Mexico Community College](#), began his involvement with Horizons as a culinary arts instructor in 1995. He has seen students develop personal and job-related skills that they need after college, and connected the college's service learning efforts with [SkillsUSA](#).

"When students are involved with service learning, they demonstrate understanding, adaptability, empathy and politeness in new and ongoing group settings. The experiences help students maintain a positive view of themselves while helping them learn to demonstrate knowledge of their own skills and abilities—all critical skills for the workforce of the 21st century," Garcia said.

For longtime Horizons mentor Duane Oakes, faculty director of the [Center for Service Learning](#) at [Mesa Community College](#) (Arizona), one of the most important parts of the Horizons project was how it encouraged and guided educators to incorporate civic engagement.

"It helped students become better citizens," he said.

Oakes was a contributor to AACC's best-selling publication, [A Practical Guide for Integrating Civic Responsibility into the Curriculum](#), along with other Horizons mentors and mentees. New online video training modules will be released this month on AACC's [service learning website](#) to help college faculty and staff understand how to use the guide.

## Higher education leadership

Brookhaven's Deibert plans to emulate the collaborative spirit of Horizons for a new, regional service learning consortium among colleges and universities.

"That kind of culture and that kind of leadership, that's the way it needs to be for the Dallas-Fort Worth area," he said, adding, "I think having that model will be very helpful to me."

The importance of service learning was echoed by some of Brookhaven's top administrators.

"Service learning and community engagement are prominent in our mission statement, and we made sure that questions about service learning were part of our presidential search. This is such an important initiative," Oscar Lopez, vice president of student services and enrollment management at Brookhaven and a Horizons mentor, said at a recent AACC meeting.

Read more about the final Horizons cohort in a new AACC monograph, "[Cultivating Community Beyond the Classroom](#)."

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