

PRD GIFT Winner AEJMC 2019
**What Are Your Students Doing Over Spring
Break? Using Disaster Relief Work to Teach
Students About Crisis Communication**

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Rationale

Public relations instruction does not need to be limited to classroom dialogue and textbook lectures, such as discussing theory or case studies. Adding service learning to the curriculum allows students to apply a meaningful experience to their education. By combining service learning with disaster-relief work, students are able to see a direct connection to the definition of public relations and how building good relationships benefits society. This experience is even more powerful when the disaster hits close to home.

Student Learning Goals

The service-learning project contributed to the following course goals noted in the syllabus:

- Understand the processes involved with crisis communication.
- Understand the roles the media, relief agencies, and first responders play in crisis situations.
- Understand effective communication techniques.
- Employ critical-thinking skills to crisis communication.
- Use teamwork skills to assist in disaster relief.
- Use storytelling skills to share experiences.
- Develop materials suitable for inclusion in portfolios.

Connection to Public Relations Practice and Theory

This service-learning project supports the theory that the public relations profession “involves a combination of practical experience and expertise, balanced with a solid grounding in the history of the practice and the social science that informs it” (Gleason & Violette, 2012, p. 281.) By assisting disaster survivors and meeting with community leaders who employ PR methods to address a crisis, students are able to connect history and information to application. The requirement that students produce a publishable artifact provides tangible evidence of their ability to create a product used in the practice of public relations.

Evidence of Student Learning Outcomes

Students write a reflection paper and produce a publishable artifact that shares highlights from their service-learning experience. The artifact projects are presented at a showcase and reception open to the university community, public, and local media. The media reported on the service-learning experience both years, thus helping the students see how positive public relations efforts can enhance goodwill. Additionally, the 2018 team was featured in the university magazine and presented at the President’s State of the University address. In his showcase presentation, one student summarized it well:

For me, the trip was absolutely life changing. It gave me a new perspective on how I should appreciate things I previously took for granted: Electricity, fresh water, sewage, and shelter to name a few. Listening to the mayor and the survivors’ stories shows me just how amazing humanity can be when we come together to help those in need.

Sample projects students have presented (shared with permission):

- <https://hannahsquared.wixsite.com/hannahstake>
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dEHkr_i4k40&t=217s
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SEU097Nkbw&list=PLR9OTGBg>
- [Ge1UsKPAZW1nsN5WuNt8UphVf&index=2&t=18s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ge1UsKPAZW1nsN5WuNt8UphVf&index=2&t=18s)

References

- Fink, S. (2013). *Crisis communications: The definitive guide to managing the message*. New York: McGraw-Hill Education.
- Gleason, J. & Violette, J. (2012). Integrating service learning into public relations coursework: Applications, implications, challenges, and rewards. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, 24(2), 280-285. Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ996274.pdf>

Appendix A

Description and Assessment

As part of a hybrid crisis communication course, a team of students and faculty members spent their spring break in Rockport, Texas, assisting in the ongoing rebuilding efforts following Hurricane Harvey. During the day the team partnered with a disaster-relief agency to help rebuild homes. In the evening, they met with survivors, community leaders, first responders, and disaster-relief workers and learned about their experiences. Leading up to the service-learning project, students studied crisis communication strategies and public relations theory and practices. After they returned, they shared what they learned from serving in a disaster region and applied it to the class discussions, readings, and projects. When the idea for a course on crisis communication was being developed, Hurricane Harvey had hit the Texas Coast—not far from where some of the students call home. This course (specifically the service-learning project) has created a positive response to a tragedy while enhancing the learning environment.

Prior to the Service-Learning Experience

For the first seven weeks of the semester, the class met face-to-face once a week. During that time, students read and discussed Crisis

Communication: The Definitive Guide to Managing the Message, which served as the course textbook. They also assessed case studies on public relations strategies and participated in team-building activities and assignments. This grounding helped prepare them for the disaster-relief service-learning experience.

Over spring break, the class traveled to Rockport, Texas, where we helped survivors of Hurricane Harvey clean up and fix their homes. For this, we partnered with Samaritan's Purse—a relief agency that assists with rebuilding efforts following natural disasters. Samaritan's Purse has a volunteer application process that takes four to six months to complete, so the paperwork had to be started the September prior to spring break.

During the Service-Learning Experience

After volunteer teams are approved and assigned a site to work, Samaritan's Purse provides meals, lodging, construction materials, resources, training, and supervision. The students' cost for the week-long service-learning project was minimal, as volunteers are only responsible for transportation and personal necessities. The fact that students can spend spring break doing something productive and educational without spending a lot of money adds to the popularity of this course and the appeal of the service-learning project.

While volunteering, the team painted, caulked, landscaped, and removed and installed doors, windows, siding, drywall, cabinets, and countertops for residents whose homes were being rebuilt by Samaritan's Purse. When we returned from the worksites, we had dinner with the Samaritan's Purse staff and fellow volunteers. After showering and eating, the students were encouraged to tour the area and visit with residents, business owners, and others affected by the hurricane to find content for their showcase project and reflection paper assignments. Additionally, while in Rockport, we had the privilege of visiting with local mayors, first responders, the Chamber of Commerce, and the Long-Term Recovery

Team. Not only did the students learn from these meetings, but the meetings also allowed the speakers to personally express their gratitude for the volunteers who helped rebuild their community—a PR gesture that was not lost on the students.

Post Service-Learning Experience

After the students returned, they met online discussing what they learned while working on their reflection paper and project. At the end of the semester, they presented their projects at a showcase where they were evaluated by outside professionals. The students have used photography, video, and essays to share their experiences. They are free to choose the medium and topic, but their projects must be approved before the showcase. Projects have focused on survivors, businesses, pets, and the service-learning experience, along with the role disaster-relief agencies play in the recovery efforts and the ongoing need for volunteers.

Assessment

Participation in the service-learning experience accounts for 30% of the course grade. The reflection paper and showcase project count for 20% each. Other assignments and an exam make up the remaining 30%.

Appendix B

Assignment Examples

Pre-Trip Example

For this assignment you are to find two news stories about recent hurricanes or another natural disaster. For each article, provide the link, briefly summarize it, and reflect on it. Is it enlightening? Does it provide adequate information? Does this story benefit survivors? Is there any PR value? Post each article as a separate discussion so that you have two entries.

Post-Trip Example

For this discussion you are to share what you are doing for your showcase project. Make sure you include the following information in your post:

- What you are doing. Is it a solo or partnered effort?
- Why you chose that project.
- Project status.
- Any assistance or guidance you need from me.
- What technology or display items will you need to present your project?

Appendix C

Service-Learning Experience Grading Rubric

_____/10 You showed up!

You get points for being there!

_____/20 You worked hard!

Did you put your heart and soul into the work? Did you whine?
Did you go above and beyond?

_____/10 You're a team player!

This score assesses your ability to follow directions and work as a team.

_____/10 Your engagement showed!

This score assesses how well you engaged guest speakers and sought information for your project.

Additional Comments

_____/50

Appendix D

Reflection Paper Instructions and Prompts

Reflection Paper Instructions

You are to reflect on the service-learning experience and summarize/ share your experiences. This paper needs to be reflective and worthy of inclusion in your portfolio.

Please respect the following directions:

- Use the Reflection Paper Prompts document as your writing guide.
- Upon completing all of the required elements, provide a word count at the bottom of your paper.
- Since this should be a portfolio artifact, you need to have it reviewed by the Writing Center. Please plan accordingly to allow time for that requirement.
- Follow the syllabus guidelines regarding font and spacing requirements. Attached is the grading rubric to help you assess your work.

Make this a valuable experience and find joy in reflecting. I look forward to reading these and learning from your reflections.

Reflection Paper Prompts

For your Applied Learning Experience reflection paper, address and respond to each of the areas noted below. Please label each section of your paper accordingly.

OVERVIEW

- Your name
- Description and dates of your service-learning experience
- Rationale for choosing your service-learning experience

SECTION 1 – Application of College Courses

What skills did you learn in this course and/or other college courses that helped you on this learning experience?

In 3-4 paragraphs be descriptive as you analyze the knowledge and skills you acquired in your college courses that you utilized in this experience.

SECTION 2 – Student Involvement and Life Experience Skills

What skills did you learn in your student organizations or other college employment that helped you with this service learning experience?

In 1-2 paragraphs be descriptive as you analyze the essential knowledge and skills acquired in experiences outside the classroom that were utilized in this experience. Provide specific examples.

SECTION 3 – Global Awareness

Share how this service-learning experience impacted your view of cultures and society.

In 1-2 paragraphs analyze and describe how this experience enhanced your awareness of the diverse world and society around you.

SECTION 4 – Implications

Share how this service-learning experience impacted your view of crisis communications and disaster-relief efforts.

In 2-4 paragraphs be descriptive as you analyze the impact this service-learning project had on understanding of public relations and the role disaster-relief agencies play in assisting disaster victims.

SECTION 5 – Putting It All Together

Drawing on your responses to the above prompts, share your service-learning experience story.

This section needs to be 5-10 paragraphs and demonstrate reflection and application.

Appendix E

Showcase Project Grading Rubric and Examples

_____/30 Content

This score assesses the depth of your project and presentation. Do you demonstrate passion and interest in your project?

_____/30 Clarity and Professional

This score assesses the clarity of your project and your presentation professionalism. Can we understand your objective? Are you professional?

_____/30 Creative and Interesting

This score assesses your creativity and presentation skills. Is it creative? Interesting?

_____/10 Proofing skills

This score assesses your grammar and how well you proofed your presentation.

Additional Comments:

_____/100