Welcome to Our First Issue

“The Service-Learner” is devoted to the pedagogy of service-learning, a teaching and learning strategy that combines community service with classroom instruction, emphasizing critical, reflective thinking as well as personal and civic responsibility. It’s this reciprocal nature of service-learning that sets it apart from volunteerism or internships.

Service-learning is proving to be an important academic tool. The traditional, passive college education, as such, is not enough anymore; it hasn’t been for a long time. Service-learning is a form of experiential learning that helps students not only master their coursework, but also practice work skills, engage in critical thinking, and understand the importance of civic engagement.

Service-learning pedagogy at QCC is not a small, solitary phenomenon. Make no mistake, we are part of a nationwide movement that represents not only a change in protocols and rules but in attitudes toward education. With government cuts, it becomes increasingly important that a movement like ours has committed individuals who are willing to go the extra mile. We are proud of all our QCC faculty, staff, and students who have demonstrated that commitment.

This dedication has led to impressive growth in service-learning. In the 2010-2011 academic year, 45 QCC faculty members incorporated service-learning into their courses, working with 26 partners to provide this transformative experience to over 1,000 students who were enrolled in 71 classes spanning 14 different academic departments and programs.

We attribute this growth to the dedicated faculty and thank them for their commitment to the pedagogy as a tool to enhance student learning. We thank the partners for providing students the opportunity to engage in productive activities that address civic needs. We finally thank our sponsors: the College; Community Colleges Broadening Horizons through Service Learning grant administered by the American Association of Community Colleges and funded by the Learn and Serve Program of the Corporation for National and Community Service; Con Edison; and a grant under the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act of 2006. The support of these agencies has advanced the overall service-learning initiative.

In this issue, you’ll find stories highlighting the successes of service-learning at QCC, including the new webpage and community partnership events. We are also pleased to announce the new QCC Office of Service-Learning in room H 246. Although the college began practicing service-learning five years ago, as of the 2010-2011 academic year, it was placed under the aegis of the Office of Academic Affairs.

Thank you so much for your participation. We are here to support you – faculty and community partners. We hope you share our enthusiasm, and we encourage your feedback to strengthen service-learning at QCC. We look forward to working with you in the future.
In Spring 2010, I needed grad school recommendations, so I scheduled a meeting with my former employer at QCC. I had finally decided to pursue teaching and, with the gentle prompting of my teacher mother, ventured to a place I remembered fondly but had not visited in a while. When I left my position at QCC a few years before, service-learning had barely begun. Coincidentally, the day I returned was QCC’s second annual Earth Day celebration, one of the largest service-learning events held here. Needless to say, I got more from my visit than I ever expected.

Yes, I got the recommendations I needed (and am becoming certified at Queens College) but more than that, I had the opportunity to witness the evolution of a unique event from two different perspectives: first, as a visitor and someone who was just dipping his toe into higher learning, and, second, as someone who was more actively engaged in education and familiar with service-learning, its mission, and its positive effects.

The ambitious Earth Day 2011 celebration was more than twice as large as the previous year’s, which is indicative of the growth of service-learning on QCC’s campus as well as the college’s commitment to it. In 2010, about 75 kids participated; this year, we had over 250 K-12 students attend.

But we’re not just increasing in quantity. The K-12 students visiting from various public schools enjoyed many interactive and engaging attractions. Last year, the kids were presented various scientific displays QCC students had set up. This year, in addition to that, they participated in hands-on lab activities. For example, Prof. Joan Petersen’s Biology students set up three experimental work stations for the youngsters to try – after all, service-learning is a hands-on process.

Earth Day is not only about teaching the next generation to value and care for our fragile planet, but it’s also about asking questions. As a service-learning enterprise, the day gives QCC students the opportunity to take the role of mentor-teacher with younger students. It puts the work in their hands, and they rise to the occasion. They realize that it is an opportunity to be leaders, and they don’t shy away from it. This model of education needs to be embraced at our school. We are educating leaders, if not of the world, then of themselves and their own lives. This Earth Day was a great example of empowering the students and being rewarded for it.

The wide variety of events delighted the children and served both sides of the service-learning equation: fulfilling a need of the community while helping students better understand the world and their potential place in it. Among the many presentations and events were: a screening of Dirt! The Movie (a documentary about the relationship between humanity and the living soil); presentations by Prof. Nathan Chao’s class on alternative energy; interactive learning activities facilitated by Prof. Simran Semhi’s class on “water footprint” (how much water that goes into everything we do and use); live animal demonstrations; and a discussion of the production of NYC Audubon’s newsletter by QCC Literature students. I witnessed Mr. Ross Ber, a beekeeper, whose intimate knowledge of the honey bee (which recently experienced a risk of disappearing!) impressed children not only with the amazing process of making honey, but also of the bees’ importance in a larger world. To me, this reflected an important tenet of service-learning, which is that the knowledge students receive not lay ‘inert,’ but help them become actively contributing citizens and community members. This process integrates them into a “bigger picture.” Earth Day teaches us that everything is connected.

I can’t help but see a parallel evolution in my own educational progress too – as my understanding of education and its purpose has grown, so has my appreciation for service-learning. Here’s to hoping next year’s celebration is even better than this one’s. See you on Earth Day.
The Service-Learning Webpage

QCC implemented its own service-learning webpage: http://www.qcc.cuny.edu/servicelearning/index.html. It serves as a gateway into the larger world of service-learning for potential partners, QCC faculty, and students, and as a resource for those already involved.

Since service-learning is a grassroots movement, it depends on faculty to embrace the pedagogy. To make this as enticing (and painless) as possible, the webpage provides links to content-specific websites, syllabi, and course examples that help faculty embark on service-learning journeys of their own. The webpage also contains a link to our Service-Learning Project Form, which faculty are asked to fill out for each project they undertake. The form is a management tool for the Office of Service-Learning and a guide to help faculty develop academically rich service-learning projects. It can be adapted or revised as the project evolves.

A Student section which contains readings and activities shows the benefits of participation and the importance of reflection in the service-learning process. The Community Partners section lists some of the wide variety of organizations that have engaged in service-learning projects at QCC.

The webpage is still growing but is already an integral part of Queensborough’s dynamic service-learning enterprise.
Community Partnerships Conference

On Tuesday, January 25, 2011, over 85 community partners, faculty members, administrators, and staff from QCC and other colleges descended upon QCC’s Kurt R. Schmeller Library to discuss how to create and sustain mutually beneficial partnerships between schools and community-based organizations, an essential part of service-learning. The conference, entitled “Achieving the Potential of Community-Campus Partnerships,” was jointly hosted by the Office of Service-Learning and the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL).

Welcome remarks were shared by Carol Consalto, Director of Public Affairs of Con Edison and President of the Queens Chamber of Commerce, and by QCC Vice President for Academic Affairs Karen Steele. The highlight of the morning, however, was the keynote address from Dr. Liberty Smith, Associate Director of the National Service-learning Clearinghouse, a project of the Corporation for National and Community Service. Smith told the audience, “It makes sense for us as educators, whether as community partner educators or educators in the classroom, because we know it’s engaging our students. It makes our work more meaningful as educators, as community partners.”

After Dr. Smith’s address, Ms. Dona Anderson, Senior Program Associate of Homes for the Homeless spoke: “What contributes to a sustainable partnership? It’s actually, in our case, pretty easy—communication.” Ms. Anderson expressed how the server and the served grew from the experience. “All of them [QCC students] said, in one way or another, how much more respect they had for their professors after having to teach all this stuff on their own because they realized how much work really goes into being able to teach something.”

Dr. Aline Euler, Director of Education at Alley Pond Environmental Center; and Ms. Stamo Karalazarides, Assistant Principal of P.S. 46, each shared their experiences as community partners, shedding light on the role of the community partner and the reciprocal nature of a successful service-learning project. Ms. Karalazarides said, “We [P.S. 46] teach it all to them, but what we notice is, when QCC students come and teach it to them, it makes a bigger impact, and that speaks enormously about the great and wonderful relationship we have with this institution.”

Dr. Smith then provided a demonstration of her organization’s website, a great resource for service-learning materials and referrals. Afterward, “breakout” sessions took place on the topics of: service-learning as civic engagement; maintaining partnerships through ePortfolio; and conducting research on service-learning activities. These conversations explored how to make a more enriching service-learning project for students, faculty, and community. Informative and inspiring, this event facilitated a cross-fertilization of ideas and experiences between campus and community sure to strengthen our service-learning partnerships for the future.