

■ *Kate McPherson*

# Projects THAT Launch A Lifetime



Culminating projects enable students to discover how their

**E**very year, students at Clover Park High School in Lakewood, WA, create public service announcements (PSAs) that inspire and inform other students and community members. The PSAs are shown during the school's PSA Showcase and Community Volunteer Fair, which is a forum for students to demonstrate their understanding of social issues and to educate their peers and community members about how to be more involved as citizens. The PSAs are also culminating projects that enable students to use their critical thinking and academic skills to design and implement civic action projects that have meaning for students and the community.

Culminating projects offer a sharp contrast to predominant practice in civics education. Although many schools require students to volunteer for a certain number of hours, most leave it up to the student to find a broadly defined "community application" of their learning, and students seldom inform their action with rigorous research. Even within these parameters, some students do amazing things, but the majority flounder when identifying projects that have value to themselves, let alone to others. In turn,

community partners are frustrated by last-minute requests to "do anything." Although cloaked in the guise of promoting student self-direction, this practice reveals a huge gap in the quality of the projects that is primarily determined by a student's social capital (e.g., personal or parental networks and prior experiences in the school or the community). The projects are lost opportunities for students and community alike.

As a service learning consultant and an instructional coach for the Coalition of Essential School's Northwest Service Learning Exchange, I have helped schools use service learning as an instructional strategy to increase student engagement and academic mastery. High schools in the network have designed and refined culminating project curricula and structures to support rich civic action projects. In those schools, all seniors plan and complete high-quality projects in which their inquiry informs and supports their civic actions.

Culminating projects include voter awareness, tutoring, a "zine" about stereotyping, and an informative display.



Photos courtesy of Clover Park High School, Heritage High School, and the author

interests and ideas can benefit their communities.

### Clear and Rigorous Standards

Although most schools have clear standards and instruction for the research paper and presentation portions of culminating projects, the community component of the project is often less well-defined. Many students and parents simply see it as "putting in their hours." But high-quality culminating projects have clear and rigorous expectations for the civic portion.

For example, senior exhibitions at Riverdale High School in Portland, OR, include service learning projects that:

- Serve an identified need
- Require academic skills
- Are guided by and informed by the student's essential question
- Have an ongoing, lasting impact
- Have a positive impact on the community.

Some projects that meet those criteria include designing a recycling program, creating a Web site that offers resources addressing an issue or problem in a particular field, and writing a piece of legislation that corrects a social wrong.

At Heritage High School in Vancouver, WA, the community engagement portion of the culminating project gives students a chance to address the issue

they examined in their research analysis paper. For example, a student's research analysis paper could examine how fish habitats are changing and analyze the role that nonprofit and volunteer groups play in helping restore local streams and rivers. For the civic action portion of the project, the student might work individually or with a group to analyze different options for habitat restoration, weighing the costs and benefits of different actions, and then help the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife with a stream restoration project. To meet the project's goals, the student must focus on raising consciousness, increasing equality, improving social conditions, or examining injustice.

Another characteristic of culminating projects is that students use them to demonstrate their knowledge to the larger community. Research indicates that students learn more when they

have opportunities to explain what they are learning to an audience beyond the school (Newmann, Secada, & Wehlage, 1995). Angie Robles, a culminating project teacher at Clover Park, pointed out, “The PSAs include student voice because included within the requirements is a reflective piece that chronicles the experience of their service. Further, students not only become more involved as citizens but the learning allows them the opportunity to understand that we all have the power to make change...and that is the heart of what citizenship is...working to change the world around us.”

### Preparing for the Projects

Many students will successfully complete rigorous projects when they have opportunities to develop and practice core civic and project planning and implementation before their senior year. Students at Quest High School in Humble, TX, practice issues analysis and project design in the fall. Using the Choices curriculum ([www.choices.edu](http://www.choices.edu)), they investigate and take action on an international policy. During spring semester, students use a similar process to investigate a local social issue, and in groups, they complete their social action projects.

Many experiences prepare Riverdale students for the service learning component of their senior exhibitions. Students plan brief service-learning projects in their freshman orientation course, and they provide 90 hours of community service throughout their four years at Riverdale. One of the strongest project elements is that all freshman, sophomores, and juniors give detailed feedback to seniors at every stage of their projects—the research paper, the service learning design, and the presentation.

### Authentic Service

Research indicates that service learning is more effective when it serves the community in authentic ways and when students thoroughly investigate an issue before designing their projects (Billig, Root, & Jesse, 2005). Because of this research, students

at Clover Park spend class time examining the concept of social justice before they work closely with community organizations to define key issues and develop their PSAs.

Teachers at Quest help students understand that citizenship is a participatory process. Students participate in the following activities to identify a focus that has authentic value for themselves and the community:

- Community mapping and interviews
- Values activities
- Panel discussions with community members
- Activities that help them identify their personal passions
- Workplace tool assessments.

By taking time to thoroughly investigate and discuss various issues, students begin to develop a personal connection to the issues and the organizations that deal with them. This process encourages students to develop a sense of ownership for the issues and their choice of action.

At Heritage, teams of students work with community mentors to research how the school can more effectively use alternative means of power, gardens, and waste management. Students’ civic action focuses on developing a strategy to implement the recommendations that come from this investigation.

### Intellectual Rigor

Service learning becomes more meaningful when students choose the issue to address; when the issue requires analysis and problem solving; and when students feel a personal connection to the task, which is often formed through a relationship between the student and the recipient of the service (Billig, Root, & Jesse, 2005). At Riverdale, students frame their research and service learning projects around an essential question. Their research and conversations



High school students teach younger girls about body image to help them understand the power of media messages.

# Guiding QUESTIONS

The following questions can help guide your planning as you work within your school and its community to develop a culminating project.

## Design Questions

- What is the purpose of your school's program and how will the community project component demonstrate your students' ability to apply academic and civic skills?
- How will it support the mission of your school?
- What are the central skills, knowledge, or attributes that students will demonstrate through this project?
- What criteria will you use to determine success?

## Academic and Civic Skill Development

- What experiences will students need before participating in this project to increase their likelihood of success?
- How will you prepare students to be able to do this project successfully?
- How will feedback and data about the experience be gathered and used for improvement?

## Project Structure

- How will you involve staff members, students, parents, and the community in developing the project?
- How will the project be coordinated?
- What will the timeline and action plan be?
- Will this project be embedded in a course or a stand-alone activity, an independent study, or an online course?
- Will credit be involved?
- Can a project be completed by a group or a team?

## Program Improvement

- Will there be modifications and accommodations for different populations, such as students who take special education classes, English language learners, students who plan to graduate early, and so forth?
- Will students be given multiple opportunities to meet the standard?
- How will the community and students be involved in assessing project quality?

## Student-Directed Learning and Youth Engagement

- How will students be involved with the planning process?
- How will you ensure that students have a choice and a voice in the selection and implementation of the project?
- What checkpoints and supports will you create to increase the likelihood of success?
- How will you provide opportunities for students to reflect on their own learning?
- How will the project be proposed and who will grant approval?
- How will you provide opportunities for student projects to extend beyond the traditional classroom?

## Authentic Service

- How will students learn about real needs and opportunities in their communities?
- How will students' research projects and presentations and involve audiences and resources beyond the classroom?
- How will you ensure that all students will have access to school and community allies as they work through their projects?
- How will students and community members determine whether the service being done is meaningful to the larger community?

## Community Involvement

- How will you communicate about culminating projects?
- How will the community and parents be involved in planning, implementing, and evaluating the projects?
- How will community members—including parents—serve as mentors, panelists, advisers, and resource people?
- What ongoing training will be provided?

## Coordination and Comprehensive Communication

- What materials will need to be created for various audiences, including students, parents, and staff and community members?
- What resource support will need to be provided?
- What budget will be provided? Will this replace existing support or be new support?
- What will the staffing needs be? Are the needed teachers on staff or will they be new hires?
- How will the design or implementation of the project affect collective bargaining agreements?

## Ongoing Professional Development and Continuous Improvement

- What technology support will be needed?
- What staff development will be needed before and after the project starts?
- What will the process for formative and summative program evaluation be?
- How will the quality of the student learning, community impact, and instructional quality be evaluated?

## Demonstration and Celebration

- How will you recognize the efforts and learning of students, educators, and community members?

## Risk Management and Liability

- What guidelines must be created to ensure student safety and risk management?

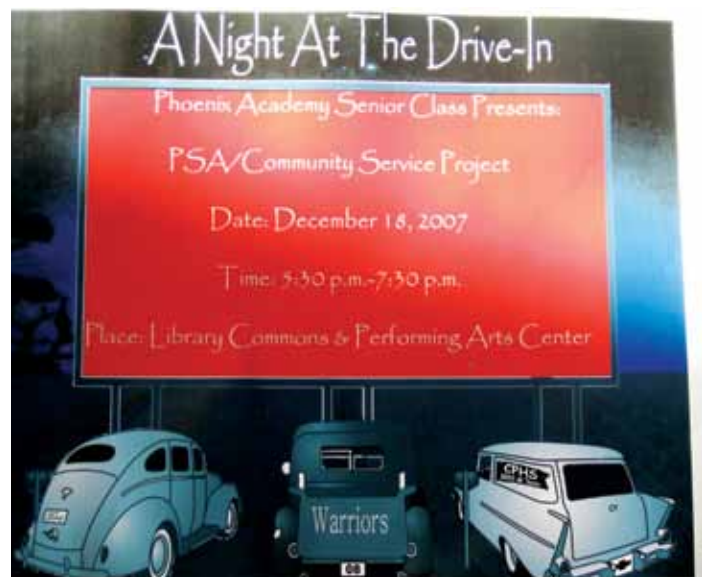
*Clover Park High School students showcase their PSAs at an annual community volunteer fair.*

inform a broad array of activities—including volunteering, advocacy, teaching others, public presentations—that use what they have learned to take action.

At Quest, students use a problem-based research process to formulate their social action projects: First, students meet in small groups to discuss a particular situation that has no easy or straightforward answer. The problems that the groups discuss are messy and true to life. The students use their own knowledge and experiences when discussing the problem, treating it as if they were personally asked to solve it. From there, each group comes up with a number of hypotheses that are likely to explain and solve the problem. Once those hypotheses have been established, the group negotiates an area of exploration for each member and the students independently research their areas. The group then meets again to discuss the problem in light of the information discovered by the group members. The results of this investigation shape the social action that students will take.

### Professional Support

The Northwest Service-Learning Exchange's network of eight high schools enabled principals and culminating project



coordinators and teachers to establish a professional learning community that supports the continual refinement of instructional practice. Through site visits and professional meetings, principals and teachers had the time and professional coaching to look more deeply at the quality of student work and the details of instruction. The network also collected examples of school curricula, which can be found on its Web site ([www.cesnorthwest.org/servicelearningexchange](http://www.cesnorthwest.org/servicelearningexchange)). Every meeting was an opportunity for teachers to share and refine their program design and for principals to meet with leadership coaches to explore how to increase the depth, breadth, and sustainability of high-quality practice.

As the instructional leader, the principal plays a key role in ensuring that the school's culminating project program clearly aligns with the mission of the school and is structured so that all students have the instructional and personal support they need to graduate with a powerful sense of competency and confidence. Depending on students to find their own community contacts or hoping that assigned "advisers" will support students will result in dramatic inequality in student experiences. The experiences of the schools in the network suggest that embedding the culminating project research and action design within a course reaps great results for students and communities.

### Worth the Investment

Developing strong culminating projects that require students to take civic action that is based on their analysis of complex issues will ensure that students are ready to become 21st century citizens when they graduate. Culminating project programs benefit schools' larger missions too. Engaging faculty members in aligning culminating projects with the civic and academic mission of the school and exploring ways to ensure that all students can successfully

## Supportive Organizations and Resources

### Project Service Leadership

[www.projects-service-leadership.org/culminating-projects.html](http://www.projects-service-leadership.org/culminating-projects.html)

### Northwest Service-Learning Exchange

[www.cesnorthwest.org/servicelearningexchange](http://www.cesnorthwest.org/servicelearningexchange)

### National Service-Learning Clearinghouse

[www.service-learning.org](http://www.service-learning.org)

### Senior Project Center

[www.seniorproject.net](http://www.seniorproject.net)

### Coalition of Essential Schools

[www.essentialschools.org](http://www.essentialschools.org)

complete such projects can be catalysts for instructional improvement. When teachers and administrators have those overarching goals in mind, they can clarify what students need to know and be able to do to be successful. Therefore, culminating project programs have the potential to serve as mechanisms for school improvement. **PL**

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**Kate McPherson** is the director of Project Service Leadership in Vancouver, WA. To learn about a 2010 summer learning institute, visit [www.projects-service-leadership.org](http://www.projects-service-leadership.org). Tip sheets for students, parents, and agencies are available at [www.principals.org/pl0210](http://www.principals.org/pl0210)

**Student Essential Questions**

Following are some essential student questions and the projects they inspired at Riverdale High School in Portland, OR.

**Question:** What is the biggest contributing factor that citizens have control over to curb the increasing rates of childhood obesity in the United States?

**Project:** The student taught a 10th-grade health class about the issues of childhood obesity and how it can be prevented.

**Question:** How could rainwater harvesting and ecoroofs increase efficiency of water use and management in the Portland Metropolitan area?

**Project:** The student established a connection between Lewis and Clark College and the Riverdale community and gave a presentation to advocate for implementation of green building strategies and water management systems at Riverdale Grade School.

**Question:** What role should hydrogen fuel cells play in our future?

**Project:** The student created a proposal for the installation of a fuel cell for the Riverdale Grade School or High School.

**Question:** How can Christianity and Islam coexist without violence?

**Project:** The student developed a Web site to promote interfaith talk on Facebook. The members can talk about coexistence.

**Question:** How can relational aggression be identified and alleviated?

**Project:** The student incorporated a reconciliation process into the school's practices to give students the opportunity and steps to resolve conflicts with peers.

**Schools' Contact Information**

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**Clover Park High School, Lakewood, WA**  
 Contact: Angie Robles, Culminating Project Faculty

**Heritage High School, Vancouver, WA**  
 Contact: Anne Sosky, Principal

**Quest High School, Humble, TX**  
 Contact: Kim Huseman, Service Learning Specialist