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TEACHING RESTORATION ECOLOGY AS IF THE COMMUNITY MATTERED

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ABSTRACT: A client-based experiential learning activity was integrated into an upper-division restoration ecology course, imparting a practical understanding of ecological restoration to students while providing meaningful service in response to client-expressed needs. Typical clients represented community conservation interests. A multidisciplinary team approach was developed that linked the classroom to the larger community in several ways. (1) The service performed by the students flowed from the course objectives and directly addressed a real need of the client. (2) The client articulated the need and project objectives. (3) Client interviews, juried oral presentations, and a written report provided structure for students to assimilate project experience and course objectives, and served as one basis for performance evaluation. (4) Assignments and course organization gave students opportunities to practice the group skills that are crucial in many organizations. The learning process addressed real problems; required teamwork, responsibility, and effective communication; and incorporated input from professionals. Based on assessment instruments; comments from clients, students, and jurors; and instructor observation and reflection, it is concluded that experiential learning offers practical solutions to the client while enhancing student learning, encouraging mutually beneficial community ties, and helping prepare students for careers in disciplines that involve public interaction.