



# INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

Published by the National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development (NISOD) • College of Education • The University of Texas at Austin

## WRITING TO SERVE

I teach writing, literature, and speech classes at a community college in rural Southeast Arkansas. This assignment was for my English Composition I class. Early on in my own education, I was taught that the primary purposes for writing were to instruct, to persuade, and to entertain. Scholars have added more to that list, such as writing to learn and writing to explore. But it is also clear that there are secondary reasons to write; and when designing a persuasive writing assignment in the context of service-learning, I wanted to implement a project where students write to serve.

For this assignment, I chose five organizations in town that were either not-for-profit organizations or government agencies that serve underprivileged students in our community. My plan was to have students visit and tour the organizations, and interview the directors. Then they would write a feature article for the local newspaper describing the organization and persuading readers to donate or volunteer. Once I selected the organizations and before I explained the assignment to the students, I contacted the director of each organization, explained my plan, and asked permission. They all agreed enthusiastically, expressing their gratitude for raising awareness about their organizations.

I also called the editor of the local newspaper to ask if he would be willing to consider any or all of the students' articles for publication. He agreed to consider some of them, but wanted our class to select the best from each group. He also volunteered to visit the class after he had reviewed the papers to discuss what was good about each one and what could be improved. I was grateful that he was willing to share his expertise.

Having received enthusiastic permission from the directors of the organizations and from the newspaper editor, I explained the assignment to the students. Many of them were excited about the possibility of having their writing published. After teaching them about persuasive writing, in general, and about emotional, logical, and ethical appeals, we discussed interview techniques. I described each of the organizations to the

students and let them decide which one they wanted to describe in a paper. Fortunately, the distribution of students and organizations turned out to be even, so each student got his or her first choice.

Each group decided upon three dates and times when each member could be available for the interview, and I called the directors to schedule the most convenient time. The students did their fieldwork during the following week in lieu of meeting in the classroom. I attended each of the interviews with the students because I wanted to meet the directors in person and learn more about the organizations. The organizations we visited and interviewed, along with a brief description of each, included:

- Dana's House—provides a home for neglected and/or abused children, receiving children from all over the state, but many coming from our own county. The children range in ages from newborn to 18 years, but they are allowed to remain until they are 21 if they are full-time students. They have space for 23 children and had 22 in residence at the time we visited. Five of these were infants, and one of the infants was only three days old when he was placed there.
- The Grand Prairie Charitable Christian Medical Clinic—provides medical exams and medicine to people who have no medical insurance and do not qualify for other forms of medical assistance. They see patients on the second Tuesday of each month, beginning at 3:00 p.m., and stay until everyone has been seen. All of the staff members are volunteers, including the physician, the pharmacist, the nurse practitioner, and the clerical staff. Patients pay a \$10 visit fee to help offset expenses, but their medical exams and medicines are free. [The clinic does not provide narcotics.] If patients do not qualify for assistance, they help them get the assistance they need if there is any available. Most of the patients are employed, but their employers do not provide medical insurance and their income is too low to afford the health care they need.
- Manna from Heaven—is a consortium of five



churches that created a food bank for citizens who have fallen on hard times and have nothing to eat. They provide dry and canned goods including peanut butter, cereals, pasta, rice, dried beans, and some household items when they are available. They usually have baby formula and diapers as well. They have been open for a year and a half and have served over 300 families over 950 times.

- The Patillo Center School—is an educational daycare for underprivileged and developmentally delayed children. They provide transportation to and from school as well as two meals and a snack each day. They educate the students and help them develop fine and gross motor skills.
- The Arkansas County Economic Opportunity Commission—operates under the auspices of the Department of Health and Human Services. Various programs throughout the year provide food, housing costs, utility and weatherization costs, clothes, and toys during the holiday season for underprivileged families.

The students shared that they enjoyed the interviews and tours. Several intimated that they had no idea there were so many people needing these kinds of services. Other students shared that they had used the services themselves, and that surprised me. I was unaware that my own students were so underprivileged, and I am grateful to have learned about that because it helps me understand their educational needs better.

The students and I were grateful that the newspaper editor took time to visit our class and share his expertise about writing and publishing, various approaches to newspaper reporting, and characteristics of article types.

The next time I make this assignment, I will have the students help select the organizations. When I learned that some of them had received services from these organizations, it occurred to me that they might feel a special affinity for a particular organization or they could have been embarrassed to be recognized by someone at the organization. Allowing students to participate in selecting the organizations might be an additional safeguard to prevent uncomfortable situations.

The benefits of this assignment included: the students had a *real* purpose for writing and a *real* audience for whom to write instead of writing for the teacher or for an imagined audience; the assignment encouraged them to think about the needs of others in their communities and appreciate their own lives better; it contributed to developing civic-mindedness and community awareness in the students; and students were able to learn more about a particular style of writing, specifically feature article writing for newspapers.

Although this assignment was created for a writing class, it might be an excellent assignment for a social or political science course or a speech course where students prepare persuasive speeches.

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### **Community College Week—NISOD Student Essay Contest**

The National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development (NISOD) announces the fourth annual Community College Week—NISOD Student Essay Contest in honor of Scott Wright, past editor of *Community College Week* (1995-2000).

#### **Essay Topic**

Describe a professor, staff member, or administrator who encouraged you to complete a course, finish a semester, or graduate from college, and describe how they encouraged you.

- Each contestant may submit only one essay, and it must address the specific essay topic.
- The essay text is limited to a minimum of 400 and a maximum of 500 words.

#### **\$3,000 in Prizes**

- \$1,000 Scholarship to the Student Author
- \$1,000 to the Faculty/Staff/Administrator Featured in the Essay
- Complimentary 2012–2013 NISOD Membership to the Student's College (\$1,000 value)

#### **Essay Submission Deadline**

**November 8, 2011**

**[www.nisod.org/student\\_essay](http://www.nisod.org/student_essay)**