

# Connecting Students to Community Engagement

[View](#)

[Edit](#)

[Revisions](#)

## Learning Outside the Classroom: Connecting Students to Community Engagement

Written by: Olivia Sickelka

August 31, 2020

Learning is not strictly done in the classroom. For students at the University of Northern Iowa, learning takes shape in numerous places outside of the classroom and in the surrounding community. Brandy Smith, an Instructor of Early Childhood Education at the University of Northern Iowa, implemented a way for her students to learn about community engagement work by volunteering in the Cedar Valley.

Brandy partnered with the Northeast Iowa Food Bank and Cedar Valley Preschool and Child Care. While at the food bank, Brandy's students packaged food and helped sort supplies. With the childcare center, students reseeded the grass space so it was ready for kids to play on in the spring as well as made blankets for the sleeping cots at the childcare center. The project mutually benefited those involved as well as the hands-on learning the students received.



“As I began to develop the class I felt it critical to get my students into the community to make real-life connections between what we were reading and discussing in class and what truly happens in the community.”

Brandy quickly noticed the benefit of community partnership and service learning as a critical part of pre-service teachers in their undergraduate experience at UNI. Her students also began to get excited about the

partnership and see how beneficial the hands-on experiences and theoretical readings were.

"This project helped me realize that, even at my age, it is important to be an active citizen and support your community. If I fail to support things in my community right now, I may not have the chance to support them later, when I might need the services." stated a student in Brandy's class.

Brandy sees the importance of community engagement work through institutions of higher education and the faculty who specialize in specific areas. Stating the abundant resources available to their faculty, staff, and students as a major factor in collaborating with community partners. Brandy's biggest asset was having the opportunity to create this class in a service-learning module. Stating she had access to the librarians at Rod who helped her understand service learning and create the class in an appropriate service learning module.



"I feel faculty and staff must demonstrate this [community engagement] to students so they see how we can each use the gifts we are given to make an impact in our larger community." states Brandy.

However, the project and basis of the class goes far beyond simply helping out in the community. The real excitement is based in the partnership created between university and the community that surrounds it. Through her project Brandy has worked with many people in the early childhood field in the Cedar Valley that allow her to create the highest quality when it comes to programming.

"The students' excitement shows as they now understand the importance of community involvement and consider how they will make these types of projects happen as they step into their own classrooms."

From learning in the classroom, to the hands-on experience the students gained, Brandy helped create a partnership to showcase the importance of community engagement work in the College of Education program here at UNI.

#EngagedUNI #BetterTogether #UNITogether