

Resources

The Pennsylvania Literacy Corps: Helping to Meet Pennsylvania's Lit- eracy Needs.

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The Pennsylvania Literacy Corps incorporates community service in a variety of higher education settings through an experiential learning program designed to train college students as literacy volunteers. Now in its third year of operation, the Pennsylvania Literacy Corps has established 16 programs which have trained nontraditional as well as traditional-aged college students to volunteer in community literacy and education programs.

The Pennsylvania Department of Labor and Industry, PennSERVE: The Governor's Office of Citizen Service, and the Institute for the Study of Adult Literacy at Penn State work together to award Pennsylvania Literacy Corps grants to higher education institutions in the commonwealth, to assist these colleges and universities in the establishment of partnerships with local literacy and education providers, and to provide on-going support and guidance in the design, implementation, and evaluation of their individual programs. Through the cooperative efforts of Literacy Corps partnerships, local literacy needs are best identified and, subsequently, best served.

Each institution develops its own credit-bearing course to train students to serve the community. Typically, 15 students enroll in the Literacy Corps course, in which they are required to perform 40 hours of community service. Many of the students participating in the program are education majors, but other academic fields are represented. Their 40 hours of service usually consist of tutoring, but can include any type of volunteer activity needed to support local literacy efforts. Literacy Corps students are predominantly female and of traditional college age, although an increasing number are returning adult students. One corps enrolls prison inmates in a college credit course which trains them to tutor their peers. Plans are also being made to target new high school and at-risk student populations. These students will be trained to tutor their peers and near-peers and to work with community literacy programs.

Through the Literacy Corps experience, students increase their awareness of literacy and community service issues, and receive training in literacy education and tutoring techniques. Education majors have an opportunity to practice their classroom theory, and all students can explore new career options. Some students have reconsidered their career goals and have entered the field of education. Students learn as much about themselves as they do about those they are serving. Their confidence increases as they begin to witness the impact they can make on someone else's life, and they often strengthen their own basic skills while teaching others. Almost a third have continued their involvement in volunteer service beyond the Literacy Corps requirement.

The Pennsylvania Literacy Corps programs serve the needs of a diverse client population. Middle school children who are falling below grade level in reading and math are tutored in after-school homework centers; high school students who are at risk of dropping out are provided with role models and encouraged by their Literacy Corps tutors to study. Literacy Corps students also work with adults wanting to earn their high school equivalency diploma or wanting to obtain or advance in a job. There is an increasing need for volunteers to work with limited English-speaking adults and children; Literacy Corps students help to fill this need. Many Literacy Corps students serve clients in job centers, rehabilitation centers, and prisons.

Last year, Literacy Corps volunteers' strong commitment to community service led to the establishment of a Literacy Corps student alumni association, Pennsylvania Resource Organization for Literacy (PRO Lit). PRO Lit is one way students can remain actively involved and supported as volunteers and provide technical assistance to individuals and institutions participating or wanting to participate in the Pennsylvania Literacy Corps.

The coming year will focus on high school involvement in the Pennsylvania Literacy Corps movement. High school corps are being planned to serve rural regions of the state where there are few higher education institutions available to host Literacy Corps programs. In addition, plans are being made to initiate the creation of corps of at-risk students who will be trained to tutor younger students, thereby strengthening their own basic skills and increasing their self-esteem and confidence through tutoring. Teaching is an excellent way to learn; the tutors, in this case, often learn as much as those being tutored.

The Pennsylvania Literacy Corps promotes experiential learning. Students of all ages and varying educational backgrounds are learning together as they work to upgrade the basic skills of all Pennsylvanians.