

NOMINATION FORM
COMMISSION ON HIGHER EDUCATION SERVICE LEARNING COMPETITION

Institution: University of South Carolina Upstate

Title of Project: Girls Studies

Project Director: Dr. Lisa Johnson

Contact Information for Project Director: 800 University Way
Spartanburg SC 29303
mjohnson@uscupstate.edu
864-503-5724

Establishment Date of Project: February 2012

Unit That Administers Project: Center for Women's and Gender Studies

Total Number of Students Involved: 35

PLEASE ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS REGARDING THE NOMINATED PROJECT
(Insert your response after each question; the response to each question should be no more than one page)

- 1. For purposes of this competition, the Commission on Higher Education defines service learning as college student learning at any level and in any situation that is *linked* in a direct, hands-on fashion to the resolution of a problem or concern in a target community outside the institution *and is related* to a college course with some type of reflection activity. How does your project meet the parameters of this definition?**

This course in Girls Studies, originally envisioned in November 2011, has been offered three times at USC Upstate. Students are introduced to this academic subfield of Women's and Gender Studies through readings on basic concepts in the field, followed by more advanced analyses of media representations of girls and theoretical articles on pedagogies in girl empowerment programs. This academic foundation is crucial for developing an outreach program that reflects the principles of the academic field, as opposed to sending uninformed volunteers into the community. Students receive in-class training from employees of the nonprofit organization, Girl Scouts--Mountains to the Midlands, and are then assigned to outreach troops embedded in under-served elementary schools and other sites (e.g., Boys and Girls Club, Salvation Army, Department of Juvenile Justice). They meet with the troops once a week for ten weeks, delivering an anti-bullying curriculum developed by the national Girl Scouts organization, supervising arts/crafts activities, and forming supportive relationships with girls age 5-16. Students keep reflective journals and write an analytical essay on the experience at the end of the semester, framing their hands-on experience within a scholarly context. The program is motivated by data showing that girls from low-income families are at risk for

a range of social problems (from girlhood bullying to teenage pregnancy) that can be reduced through preventative measures that strengthen girls' self-esteem and interpersonal negotiation skills.

2. Specifically, which segments of the college/university community does your project involve?

This course serves two important academic minors at USC Upstate: the minor in Women's and Gender Studies and the minor in Childhood Advocacy Studies.

3. How many students (specify degree levels to the extent possible) does the project affect?

The course is typically offered every fall semester. In the first two years, the course enrolled eight students per semester. After the course was approved to serve a second minor, enrollment more than doubled in the third year, with 19 students in Fall 2014. The course was moved to Spring semester during the 2015-2016 academic year with 11 students currently enrolled.

4. Describe the target community or communities your project serves.

The project serves pre-teen and adolescent girls from low-income families in Spartanburg County. Due to complex social interactions between race and class, a large percentage of these young girls are African-American.

5. Describe your project's effectiveness in helping to solve the problems or concerns in the target community.

Our primary data comes from surveys administered to the girls in December 2014, so it is preliminary. This data shows that the young girls appreciated the time spent with college students whom they saw as role models. The positive relationships formed with the college students were ranked by the girls as having more impact on them than the details of the anti-bullying curriculum. Anecdotal data also shows that the girls gained self-confidence, as quiet girls slowly came out of their shells through the Girl Scout pledges of sisterhood and friendship. Girls sought out school leadership positions and stepped in to stop fights as a result of the diplomat and peacemaker merit badges. As one of the college students put it, "The girls came in separated by their differences emotionally and physically, and learned to acknowledge their similarities in order to celebrate themselves in the community. It forced me to reevaluate what my true purpose was in the community. I wasn't there to have them sit like ladies and make friendship bracelets. I'm there because these girls have the potential to change the world."

Please see supplemental details for the data report.

6. Describe the degree to which your project enhances student learning while providing specific examples of the service learning activities the college students engage in. Also explain how the service learning activities reinforce or apply what the college students learn in the classroom.

Working with girls dealing with real life situations enhances students' ability to critically analyze the cultural dynamics at play in girls' environments (e.g., school, after-school programs, family, and the media). Conversely, reading the academic material equips students to make productive critiques of girl empowerment programs in our community. Student perspectives on the limitations of the outreach environment and curriculum are delivered to representatives of the local Girl Scout Council in order to make improvements for the following year. Students know their written analyses are more than academic exercises and that their audience extends beyond the professor to the community.

Furthermore, as legal professor Dr. Kimberlé Crenshaw demonstrates in a 2015 report on the disproportionate suspension of African-American girls in K-12 educational environments, this demographic faces specific obstacles that require racially sensitive prevention strategies. In addition to the Girl Scouts curriculum on anti-bullying, students in Girls Studies read and implement strategies from educational theories on supporting the self-esteem of African-American girls, with a special focus on publications by Dr. Ruth Nicole Brown on mentoring without hierarchy and listening to girls' voices in more meaningful ways. While the Girl Scouts approach is already defined as girl-centered and girl-led, these reading assignments have been described by our students as complete game-changers in their understanding of what girl-led really means. The students learn how to support the young girls without seeking to "control" them.

7. Is there academic credit associated with the project (not necessary for submission)? If so, please explain the particulars.

Students receive 3 credits toward their undergraduate degree for this course.

8. If funding is required, how is the project funded and what is the approximate annual budget for the project?

No funding was required in the first two years. In the third year, the project required approximately \$1200.00 to purchase the anti-bullying curriculum in the form of handbooks to be given to all participating girls, along with a packet of 3 merit badges for each girl. The cost was split three ways between the two minors (Women's and Gender Studies, and Child Advocacy Studies) and Girl Scouts--Mountains to the Midlands.

9. Add any other comments you may have about your project.

As students and faculty become more aware of this service-learning opportunity, enrollments should continue to grow. In serving the minor in Child Advocacy Studies, the reach of the course has been significantly expanded, and students are being advised toward taking the course several semesters in advance. Students uniformly describe the experience as highly valuable.

You may also include supplemental information about the project (such as brochures, pictures, etc.).

Please return this form via e-mail by **February 26, 2016**, to:

Trena Houp, Program Manager
Academic Affairs
South Carolina Commission on Higher Education
1122 Lady Street, Suite 300
Columbia, SC 29201
803.737.4853
thoup@che.sc.gov

Article co-authored with student Katlin Bollinger:

Girls Studies/Girl Scouts

Katlin Bollinger and Lisa Johnson

Girls Studies is the perfect opportunity for students to take what they learn in the Women's and Gender Studies classroom and apply it in the community. For the first five weeks, students are introduced to basic concepts and major scholars in the field on Tuesdays and are trained by representatives from Girl Scouts—Mountains to the Midlands to become troop leaders on Thursdays. They learn the Girl Scout promise and the Girl Scout law, as well as the AMAZE curriculum on anti-bullying, and they also practice techniques to break the ice and form a rapport with adolescent girls. After training is complete, students are placed on leadership teams of 2-4 people and are matched with outreach sites that fit their scheduling needs. Outreach sites are usually local elementary schools, but sometimes include Boys and Girls Club meetings at the Salvation Army or group meetings for inmates at the Department of Juvenile Justice in Greenville. The troops are formed in under-served low-income areas of Spartanburg and Greenville County.

The impact of this outreach is positive for everyone involved. Over the course of ten weeks of meetings with troops, girls exhibit increased self-confidence and leadership skills. Sometimes change is very noticeable: a girl who initially seemed quiet and withdrawn will become willing to speak her mind. Girl Scouts emphasizes girl-led activities, and this value results in girls who take on positions of responsibility not only within the outreach troop but also during their everyday lives at school. They report back to the troop leaders with pride in their newfound role as agents of positive change. Instead of thinking they must “act out” or be ignored, these girls learn to attract attention by helping each other and defusing conflicts. They benefit from the safe space of the outreach troops where they can vent their frustrations and work collaboratively to make sense of difficult life experiences and confusing situations. As troop leaders, our USC Upstate students make a special effort to celebrate the girls' academic and interpersonal successes in school. The semester may begin with young girls rolling their eyes at each other and refusing to hold hands, separated by their differences emotionally and physically, but by the end, the same girls recognize each other as sisters, friends, and scouts.

Seeing the impact they've made on these girls' lives, the Upstate students grow through the process as well. One student described the experience of giving a girl a candy cane and seeing her face light up when she tasted it: “Something I take for granted was completely spectacular for her. It forced me to reevaluate my true purpose in the community. I wasn't there to have them sit like ladies and make friendship bracelets. I'm there because these girls have the potential to change the world, but they don't know it yet. The girls have more life knowledge in some cases than I do. They taught me as much as I taught them.” The positive impact is shaped in part by academic readings that apply Critical Race Theory to girl empowerment programs. In particular, Ruth Nicole Brown's books—*Black Girlhood Celebration* (2008) and *Hear Our Truths* (2013)—equip students to approach girls not as projects in need of reform, but as unnoticed and untapped resources in the community. Students are asked to write a final paper that reflects on their experience of mentoring adolescent girls, and many of them describe Girls Studies as “the most inspiring course” during their time at USC Upstate.

Data from survey of program connected to the service-learning course Girls Studies at USC Upstate

***Be a Friend First* aimed to help girls:**

- Build self confidence
- Identify and avoid bullying and exclusive behaviors
- Resolve conflicts peacefully and constructively
- Build trusting relationships with classmates and nonrelated adults
- Feel empowered to create a culture of peace

Upon completion of the program, girls completed a survey that revealed:

- 94% of the girls agreed that they really like who they are, no matter what other people think (plus 3% agreed a little).
- 64% of girls agreed that despite peer pressure, they still choose to do “what [they] want to do anyway” (plus 11 % agreed a little).
- 71% of girls agreed that they can find ways to help a team move forward, even when strong emotions get in the way (plus 24% agreed a little).
- 59% of girls agreed that they like to tell others how they can help their community (plus 18% that agreed a little).
- 71% of girls believe that they can do most things they try, even if they are hard.
- 83% of girls let their friends know when they think they are good at something.
- 76% of girls agreed that they can take what they have learned in BFF and apply it to other areas of their lives.

Among these positive findings, girls also expressed that they valued the relationships with their leaders and the safe space the program offered them to simply talk about issues in their lives.