

Proximate Outcomes of Service-Learning Among Family Studies Undergraduates

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ABSTRACT. Attitudes in academics, career, civic responsibility, and empowerment were reported before and after 143 undergraduate Family Studies students completed a service-learning project. Results suggested improved academic and career post-test scores. Civic responsibility and empowerment improved but not significantly. Open-ended responses suggested three additional outcomes: group work, leadership, and empathy. Implications for academic programs focused on engaging students in service-learning projects working with or on behalf of families are discussed.

Service-learning, the integration of classroom instruction and community service, is intended to enhance students' understanding of course content while promoting a commitment to civic and social responsibility within one's community (Burnett, Hamel, & Long, 2004). The National Service-Learning Clearinghouse (2009) defined service-learning as "a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities." Similarly, Bringle and Hatcher (1996) defined service-learning in the context of an academic setting as:

a course-based, credit-bearing educational experience in which students a) participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs, and b) reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of the course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility (p. 222).

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Service-learning initiatives emerged from activism on college campuses in the 1960s and '70s and from the field of experiential education (Stanton, Giles, & Cruz, 1999). Its roots can be traced back to the formation of the Peace Corps in 1961 and the Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA). Additional historical beginnings of service-learning can be linked to work conducted by social worker Jane Addams in the early 1900s, when she pioneered the practice of service within the community at the social settlement, Hull House (Daynes & Longo, 2004).

In 1990, the National Community Service Act was enacted, authorizing grants to schools to support service-learning and demonstration grants for national service programs to youth corps, non-profit organizations, colleges, and universities. The federal commitment to national service was further demonstrated by the National and Community Service Trust Act of 1993 for the purpose of increasing opportunities for Americans of all ages to better serve their communities.

Over the past decade, postsecondary institutions have maintained a somewhat ambivalent stance toward service-learning and community action, caught between a desire to pursue objective science and a commitment to support civic engagement. This, and similar kinds of conceptual debates regarding competing missions and purposes of higher education, have traditionally kept college campuses and their communities at arm's length from one another. Universities have often expressed this ambivalence through definitions of service that are largely internally focused (Stanton et al., 1999).

Despite historical ambivalence, incorporating service-learning pedagogy into the academic experience of students is becoming increasingly popular on college and university campuses (Hink & Brandell, 1999; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2000) and was recently endorsed through the establishment of the Community Engagement Elective Classification by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. Additional support for community services comes directly from the White House through President Obama's *United We Serve* program.

The utilization of service-learning in the classroom is of particular salience for human service undergraduate students within professional fields of family studies, social work, and psychology, as service-learning can be used to prepare students to work with individuals and families in diverse community settings, while simultaneously increasing students' sense of social and civic responsibility (Anderson, 2002; McDonald, Caso, & Fugit, 2005; Poulin, Silver, & Kauffman, 2006; Roos et al., 2005; Shastri, 2001; Whitbourne, Collins, & Skultety, 2001). While not the focus of the present article, civic engagement is another construct thought to be related to participation in service-learning. Civic engagement, when defined in terms that are broader than just political participation, is a realistic potential outcome from participation in service-learning activities. These outcomes have been described within schools and institutions of higher education as pro-social behaviors exhibited by students through involvement in activities that benefit themselves in addition to their educational programs and institutions (Lerner, 2004).

In addition to potential benefits for students, there are potential benefits for faculty, the institution, and the community. For faculty, service-learning is an innovative and emerging approach to teaching course material. Further, faculty form relationships with community organizations, which may be interested in collaborating on community-based research projects. However, there are potential drawbacks for faculty as service-learning work is not always valued by the larger university in tenure consideration (Holland, 1999; Kramer, 2000). For the college or university, service learning can help to meet institutional missions that are founded in working for and within the community. Finally, for the community organizations, service-learning projects provide resources, including time and innovative ideas, and services, that might otherwise be unavailable.

Courses incorporating service-learning activities often focus on supporting or strengthening students' mastery of in-class coursework, understanding of critical skills required for their future profession, professionalism, and civic responsibility (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000; Prentice, 2007; Toews & Cerny, 2005). A study of 22,236 college undergraduates suggested that service-learning participation contributed to positive outcomes related to academic performance, self-efficacy, values, and career choice (Astin et al., 2000). Similarly, another study of 166 community college students found that participation in service-learning activities positively impacted students' attitudes toward civic engagement (Prentice, 2007).

Despite gains in realizing the potential benefits of and outcomes related to service-learning, there remain substantial gaps in knowledge about the impact of service-learning on students. Some of the research is inconclusive, especially considering behavior change and sustained changes in attitude and behavior over time (Bringle, Phillips, & Hudson, 2004; Eyler & Giles, 1999). The majority of published research has focused on the process and practice of developing and teaching service-learning courses rather than the outcomes (Johnson, 2005; Lemieux & Allen, 2007; Sather, Weitz, & Carlson, 2007; Singleton, 2007; Whitbourne et al., 2001). Increased calls for accountability and evidence-based practice in higher education (e.g., U.S. Department of Higher Education, 2006) suggest that quality assessment using objective instruments is necessary (Steinke & Buresh, 2002; Steinke & Fitch, 2007). Eyler (2000) suggests a need for additional research in three main areas: 1) intellectual outcomes of service-learning; 2) development of standardized and valid outcome measures; and 3) identification of best-practice techniques and methods.

Undergraduate students pursuing degrees in family studies, social work, and related fields frequently engage in service-learning activities and projects as a means to familiarize them with human service agencies. Participation in service-learning activities also helps students learn how to assess and respond to the needs of individuals and families in their local communities. The current study assessed four potential outcomes associated with participation in a service-learning course including: academics, career, civic responsibility, and empowerment. The rationale for including each of these is described within the methods section.

Method

Participants

Participants were undergraduate college students enrolled in an upper-level undergraduate course required for Family Studies majors at a large, east coast, metropolitan university. After receiving approval from the University's Institutional Review Board (IRB), students from six different classes offered over a three-year period were asked to participate. A service-learning project was required as part of the class; but participation in the research study was voluntary. Nearly all of the students enrolled in the course agreed to participate in the research study ($N = 143$ out of 150 or 95%).

Similar to the demographics of the Family Studies major, almost all of the students were women (96.5%, $n = 138$) and most students identified their race as Caucasian (78.2%, $n = 111$) or African American (15.4%, $n = 15$). The average age of the students was 22.57 years ($SD = 2.22$). The majority were Family Studies majors (79.0%, $n = 113$), and the remainder (15%, $n = 22$) had a double major in Family Studies and Psychology, Sociology, or Deaf Studies.

Overview of the Family Studies Service-Learning Course

The Community Services for Families course was designed to introduce students to the application of knowledge about families and human services through completion of a group service-learning project. The course was created with learning outcomes relevant to the family studies field, including the use of program planning, development, and evaluation skills within human service agencies. The course was also designed to support student development of professional skills for the family and broader human service fields including interpersonal and administrative skills, as well as to understand how ethics and professional responsibility affect direct service work with individuals and families. Students participated in weekly 2.5-hour class sessions in addition to spending time outside of the classroom to complete their service-learning project. Class sessions provided students a forum to discuss their projects and reflect on their field experiences. The course curriculum also emphasized diversity and cultural competence, group work and program planning, development, and evaluation. Reflective assignments that incorporated examination of personal biases and expectations were used to further emphasize the importance of diversity and culture.

The students worked in groups of three or four and identified an appropriate family-service organization from a list of agencies approved by the instructor to partner with and complete a service-learning project. Organizations varied from schools to hospitals to other non-profit organizations as service learning can take place in various settings (Marlin-Bennett, 2002). The types of work completed also varied; some were clinical in nature while others were administrative. Students may have found their group providing direct services, preventative education, or coordinating family support services within the community. Projects could also involve the development of new services or the enhancement and evaluation of existing services within an organization. All projects were completely or partially based on findings from a small agency organizational assessment the students completed during the first few weeks of the semester. These assessments included interviews with site supervisors conducted by student groups with guidance from course instructors. Each student was required to spend between 40 and 60 hours per semester working at or on behalf of the organization. For example, one student group developed family resource binders for a child-life unit at a local hospital while another group assisted with youth program development for Habitat for Humanity.

As Horwood (1995) identified, reflection is a strategy that helps students integrate and make meaning of their community experiences. Reflection has been demonstrated through research to be an essential part of service-learning (Boud, Cohen, & Walker, 1993, Eyler & Giles, 1999; Gray et al., 1999). As part of this course, students were required to integrate their field experiences through course assignments. Journal entries allowed students to systematically observe and reflect upon the community environment, while integrating their experiences with concepts learned in class. The synthesis paper completed at the end of the semester provided a final opportunity for reflection. In this paper, students were able to demonstrate their learning throughout the semester, and to integrate the experience they gained through service-learning with knowledge acquired in the classroom.

While faculty may benefit from the opportunity to engage in partnerships with community agencies, it is important to note that developing and instructing a service-learning course has unique challenges. For example, developing new service-learning opportunities is time-consuming and not always valued the same as other research activities. For example, the Campus Compact (2009) surveyed members in 2008 and reported that 85% of respondents were engaged in service learning as part of their workload, but there was no information provided regarding

how it was valued by the administration. Once relationships have been initiated, the faculty member must stay in contact with the agency to assess the appropriateness of student projects and monitor students once engaged in the community.

Procedures and Measures

At the conclusion of the initial and final class sessions, students were asked to complete the Higher Education Service-Learning Survey (HESLS; Diaz-Gallegos, Furco, & Yamada, 1999). This 29-item self-report measure includes four subscales that are intended to assess changes in students' attitudes and perceptions regarding *academics* (6 items), *career* (6 items), *empowerment* (8 items), and *civic responsibility* (9 items). Sample statements assessing *academics* include "I find the content in school courses intellectually stimulating" and "I learn more when courses contain hands-on activities." Engaging students in their learning within the classroom by providing opportunities to practice using skills in real-life situations through service-learning is a cornerstone of the family studies program. *Career* was assessed with statements such as "I have definite career plans" and "I feel well-prepared for my future career." Advising is required for all family studies students involved with this study. A common sentiment among students (and sometimes their parents) is "what does one do with a degree in family studies?" and "What types of jobs are there for people who have such skills?" One goal of using service-learning in the community service course was to further advance students' knowledge of career opportunities by connecting them with practicing professionals in various agencies servicing individuals and families. *Empowerment* was assessed with statements such as "I can make a positive difference in my life" and "I feel that I have little control over the things that happen to me" [reverse-scored item]. Empowerment is a complex construct, but notions of empowerment and teaching students to feel more confident in their abilities to be successful and make a difference in the world through their work is a core value of the family studies program. Finally, sample statements assessing *civic responsibility* include "I am concerned about local community issues" and "I think that people should find time to contribute to their community." This service-learning project is the first hands-on experience students are exposed to within their major. One of the goals is to introduce students to various parts of their community and engage them in understanding the importance of volunteerism and community service. Students reported how much they agreed or disagreed with the statements using a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 4 ("strongly agree") with several items reverse-coded. Reliability for the four sub-scales ranged from fair to good with Cronbach alpha coefficients of .612 for *empowerment*, .654 for *career*, .708 for *academics*, and .746 for *civic responsibility*.

In addition to using the HESLS, the researchers asked the following two open-ended questions: 1) Did the service-learning component of this course meet your expectations? Why or why not? and 2) Did your participation in the service component of this class enhance your understanding of course material?

Results

All quantitative data was coded and analyzed using SPSS 14.0. To assess overall change among the four outcomes of interest (*academic*, *career*, *empowerment*, and *civic responsibility*) the researchers used dependent *t* tests to compare pre and post-test scores on the various subscales. The open-ended responses or written examples provided by the students were coded according to the four primary outcomes of interest using a modified template analysis process to identify evidence for the existence of the four primary outcomes of interest (Crabtree & Miller, 1999). For responses that did not fit the definition of these categories, new categories were

developed by the researchers. Three members of the research team coded the data independently from each other and then compared results, which are described in this section.

Academics. Average scores reported for the *academics* subscale were significantly higher at post-test; $M = 19.73$ ($SD = 2.11$) for pre-test compared to $M = 20.05$ ($SD = 2.10$) for post-test [$t(142) = -2.108, p = .037$]. A separate open-ended question asking students what they learned about themselves or others as a result of the service-learning project was included at the end of the survey. Several statements supported an improvement in how students felt about their learning in class and the use of the service-learning project to enhance learning. For example, one student wrote, "...hands on experience is necessary in school involvement. I learned better in that environment."

Career. Average scores reported for the *career* subscale were significantly higher at post-test; $M = 18.63$ ($SD = 2.46$) for pre-test compared to $M = 19.25$ ($SD = 2.30$) for post-test [$t(142) = -3.156, p = .002$]. Analysis of the open-ended responses to the general question, "what did you learn about yourself or others as a result of participating in a service-learning project" also supported a change in knowledge and attitudes about career options within the family studies field following completion of the service-learning project. One student reported, "The project reiterated my belief that I want to be a human service worker and that I will be successful at it." Another student wrote, "I understand what human service workers do now, I have a better respect for the time and care that goes into planning for an organization." Some students identified specific populations they would or would not want to work with or settings in which they might want to work, "I learned that adolescents are not as difficult to work with as I thought," and "Hospitals aren't really that bad to work in."

Empowerment. While changes in scores for the *empowerment* subscale were not statistically significant at the $p < .05$ level, analysis of open-ended data revealed that students may have developed an increased sense of empowerment from their service-learning experience. Some examples of this included: "I learned I am capable of doing anything if I put my mind to [it]..." "I learned I have the patience, tolerance, and flexibility to work in a human service setting," "patience is a true determinant of character," and "... you alone are the one who inhibits your growth as an individual."

Civic responsibility. Average scores on the *civic responsibility* subscale did not differ significantly from one another at pre-test and post-test ($p < .05$); however the students' responses to open-ended questions suggest there may have been some changes in attitudes in a positive direction. Examples of improved sense of civic responsibility include statements such as, "I realize how important it is to help out the community" and "... [I] want to continue volunteering my time."

Additional themes. Students' responses to the open-ended questions about what they learned about themselves and others as a result of the service-learning project did not fit neatly into the four subscales. Three additional themes emerged through this analysis: group work, leadership skills, and empathy. Students comments reflect what they learned about their feelings about group work and about their capacity to work in *groups*: "I prefer individual work and projects," "I have learned that I get aggravated more easily when working in a group," "working in a group is not as bad as I had anticipated," and "I work well in groups when I thought I wouldn't." Other students' responses reflect what they learned about their feelings about *leadership* and about their capacity to lead: "It is Ok not to be the leader because everyone in the group is just as important," "I learned that I am a hard worker and can be a leader," "I am not a natural leader, I need to work on my leadership skills," and "I have learned that I need to speak-up more and be

more assertive.” A final theme, which emerged from this analysis, was *empathy* or understanding of vulnerable and at-risk populations. Representative responses include: “Stereotypes are always untrue. They are what keep you from new experiences,” “I learned to accept people as human beings and not just as homeless, poor, etc,” “. . . disability doesn’t define an individual,” “at-risk students want to do well,” and “I have personal biases working with diverse cultures.”

Additional survey questions. The survey also included a question about whether or not the service-learning component of the course met students’ expectations. Students who responded ‘Yes’ ($n = 107$, 74.8%) scored significantly higher on the *career* subscale at the time of the post-test data collection [$t(129) = -2.050$, $p = .042$]. None of the other outcomes post-test scores were statistically significant ($p < .05$). Examples from the open-ended responses supporting how the project met their expectations included: “we [the group] actually completed a project and felt good about what we did,” “it actually exceeded them [student’s expectations]— I learned a lot about myself and personal things I need to work on,” and “I expected it to be more fun, it was more work than fun, but I still liked it a lot.”

Another question on the survey asked whether or not participation in the service-learning project enhanced students’ understanding of course material. Of those students who responded ‘Yes’, 83.9% ($n = 120$), there were no significant differences found at post-test among the four outcomes of interest. Scores for the academic subscale were approaching significance ($p = .071$). Additionally, results from the qualitative analysis of open-ended responses suggested a change in students’ understanding of how they learn as a result of participating in the service-learning experience. Some students noted that service learning offered an opportunity to apply course content in the real world. Representative comments included: “we brought what we were learning in class to the community” and “you talk about service in class, then you go into society and implement it, you get to see things happen instead of reading about it.” Furthermore, many students reported that they were “hands-on” learners and the service-learning project helped them understand course content. It appears that students appreciated the opportunity to apply course content and that this application enhanced students’ understanding of course content.

While not a focus of the current study, the researchers were interested in understanding whether participation in service-learning activities affects long-term behavior related to volunteerism. One of the questions addressing sustainable behavior after conclusion of the course was whether or not the student planned to continue volunteering at their service-learning agency. A little over one-third ($n = 51$, 35.6%) of the students responded positively that they planned to continue volunteering. The researchers compared students who planned to continue volunteering to those who did not plan to continue with regard to the four outcomes of interest. Results suggested that at the time of the post-test survey, students who reported they were planning to continue with their agency also reported a better understanding of their future career options and a better attitude toward civic responsibility ($p = .029$ and $.003$, respectively). As will be discussed further in the limitations section below, this was not a longitudinal study. Thus, this survey addressed students’ intentions to continue volunteering but we did not study students’ actual volunteering activities following the conclusion of the course.

Strengths and Limitations

This study has several limitations and also several noteworthy strengths. First, the use of a pre- and post-test cohort design precludes the researchers’ ability to make causal statements regarding the changes observed; however, a prospective cohort design is appropriate given the exploratory nature of this study. Further, this research design builds on results from other studies

using cross-sectional or post-test only designs. While the use of a pre-test (post-test design builds on existing research), it is important that future researchers utilize longitudinal designs with follow-up data collection to measure the impact of multiple service-learning experiences and the potential sustainability of changes in attitudes and behaviors over time. Ideally, this research would include control groups of students who are not engaged in service-learning activities.

Finally, the sample used in this study was made up entirely of Family Studies majors or double majors and was predominantly women; therefore, results cannot be generalized to the larger university student population. Students' interest in a subject matter may influence the extent to which service-learning enhances their development (Astin et al., 2000), potentially resulting in students who are more interested in the course content might reap more benefits from the class. To address these limitations, future research assessing the impact of service-learning on professional development and attitudes toward civic responsibility and engagement should include more diverse populations. The response rate for this study was high (almost 100%) which is likely because the survey was completed during class. While this may have contributed to social desirability bias, the final post-test survey was not included in graded material.

Discussion

Results of this study are consistent with other studies linking participation in service-learning projects to enhanced understanding of their coursework, career options, professional development, and importance of service within local communities (Astin et al., 2000; Eyler, Giles, Stenson, & Gray, 2001; Prentice, 2007; Toncar, Reid, Burns, Anderson, & Nguyen, 2006). Specifically, participation in service-learning has been shown to improve students' understanding of course material and the importance of what was being learned in class would be applied to future careers in family studies (Sikula & Sikula, 2005). Results differed from those of Bunde and Howlett (2008) who reported that while the majority of students surveyed reported enjoying participating in the service-learning project, there were no significant changes in post-test scores on the four subscales of the HSLES. In the present study, not all students reported having a positive experience completing their service-learning project and some who did not enjoy the project or working in a group still experienced positive changes in the areas of education/academic career, and civic responsibility.

Overall, the study's findings were supportive of student development in two of the four primary outcomes: *academics* and *career*. It is powerful to see how participation in a single service-learning project over the course of only one semester can contribute to observable changes in students' perceptions and understanding of their career goals and education. Prior research has noted that dramatic results should not be expected from only one class (Argosy Foundation, 2007). In a human services field of study, such as Family Studies, it is common for students, as well as their parents, to question how their knowledge from the classroom will be applied in the real world post-graduation. Engaging students in service-learning experiences, such as the ones described in this study, is one method for teaching students how they can apply what they are learning in the classroom to careers in human services focused on helping families and organizations within the community.

The third subscale, *empowerment*, did not result in statistically significant scores between pre-test and post-test. Empowerment is a complex construct and may be one that is difficult to measure with only a few questions. Furthermore, empowerment incorporates more static personality characteristics related to self-esteem, self-efficacy, and locus of control. While the quantitative data did not support a significant improvement, students' responses to open-ended

questions suggested improvement in areas of leadership development, assertiveness, and self-esteem. Improvements in these areas are supported by the literature (Astin et al., 2000; Eyler et al., 2001; Wade, 1997).

With regard to *civic responsibility*, students' responses to open-ended questions suggested improved attitudes toward volunteering and working with and on behalf of one's community. Prior research supports the notion that participation in service-learning can contribute to an enhanced sense of citizenship and that students who participate in community-based learning projects are more likely to stay active and concerned with public affairs in the future (Annette, 1999; Astin, 1999). While not objectively measured in the present study, many students reported a desire and plan to continue volunteering with their community organization after the project ended. However, this study did not confirm students' subsequent participation, as there was no follow-up with the students once the class ended.

Themes that emerged from the open-ended statements that did not fit neatly into the pre-existing service-learning outcomes measured by the HSLES included leadership, group work, and the development of empathy for vulnerable persons or diverse populations. These three areas relate to empowerment and civic responsibility, but also have unique traits that have been reported in prior research (Eyler et al., 2001; Roldan, Stage, & David, 2004; Sanders, McFarland, & Bartolli, 2003). Future research should incorporate measures of these categories. However, it is important to note that not all service-learning occurs in groups; thus, group measures would not be pertinent to all service-learning research.

While the current study has notable limitations, results yield important implications for the development of undergraduate family studies and other human service curriculum. Findings highlight the value of integrating service-learning methods into existing teaching pedagogy, with results demonstrating the potential for enhanced student attitudes toward civic responsibility and engagement, as well as academic and career outcomes. Improved understanding of course content and how what they learn in class will translate to skills useful for their future career may help students focus on the attainment of additional skills and relevant undergraduate coursework as they complete their academic study. Additionally, increased appreciation of education and human service careers may contribute to increased numbers of students becoming interested in pursuing graduate work in family science or social work.

The current job market for college graduates is highly competitive, and graduating from college is no longer a guarantee of a good job. Participation in service-learning projects and other related activities within the community provides students opportunities to network with potential employers and build skills that can help them more smoothly transition from school to full-time employment, post-graduation. Colleges and universities are beginning to recognize the potential benefits of service-learning as a teaching method that can contribute to bridging the gap between course content and applied knowledge and experience. Additionally, local community agencies are served through service-learning projects, often benefiting from services they would otherwise not be able to afford or have time to provide to families (Nigro & Wortham, 1998).

Service-learning clearly represents an opportunity for both students and the local communities with which they interact. While the time that is necessary to organize a service-learning course is substantial, if the outcomes lead to more engaged students and satisfied community organizations, this clearly represents a win-win for university settings seeking to build stronger relationships with their students and the surrounding communities. Institutions of higher learning should recognize these additional duties that are inherent in service-learning courses and continue to support faculty who take on this challenge.

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