

Benefits of Service-Learning in a Youth Development Program

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Service-learning requirements in higher education courses have been found to be a positive educational experience in a variety of disciplines and at many different institutions of higher education. Service-learning is also known as one form of High Impact Practices (HIPs) which Kuh (2008) found to be beneficial to college students from a variety of backgrounds. In addition, in 2006 the Carnegie Foundation added community engagement as an elective classification emphasizing the value of community engagement in higher education. The goal of service learning and community engagement is for students to take the knowledge they learn in a course and implement it in their communities. Research on service learning has found that it gives students the opportunity to apply course knowledge skills and acquire awareness about their discipline and community (Desmond et al., 2011; Hildenbrand & Shultz, 2015; Jenkins A. & Miller et al, 2018, Sheehey, P., 2011; Rockenbach et al., 2014; Stringfellow & Edmonds-Benred, 2013; Weiler et al., 2013; Wilson, 2008). Service learning positively impacts the academic knowledge of students as well as impacting their personal development and community understanding. Both learning outcomes are beneficial to the overall educational experiences of undergraduate students.

The research on service learning as a strategy for developing civic engagement and community awareness has been documented to be effective (Weiler et al., 2013). In addition, the Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) has published two books on service-learning research: Volume 2A of *Research on Service Learning: Conceptual frameworks and Assessments* focuses on Students and Faculty (Clayton et al, 2012) and Volume 2B of *Research on Service Learning: Conceptual frameworks and Assessments* focuses on Communities, Institutions, and Partnerships (Clayton et al,

ABSTRACT

Undergraduate students majoring in child and family development (CHFD) at a southeastern public doctoral/research university were required to complete 14 hours of service learning in a local after school program as part of the course requirements in a class titled *Youth Development*. The course is a required course for majors and reviews research, theory, and practice as they relate to the development of children ages 6 to 18 years as well as planning and implementing developmentally appropriate youth programming. A two-page survey measure called the *Benefits of Academic Community Engagement (BACE)* developed by Miller, Mehta, and McCauley (2018) was used to assess the benefits of the service-learning requirement in this course. Findings from this three-year (six semester) study found evidence in support of service learning as means of hands-on pre-services learning experiences with children ages 6-12 in an undergraduate class (N=219).

2013). The authors of both volumes bring perspectives from a variety of disciplines to aid in the research on the impact of service learning to meet community needs. Civic engagement and community awareness are important, but in disciplines such as CHFD it is also valuable for students to get hands-on experience with children and youth.

Teacher Education Programs

The mission of higher education laboratory early childhood programs has remained consistent over time and are an important, if not vital, component in the education of early childhood preservice teachers and professionals. University laboratory programs have strived to be higher quality model programs that are implementing the most current trends in early childhood education as well as meeting the new challenges and changing needs of children. Unfortunately, most elementary, middle school, and high school laboratory schools no longer exist on university campuses but thankfully early childhood laboratory schools at some universities have survived budget cuts and criticism. Therefore, students are getting valuable pre-service experiences and training with young children but no longer with school-age children and older. Laboratory childcare programs provide students the opportunity to apply theory to practice with children ages six weeks to five years in a supervised classroom environment. Students get hands-on experiences in infant, toddler, and preschool classrooms with related written assignments and a periodic evaluation of skills.

Due to the lack of laboratory schools for elementary school children service learning in undergraduate courses can provide hands-on pre-service experience with school-age children and research on these requirements have found positive results. In a study by Fleck et al. (2017) on service learning a control group was given the course content but did not participate in service learning at a Boys and Girls Club, the non-control group was given the course content and participated in service learning at a Boys and Girls Club. Findings indicated that the service-learning students performed significantly better on their exams and reflected more in-depth course knowledge assessed via written assignments. In another study, Whitley, et al. (2017a), "findings included the development of leadership, self-confidence, self-understanding, self-efficacy, and tolerance, along with increased sensitivity to and awareness of diversity and reduction in stereotypical beliefs" (p. 426). In another discipline, Fisher et al. (2017) found that therapeutic recreation students perceived service learning to be academically and personally beneficial when compared to non-therapeutic recreation students. Students benefitted from the service-learning component of a course which allowed students to gain experience and practice skills learned in course work preparing them to be future recreational therapists.

Teacher education research indicates service-learning as an effective means of preparing pre-service teachers for future classroom settings (Chambers & Lavery, 2012; Chen, 2004; Legette, 2018; Nelson, 2013). In addition to teacher education program, undergraduates in fields like child and family development, psychology, and social work can benefit from service-learning experiences. McElwain et al (2016) had undergraduate service-learning students implement a relationship education program for high school students in their community. The relationship education program was beneficial to the high school students but also enhanced the student's professional development and hands-on learning. In another study, Legette (2018) was concerned

by a lack of preservice Pre-K experiences in his music teacher education degree program, so he created a service-learning experience in Pre-K settings for students in an elementary music education teaching methods course. College students were required to spend one hour a week in a community childcare program for a semester. Undergraduate students taught a variety of music related activities each week and then reflected on the experience by writing two papers. The children in the childcare centers gained music education experiences that they otherwise might not have had access to otherwise. Three of the centers were in low-income neighborhoods. The result was a valuable learning experience that benefited the community, the children, and the preservice music teachers.

In a study by Mergler et al (2017) researchers explored the value of service learning on preservice teachers in Australia looking specifically at the need for preservice teachers to embrace and understand diversity. There is increased emphasis in Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) in many disciplines. The repeated measure design found that fourth year pre-service teachers reported significantly higher levels of confidence in supporting diversity, willingness to be inclusive, and were more prepared to teach diverse students after the service-learning requirement. The students had other coursework related to teaching children from diverse backgrounds, but the pre- and post-test design did quantify growth in the one semester that the pre-service teachers had the unity on inclusive education and the required service-learning experience. Working with diverse populations of children is the goal and reality for becoming an inclusive teacher and university laboratory schools are not always representative of a diversity in SES, race, or ethnicity.

In the discipline of Child and Family Development (CHFD), one goal of the undergraduate major is to educate students to teach in a childcare classroom or a Pre-K classroom. The undergraduate students majoring in CHFD are required to take three courses designed to teach about development and teaching methods and skills from conception through the first five years of life and apply them in the university laboratory childcare center where students get hands-on experience with infants, toddlers, and preschoolers. A study by Hall et al. (2017) completed at this same institution assessed the effectiveness of the three-course sequence and found that the laboratory classes were an effective means of promoting understanding and developmentally appropriate practices in undergraduate students. While laboratory schools are a more controlled environment since they are units within a university, it is hypothesized that service-learning experiences could have the same benefit for undergraduate students working with a different age group. It is one thing to lecture on how to work with young children, school-age children, the elderly, or children with special needs but more beneficial to provide students with hands-on experiences with these populations via service-learning opportunities.

In addition to early childhood jobs, a degree in CHFD prepares students to work at summer camps, with after school programs, or in 4-H. To address the lack of hands-on experiences with school age children at this institution, a service-learning requirement was added to a course examining the development of children ages 6 to 18 titled *Youth Development*. Without a laboratory school, service learning at local after school programs has been a valuable pre-service learning experience for undergraduate students.

The Service-Learning Requirement in Youth Development

Youth Development is a required major course and can also be used as one of the course choices for the CHFD minor. The course description states that “this course reviews research, theory, and practice as they relate to the physical, cognitive, language, aesthetic, and social and emotional development of children ages 6 to 18 years. Emphasis will be on current issues that relate to these years and planning and implementing developmentally appropriate youth programming.” *Youth Development* requires students to complete 14 hours of service learning in one of three after school program settings in the community. Community engagement knowledge is gained by understanding the need for after-school care in communities. While all communities have public schools not all have after school programs which are operated by a variety of organization across the United States. After a presentation from the site directors, students chose the site to complete their hours. While at the site, students were not there to observe but to interact with the children/youth in that program and serve as an additional member of the staff/child ratio. The learning element is applying and critiquing what students have learned in *Youth Development* and other CHFD course content with their experience at the site. One site in the study was no longer a service-learning option after the Spring Semester of 2017. The three sites have different missions and serve children from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds. One program was free, another subsidized by donations and fundraising, one funded by tuition, the third funded by parent tuition.

After the students selected a site and had a favorable background check, they could begin their hours. The instructor made sure students enrolled in the course know they must have a background check and time in their course schedule between 2:00 and 6:00 in the afternoon since their site is an after-school program prior to enrolling in the course. The days of the week are flexible but not the times of the day. This course is offered online in the summer to accommodate students whose schedule does not work to complete the hours or if students do not have transportation. The instructor does encourage carpooling and none of the sites are further than 10 miles from campus.

Using the definition of service learning stated earlier, the service element is for the students to serve as an additional member of the staff/child ratios at each site. The learning element is applying and critiquing what students have learned in *Youth Development*. From the first day of class, the focus is on how to work with school-age children in a youth development program, specifically an after-school program. Lectures on a high quality after school environment, a daily schedule, building relations with children, behavior management skills, and program planning are embedded into the course outline in addition to lectures on the physical, cognitive, and social/emotional development of school-age children. The goal is for students to be knowledgeable and prepared as they complete their service-learning hours. To assess course content learning, three two-page reflection papers were assigned. The students were also required to plan and conduct a developmentally appropriate activity at their chosen site. The course content coincides with the reflection papers' due dates and prepares the students for what they will experience at the site. There can be some anxiety for students who have little experience with this age group and/or have not been in an after-school program. The first paper reflects their first impression of the site and their

goals for the service-learning experience. The second paper asked the student to reflect on an observed behavior challenge with children and critique how it was handled. The final paper asks students to use the readings and course content to critique the program: indoor space, outdoor space, daily schedule, and program elements. These papers were given to each site after the semester was over with student names removed to aid in program improvement. Without a laboratory school, service learning at local after school programs has been a valuable pre-service learning experience for undergraduate students. The focus of this study was to assess the undergraduate students' perceptions of the benefits of the required hands-on experiences with youth in a local after school programs using a scale developed at another university.

Method

Participants

During the last week of classes every semester, an IRB approved a consent letter, and the written survey were passed out to students enrolled in the course from Fall 2015-Fall 2017. The researcher explained that the survey was designed to assess the effectiveness of service learning and would not have any impact on individual course grades. Students were given the right to take the survey or to refrain. No incentives for participating in the research were given. If students chose not to participate, they were asked to sit quietly in their seat until the survey was completed and collected.

Measure

At Sam Houston State University, Miller, Mehta, and McCauley (2018) developed a measure called the Benefits of Academic Community Engagement (BACE) scale to assess student's perceptions of growth in social responsibility and personal development of the Office of Academic Planning and Assessment at their university. The faculty developed the instrument and then conducted three studies of the instrument's validity and reliability. The goal was to create an instrument that could be used by a variety of disciplines and was easy to administer. The results of the three studies yielded an instrument with strong reliability and validity and a factor analysis yielded two factors they called personal development and social responsibility. The authors gave permission for the scale to be used at this southeastern public doctoral/research university.

The two-page survey has 20 questions using a Likert scale from 1-5, with 1 being strongly disagree and 5 being strongly agree. The second page asked demographic and classification questions. In addition, students were also asked to use three words to describe what they liked most about the service-learning part of the course and three words to describe what they liked least about the course. Because these researchers were focused on the pre-service teaching skills and after school programming, questions #13, #14, #15, and #18 were changed to assess content specific to *Youth Development* to measure gains in course content as well as personal development and social responsibility. For example, Question #14 reads "This course helped me understand effective behavior management techniques to use with youth," and Question #15 reads, "The service-learning aspect of this course showed different types of youth

development programs.” These four questions address the skills and knowledge needed to work with school-age children in a youth development program and were part of the course content. The demographic questions were summarized, and the mean scores were calculated for each of the 20 questions. The three words listed were grouped by similar answers. A one-way ANOVA was run to assess any meaningful differences between each after school site.

Results

Of the 236 students enrolled in *Youth Development* from the Fall 2015 to the Fall 2017, 176 surveys were completed (a 75% return rate). The participants included 2 males and 174 females, 145 (82%) of the students fell into the ages of 19 to 22. Among the students, 61.36% were White Caucasian, 32.39% were African American, 3.41% were Non-White Hispanic, 2.27% identified as Other, and 0.57% were Asian-American. This is not like the demographics of the student population at the university but representative of the major. The students were primarily (67%) CHFD majors. The mean scores on the 20 survey questions ranged from 3.09-4.66 (on a 5-point scale). The overall mean was 4.07 on all 20 questions, indicating an overall positive experience. The lowest mean score was Question #1 which talked about being uneasy and the lower mean indicates that students were not uneasy. The instructor tells them to go in pairs if they are apprehensive. On the non-course specific questions, the higher mean scores were for Questions #7, understanding differences, $M=4.31$ ($SD=1.08$), Question #12 applying the subject matter to the “real world”, $M=4.29$ ($SD=.93$), and Question #16 becoming more aware of the needs in the university town, $M=4.31$ ($SD=.99$).

While it is challenging to sum up pre-service teaching skills with only four questions, the four given do reflect basic skills needed to be a pre-service youth development program leader or teacher. The means for the four questions changed to reflect the *Youth Development* course were $M=4.34$ ($SD=.88$) for Questions #13, understanding developmentally appropriate youth programming and planning, $M=4.29$ ($SD=.96$) for Question #14, understanding effective behavior management techniques, $M=4.13$ ($SD=1.04$) for Question #15, different types of youth development programs, and $M=4.22$ ($SD=1.08$) Question #18, using the skills developed in the course in future career. On a 5-point Likert scale, the meant scores were high and affirm that most students perceived themselves to be learning and applying course content at the service-learning youth development program. The highest means and smaller standard deviations were related to youth programming and behavior management techniques which are basic and necessary skills to work in a youth development program (see Table 1).

Table 1.

Benefits of Service Learning in Youth Development Course

Question	M	SD
1. At the beginning of the semester, I was uneasy about the service-learning component of the course.	3.08	1.28
2. Participating in the community helped enhance my <i>leadership skills</i> .	4.07	1.02
3. The service-learning I did in this course helped me <i>analyze problems</i> .	4.10	1.06
4. The service-learning I did in this course helped me to <i>think critically</i> .	3.95	1.04
5. The service-learning in this course helped me to develop <i>workplace skills</i> .	3.97	1.09
6. The service-learning in this course has made me <i>more employable</i> .	4.06	1.05
7. The service-learning in this course assisted me in defining the <i>type of work</i> I want to do in the future.	3.84	1.08
8. Participation in the community helped enhance my <i>communication skills</i> .	4.04	0.99
9. The service-learning in this course helped me to develop <i>organizational skills</i> .	3.63	1.13
10. The service-learning in this course helped me to connect <i>theory with practice</i> .	3.93	1.07
11. Working in the community helped me to define my personal <i>strengths and weaknesses</i> .	4.04	0.99
12. The service-learning in this course helped me to apply the subject matter in a “real world” situation.	4.29	0.93
*13. This course helped me understand developmentally appropriate youth programming and planning.	4.34	0.88
*14. This course helped me understand effective behavior management techniques to use with youth.	4.29	0.96
*15. The service-learning aspect of this course showed different types of youth development programs.	4.13	1.04
16. The service-learning aspect of this course helped me to become more aware of the needs in <i>my community</i> .	4.22	0.99
17. This course helped me understand differences (i.e., cultural, racial, economic, etc.) that exist in our community.	4.31	1.08
*18. I probably will use the skills I developed in this course in my future career.	4.22	1.08
19. I would recommend this course to a friend, specifically because of the service-learning aspect.	3.62	1.34
20. At the <i>end</i> of the semester, I thought that the service-learning aspect of this course was valuable.	4.21	1.09

*Questions revised to fit content in this course.

Of the four questions that were revised to reflect course content, total ($n=176$) mean scores for each agency were: Site A 4.61, Site B 4.47, and Site C 4.17. A one-way ANOVA between agencies indicated no significant differences, therefore no matter which agency students chose they had similar experiences which is important to the instructor. All three sites resulted in the same experience, so no one group of students gained more from one site than the other. This was important to ensure that students at one site were not getting different experiences than the students at another site.

The two open-ended survey questions asked for three separate words indicating what they liked most and disliked most about the experience. The top four most common words listed as liked were *Children, Experience, Relationships, and Fun*.

These words indicate the first and foremost the undergraduate students enjoyed their time with the children. This is a frequent comment on the course student ratings of instruction. The instructor encourages the students to build relationships with the children and the children always ask them when they are coming back. The instructor emphasizes that fun is not the goal, but education and enrichment are the goals of after school programs, but it is positive that the students enjoy the experience and call it fun. The top four most common words listed as disliked were *Time-consuming, Unorganized, Behavior, staff* (see Table 2). Spending 14 hours during a semester in an after-school program requires planning and time management skills so it was not surprising that students mentioned time consuming. After school programs are active, loud, programs, which are important since the children have been sitting in a classroom all day, but students find them a little chaotic. Challenging behaviors exist and the students are developing effective behavior management techniques which is why there is a question about behavior management. Since it was an open-ended question there were a wide variety of answers and only 9 students did not answer these two questions, Overall, top four words listed are not surprising and consistent with the Students Rating of Instruction Survey (SRI) administered by the university every semester. While the SRI information was not part of the IRB approved study, the SRI reports have consistently listed working with the children in service learning as a benefit and the time involved to complete the hours as a hinderance.

Table 2.

Words Used to Describe Service-Learning

Answer	Frequency
Most Liked	
Children	85
Relationships	59
Fun	49
Relationships	45
Most Disliked	
Time-consuming	94
Unorganized	46
Behavior	44
Staff	40

The service-learning experience helped the undergraduate students apply the course content to the “real world” and helped the students become more aware of the needs in the local community. Some students report having lived in communities where there are no after-school programs. After school programs are vital for all communities since children need them before, after, and full day care when schools are not in session. This experience gave the students a sense of what the local community

provided especially compared to their home community, The experience also helped the student understand cultural, racial, and socio-economic differences in the local community. Another important outcome is that students learn about the elements of high quality after school care and realize differences in quality of care.

Discussion

The 20-question survey assessed the goals of service learning in higher education and specifically this course content. The findings indicate that the service-learning requirement in *Youth Development* is beneficial to students prior to graduation, much like the positive research findings from teacher education programs (Chambers & Lavery, 2012; Chen, 2004; Legette, 2018; Mergler et al, 2017, Nelson, 2013). When the instructor first started requiring service learning in 2010, the service-learning and the HIPS terms were very new, and the primary goal was for students to interact with school-age children. When the researcher learned of the BACE survey it provided a measure to assess student learning other than grades and SRIs. These results found that the service-learning requirement contributed to the students' academic knowledge of youth development and their personal development based on the questions asked in the survey. Their short answer statements indicated that the students benefitted from the relationships that they built with the children at the afterschool programs. CHFD majors want to work with children professionally, so it makes sense that they enjoy getting to know and mentoring the children who attend the program. The children bonded quickly with the college students and asked them frequently when they were coming back again so the extra adults benefitted the youth enrolled in the program.

In addition, the students were able to critique the way programs were organized and the ways challenging children's behavior was managed. The word "unorganized" appeared in the disliked question. This was not surprising since after school programs are busy and full of lots of social interaction. School-age children are learning rules, pro-social behavior, and test limits. Managing behaviors in a youth development program involves learning skills and take practice to perfect. High quality programs are not an extension of the school day so they can appear a bit chaotic at times. This course adds to student's experience since it is the only class in the child and family development major that offers hands on experience with children 6–12-year-olds. Students enrolled in the course gained a better understanding of high-quality after-school programming and behavior management techniques. In addition, students believe this course will be beneficial to their future careers.

One major limitation of this study is that the results are based on descriptive statistics and not inferential statistics. In addition, all the information was self-reported by the students. The study could be strengthened using control groups and pre and post test data. Ryan (2017) used control groups to assess the student learning of students who completed 10 hours of service-learning at a nursing home, assisted living facility, or hospice location. She found a significant increase in aspects of social responsibility, empathy, and community and personal involvement in the service-learning group but not in the control group. This was a gerontology related course which added to student's understanding of our older adult population by working with seniors in a variety of settings in the same community at the same university in the present study. A future study could get IRB approval to analyze the students' required three reflection papers

which could contribute to the literature on what students learn by completing the service-learning hours.

Even without a control group and pre and post test data these findings support the importance of service-learning as means of pre-service experiences with children ages 6-12. In addition, this study does contribute to the literature supporting the use of service-learning in the discipline of Child and Family Development for pre-service teachers. Laboratory school experiences and student teaching in K-12 schools have been used for many years but with emphasis and support of service-learning and high-impact practices in higher education more disciplines will be likely to use community organizations and services as part of the pedagogy. This literature review included the implementation of service learning in teacher education but also a therapeutic recreation, sport science, and psychology. More research needs to be done to understand the pedagogy of service learning in higher education courses and making sure students have the time and resources to get in the community. This institution did provide van transportation to sites and the instructor encouraged carpooling, but some students still struggled to get to sites. The course is offered in the summer and does not require the service-learning component to aid students who cannot fit it in their schedules.

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Author Note

This project was a three-year evaluation completed with the help of three undergraduate students: Katherine Delp, Kristen Pritchett, and Victoria Harper