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Student and Agency Personnel Perceptions of the Impact of Community Service-Learning

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate student and agency personnel perceptions of the impact of community service-learning across several different courses at a Midwestern metropolitan university. Eighty-five students and 18 community agency personnel completed the Service-Learning Index. The results of the study indicated that student and agency personnel perceptions of the impact of community service-learning were positive and similar and did not vary across academic disciplines. Perspectives about the service-learning course received the highest ratings from both students and community agency personnel. Recommendations were made to expand the community service-learning program at the university where the study took place.

Introduction

A challenging issue facing higher education today is community engagement (Meister, 1998), which is one of the strategic planning goals of the Midwestern metropolitan university where this study took place. Community service-learning provides an avenue for community engagement while strengthening and authenticating higher education's traditional goals of teaching and learning (Zlotkowski, 1998). In addition, it offers a response to President George W. Bush's "call to service", a call for all Americans to engage in community service. The U.S. Department of Education and Corporation for National and Community Service have developed the Students in Service to America guidebook and website to help educators involve students in community service ("USA Freedom Corps," 2002).

The origins of community service-learning date back to the work of John Dewey (1938) who believed that education must be based on experience in order to accomplish its goals for both the individual learner and society. Community service-learning combines service to the community with an experiential pedagogy "in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and development" (Jacoby & Associates, 1996, p. 5). Most often, community service-learning is combined with traditional classroom learning to provide students with hands-on applications of what is learned in class. Faculty members incorporate community service-learning into their courses in order to have a positive impact on students' critical thinking and problem-solving skills, student altruism and caring, and the needs of the community

(Battistoni, 1998; Benson & Harkavy, 1998; Buchanan, Baldwin, & Rudisill, 2002; Fredericksen, 2000; Pritchard, 2001).

The integration of community service-learning into college courses is growing, but little empirical research exists on its impact and benefits (Astin & Sax, 1998; Speck, 2001). To date, much of the research on the impact of community service-learning is qualitative, involving anecdotal reports (e.g., Eifler, Ziebarth, & Potthoff, 1999; Elwell, 2001; LaMaster, 2001; Neururer & Rhoads, 1998; Roschelle, Turpin, & Elias, 2000; Salz & Trubowitz, 1997; Whitbourne, Collins, & Skultety, 2001). Student reports from such qualitative research indicate that the community service-learning aspect of courses is perceived as valuable for students, helping them to personalize the lives of others, confront stereotypes, and at its pinnacle, develop an ethic of care (Neururer & Rhoads, 1998).

Most of the quantitative research on the impact of community service-learning focuses on single courses or subject areas (e.g., Fredericksen, 2000; Giles & Eyler, 1994; Markus, Howard, & King, 1993; Rowe & Chapman, 1999; Shastri, 2001). Results from such quantitative studies indicate that the community service-learning aspect of courses enhances students' academic performance (Markus et al., 1993) and sense of civic responsibility (Shastri, 2001). Only one quantitative study was found that investigated agency personnel perceptions of the impact of community service-learning, although such feedback would provide important information to programs (Ferrari & Worrall, 2000). No studies were found that investigated differences between student and agency personnel perceptions of the impact of community service-learning.

The purpose of the current study was to gather and analyze quantitative data from student and agency personnel concerning their perceptions of the impact of community service-learning across several different courses at a Midwestern metropolitan university. The study addressed the following research questions:

(1) What are student perceptions of the impact of community service-learning in the following areas: perspectives about (a) the service-learning course, (b) community involvement, and (c) the influence of service on career choice and (d) personal reflections?

(2) Are there differences in student perceptions of the impact of community service-learning across academic disciplines in the following areas: perspectives about (a) the service-learning course, (b) community involvement, and (c) the influence of service on career choice and (d) personal reflections?

(3) What are agency personnel perceptions of the impact of community service-learning in the following areas: perspectives about (a) the service-learning course, (b) the impact to the agency, and (c) community involvement and (d) reflections?

(4) Is there a difference between student and agency personnel perceptions of the impact of community service-learning in the following areas: perspectives about (a) the service-learning course and (b) community involvement and (c) reflections?

Method

Participants

The participants of the study included 85 students enrolled in community service-learning courses at a Midwestern metropolitan university during the 2002 fall and 2003 spring semesters and 18 community agency personnel who worked at the corresponding community service-learning sites. The community service-learning sites included homeless shelters, both public and private schools, Habitat for Humanity, the mayor's office, and an immigrant rights network.

The ethnicity of the majority of the students was Caucasian (93%). The students' class ranks included freshman (1%), sophomore (4%), junior (45%), senior (34%), and graduate student (15%). (Percentages do not add to 100 because of rounding.) Seventy-three percent of the students were females. Their ages included 75% under the age of 25, 11% between 25 and 34 years old, 8% between 35 and 44 years old, and 6% between 45 and 54 years old.

The ethnicity of the majority of the community agency personnel was Caucasian (83%). Seventy-eight percent of the community agency personnel were females. Their ages included 28% under the age of 25, 28% between 25 and 34 years old, 6% between 35 and 44 years old, 22% between 45 and 54 years old, and 17% over the age of 55. (Percentages do not add to 100 because of rounding.)

Instrumentation

The Service-Learning Indexes for both the university student and the community agency personnel were adapted from Driscoll et al.'s. (1998) work at Portland State University following their approval (personal communication, April 4, 2002). The Service-Learning Index for the university student included items in four main areas: perspectives about (a) the service-learning course, (b) community involvement, and (c) the influence of service on career choice and (d) personal reflections. The Service-Learning Index for the community agency personnel included items in four main areas: perspectives about (a) the service-learning course, (b) the impact to the agency, and (c) community involvement and (d) reflections. Both university students and community agency personnel responded to the items on the Service-Learning Indexes on a 5-point Likert scale from "1" strongly disagree to "5" strongly agree.

Table 1

Student Service-Learning Index Items

Perspectives about the service-learning course

1. The community participation/field experience aspect of this course helped me see how the course information can be applied in actual practice.
2. The community work/field experience I did through this course helped me to better understand the lectures and readings in this course.
3. I would have learned more from this course if more time would have been spent in the university classroom instead of doing the community work/field experience. (RK)
4. The idea of combining work in the community with university coursework should be practiced in more classes at the university.
5. I applied the knowledge that I obtained from this course at the community/school site.

Perspectives about community involvement

6. I participated as a volunteer in my community before taking this course.
7. The community participation/field experience aspect of this course showed me how I can become more involved in my community.
8. The community work/field experience I did through this course benefited the community/school.
9. I probably won't volunteer in the community after this course. (RK)
10. The community work/field experience involved in this course helped me become more aware of the needs in my community.
11. I have a responsibility to serve my community.

Perspectives about the influence of service on career choice

12. Doing work in the community helped me to define my personal strengths.
13. Doing work in the community helped me to define my personal weaknesses.
14. The community work/field experience in this course helped me verify the profession I am pursuing.
15. The work I accomplished in this course has increased the likelihood of my getting hired in my chosen profession when I graduate.

Personal reflections

16. Most people can make a difference in their community.
17. I developed a good relationship with the professor of this course because of the community work/field experience I performed.
18. As a result of the community work/field experience, I am more comfortable working with cultures other than my own.
19. The work I performed in this course helped me learn how to plan and complete a project.
20. Participating in the community/school helped me enhance my leadership skills.
21. The work I performed in the community/school enhanced my ability to communicate my ideas in a real world context.
22. I developed a good relationship with the community agency/field experience

staff because of the community work/field experience I performed.

Note. RK indicates that the item is reverse-keyed. The Student Service-Learning Index items were adapted from the work of Driscoll et al. (1998).

Content validity.

Three faculty members who have experience in the service-learning program at a Midwestern metropolitan university reviewed the adapted Service-Learning Indexes. Based on their input, items were reworded so that the items would be applicable to students and agencies in a variety of disciplines. Then, the Service-Learning Indexes were distributed to university students and community agency personnel involved in the service-learning program at a Midwestern metropolitan university during the 2002 spring semester. Both the university students and community agency personnel were asked to provide ways to improve items. Based on the input from 46 university students, five items were reworded and one item was discarded, resulting in a 22-item Likert scale survey for university students (see Table 1). Based on the input from six community agency employees, three items were reworded and two items were discarded, resulting in an 18-item Likert scale survey for community agency personnel (see Table 2).

Table 2

Agency Service-Learning Index Items

Perspectives about the service-learning course

1. The community participation/field experience aspect of the university course helped the student see how the course information can be applied in actual practice.
2. The student would have learned more from this course if more time would have been spent in the university classroom instead of doing the community work/field experience. (RK)
3. The idea of combining work in the community with university coursework should be practiced in more classes at the university.
4. The student was well prepared for the community work/field experience.
5. The professor was available to the agency/school staff for any questions or concerns.

Perspectives about the impact to the agency/school

6. The student's involvement positively impacted our agency's/school's capacity to serve clients/students.
7. The student's involvement was a burden to our agency/school. (RK)
8. The student's involvement provided new insights into our agency's/school's operations.
9. I would recommend to a colleague in another community organization/school to become involved in the university community participation/field experience program.

10. Our agency/school intends to stay involved with the university community participation/field experience program.

Perspectives about community involvement

11. The community participation/field experience aspect of the university course showed the student how to become more involved in the community.
12. The community work/field experience the student did through this course benefited the community/school.
13. The community work/field experience involved in the university course helped the student become more aware of the needs in the community.

Reflections

14. Most people can make a difference in their community.
15. I developed a good relationship with the student during our agency's/school's involvement with the university community participation/field experience program.
16. During the community work/field experience, the student seemed comfortable working with cultures other than his or her own.
17. Participating in the community/school helped the student enhance his or her leadership skills.
18. The work the student performed in the community/school enhanced his or her ability to communicate ideas in a real world context.

Note. RK indicates that the item is reverse-keyed. The Agency Service-Learning Index items were adapted from the work of Driscoll et al. (1998).

Reliability.

Reliability estimates for each of the Service-Learning Indexes main areas were computed using Cronbach's alpha. For the student Service-Learning Index the reliability estimates were as follows: perspectives about (a) the service-learning course (.82), (b) community involvement (.70), and (c) the influence of service on career choice (.82) and (d) personal reflections (.82). For the agency Service-Learning Index the reliability estimates were as follows: perspectives about (a) the service-learning course (.70), (b) the impact to the agency (.82), and (c) community involvement (.81) and (d) reflections (.72).

Data Collection Procedures

During the 2002 fall and 2003 spring semesters, students enrolled in the courses listed in Table 3 and agency personnel who worked at the corresponding community service-learning sites were asked to complete the student or agency Service-Learning Index (SLI), either the on-line or paper version. The SLI surveys included (a) a cover letter that explained the purposes of the study and informed the subjects that participation was voluntary and that responses would be anonymous, (b) the 22-item student SLI or the 18-item community agency SLI, and (c) demographic items used to describe the

participants. Of the 109 students who were asked to participate in the study, 85 completed the SLI for a student return rate of 78%. Of the 19 community agency personnel who were asked to participate in the study, 18 completed the SLI for an agency return rate of 95%.

Table 3

Community Service-Learning Courses

<i>Course</i>	<i>Department</i>	<i>n</i>
The World of Work	Engineering	12
Systems Analysis and Design	Information Systems	2
Latino/a Politics	Political Science	8
Interpersonal Conflict	Speech	8
Teaching of Reading	Teacher Education	24
Teaching of Social Studies	Teacher Education	16
Career Development for Persons with Disabilities	Special Education	15
Total		85

Data Analyses

Data were analyzed using the SPSS 10.0 software. Mean scores for each of the SLI areas were computed for each student and community agency personnel participant to investigate perceptions of the impact of community service-learning. To determine if there were differences in student perceptions across academic disciplines, one-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were computed for each of the four SLI areas. To determine if there was a difference between student and agency personnel perceptions of the impact of community service-learning, independent t-tests were conducted for each of the three common SLI areas. Because multiple statistical tests were conducted, the alpha level was reduced to .01 for each inferential test to control for Type I errors.

Results

Student Perceptions of the Impact of Community Service-Learning

The students' perceptions of the impact of community service-learning were marginally to moderately positive. The highest rated area was students' perspectives about the service-learning course ($M=3.98$, $SD=.72$) followed by their perspectives about community involvement ($M=3.94$, $SD=.65$). The lowest rated area was students' perspectives about the influence of community service-learning on their career choice ($M=3.67$, $SD=.82$) followed by their personal reflection rating ($M=3.87$, $SD=.64$).

Differences in Student Perceptions Across Academic Disciplines

Table 4 lists the means and standard deviations for each of the SLI areas for each course surveyed. The one-way ANOVAs indicated that there were no significant differences in student perceptions of the impact of community service-learning across academic disciplines for any of the SLI areas (see Table 4).

Table 4Departmental/Course Means and Standard Deviations and ANOVAs by SLI Subscale

<i>SLI Subscale</i>	<i>Department</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>ANOVA</i>
<i>Perspectives about course</i>				
	Engineering	4.08	.36	
	Information Science	4.50	.42	
	Political Science	3.95	.67	
	Speech	3.70	.51	
	Teacher Education	3.94	.72	
	Teacher Education	4.23	.58	
	Special Education	3.77	1.10	$F(6,78)=0.95, p=.466$
<i>Perspectives about community involvement</i>				
	Engineering	4.17	.40	
	Information Science	3.92	.59	
	Political Science	4.08	.78	
	Speech	3.96	.58	
	Teacher Education	3.85	.66	
	Teacher Education	3.94	.60	
	Special Education	3.80	.85	$F(6,78)=0.48, p=.820$
<i>Perspectives about career choice</i>				
	Engineering	3.69	.53	
	Information Science	4.00	1.41	
	Political Science	3.56	.75	
	Speech	2.78	.75	
	Teacher Education	3.80	.71	
	Teacher Education	4.05	.53	

Special Education	3.52	1.15	$F(6,78)=2.66, p=.021$
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Personal reflections

Engineering	4.05	.43	
Information Science	4.36	.51	
Political Science	3.78	.67	
Speech	3.77	.65	
Teacher Education	3.73	.60	
Teacher Education	4.19	.45	
Special Education	3.67	.88	$F(6,78)=1.58, p=.165$

Agency Personnel Perceptions of the Impact of Community Service-Learning

The agency personnel perceptions of the impact of community service-learning were moderately positive. The highest rated area was agency personnel perspectives about the service-learning course ($M=4.20, SD=.51$) followed by their perspectives about the impact of community service-learning to the agency/school ($M=4.18, SD=.59$) and their reflections about community service-learning ($M=4.18, SD=.49$). Agency personnel perspectives about community involvement ($M=4.14, SD=.72$) was the lowest rated area.

Differences between Student and Agency Personnel Perceptions

Table 5 lists the means and standard deviations for each of the common SLI areas for the student and agency personnel groups. The independent t-tests indicated that there were no significant differences between student and agency personnel perceptions of the impact of community service-learning for any of the common SLI areas (see Table 5).

Table 5Group Means and Standard Deviations and t-tests by SLI Subscale

<i>SLI Subscale</i>	<i>Group</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t-test</i>
<i>Perspectives about course</i>				
	Student	3.98	.72	
	Agency	4.20	.51	$t(101)=-1.25, p=.213$
<i>Perspectives about community involvement</i>				
	Student	3.94	.65	
	Agency	4.14	.72	$t(100)=-1.15, p=.255$

Reflections

Student	3.87	.64	
Agency	4.18	.49	$t(101)=-1.91, p=.060$

DiscussionBenefits to Students and Community Agencies

The results of this study indicate that community service-learning is beneficial for both students and community agencies. Perspectives about the service-learning course received the highest ratings from both the students and community agency personnel. One student commented, “This project has been the most valuable aspect of my education thus far. I’ve learned more in this one course than all the other ones combined.” Another student wrote, “This class was a lot more fun than class only. I have always thought the university should be more involved in the community. I think you are more prepared for the work force when you participate in the job and not just study textbooks.”

Comments from the agency personnel paralleled those of the students. One person wrote, “Thank you! The experience greatly enhanced our services.” Another person who worked at a homeless shelter wrote, “The child receiving tutoring is benefiting greatly from this program.... I feel the child values the adult interaction, praise and concern he receives from the tutor.”

Additional Benefits to Students

In addition to the comments on perspectives about the community service-learning course itself, student comments also included perspectives about community involvement and the influence of service-learning on their career choice as well as personal reflections. One student wrote about the benefits of service-learning on community involvement when he or she commented, “I really enjoyed the time I put in on building the Habitat House. It was a great experience and I definitely plan on helping out in the future as a volunteer.” Another student wrote about the benefits of community service-learning in making a career choice when he or she commented, “The experience for service-learning is greatly undervalued. These learnings do not have to be lengthy but I do believe that service-learning is even more valuable for undergrads; they can see if this is what they really want out of a career.” When personally reflecting on the community service-learning experience one student wrote, “My service-learning project helped me to better understand my weaknesses and strengths. It also enhanced my want [*sic*] to work with children with disabilities.”

Conclusion

The results of this quantitative study add to the research findings on the benefits of community service-learning for both students and community agencies (Ferrari & Worrall, 2000; Fredericksen, 2000; Giles & Eyler, 1994; Markus et al., 1993; Rowe &

Chapman, 1999; Shastri, 2001). This study provides evidence that student and corresponding agency personnel perceptions of the impact of community service-learning are positive and similar. For students the benefits of community service-learning are consistent across academic disciplines. The results of this study warrant the expansion of the community service-learning program at the surveyed university to include more courses and to involve more community agencies.

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