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Intergenerational Service-Learning: Contributions to Curricula

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INTERGENERATIONAL SERVICE-LEARNING: CONTRIBUTIONS TO CURRICULA

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This article reports some findings from a national demonstration project involving the National Council on the Aging (NCOA) and thirteen colleges and universities. We studied 39 courses in which students were involved in service-learning in aging. We describe and discuss (1) the range of demonstrably feasible adaptions, (2) what faculty say their students learned from the experiences, and (3) faculty perceptions of personal benefits and costs associated with developing and directing these projects.

INTRODUCTION

In times of shrinking dollars and growing needs, scholars and practitioners in the field of gerontology seem to agree on the need for closer ties between academic institutions and community agencies, although the most appropriate types of relationships still need to be clarified. Intergenerational service-learning[1] has been hypothesized to be one approach which may be particularly effective

[1] For purposes of this discussion "intergenerational service-learning" is defined as: any activity of student involvement which is designed to simultaneously achieve two outcomes: (a) student learning through service-oriented field experiences, and (b) provision of needed services to older individuals or those agencies, organizations, or institutions that serve older persons. Thus a variety of student experiences can fit under this definition (e.g., field placements, class projects, practica, work-study, co-op education, student enterprises, and volunteer projects) as long as the activity includes both tangible service and supervised learning.

in meeting overlapping needs of campus and community members of the aging network (Gelfand and Firman, 1981).

Although the desirable nature and extent of university involvement in community service has been a long-standing subject of discussion, a general consensus seems to have emerged that colleges and universities should "participate, if possible, only in public service activities that are a direct outgrowth of . . . regular teaching and research programs and that in turn feed back and strengthen them" (Carnegie Foundation, p. 21). This consensus points to the need for a better understanding of the benefits and costs of intergenerational service-learning to both students and faculty. Benefits and implications of the service-learning approach to community agenices are discussed elsewhere (Firman et. al., 1983). In this article we present data about three aspects of course-related intergenerational service-learning projects which may be of particular relevance to members of the academic community. They are: (1) types of adaptions and examples of projects that have been demonstrated to be feasible; (2) faculty assessments of what students learned from participation in these projects; and (3) faculty reports of their personal benefits and costs associated with developing and directing these projects. We conclude with a discussion of some of the strategic implications of these data and with some suggestions for further research and demonstration efforts.

BACKGROUND

In January 1979, the Intergenerational Service-Learning Project was initiated to demonstrate and evaluate the ways and extent to which the concept of intergenerational service-learning could be adapted to institutions of higher learning. The thirty-month project was conducted under the auspices of the National Council on the Aging (NCOA) with funding from the Community Services Administration, The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and the participating institutions of higher education.

A mix of colleges and universities was selected by NCOA to participate in the project including schools that were urban and rural, public and private, large and small, a minority institution, and a consortium of seven schools in one city.[2] NCOA provided each of

[2] The following institutions participated in the project: Boston University, Boston, Massachusetts; the Consortium on Urban Education, Indianapolis, Indiana; University of Denver, Denver, Colorado; George Washington University, Washington, D.C.; Hampton Institute, Hampton, Virginia; Oregon State University, Corvallis, Oregon; and University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia.

the demonstration sites with a total of $60,000 over a period of thirty months. Funds were used to hire staff who were charged with the mission of increasing faculty and student involvement in service-learning with the aged. Health needs and services to the poor elderly were emphasized along with the development of projects which could become self-sustaining beyond the demonstration phase. Otherwise, the local projects were given a relatively free hand to develop projects most consistent with local campus and community needs.

During the thirty months of the demonstration project, more than 2,400 students participated in providing 106,000 hours of services for or on behalf of older persons. Approximately two-thirds of the students participated for academic credit, one-quarter were volunteers, and the remainder were employed.

The findings presented in this paper are based primarily on an in-depth study of 39 "successful adaptions" of the concept of intergenerational service-learning to the curricula of the participating colleges and universities. Four criteria were used to identify these successful adaptations:

1. The project was developed and implemented as a course-related activity during 1979 or 1980 at one of the participating colleges or universities.
2. There appeared to be both significant learning and substantive service associated with the project.
3. The project involved three or more students in a similar or related activity.
4. The project seemed likely to be continued or repeated or it had come to a satisfactory and planned conclusion.

FEASIBLE ADAPTATION STRATEGIES AND PROJECTS

The concept of intergenerational service-learning was successfully adapted to a total of 39 courses during the demonstration project. These courses were taught by faculty in twenty different disciplines ranging from art to medicine to sociology. Four basic strategies for adaptions were observed: (1) a new course was developed; (2) a service-learning component was added to an existing gerontology course; (3) a gerontological focus was added to an existing service-learning course; and (4) an existing activity of service-learning in aging was expanded.

Fifteen new courses with components of service-learning in aging

were developed either as a direct result or with the assistance of the campus-based centers. For example, two courses at George Washington University were developed which involved medical students with older persons. In one course the students did health assessments and advocacy for homebound elders, and in the second course, medical students were teamed with dance majors to provide health education/physical fitness programs at senior centers and nutrition sites. An innovative course in Theater Activity at Marian College involved students in developing and implementing a drama therapy program for elder residents of a state mental hospital. At the University of Denver, a "Physical Manifestations of Aging" course involved student nurse/social worker teams in providing health and advocacy services at a variety of community sites.

In fifteen other cases, a service-learning component was added to an existing gerontology course. In a "Psychology of Aging" course in Indianapolis, students were teamed with healthy older persons in the Senior Companion Program to provide in-home services and support to other older persons who had recently been discharged from acute care hospitals. In a course entitled "Religious and Social Perspectives on Aging" at Christian Theological Seminary, a field component was added through which divinity students became directly involved in working with elderly parishioners in both counseling and advocacy roles. Several other courses at the participating schools also involved students in a variety of one-on-one and group activities with both the institutionalized and community-based elderly.

In five departments where a service-learning course was already ongoing, a focus in gerontology was added. For example, at the University of Georgia there was an active speech and hearing clinic which previously had focused primarily on the needs of children. With assistance from the campus-based center, the clinic developed a highly visible and successful program of screening and follow-up for the elderly in nine rural counties. Another example of this adaption strategy was the use of graduate business majors in a marketing course at George Washington University; in this case students developed marketing and promotion campaigns for several small community-based agencies seeking to expand the number of clients they served.

The fourth strategy to increase student involvement in services to the elderly was to help faculty expand existing courses. By supporting additional teaching assistants or field supervisors or by providing additional travel stipends, four already successful courses in sociology, physical education, and health services administration were able to accommodate many more students.

MAJOR LEARNING OUTCOMES FOR STUDENTS

To discover what students had learned from participation in their intergenerational service-learning projects, data were collected from several sources: (1) interviews with the faculty members directly involved in 28 successful course-related projects; (2) interviews with a sample of agency personnel who supervised students; and (3) assessments by some of the students themselves of their experiences.

Table 1 summarizes faculty assessments of student learning. In most cases, the faculty based their assessments on three or more criteria, usually some combination of seminars/class discussions, student papers based on their experiences, student journals, student responses to evaluation forms, and on-site observations. The data from the interviews with community agencies and student papers generally supported the findings based on interviews with faculty.

All the faculty interviewed reported that the service-learning experience "provided students with a greater empathy for older people" and "increased student awareness of the problems and needs of older people" either "significantly" or "to a great extent."

Several other learning outcomes appear to have been achieved by most (75% or more) of the projects. In most cases, however, it was not possible to conclude from the available data why significant learning did not take place. The only exceptions were the questions about "increased student understanding of the needs and problems of poor people" and "increased student understanding of and/or empathy for the ethnic or racial minorities." In those cases where students were in contact with low-income or minority elderly, all faculty reported that the related learning objective was achieved to a significant or great extent.

An analysis of student assessments of their experiences generally confirmed faculty perceptions of what had been learned. In addition, most students seemed to place a high value on the personal relationships they developed with individual older persons. Many students reported that good relationships took time to develop. At first, many students and older persons were uncomfortable with each other and only with the passage of time did better relationships develop. It was both encouraging and somewhat surprising to find that a majority of the students (55%) expected to continue relationships with older individuals they met through their service-learning experience after the course ended.

TABLE 1   Student Learning Outcomes (% of Faculty Reporting Student Learning of a "Significant" or "Great" Extent)[a]

All (100%)	Most (99–75%)	Many (74–50%)	Some (less than 50%)
Provided students with a greater empathy for older people (100%)	Increased student respect for the elderly and recognition of their potential (86%)	Increased student understanding of the needs and problems of poor people (71%)	Enabled students to increase their knowledge about types of programs for older people (43%)
Increased student awareness of the problems and needs of older people (100%)	Helped reduce students' stereotypic images of older people (82%)	Enabled students to gain experience in providing services to older clients (61%)	Increased student understanding of and/or empathy for ethnic or racial minorities (48%)
	Enabled students to put theory into practice by learning ways to apply knowledge of a discipline or field to specific situations (82%)	Helped students to become more responsible citizens by increasing their understanding of issues of social concern and by developing skills for social participation (58%)	
	Increased student understanding of the demands of the service role (80%)	Enabled students to increase their knowledge about organizations which provide services to older people (54%)	
	Enabled students to develop specific skills, competencies or attitudes pertinent to problem-solving, interpersonal interacting or group process (79%)		
	Contributed to student understanding of aging as a normal experience (75%)		

[a] Responses of Don't know" were excluded from the analysis.

BENEFITS AND COSTS
TO PARTICIPATING FACULTY

In addition to student involvement, faculty acceptance and participation are critical to the successful adaption of intergenerational service-learning in academic institutions. To gain a better understanding of why faculty participate in these projects, we asked the adapters to describe the personal benefits and costs they associated with participation. Faculty perceptions of personal benefits are shown in Table 2.

Faculty adapters unanimously identified their time as being the major personal cost of involvement in service-learning. In addition, 30% reported some stress, anxiety, or energy drain was associated with their participation.

In response to another question, almost 60% of the participants in the feasible adaptions considered the time they expended to be part of their normal workload; 40% considered at least some of the time they put in to be above and beyond what was expected of them. It is

TABLE 2   Personal Benefits Reported by Faculty Who Participated in Service-
Learning Projects ($N = 30$)

Benefits	Significantly	Slightly	Not at all
Enhanced the effectiveness of your course	86	11	3
Contributed to your personal learning	70	27	3
Enhanced your general effectiveness as a teacher	63	30	7
Provided you with a satisfying or enjoyable feeling	93	7	0
Enhanced visibility and contacts in the community	50	40	10
Resulted in publications or likely to result in future publications	17	3	80
Enhanced visibility and contacts on campus	30	27	43
Opened up new research opportunities	27	23	50
Enhanced your chances of gaining[a] tenure or a promotion	21	26	53

[a]Excludes responses of 11 individuals (including 4 full professors and 7 people who were not on tenure-tracks).

not clear why some faculty do and some do not, consider participation to be part of their job assignments. For example, of the four sociology professors who taught courses with service-learning components, two considered their marginal cost to be equal to zero and two thought their marginal cost was greater than zero. The data do suggest, however, that on a given campus, there are likely to be some people who already perceive this type of activity to be part of their job responsibility and at least some others who will be willing to take on the extra work anyway.

The perceived marginal cost or extra effort associated with various adaption strategies varied significantly. For example, adding a service-learning component to an existing gerontology course had an average marginal cost in time of 3.0 hours per week. On the other hand, adding an aging focus to an existing service-learning experience had an average perceived marginal cost of only one-half hour per week. Whereas it took faculty an average 5.5 hours per week to develop a new course, only 1.1 of those hours were perceived to be above and beyond what was expected of them.

DISCUSSION

The data on feasible projects provide compelling evidence that the concept of intergenerational service-learning can be successfully adapted to a wide variety of academic disciplines through a multiplicity of strategies. Specific implications of intergenerational service-learning for nursing, sociology, occupational therapy, physical therapy, speech and hearing, home economics, and physical education, recreation, and dance is the subject of a recent monograph series (NCOA, 1984b). A guidebook for campus-wide programs will also be forthcoming (NCOA, 1984a).

The findings on student learning are significant in relation to the recent AOA funded "Foundations for Gerontological Education Project," which attempted to define a core of knowledge essential for all people working in the field of aging (Johhson et al., 1980). Although there was a notable lack of consensus about most specific items, almost all respondents agreed that "an understanding of aging as a normal experience" was an essential skill or approach to be acquired. Three other skill areas which were deemed essential by 90% or more of the respondents were "interdisciplinary collaboration," "assessment of health status," and skills in "planning and program development." The data from this study indicate that an appropriate service-learning experience may be an effective way to achieve some or all of these learning objectives.

The data on student learning is probably of somewhat limited value because of its aggregate nature. More research is needed to relate various aspects of academic field experiences to student learning outcomes. Controlled research designs and studies are needed to examine the effects on students and older people of field experiences which may be differentiated by organizational settings, characteristics of the older individuals, and tasks performed. The sparse literature on service-learning will greatly benefit from such studies.

The data on faculty perceptions of personal benefits and costs highlight a major difficulty associated with faculty adaption of service-learning. Athough faculty viewed service-learning projects as enhancing their course materials, service-learning projects were not seen as a significant vehicles for increased chances for publications, resulting contract renewal, tenure, and/or promotion. With the constriction of academic jobs, activities that result in publication (the major yardstick of quality in many academic environments) are being given precedence at large campuses. Only 27% viewed service-learning as providing significant research opportunities, an even smaller number (21%) valued service-learning projects as significantly enhancing their chances of tenure or promotion.

Widespread involvement of faculty members on many campuses may thus founder on the perceived reality of the faculty job situation. Although almost all colleges stress service to the community, teaching and research as criteria for a promotion, little weight is often allocated to community service in job renewal and promotion decisions. The expansion of faculty involvement in service-learning may thus need to coincide with a reexamination of the emphasis being used (or at least the faculty perceptions of these emphases) to decide on the merits of a faculty member's performance. Alternatively, the data suggest that efforts to recruit faculty to participate in service-learning should be targeted on those educators who either already are tenured or who are not on a tenure-track.

These data also suggest the need to develop strategies which reduce the time commitments required of faculty members to develop an intergenerational service-learning project. One strategy is to centralize certain functions which can lighten faculty burdens and avoid duplication of efforts. Based on our multi-site experiences, we recommend that a minimum of three functions be centralized within an administrative unit such as an Institute on Gerontology or an Office of Experiental Education:

1. Community agency outreach and liaison
2. Assistance in recruiting and orienting students
3. Technical assistance to faculty

Another strategy that should be tested is the use of retired faculty and/or agency personnel as service-learning supervisors. There are at least three potential benefits from this approach: (1) it would reduce the time required for full-time faculty to set up and supervise service-learning projects; (2) it would provide retirees with an opportunity to contribute both to society and student development through meaningful part-time work (either paid or volunteer); and (3) it would expose students to a healthy and active older person as well as a possibly frail and vulnerable client group.

CONCLUSIONS

Intergenerational service-learning should be viewed as a joint venture between educators and service providers in the aging network. To be successful, projects must be both feasible and mutually beneficial. This article has attempted to clarify some of the benefits and limitations of the service-learning approach as a way of meeting overlapping campus and community needs. Further efforts are needed to increase the extent and improve the forms of future campus-community collaboration.

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