November 2019

Development of Social Learning Program for Students in Undergraduate Deaf Rehabilitation Program

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Abstract

Service-learning models have long since provided students the opportunities to connect with the community they will serve upon graduation. Valley-ICAN (Independent, Confident, Activities, Network) was developed to supplement a capstone practicum requirement for an undergraduate rehabilitation program with a concentration in services to individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing and to help reinforce the curriculum, by connecting the students to the deaf community and the service providers. This article describes the program and its benefits to the students and the community.

Keywords: rehabilitation, practicum, education, service, learning

Training students to be civic-minded and connected to their communities is an important goal of rehabilitation counselor programs (Evenson & Holloway, 2000; Mpofu, 2004, 2005). One method for assisting in this goal is service learning. Service learning has been in use since the early 1900s. John Dewey and William Kirkpatrick are credited with introducing the idea of adding service-learning experiences to curriculum in order to enhance outcomes for students (Conrad & Hedin, 1991).

Over the years, the use of service learning in counselor education programs has steadily increased (Barbee, Scherer, & Combs, 2003). Fields such as business, education, nursing, occupational therapy, physical therapy, and school counseling have also used service learning as part of their curriculum (Arman & Scherer, 2002; Hamm, Dowell, & Houck, 1998; Jorge, 2006; Lashley, 2007; Rehling, 2000). This model is not limited to the United States. Other countries welcome service-learning techniques offered by schools in the United States to serve needs within their countries (Pechak & Thompson, 2009). In addition, literature discusses new interest in students from Germany and Hong Kong engaging in service learning (Baltes & Seifert, 2010; Chung, 2001). This paper describes the development and goals of one such service-learning program for students in an undergraduate Rehabilitation for Individuals who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing (Deaf Rehab) program.

The program, Valley-ICAN (Independent, Confident, Activities, Nnetwork), focuses on the students' experiential activities towards the deaf population in Rio Grande Valley, Texas, and was developed to provide both hands-on experiences while doing good for the community.

Development of Valley-ICAN

The Deaf Rehab concentration at the university intentionally limited its number to approximately15 students because of the practicum requirement. Although local service providers (federal,state, or local) are very generous with allowing students to observe and participate in practicum placements, there is a limited number of community placements that focus on people who are deaf or hard of hearing. There existed a need to identify needed services in which students could participate. Various service providers gave guest lecturers for the students to help fill a gap in the students' experiences within the community. One such guest lecturer was the Deafness Outreach Coordinator of the Communication Axess Ability Group (CAAG).

Discussions between the university coordinator and the CAAG representative lead to the identification of the issues each program faced. The university program faced a limited number of volunteer or practicum placements while the CAAG experienced an overflow of community needs. There has been far greater need in the community than the local agencies have been able to provide for. Some of the needs simply do not fall in the realm of provided services from the agencies and there is a shortage of interpreters precludes the individuals from participating. Discussions continued and formed the program outline addressing the (a) goals for the program, (b) leadership roles, (c) goals for the students, (d) program participation, and (e) service-needs identification.

Goals for the program. The overarching goals for the program include (a) identify community needs, (b) manage volunteer resources, (d) direct volunteers for effective outcomes, (e) teach students problem-solving skills, (f) expose students to professional meetings, and (g) develop resource library. All of these goals will be explained in more detail in this paper.

Leadership roles. There are two people who play key roles in the success of this program: the professor and the CAAG representative. The university professor is involved in identifying community needs, mentoring the students through the program, evaluating the student's progress, and providing

feedback. The CAAG representative is also involved in the identification of community needs and in providing individual referrals and feedback to the students during meetings.

Both parties are present at the meetings where the students provide reports on their activities. It is at these meetings that the majority of the advice and feedback is provided to the student groups. The students also meet with the professor individually for one-on-one feedback and to address any concerns which arise in the program.

Goals for students. In addition to identifying the leadership roles as a programmatic goal, the students were identified early in the development stage. The main goals for the students in this program are (a) learning the curriculum, (b) professional networking, (c) experiencing advocacy for others, (d) involvement in the Deaf community and (e) obtaining employment or entering a graduate program.

Learning the curriculum. The ultimate goal of this program is to reinforce the curriculum. The students are provided with the opportunity to experience the curriculum in the field. For example, they may be exposed to case management techniques, be provided experience with explaining the ADA to the community, expand their signing skills, and be exposed to any number of experiences directly related the rehabilitation curriculum. In an example, the students were able to meet with a person who lost their hearing due to ottotoxic medication used to treat cancer. This experience brought forward an ottotoxin lecture, a discussion of the medical aspects of disability, and lectures regarding the psychosocial aspects of deafness in one person's life. The students were also exposed to and assisted in the search for appropriate community resources for this individual. They were able to see the connection of multiple lessons in an individual's life. In addition to using critical thinking skills this activity provided networking opportunities with a variety of local service providers.

In addition to learning the curriculum, students participate in professional meetings and learn the skills necessary for attending such meetings. The students are exposed to meeting agendas, minutes, and the basics of Robert's Rules of Order (Robert, Evans, Honemann, & Blach, 2004). For many students, this is the first opportunity to participate in such structured meetings and to understand the etiquette of meeting participation which they will need upon their graduation .

Professional networking. Throughout the time they participate in the program, the students have the opportunity to network with other professionals in the community. Their contact with the community can be obtained in a a range of ways. One way, is for the professor and the CAAG epresentative to set up initial contacts between members of the community and the students such as participation in transition fairs for the Regional Schools for the Deaf. Several agencies and service providers usually attend these functions. Another way, is advising the student of individuals they need to contact to meet their project needs. A third way, is for the students to evaluate their situation and make a determination on who is the appropriate party from whom they can obtain the information or services need to reach their goal. The professor intentionally guides the students through the first two scenarios in order for the third to occur. One goal of the networking experience is for the students to develop the critical-thinking skills and self-confidence necessary to seek out new networking opportunities. This system appears to be successful as evident by the types of jobs which were created for students in the community and the existing positions they have obtained.

Experiencing advocacy for others. Through this project, the students have the opportunity to experience advocacy for others. Some of the students participated in helping an individual with deafness to learn how to read. Others participated in helping another deaf person to learn basic manual communication skills. Another group of students assisted with GED training for a group of people who were deaf. In all of these situations the students were able to see progress in the individuals they were working with and experienced first hand the excitement that an individual experiences when reaching a goal. In this way, they developed a greater understanding of the meaning of advocacy.

In addition to the individual advocacy experiences, there were opportunities for groups of students to experience advocacy through community education. These students were involved in seeking opportunities to educate public services organizations and private businesses regarding etiquette for working with people who are deaf or hard of hearing. They explained material learned from the curriculum including their classes of Deaf culture, assistive technology/audiology, policy, and independent living. In this situation, they experienced advocating for the Deaf community through the general hearing community. This opened up opportunities for the hearing population to ask questions in a safe environment. The students were also able to teach basic signs such as "May I help you?", "How can I help you?" and to provide an ASL

signing sheet for very basic communication. They experienced advocating for others through this buy the overwhelming majority of people involved stating they are going to take ASL classes. As part of their advocacy experience for the deaf, the students provided information on local ASL classes. The information included classes from the local university, community college, independent living center, and informal groups participating in activities such as Deaf Coffee Chat and sports leagues within the Deaf community.

Involvement in the deaf community. The students may be tangentially involved with the Deaf community as part of the program. However, when being part of the Valley-ICAN they have direct access to individuals in the community and in most cases the families of these individuals. Students experience firsthand the issues faced by this population. They are able to interact with them, learn their life stories, and gain a deeper appreciation for the struggles they face in areas such as interpreter shortage, limited resources resulting in limited opportunities for advancement in career choices, and functional limitation of hearing loss. Through the involvement with the targeted individuals the students were able to meet other people who are deaf through suggested activities of the Deaf community, such as deaf bowling nights, softball, basketball and other activities where the community meets to socialize. This greatly increased the understanding of deaf culture by the students. Students in turn are able to demonstrate this knowledge to perspective employers.

Obtaining employment or entering graduate programs. Undoubtedly, seeking employment at this time is difficult. The country is in a recession and jobs seem to be scarce (Bartsch, 2009; Clark & Nakata, 2006). Valley-ICAN uses the students' own enthusiasm towards their goals to make connections with employers. The career goal of Regional Counselors for the Deaf (RCD) as a Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor (VRC) in the state/federal vocational rehabilitation program for the students is the priority of the program. However, in order to become a VRC in the state one must obtain a Masters in Rehabilitation Counseling. Although this is an undergraduate program, the students who graduate from it are able to compete for VRC positions within the state/federal VR program. Because the students are well prepared for the master's program many choose to pursue the degree full time. Some receive Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) Long Term Training grant scholarships for the masters program and others use their community connections to secure part time or full time employment while finishing their master's degree. The outcomes for the first group of students

were rather impressive. Of the 19 students participating in the program, 15 were accepted into the masters of rehabilitation counseling program. Two students accepted a VRC position with the state/federal VR program out of the area and is working on a masters' degree on line. One graduate decided to take further undergraduate courses and apply for an Occupational Therapy program at the same institution. One made connections with a local cochlear implant surgeon during the Valley-ICAN community outreach activities. The student's knowledge of the curriculum and community outreach abilities was impressive enough for the surgeon to create a new position. A local service provider created a Deaf Specialist position for another student. Two students are working as itinerate teachers for the local regional school for the deaf. They are continuing their education and certification through the state regional service center. Both were accepted into the masters program but they deferred entrance for one year to become established in their positions. Of the remaining students three were selected and are receiving an RSA graduate scholarship. These scholarships are very competitive: Only eight students received the awards in a pool of over 50 applicants.

Program participation. Any current student in the Deaf Rehabilitation concentration and former Deaf Rehabilitation student in the graduate program is eligible to participate. The students in the *Clinical Topics* class were selected to be the introductory class of the project. This class takes place in the fall semester and requires a field-based clinical study. Part of the requirement for the class is to give a 30-minute presentation on what they have learned during their activities and the supporting documents are given to each student. An additional packet is given to the CAAG representative to be filed in the clearing house for future reference for anyone seeking information on the topic. For example, students interested in mental health and services for the Deaf would gather information regarding the service, availability, how to obtain employment, and who to contact for more information. of the goal of the class is for each student to secure a practicum placement by the end of the semester.

The course following *Clinical Topics* is *Practicum* which takes place in the spring semester. It is in this capstone course where the bulk of the activities and service learning occurs. The meetings that will be discussed later in this paper take place in the context of this course. As with most practicum classes there is a practicum placement requirement. However, in the Deaf Rehabilitation practicum course due to limited number of practicum sites serving individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing, the students are able

to divide the number of hours required for successful completion of the class. The students must have an approved practicum site but are allowed to count their Valley-ICAN hours toward the total. This allows a greater number of students to experience both the practicum site since the site is not overwhelmed, and community service learning.

Service-needs identification. Service request can come from various people in the community, agencies, students, or through the CAAG representative or the professor. Once the professor and CAAG representative identify a list of community needs, the needs are evaluated to see if the students will benefit from participation in the activities, that is whether the activities support the curriculum. In addition, the professor or the representative determines which broad category the activities will fit into, whether they will be classified as one-on-one, community education, or research). After the leadership has determined appropriate activities, a meeting is held with all of the students where the community needs are listed and discussed. The professor intentionally refrains from prioritizing the issues so the students will take ownership of the issues and become more involved in volunteering. In order to not overwhelm the students they are limited to two activities of interest (see Figure 1).
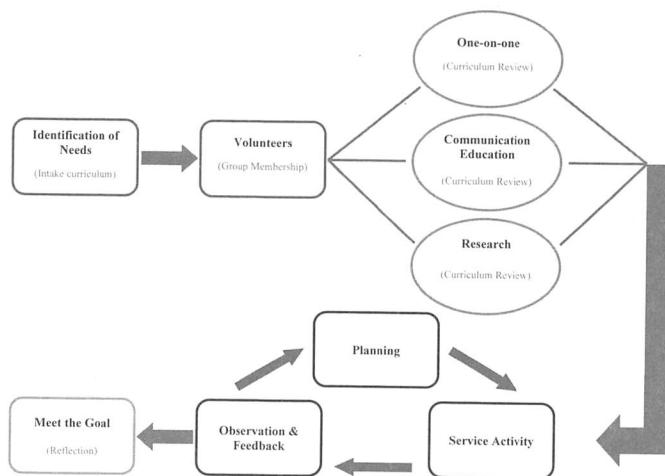

Figure 1: Yearly Process of Valley-ICAN

Individual. The individual needs refer to needs for which one person is the intended recipient. The student volunteers meet with the individual and all involved, they schedule convenient for both parties one-on-one time with

the individual to ensure ongoing progress, and pay attention to the goals of that person. The individuals receive one-on-one attention from a group of four to five students. For example, in the past, individual needs included sign language tutoring, reading tutoring, and GED tutoring.

Community education. During the Valley-ICAN meetings the students discuss community issues which derive from their experience and their understanding of the curriculum . Theprofessor monitors the discussion of those issues that are perceived as needing attention in the community since they relate to social justice for individuals who are Deaf or hard of hearing. The group needs were community based such as ADA, transition, and addiction committees. Each provided community education on their topic.

Research. Issues related to the clarification of laws fall in the research group. When students are asked questions from the community, various means of information gathering are used to form answers. The professor reviews the answers and provides feedback. If the answer is satisfactory then the students report the results to the person or entity who asked the question. Most questions revolve around interpreting issues. These activities hone the information retrieval skills and provide another opportunity to the students to experience advocacy and networking.

Positive Outcomes

Although positive outcomes for the recipients of the services and the students have been realized, outcomes icluding the skill sets learned, the number of presentations given, the number and types of employment the graduates receive, the number of students going into graduate programs to further the education and become VRC for Deaf people and the outcomes of constructs such as attitudes towards the deaf population have not yet been measured in this program. The program is now in the process of obtaining approval for a pretest/posttest research project in which the students involved will be administered a survey measuring their attitudes towards people who are deaf.

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