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THEME-BASED “MAKE A DIFFERENCE DAY” AND ITS IMPACTS:

Did the “Make a Difference Day” Make Actual Differences?

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ABSTRACT

Prior to graduating from universities, most undergraduate students participate in at least one community service activity. Although beneficial effects of community service activity on students’ cognitive and prosocial behavior development have been assumed, the activities and processes of implementing service-learning programs in higher education tend to be unsystematic and vary widely. This reflective summary describes a process to redevelop the traditional community service activity, named “Make a Difference Day” (MDD), at Purdue University by implementing the selective theme and its effects. The selected theme “homelessness” enabled administrators to implement background theory, select appropriate community partners, and develop reasonable learning outcomes and assessments. The postsurvey results showed three learning outcomes were fairly reflected on participants’ responses: increased awareness and understanding of the homeless, enhanced understanding of roles of community partners, and developed future plans to apply lessons from the MDD. Lack of integration of academic classes remained for the future development.

INTRODUCTION

In 2012, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) reported that one in every six Americans is food insecure. This number has remained at or near 50 million Americans for the past four years. Among people who are seeking emergency food, 51% are in families, 37% are employed, and nearly 8.5% are homeless (Hunger and Homelessness Survey, The United States Confer-

ence of Mayors, 2012). Although the Habitat Movement has been promoted across the United States and other countries for the last several decades, it is hard to find that this issue is solely focused in college students’ community service activities. Additionally, many students do not recognize how many people, including children, are facing dangers of homelessness and why those people cannot overcome this issue. Often, students tend to simply attribute the homelessness to laziness, though a lot of factors are interwoven within this issue.

Every fall, 300–500 Purdue University students have an opportunity to participate in a community activity, named “Make a Difference Day.” The Civic Engagement and Leadership Development office at Purdue designs this half-day of service to foster students’ engagement in a meaningful service project and connects with nonprofit organizations in Greater Lafayette. Although it was assumed that community service is inherently beneficial to students that take part, there was no theme for “Make a Difference Day” (MDD) until 2012. The selected theme of homelessness was implemented to increase students’ awareness around this issue in the community, what is being done to address it, and ways students can get involved.

DESIGN OF MAKE A DIFFERENCE DAY

Whereas the traditional MDD tended to be unsystematic to measure students’ learning outcomes and was developed based on broad conceptual background for service, the selected theme for 2013, homelessness, helped design systematic and educational approaches to this issue.

This theme-based design provided a platform for building theoretical backgrounds and systemic evaluation processes to assess students' learning outcomes.

Theoretical Background: Social Change Model

The Social Change Model was selected as a basic theory to design MDD and facilitate the theme of homelessness in MDD because it aimed to mold the concept of leadership as an inclusive process by which change is influenced for improvement of others. It is a value-based model which assumed that service is a powerful vehicle for students' leadership development. Thus, this model can reflect the purpose of MDD, that is, to promote positive social changes in Purdue and Greater Lafayette through Purdue students' participation in this community service activity.

Collaboration with Local Partners

Over 30 local partner agencies working to address the issue of homelessness and poverty were contacted, and 12 of them participated in the MDD in fall 2013. Service opportunities included Habitat Restore, Habitat main office, Homestead Consulting Services, Ellsworth Romig Neighborhood Association, Meals on Wheels, Lafayette Adult Resource Academy (LARA), Salvation Army, and YWCA on campus to be distributed to local community members.

Learning Outcomes

Three specific learning outcomes, defined below, were developed based on consultations with community partners and literature regarding best practices for teaching civic engagement to college students:

- Gain understanding surrounding the issue of homelessness and its effects on local, national, and global communities.
- Be able to describe what local agencies are doing to address the issue of homelessness and ongoing volunteer opportunities focused on homelessness.
- Create a personal action plan to address homelessness in the local community through advocacy, giving, or volunteerism.

METHODOLOGY

A structured questionnaire was developed by staff in the Civic Engagement and Leadership Development office

to examine students' conceptual improvements and experiences at MDD. This questionnaire consists of quantitative and qualitative items. While the quantitative items check students' awareness of hunger and homelessness, qualitative items were added to investigate their experiences and effects on students' future action plans. The participants had time to complete this questionnaire after service on the day of the event.

In order for the participants to effectively integrate the skills, reflection time was added on the assessment. Researchers noted that effectiveness of a service program on students' leadership development is not guaranteed without reflection, as it is imperative that their experiences be placed in a larger context (Blyth, Saito, & Berkas, 1997; Conrad & Hedin, 1991; Waterman, 1997).

Procedures

Approximately 250 students participated in an opening section outlining the purpose of the MDD in October 2013. The participants cleaned the agencies, helped sort donations and food, painted walls, or distributed agencies' brochures to people in Greater Lafayette.

They participated in a 30-minute reflection about their experiences after service, and 154 participants completed the structured questionnaire. The survey results indicated an increase of awareness of homelessness and an understanding of multiple factors on the homeless.



Figure 1. Homestead CS—Indiana Fields of Fear.

RESULTS

Learning Outcome 1: Gain an understanding surrounding the issue of homelessness and its effects on local, national, and global communities.



Figure 2. Ellingsworth Romig Neighborhood Association.

One of the concerns was many college students attribute homelessness to personal laziness. However, the participants showed enhanced understanding about causes of the homeless. For the question “What are some issues that contribute to homelessness, and how can they be prevented?”, only two students responded “laziness.” Others mentioned mental illness/disease (n = 43; 20.57%), low education (n = 69; 33.01%), poor job market (n = 71; 33.97%), and inattention of society (n = 24; 11.48%). One participant said, “Neglect and ignorance caused for the homelessness. Society has a huge impact also due to different changes.”

For the question regarding why those people had a low education level, one student said, “. . .inconsistent attendance in programs by the homeless. It is hard to retain their participation. Also, there aren’t always enough spaces.” This response indicates that the participants understood multiple factors on homelessness and considered this issue as a social problem rather than personal.

The other concern was college students tend not to recognize the homelessness issue as a social issue, rather than a personal issue. Moreover, negative effects on society reputation were highlighted by a lack of empathetic perspective, instead of talking closer to this issue and people from their perspective. The participants responded to a question “What is the impact of homelessness on

society overall, and how does homelessness affect families?” Three themes emerged: increase of crime (n = 47, 30.51%), decrease community value and economy (n = 32, 20.77%), and destroyed families (n = 75, 48.70%).

Although about half of the responses are related to general negative effects on community, the rest of the responses focused on specific issues on families: “it damages the critical learning stage of children creating a cycle of poverty,” “Homelessness affects families by making them feel bad about themselves and their life,” “Homelessness has a high impact on society. It raises awareness on how some people and families just can’t make it alone. Homelessness affects families by making it hard to live healthy, functional lives.” In addition, one participant noticed, “It affects us by being there as a reminder of possibilities.” These responses indicate that participants recognized not only the negative effects of homelessness on society and family but also the serious effects that destroy those families’ lives.

Learning Outcome 2: Be able to describe what local agencies are doing to address the issue of homelessness and ongoing volunteer opportunities focused on homelessness

Before we discussed actual local agencies, the participants were asked how to help the homeless. Students identified strategies to overcome homelessness in the community. Responses to the question, “What are some strategies used to overcome homelessness?” fell into the following five categories: (a) shelters, housing programs, and other organizations (e.g., food banks) combat homelessness (n = 66; 43%); (b) individuals experiencing homelessness should ask for and accept help from family, be less lazy, and increase their motivation and commitment (n = 17; 11%); (c) giving resources, time, and other material support to organizations that combat homelessness (n = 21; 14%); (d) educate others about the issue of homelessness and the resources available (n = 19; 12%); and (e) addressing systemic problems such as joblessness, high cost of resources, mental health and income disparities, and access to mental and physical health care (n = 31; 20%).

Enhanced knowledge about local agencies and their programs were also detected. For the prompt “Discuss two strategies you can use to make a difference in ending homelessness,” some students who volunteered in Lafayette Adult Resource Academy (LARA) used the specific program as an example to spread to people in homelessness. Importantly, many participants elected to raise awareness of homelessness in the community. This awareness includes “inform[ing] people about homelessness and create[ing] programs to help the homeless.” Ad-

ditionally, Lafayette Urban Ministry was highly recommended to receive adequate help.

Learning Outcomes 3: Create a personal action plan to address homelessness in the local community through advocacy, giving, or volunteerism.

Continuing from the question “Discuss two strategies you can use to make a difference in ending homelessness,” the responses fell into four categories: providing vocational education, offering assistance for mental disease, volunteering and participating in donation, and raising awareness. Most of the participants selected volunteering as a strategy. Students were also asked to rate the possibility to apply the lessons from MDD in their actions on a 5-point Likert-type scale. The average self-reported score was 3.65. It indicated that participation in MDD moderately affected on their future volunteering activities towards homelessness. For donations, the participants emphasized avoiding giving money to those who are homeless: “Do not encourage by giving them money. Instead show opportunity.” A few students mentioned, “Building trust and connections with the homeless to encourage them to seek housing,” “make friends with them and invite them to public events,” and “give people motivation; be a friend.” This result indicated the participants started seeing the homeless as community members or friends.

Participants were asked to complete an after action plan following their service in which they were instructed to check off actions they planned to take with the goal of continuing the work they began at MDD. Having a conversation with a friend or family member about the impact of hunger and homelessness in the community was the most common action participants committed to taking following the day of action, followed by “donating” a social media post.

The results suggest it may be useful to increase social media presence of the Civic Engagement and Leadership Development office. Additionally, sending students home with literature regarding hunger and homelessness may enable students to carry out their after action plan to have a conversation with a friend or family member about the impact of hunger and homelessness in the community.

Regarding the most important lesson, experience, or situation during MDD, four themes emerged: (a) increased awareness of homelessness (n = 61; 39%); (b) enhanced understanding of factors on homelessness (n = 34; 22%); (c) recognized importance of volunteering (n = 31; 20%); (d) understood the possible multiple approaches to prevent this issue (n = 14; 9%); and (e) increased knowl-

Code	Number
Having a conversation with a friend or family member about the impact of hunger and homelessness on our community	81
Donating a social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter) post to advocate for those at risk of hunger	49
Serve at Salvation Army’s Winter Warm Up on November 2	39
Making a food donation during the Drive Away Hunger food drive	23
Taking the food stamp challenge with my family and or friends	10

Table 1. Postevent action plan.

edge of local shelters and nonprofit organizations to help homelessness (n = 14; 9%).

Although this was a short community service project, the participants had an opportunity to see the homelessness around them and realize how serious this is in our community. The participants said, “homelessness is REAL and a bigger problem than we think. Things won’t change unless you make them/do your part,” “there is more happening in the world than meets the eye,” “getting to see the people in the surrounding neighborhood and actually seeing what the demographic is like,” “there is a presence of homelessness in the community that impacts a lot more people; that needs to change,” “it was eye opening to learning about the prevalence of homelessness and what cause it,” and “it opened my eyes to see the ladies in the shelter living the way that they did/do.” One student raised an important point: “treat the mental illness, don’t apply a Band-Aid to a permanent problem. Though shelters are critical, consistent treatments will help solve the permanent problem or mental health issues.”

Next, the participants started recognizing homelessness as a social issue and developed insights of multiple causes in a society system rather than a personal laziness:

- “Homelessness isn’t just not having a roof over your head.”
- “I learned that homelessness in our community is actually prevalent and that college graduates are not immune to it.”
- “The understanding of how people may get stuck in a cycle of chronic homelessness.”
- “I will try to remember how many problems and experiences are interconnected within society.”

- “It is important to foster a culture of connectedness and cooperation.”

Additionally, participants experienced how community service is important to make a social change:

- “Volunteering is not merely serving others but also can be a good lesson to experience and know more about those social issues and make positive change even though they are small but vital.”
- “Reaching out to the homelessness is important to help the community.”
- “Handing a brochure to a man that was outside and seemed to be in a bad place. He had asked what we were doing and for a brochure. I felt as though I could have just made an impact in this man’s life. I respected him for asking, even though he seemed to be in a bad place he swallowed his pride and had the guts to ask.”

Also, this event helped the participants to increase knowledge about local resources for homelessness:

- “How many different agencies work to help the homeless.”
- “I didn’t know there was a whole system where there is a day shelter and night shelter to spread around the work.”
- “10% of chronic homeless use 50% of resources.”

DISCUSSION

The Make a Difference Day in 2013 and its systematic approaches provided students an educational opportunity to investigate the specific theme of homelessness and to check improved conceptualization for this issue and its application on future actions by using organized assessments.

Implementing the selected theme for civic engagement enabled the administrators to develop a systematic process and design assessments to evaluate students’ learning outcomes (Figure 3). Traditionally, the MDD was designed and administered based on a broad assumption that community service is beneficial for students but it was hard to develop and measure students’ learning outcomes and effects on student development.

The new process consists of theoretical background, the selected theme, learning outcomes, and reflection and assessments. The open-ended questionnaire results showed that three learning outcomes are reflected on students’ responses: gaining understanding surrounding the issue of homelessness and its effects on local, national, and global communities; improving knowledge of local

agencies and their functions with this issue; and developing personal action plans in communities.

This study began with a question as to whether a one-time service-learning experience can have a measurable impact on students. In order to provide a positive learning experience, the theme-based design was implemented to provide a meaningful experience about the specific social issue. The results of MDD indicate that a one-time service-learning experience can create measurable impacts on students’ perceptions and attitudes towards a social issue, homelessness. However, important questions still remain as to whether these effects are the result of participation in the service-learning experience or implementing the theme-based design of MDD. Additionally, MDD is not integrated with an academic course. Many researchers have advocated that service-learning needs to be integrated into academic courses (Conrad & Hedin, 1982; Markus, Howard, & King, 1993). The question about this kind of integration needs to be explored in a future study.

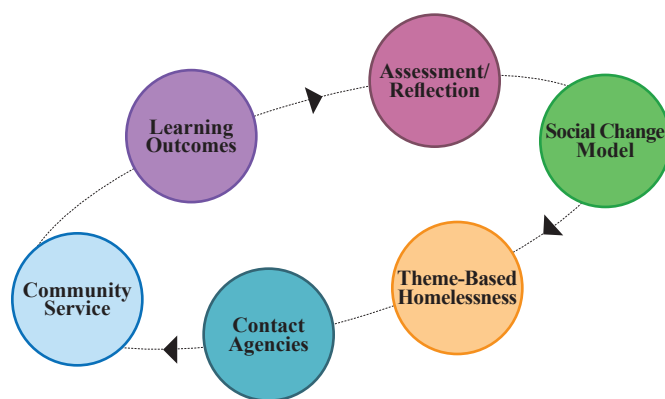


Figure 3. Model of MDD in 2013.

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