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Youth-Centered Service-Learning: Exploring the Professional Implications for College Students

*Russell L. Carson
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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the professional impact that a youth-centered service-learning program had on college students. Participants were 34 undergraduate students (28 females, 6 males) enrolled in an academic core course that integrated Lifetime Exercise and Physical Activity Service-Learning (LE PAS), an after-school program developed to address the physical and social needs of hurricane displaced K-5 youth living in a travel trailer community. The students worked in LE PAS-related activities and completed a series of reflections. Inductive analysis revealed that a youth-centered service-learning program was effective for (a) getting college students to think seriously about working with youth professionally, and (b) discovering and adopting valuable strategies for working with youth.

Introduction

Concerns about the daunting issues facing today's children and youth (obesity, drugs, and crime, for example), especially in economically deprived settings (Ball & Crawford, 2005), and undergraduate students' wavering interest in and attitudes toward working with culturally diverse children (Barnes, 2006; Proctor, Rentz, & Jackson, 2001), have motivated educators to find ways to attract future professionals to work with young populations (Ingersoll, 2002; Merrow, 1999). Interspersed shortages in early child care, education, recreation, and other youth-related fields are becoming more and more common (Howard, 2003). One largely overlooked strategy that has great potential for increasing the supply of youth-oriented professionals is service-learning.

Service-Learning

Service-learning is a hands-on experience that simultaneously fulfills a local community need and the learning goals of an academic

course (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996). While this form of real-world learning, also referred to as community service learning, can take many shapes (Eyler & Giles, 1999), it is essential that both the community and the students benefit; that is, the service must be meaningful to the community while enriching the learning of the student. Researchers have added a third element to service-learning, purposeful civic learning. This element highlights how this forum of learning prepares students to be future contributors to their communities. (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996; Howard, 2001). Programs that fall short of these ingredients, or that emphasize one ingredient more than others, should not be referred to as service-learning (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Howard, 2001; Richardson, 2006).

The central thread between the meaningful service provided to the community and the enriched educational growth of the students is reflection. Reflection can come in many different written and oral forms—reflective journals, class discussions, directed readings, personal narratives, directed writings, and reflective interviews, for example). Reflection is most effective when it incorporates the “4 C’s”: (a) continuous—is undertaken throughout the service-learning experience; (b) connected—is directly related to the course objectives; (c) challenging—demands high quality student effort and facilitates instructor feedback; and (d) contextualized—complements the level and type of learning activities of the course (Eyler, Giles, & Schmiede, 1996).

Youth-Oriented Service-Learning

Service-learning programs have been implemented in higher education courses throughout the United States since the mid-1970s (Zlotkowski, 1998); yet, it was not until the mid-1990s that service-learning principles surfaced within the course syllabi of child-centered programs (Anderson, Swick, & Yff,

2001). Since then, the presence of service-learning within mainstream youth circles has ballooned. The most common examples include placing future teachers in school- or community-based field settings (Baldwin, Buchanan, Rudisell, 2007; Domangue & Carson, 2008; Hale, 2008; Malone, Jones, & Stallings, 2002; Potthoff, Dinsmore, & Eifler, 2000; Slavkin, 2002; Strage, Meyers, & Norris, 2002; Vickers, Harris, & McCarthy, 2006); or involving teachers and K-12 students themselves in the design and implementation of service-learning assignments at local schools (Nelson & Eckstein, 2008).

Research pertaining to youth-oriented service-learning programs has predominately focused on documenting the academic, behavioral, or civic learning outcomes acquired by those providing the needed public service (e.g., preservice teachers) or those receiving the needed public service (e.g., youth). Findings have clearly demonstrated that service-learning can significantly increase both providers' and receivers' personal identity and esteem, interpersonal and leadership skills, sense of civic and social responsibility, cultural and racial understanding, connectedness to school and each other, application of course content, and, for receivers only, academic skills and knowledge, school attendance, motivation to learn, and graduation likelihood (Eyler, Giles, Stenson, & Gray, 2001).

Another body of research suggests that service-learning contributes to the future intentions of those involved, whether it is in their commitment to service or future engagement in community organizations (Astin, Sax, & Avalos, 1999; Yates & Youniss, 1996). However, what is less known is the impact that service-learning has on participants' future career endeavors. In a literature review, Richardson (2006) concluded that service-learning has been successful in enabling participants to become more knowledgeable and realistic about their careers. Perhaps, service-learning might not only have the power to increase career awareness, but also to attract future professionals to certain careers.

Given the pressing employment needs in youth fields today, it seemed important to investigate how service-learning can influence the careers aspirations of college students. Thus

our purpose was to explore the professional impact of a youth-centered service-learning program on college students.

Method

Participants and Course Description

The participants were 34 upper division undergraduate student (28 females and 6 males, of whom 27 were Caucasian Americans, two were African-Americans, two were Hispanic Americans, one was Asian American, and two were self-identified as "other") enrolled in an academic core course at Louisiana State University. The main objective of the course, Lifespan Motor Development, was for students to develop an understanding of the age-related changes in human motor behavior (e.g., reflexes, locomotor skill, fine motor skills, object-control skills) from infancy to adulthood, and the cognitive, social, and physical processes that underlie these changes. The course is a requirement for all allied health, rehabilitation, wellness, and athletic training majors at LSU. It is generally conducted in a lecture-style format. Students are assessed via exams, a presentation, and a series of assignments. Beginning in the spring semester of 2007, LE PAS was integrated into the course as an assignment.

Service-Learning Program: LE PAS

Following the destruction of hurricanes Katrina and Rita in the fall of 2005, government-funded travel-trailer communities were established throughout the Southeast to house evacuating families. An array of local and state service providers, including universities, responded to the immediate and long-term needs of these evacuees. Services that targeted youth focused on increasing their educational outcomes and life success through stable, safe, and structured homework and after-school activities. LE PAS was one of the many valuable after-school programs provided at the largest government-funded, temporary living community (1,600+ residents, 550+ trailers) in the United States at the time.

The purpose of LE PAS was to address the physical and social needs of children and teens displaced by the hurricanes, while allowing college students the opportunity to authentically experience course content relative

to teaching methods in physical education (see Carson, 2008) and the motor development process in childhood and adolescence. LE PAS took place four days a week for two hours a day in conjunction with an after-school tutoring program. During the first hour, general education service-learning students tutored the youth who then went outside to participate in physical activities led by either a LE PAS instructor (a graduate student or paid LE PAS students from previous semesters) or undergraduate LE PAS students. The outdoor activities varied, but generally included some form of aerobic/rhythmic movements, cooperative challenges, or lifetime sports. Before the closure of the housing community, LE PAS was in place for five consecutive semesters, enlisting a total of 141 undergraduate service-learning students, and serving an average of 28 children and 12 teens a day.

Procedures and Data Sources

This study was conducted across the spring and summer semesters of 2007. At the onset, we obtained Institutional Review Board approval and the students' informed consent. We also verbally emphasized to the students that participation was voluntary and in no way would affect their course grade. Data transcription and analysis did not commence until after the summer 2007 semester had concluded.

Prior to the first visit to the service-learning site, all participants completed a study-designed questionnaire that pertained to their previous youth-related work or volunteer experiences, future career plans, and initial thoughts about how LE PAS might impact their career choices. Then, as part of the service-learning portion of the class, participants were required to provide the displaced youth with five hours of service throughout the semester. Participants fulfilled this requirement by either organizing and leading LE PAS outdoor activity sessions or assisting with after-school tutoring. Throughout the service-learning experience, participants were asked to (a) reflect on each visit in a course journal, (b) contribute to in-class discussions related to LE PAS, and (c) reflect on the entire experience by writing an overall, more thorough, final reflection. These reflections were guided by questions that addressed their concrete experiences (e.g., "What happened

at the community service site?"), academic learning (e.g., "What did you learn about the course content as a result of your involvement today?"), and personal and professional growth (e.g., "What impact might your service have on your career path?"). The instructor also recorded personal observations and reflections in a journal, which was later transcribed and used as a data source along with students' course journals and final reflections.

Service-learning course credit was based on the number of LE PAS participating hours and corresponding reflections students completed throughout the semester, not on the content of their journals or final reflections. Therefore, college students were encouraged to reflect freely and openly.

Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

Data were inductively analyzed (Patton, 2002) using the three-step process of open, axial, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). That is, the central ideas of the journals and reflections were first labeled and grouped into conceptually similar categories, which were deepened from the close examination of related and unrelated meanings, and finally constructed into larger relational statements or themes that resemble the essential elements of interrelated categories. The results of this study, therefore, are grounded in and abstracted from the data rather than being imposed a priori from preconceived premonitions or propositions. We attempted to minimize some degree of researcher bias or distortion by having a second researcher, who was not involved in LE PAS in any way, conduct all analyses. Final interpretations were member checked and shared with a peer debriefer, who was also unrelated to the research studies of LE PAS, to ensure that findings were trustworthy and dependable. Participant and service site anonymity were maintained through the use of pseudonyms.

Results

LE PAS provided a unique opportunity for the college students to become involved in a service-learning experience. Many were enrolled in the university when Hurricane Katrina struck, and LE PAS allowed them to give back to the residents who were affected. Susan emphasized an important reason for providing the youth-

aged residents with regular physical activities, when she wrote:

Due to their circumstances, some of the family members may feel extra stress in their lives. It is especially important during times like this that exercise be incorporated into people's lives. Not only does exercise increase health, but it can decrease stress, which is important in times of turmoil.

The college students not only were able to provide physical activities for the youth, but also found significance in the work they were doing. Cassie stated:

It has to be hard to have your home completely destroyed and have to live in a trailer for two years. These children were taken out of their comfort zones and placed in an area and school that they probably never even heard of before the storm. The families had to start all over and make the best of a bad situation. They are hanging in there, and the kids are actually benefiting from this experience.

The empathy these college students felt perhaps served as a springboard to allow them to make meaningful connections to their future interests and career paths.

Two themes emerged pertaining to how college students' involvement in LE PAS impacted them professionally. First, LE PAS allowed college students to confirm or discover a future career in youth service fields. Second, college students realized and adopted valuable strategies for working with youth. The remainder of this section will explore these themes.

Confirming and Discovering a Career Path That Includes Youth Populations

This theme is significant due to the fact that only 8 of the 34 college students initially believed their career paths would entail working in youth-centered environments. For example, Julia, who already assisted youth at a pediatric physical therapist clinic, expressed a continued interest in serving youth due to her enjoyable LE PAS experiences.

Additional comments echo these sentiments.

[Susan] This opportunity to work with children at New Start Village [service-learning site] has really been a glimpse into the future. I want to go into pediatric physical therapy, and it may be that I will have a child in my care whose family goes through what these families have gone through.

[Ashlee] My experience...[in LE PAS] was an important learning lesson. I will be able to take what I have learned and apply it to my future career as a nurse. As a nurse, I want to work with children. I believe that working with the children was similar to the interactions that I will experience as a nurse.

Cameron presented an alternative way to continue working with youth. In addition to her goal of being a coach, she stated that after participating in LE PAS, she now plans on finding ways to get her student-athletes involved in community service activities. She commented:

[LE PAS] has encouraged me to do more around me...when I become a coach.... It will be extremely important to me to always be involved in the community...and to share that feeling with the girls that I will coach.

By the end of the service-learning program, there were 14 students who either reconsidered their initial career paths to include youth populations or expressed a new-found interest in assisting children in the future. As a result of working with the youth in LE PAS, Mary, who previously was uninterested in a youth-oriented career, wrote:

Before this experience, I planned on focusing my future career aspirations on rehabilitation. Whereas, now I would also like to help promote physical activity among youth, especially due to the rising epidemic of childhood obesity. At first, I was more interested in dealing with individuals around my age because it is easier to relate to them than those not in my age group. I am now considering working with younger

populations.

Molly is another example of a student who originally did not intend to choose a youth-oriented career path. However, after her experiences in LE PAS, she stated that a career in pediatric medicine is now a very realistic option for her. She wrote: "If I were to go into pediatrics I would be able to use the knowledge that I've gained from forming relationships with these kids to form relationships with my future patients."

Although each student's future career plans were unique, this service-learning experience appeared to open the door to new considerations and possibilities.

While the professional horizons of several participants were expanded to youth settings, not all of the students arrived at this conclusion. Eleven of the students revealed that the service-learning experience had less of an impact on their future plans. Laura reflected: "I know from this experience that this [age group] is not a population I would work well with." Her comments reiterate the important role of reflection in service-learning; without reflection Laura might not have come to this career realization.

Adopting Strategies to Reach Youth

Through meaningful connections to their service efforts, the college students were able to learn, adopt, and adapt effective strategies for working with the youth of LE PAS, which seemingly had identifiable career implications. One valuable method they learned when relating to and involving children was the *power of making activities fun*. Once many of the students realized that it was important for both them and the children to have positive movement experiences, they were able to reconsider how to structure and organize the activities to include a high level of enjoyment for everyone. Patrice wrote:

It challenged me to think of fun ideas and games, to make sure the kids were having fun. For example, instead of just playing catch for thirty minutes, I had to think of ways to make the game a little bit more challenging and fun.

Likewise, Sarah stated: "This experience has taught me to never underestimate how much of an impact you can have on someone by simply playing a game." She also discussed a time during her involvement in LE PAS when a child told her that he had never had so much fun. Similarly, Jessie realized the impact that "having fun" had on the children. She wrote: "I think the most significant aspect of service-learning is experiencing the kids' joy. I loved seeing the smiles on their faces and knowing how much fun they were having."

A valuable lesson Susan learned from observing and interacting with the children was that, "No matter how hard life gets, you can always put on a smile." Her experiences in LE PAS increased her fervor to adapt exercise and physical activity so that it is fun and exciting. She astutely noted: "The more fun people have at exercising, the more likely they are going to stick with it and incorporate it into their daily lives."

The students learned the power of fun not only by observing the children having fun, but by having fun themselves. Andrea reflected: "... working with them [kids] you have to...know that they are kids and just want to have fun.... Being with kids allowed me to loosen up and just have a good time." Julia agreed:

No matter what my attitude was going to the site, the second a little kid smiled, it was as if everything that was going wrong suddenly did not matter. I could feel sick or have a ton of homework that I needed to do, but once I got there and saw the kids, the other stuff faded to the back of my mind and no longer mattered. It was a whole body recharge. Playing with the kids made every problem in my life become insignificant. My focus became making what time I had with them enjoyable and hopefully memorable.

Marcus expressed similar reactions to the fun he shared with the youth. He wrote:

Before going to New Start Village, I didn't expect to gain much from the experience. I considered it just another assignment which I had to get done.... But after the first trip, I found myself looking forward to the next

one. The great thing I've always found about kids is that they allow me to forget my own age. I can act silly, forget about all the other responsibilities and commitments in my schedule, and just have fun.

These reflections emphasize the need for service-learning students to recognize that their contributions are not just unidirectional.

Enjoying the service-learning experience was not the only strategy learned when working with children; two other strategies emerged from the reflections. The college students became aware of the importance of *being creative* to spark youths' interests. For example, Alexis wrote: "Having this experience really taught me that I have to be able to be creative in order to keep the child's...attention." Additionally, college students learned the importance of *maintaining patience*, which is an essential strategy in all careers paths. Camille reflected:

I feel that this experience will help me out with some of my future plans. I plan on going into the field of pediatric cardiology. The interaction with children was definitely a learning experience for me. They helped me to build the patience that I know I will need in the future.

Similarly, Anna acknowledged: "...I believe that this experience could affect my future career. I think it helped me with having patience with other people, especially since you may not know what they are going through at the time." Although Anna plans to be a personal trainer and does not intend to work with youth in her future, she acknowledged that the skills gained from her LE PAS experiences can be applied across the lifespan.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore how a youth-centered service-learning program influenced college students professionally. Findings support the professional impact of a youth-oriented service-learning program, as two-thirds (22 of 34) LE PAS appeared to alter their preconceived notions of children. Moreover, the participants also learned successful methods for working with youth populations, such as the power of fun, creativity, and patience, which

they felt would be helpful in any career path.

There are several explanations for why LE PAS might have influenced the decisions of college students to serve youth in their future. First, this service-learning program provided the college students with an impressionable positive experience with children that, to most, was seemingly unexpected. Certainly, the LE PAS experiences reaffirmed the professional interests and passion of those already striving for a career in a youth field. However, for almost half of the college students, LE PAS appeared to alter their preconceived notions of children. The structure of LE PAS, with planned, movement-related activities as the focus of each session, allowed initially unenthused college students to interact with youth in a fun and meaningful way. For many of the college students, this was their first time leading movement activities for youth, giving them the opportunity to increase their confidence and attitude toward youth.

Second, it appeared that the college students felt their service really mattered. This is not too surprising given that service-learning is expected to result in some tangible community benefit (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996). But the observed gains in the LE PAS youth struck a deep human chord with the college students that seemed to fuel a need for similar experiences in the future. One possible reason for the future impact of this human connection is that they probably experienced frequent success reaching youth. Due to the harsh circumstances in New Start Village, it is highly possible that the college students felt the youth benefited from their efforts each and every visit. These feelings could have easily carried over to a belief that they could reenact similar feelings again in the future with other youth populations.

Third, the outcomes of any form of service-learning cannot be realized without reflection. The assignment of a youth-oriented service-learning program might have been a rewarding experience to college students, but in all likelihood would have probably been less influential on their careers if reflection were not part of the process. Following the recommendations of Eyler et al. (1996), college students were constantly asked to specifically reflect on the career implication of the service-learning experience. While this was not an easy connection for everyone, this study confirmed

that the reflection process did instill greater career awareness in college students—whether confirming one’s professional interest (or disinterest) in working with children or learning strategies that can apply to any future job settings (Astin et al., 1999).

Related to reflection, and crucial to uncovering this study’s findings, is the need for service-learning coordinators to consider college students’ initial perspectives or apprehensions toward working in youth-oriented settings. Through such inquiries, instructors can gain insight into college students’ perceived strengths and weaknesses regarding youth, while also accessing information that can assist in the development of a service-learning program that is sensitive to previous experiences and perceptions. For individuals who have future plans to work with youth, the instructor can shape the environment so that it provides opportunities for these students to maintain their youth-oriented career interests while learning useful career-related skills. If the instructor discovers that individuals are disinterested or have trepidations toward working with youth-aged populations, the instructor can provide these students with helpful tools to work with the targeted population.

This study found three tools to be helpful for college students when working with children: *having fun, being creative, and maintaining patience*. These three tools have previously been shown to be effective for motivating children in education settings (Garn & Cothran, 2006; Weinstein, 1989; Ward, Wilkinson, Vincent-Graser, & Prusak, 2008), and this study indicated that they are also beneficial to those working with children. Regardless of career aspiration, college students realized that the lessons learned from serving youth (e.g., enjoying the task at hand, challenging oneself to be imaginative when meeting goals, and recognizing that individuals acquire knowledge/skills at different paces) are also applicable to most professions, especially in service-oriented settings. This study highlighted that working with youth allowed college students to broaden their professional skill set and thus enhance their career path.

Practical Implications

The suggestions we offer to service-learning coordinators as result of this study are threefold.

First, *expose college students to people of all ages in service-learning*. As Gutheil & Chernesky (2006) found with older populations and we confirmed with youth, exposing college students to individuals outside of their initial interest can be an effective means for teaching college students about this population and attracting them to a related career. Second, *include contemplative, career-oriented questions throughout the service-learning experience*. As noted above, these questions might first be included at the outset of the service-learning experience as a barometer for how the service-learning experience might be shaped to meet college student needs. Sample pre-service-learning questions might include (a) what are your career plans?, (b) how do you see your career plan linked to this service-learning experience?, and (c) what do you think you might gain professionally from this service-learning experience? Similar questions could be included in the reflective process throughout the service-learning process as well. Besides those posed in the procedures section of this study, these questions might include (a) how did your career plan change as a result from today’s experience?, (b) how can you best use what you experienced today in your future career?, and, (c) professionally, did you gain what you thought you might gain from this experience? Third, *give college students the freedom to have fun and be creative in youth-oriented service-learning settings*. Adopting the same strategies college students learned from youth in this study could very well be successful in altering career decisions and mapping out future goals to include serving youth. Future research is needed to confirm this relationship.

Conclusion

This study is one of the first to examine how youth-centered service-learning influences the future interest and career paths of college students. This study examined how youth-centered service-learning impacts the future interest and career paths of college students. While college students only engaged in LE PAS for five hours throughout a semester, this service-learning experience with youth also allowed college students to recognize important strategies for working with children, all of which were believed to be significant skills they could use across ages groups and professions. Follow-

up efforts should elucidate the actual long-term career effect from youth-centered service-learning programs.

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Notes

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About the Authors

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Exploring Career Implications for College Students



Students in an LSU service-learning program, some of whom are shown here, became more likely to consider working with children in the future and learned strategies for doing so effectively.