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Twas a Thursday in Class...

Victoria Pentecost, Alexis M. Willis,
and Dusty D. Jenkins

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to describe a service-learning partnership between a human sexuality class and a community agency that assists those affected by intimate partner violence and sexual assault, and the benefits of the service-learning experience from the viewpoints of two of the students.

Unfortunately, it is not hard to say that intimate partner violence (IPV) and sexual assault are prevalent in college populations. For instance, one study found that 30–34% of relationships in three samples of American college students involved some form of physical violence over the course of one year (Straus & Ramirez, 2007). Likewise, young women are reported to have an elevated risk of sexual victimization compared to adult women of other ages, and college men have a much higher rate of experiencing sexual violence than non-college men of the same age (Sinozich & Langton, 2014). The public should keep in mind, however, that it is estimated that most incidents of sexual victimization go unreported to law enforcement (Fisher, Cullen, & Turner, 2000). Thus, a college campus is not necessarily a safe space when it comes to IPV or sexual assault.

Recently in our undergraduate honors human sexuality class we were given the option to learn about IPV and sexual assault via a service-learning partnership with a local family crisis center. Students from our class chose to work in support roles to assist those impacted by IPV or sexual assault, to help with prevention efforts, or to do both. We were trained by and worked with a local family crisis center whose mission is to educate and to assist those affected by IPV and sexual assault. The hope was to increase students' knowledge of important topics related to class (i.e., IPV and sexual assault), and to offer real-world learning experiences that would be valuable for students when later applying for jobs or entrance into graduate school. The next sections describe how two students in the class, Victoria and Alexis, benefited.

Victoria's Reflection

My name is Victoria Pentecost and I was a sophomore psychology major, minoring in criminal justice, when I took this class. I chose to do the support and prevention roles because I want to eventually be a counselor for victims of sex crimes.

The service learning, in the curriculum of our human sexuality class, really helped. We not only read about important topics, we were able to see it firsthand and fight for awareness and for victims by being involved on campus and in the community. In the beginning, I was nervous and unable to clearly pin down what skills I had as a new college student to offer to our community partner. But I went through training and started actually doing service, and I began to realize what I could do as a part of the crisis center's team. I learned what risk factors are, how we can minimize risk factors, what rape culture is, how it affects both men's and women's lives, how to communicate with a recent sexual assault survivor, and so much more. Because of the service learning, I now feel so much more confident and prepared to talk about these issues than I would just learning about them in a textbook and class. As part of service learning, we had dialogues with leaders on campus and in the community on how we can actively change things—and that is something I never would have gotten in a traditional classroom setting.

The service-learning experience allowed me to transfer skills I had learned to a wider audience. For instance, I was able to become the service officer in the local chapter of a national service-based organization, and translate skills that I had learned, such as honing in on the needs of the local community, and being able to establish and maintain connections with community leaders. Finally, some of the most personally impactful outcomes of the service-learning class are that I have been able to identify toxic/abusive attitudes among myself and others, and have been able to meaningfully contribute to classroom and friendly conversations on these topics. As an aspiring counselor, getting practice in encouraging others to seek healthy change is an invaluable asset.

Alexis's Reflection

My name is Alexis M. Willis and I chose to

work on the service-learning project because I always wanted to work with victims of abuse. I was a junior majoring in psychology with a minor in child development and family living, and I believed that working on the project would help me to solidify my career path. I must say that the training with our community partner for the project was initially difficult. For instance, it was the first time I had learned about the full process of a rape kit. Moreover, I was disheartened to hear from our trainer that it might take up to two years for the survivors of an assault to get the results of the rape kit in the state in which we reside. However, through the training I learned so much more than I had ever anticipated.

One thing I did was promote prevention efforts through numerous campus events. Some of those events included hosting a self-defense class for women, and handing out information about IPV and sexual assault resources to students. Yet perhaps most impactful for me was the bulletin board we set up in the Department of Psychology, which aimed to get information about sexual assault and the campus resources out to students. We created an interactive bulletin board, using “Love Should” posters that were collected during self-defense classes, and also left blank ones for students to take, write their answers on, and tack back on the board. The posters said, “Love should _____.” We thought the posters would be eye catching and also make people stop and contemplate what they believe love is. One of the biggest impacts was when in just a few days after putting up the board, I walked by to see that the board was completely filled with posters of people’s ideas of what love should and should not be! Seeing it so completely filled after only a few days made me feel proud, because it was something that made an impact by getting people discussing important issues.

In addition to promoting prevention, I also served in an on-call support position. The first weekend I was on call I felt both excited and scared. I questioned my abilities to actually provide support to an individual who had gone through a traumatic experience. By the end of the weekend, I had not been called out, and I was a little disappointed that my training had not been put into use; but more so, there was just immense relief to know that no one in my area needed help because of a sexual assault that weekend.

I continued to volunteer with the community agency after the course ended, and my experiences with the agency opened the door for me to do a summer internship with another local agency.

I also branched out to work with other campus organizations to help spread awareness about sexual violence. I have now graduated from college and will continue my journey of working with a rape and suicide crisis center in my hometown, while also pursuing a master’s degree in social work. Overall, through service learning I gained a better understanding of what it truly means to be helpful and giving, and how I want to better my community and the world around me. I also realized in hind-sight that I had originally signed up for service learning thinking that I would make a difference in someone else’s life, but the truth is I came out of it a better and more understanding person of the world around me and the people in it who are striving to make it a better place.

Victoria and Alexis’s Creative Reflection

At the end of the semester, we did classroom presentations about our service-learning experiences. Our professor encouraged us to be creative. Because we had been working side-by-side all semester in our service-learning roles, we decided to work together on our presentation, and to our professor’s delight, we took her up on her suggestion to get creative! We wrote a short story to the rhythm of “Twas the Night Before Christmas,” and upon closing, we provide the (slightly more polished) version here. We hope that others are inspired to know that there is a real need for help in the fields of IPV and sexual assault prevention, and to know that while making a meaningful impact on others and learning about important issues, there is still room for having fun!

Ch. 1 – A Chance of a Lifetime

Twas a Thursday in class, and all through
the room,
the students were buzzing, “who, who,
who?”
there were guests in the corner, strangers
to us,
but our professor said, that these we
could trust.
We listened with wonder, looking for
someone to work under
As they told us the story of the Family
Crisis Center.
Immediately we knew, we didn’t want to
work with just one, but two!
A lesson from our mentor:
When you help others, you help yourself,
too!

Ch. 2 – It Doesn't Take a Rocket Scientist (but maybe a SANE¹ Nurse)

Paperwork, paperwork, paperwork we sifted through
Confidentiality agreements needed our signatures too!
Quinn² gave us facts about all that they do
As we finished training, she said, "and now, it's up to you!"
Then we met with Lissy³, and that was a long training
It was important, yet mentally draining.
We explored lots of ways someone can be hurt
And that it definitely is not always someone in a skirt
We signed up and set out
Updated our calendars too
Ready for anything, and to help more than a few

Ch. 3 – Working with Quinn

The SAVE⁴ Coalition
To serve is its mission
So, for volunteer ideas we were fishin'
Dr. Jenkins stepped in, and helped with our woes
A board on the wall (we could only reach on our tip toes)
It came out great
The impression we left was everlasting
So many people caught
The message we were broadcasting
We learned a lot, too, on freshman recruitment day
Even if it started rough, the two of us got tough and put our worries away
Quinn let us go free, initially we were scared
From the ups to the downs, only smiles we bared
We set up a table, flyers in hand
We found students who were willing to take a stand
They pledged alongside us (for a gift, well earned)
After talking with us, there was so much they learned
Throughout all this, there was but one true obstacle
Scary parents that we later found comical
All in all, they left knowing their kids would be safe and could stay
And they were encouraged to come back, and live the SFA Way⁵

Ch. 4 – Working with Lissy

Waiting in anticipation
We were tempted with evasion
But when no call came through
We found ourselves sad and blue
There was celebration in safety
Yet somehow we felt, that without a call under our belts,
Our experience was hazy
In the end, we were grateful. The opportunity was given
And after this is done we will continue the mission

Ch. 5 – Lumberjacks⁶ Make Great IPV and Sexual Assault Educators

As we look back and reflect
A few things we could not neglect
The lessons we taught
And the stigma we fought
Were nothing compared
To the excitement we shared
The moral of service learning?
Making a difference is hard
But it gets your spirits burning!

¹ Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner

² One of our agency supervisors

³ Another agency supervisor

⁴ Sexual Assault Violence Education, a volunteer group of concerned community members hosted by the Family Crisis Center

⁵ Our university's root principles of respect, caring, responsibility, unity, and integrity

⁶ Our school mascot

References

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About the Authors

At the time of this writing, Victoria Pentecost and Alexis M. Willis were students and Dusty D. Jenkins an associate professor in the Department of Psychology at Stephen F. Austin State University.