

January 2015

Service Learning and Community Engagement in Graduate Social Work Classrooms: One Student's Perspective

Christina J. Messer Gaitskill
Northern Kentucky University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.northgeorgia.edu/jces>

Recommended Citation

Messer Gaitskill, Christina J. (2015) "Service Learning and Community Engagement in Graduate Social Work Classrooms: One Student's Perspective," *Journal of Community Engagement and Scholarship*: Vol. 8 : Iss. 1 , Article 15.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.northgeorgia.edu/jces/vol8/iss1/15>

This Student Voices is brought to you for free and open access by Nighthawks Open Institutional Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Community Engagement and Scholarship by an authorized editor of Nighthawks Open Institutional Repository.

STUDENT VOICES

Service Learning and Community Engagement in Graduate Social Work Classrooms: One Student's Perspective

Christian J. Messer Gaitskill

Appalachian Ohio is a unique community with a rich history, which presents both strengths and challenges for community engagement initiatives. This paper describes a service-learning project that offered cultural diversity training to professionals in Appalachia as a foundational component of a social work program focus on community engagement. Service learning in social work classrooms has been examined for many years (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996; Lemieux & Allen, 2007; Lowe & Clark, 2009; Mink & Twill, 2012; Mitschke & Petrovich, 2011). By definition, many service-learning projects necessarily involve community engagement.

Integral to this paper is the definition of community engagement. The Carnegie Community Engagement Classification defined community engagement as “the collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity” (Campus Compact, 2015, para. 4). Community engagement involves students spending time in their larger communities, with the broad goal of both learning and having a positive impact.

Texas Tech University defined service learning as “a pedagogy that links academic study and civic engagement through thoughtfully organized service that meets the needs of the community” (Lowe & Clark, 2009; Texas Tech University, 2002, para. 2). Service learning, an active form of community engagement, can be used in the social work classroom in a variety of ways, including in the promotion of hands-on experience within the safe context of academic supervision.

Primarily, the literature in the area of service learning reflects instructor analyses of student projects in bachelor of social work classrooms (Lowe & Clark, 2009; Mink & Twill, 2012). However, there is limited literature available regarding the experiences of a Master of Social Work (MSW) student, from the student's perspective. This article seeks to share an MSW student's perspective regarding a service-learning project conducted in an agency in Appalachian Ohio, as well as describe the impact to the overall community.

I work as a guardian ad litem (GAL) for Court Appointed Special Advocates for Clermont Kids (CASA), in Clermont County, Ohio Juvenile Court. I have worked with the abuse, neglect, and dependency docket in that court since February of 2011. This work with families in difficult situations is extremely rewarding. In order to serve as a GAL, I was required to attend a 40-hour training. In addition, I am required to complete 12 hours of continuing education each calendar year. I am also currently a MSW graduate student in Kentucky.

Upon entering a graduate level social work class in multiculturalism, I learned that service-learning projects would comprise one of our focus areas for the course. Furthermore, each student would be allowed to pick an agency with which to work. One of the ways in which social workers can expand their cultural competence is to learn about their own culture and the experiences of others in that culture (Clay, 2010). Therefore, I chose to complete my project by expanding my knowledge of the culture of poverty experienced by Appalachian people. This community experiences poverty at a rate of 111.5% of the poverty rate of the United States overall (Appalachian Regional Commission [3], n.d.).

The broad focus of my project was a Culture of Poverty and Appalachian Cultural History training class that I developed and taught for other GALs at CASA. The purpose of this class was to provide an in-depth look at the population served by GALs in that area, the Appalachian community. This paper discusses the project completed, and advocates for the implementation of service learning as an effective means of community engagement in graduate social work classrooms.

CASA is an organization of community volunteers that advocate for the best interests of children in the foster care system (CASA for Clermont Kids, 2015; Royalty, 2014.) The concept behind CASA came about in response to children “slipping through the cracks” of the legal system (Royalty, 2014). In many instances, “slipping through the cracks” indicates that a child’s case has not received proper attention, and that child may be at increased risk as a result. GALs in Ohio are appointed by a judge to advocate for the best interests of a child by making recommendations to the court in the form of a written report (CASA for Clermont Kids, 2015). The major advantage of having a CASA GAL appointed on a case is the more individualized attention the CASA volunteer can provide to each case, as they typically only work on one to two cases at any time.

This branch of CASA works exclusively in an Appalachian county, but does not always have workers who may identify as Appalachian (Royalty, 2014). Clermont County, Ohio serves as the most western border of Appalachia in Ohio (Appalachian Regional Commission [1], n.d.). In 2010, Clermont County had a population of 197,363 with a per capita income of \$34,786 (Appalachian Regional Commission [2], n.d.). For 2010, the unemployment rate in Clermont County was 9.7%, with 18,790 people living below the U.S. Federal Poverty Guidelines for 2007–2011. This indicates that, in 2010, Clermont County had a poverty rate of 9.6% (Appalachian Regional Commission [2], n.d.).

CASA for Clermont Kids served 232 children in 2013 (Royalty, 2014), all of them from Clermont County. While many of the clients served by CASA are among those included in the lowest income families in the county, many of the GALs come from more middle class or upper middle class backgrounds (Royalty, 2014). This creates an obvious disconnect between the experiences of the families served and those serving them. For this reason, it was determined that a community need would be filled by educating GALs about the culture of poverty and Appalachian culture and history.

For my project, rather than risk the possibility of revealing confidential information regarding real clients, I made the decision to use a case example from the popular documentary “The Wild and Wonderful Whites of West Virginia” Video excerpts from the documentary were used in the training class. One of the people featured was Susan White, who discovered she was pregnant after stabbing her boyfriend with a knife. Susan had a problem with prescription painkillers, and the baby also subsequently tested positive for painkillers at birth. The documentary shows Susan crushing and snorting pills in the hospital prior to her release after childbirth. Local authorities were notified, and the child was placed in the custody of the local children services agency (Taylor & Nitzberg, 2010).

I chose to use this example because an overwhelming majority of the cases in which CASA becomes involved have an element of substance abuse listed as the primary reason for the removal of the child. Clermont County is currently experiencing an epidemic of heroin abuse. From January through June 2014, 68 children were removed from their homes and placed in the custody of Clermont County Children’s Services. Of those, 47% of the cases were related to substance abuse (Royalty, 2014). Every case that I have handled in my time with CASA has been either directly or indirectly related to substance abuse in some way.

After choosing the video excerpts, I began building a PowerPoint presentation that included a general discussion of poverty, situational versus generational poverty, and a brief history of the exploitation of Appalachian populations and the prevalence of negative Appalachian stereotypes in popular media. I then related all of this information back to the ways in which GALs can support Appalachian families to promote the reunification of the family following a child’s removal from the home.

A fundamental tenet of service learning is that it should be mutually beneficial, with “...two main goals- enhancing student learning and civic responsibility while also providing a benefit to the local target community” (Mitschke & Petrovich, 2011, p. 97). In concurrence with this standard, this project was both beneficial to the community as well as myself. Nine practicing GALs participated in this training, which equals roughly 20% of the CASA GALs in the county at that time. Those who attended the training class completed a survey based on their experiences, and reported that they felt more comfortable working with a population with which they were previously unfamiliar. This

is a benefit to the local target community, as the professionals gained knowledge of the population with which they work.

As for the impact on me as a student, I learned how valuable it can be to share information in a formal agency setting. I was excited and honored to be able to share a topic I am passionate about with a group of individuals whose primary goal is to improve outcomes for children in our county. I have been able to see the long-term effects of this training in questions from participants that I have received since the training. Being able to get out in the community and impact a population that holds a special place in my heart allowed me to see the struggles Appalachian populations must face in working with people who do not understand their culture. It was a very enlightening experience that I may not have had without the opportunity this project afforded me to become further engaged in the community in such a deep way.

Looking back on my experiences with this class project, there are several things I would change for a future project. Because we were allowed so much freedom in picking our projects and agencies, it would have been nice to have one semester's worth of advanced notice of the project. That would have allowed students to really think about the projects they would like to complete, and if not already affiliated with an agency, to identify and partner with an agency that appeals to the student's area of interest. One semester to partner with an agency, get a project approved, and complete the actual project seemed a bit rushed.

Additionally, this project assignment would have been more beneficial to the target population of children and families if more CASA GALs had attended, and if this training class had been offered to all guardians working in Clermont County. Participants were offered the opportunity of earning three credit hours toward their yearly-required 12 hours. However some other type of incentive, such as a drawing for a gift card or books, may have made a difference in the attendance numbers, thereby potentially making a larger impact on the community.

Following my experience with this project, I decided that more work needed to be done with regard to the impact of the training class. Because "service learning in social work education is a pedagogical approach in need of more rigorous evaluation research to advance knowledge and to inform practice in the field" (Lemieux & Allen, 2007, p. 321), I approached my advanced research professor as well as the professor who assigned the

original service-learning project about conducting a study on the overall effectiveness of the training. They both agreed to further develop and evaluate this project, and the continued project is an ongoing effort.

After completing this project, I feel that the impact of service-learning projects on both MSW students and the larger community is greatly beneficial. Organizations have the ability to benefit from a knowledge base they may not otherwise be able to access. Furthermore, it allows students to work on a project and immediately see the benefit in real-life situations. Because both of these combine to help create stronger communities and more civic-minded professionals, I feel that service-learning projects that incorporate a strong community engagement emphasis should be part of the educational experiences of MSW students across the country.

References

- Appalachian Regional Commission (1). (n.d.). Poverty rates in Appalachia, 2007–2011. Retrieved from http://www.arc.gov/research/MapsofAppalachia.asp?MAP_ID=76.
- Appalachian Regional Commission (2). (n.d.). Socioeconomic data: Clermont County, Ohio. Retrieved from http://www.arc.gov/reports/socio_report.asp.
- Appalachian Regional Commission (3). (n.d.). Poverty rates, 2008-2012. Retrieved from http://www.arc.gov/reports/custom_report.asp?REPORT_ID=55.
- Bingle, R.G., & Hatcher, J.A. (1996). Implementing service learning in higher education. *Journal of Higher Education*, 67, 221–239.
- Campus Compact. (2015). Carnegie community engagement classification. Retrieved from http://www.compact.org/initiatives/carnegie-community-engagement-classification/?zoom_highlight=community+engagement#Description.
- CASA for Clermont Kids. (2015). About us. Retrieved from http://casaforclermontkids.org/?page_id=30.
- Clay, R. A. (2010). How do I become culturally competent? *gradPSYCH Magazine*, 8(3), 24. Retrieved from <http://www.apa.org/gradpsych/2010/09/culturally-competent.aspx>.
- Lemieux, C.M., & Allen, P.A. (2007). Service learning in social work education: The state of knowledge, pedagogical practicalities, and practice conundrums. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 43(2), 309–325.
- Lowe, L.A., & Clark, J. (2009). Learning about

social work research through service-learning. *Journal of Community Engagement and Scholarship*, 2(1), 50–59.

Mink, T. & Twill, S. (2012). Using service-learning to teach a social work policy course. *Journal of Community Engagement and Scholarship*, 5(1), 5–9.

Mitschke, D.B., & Petrovich, J.C. (2011). Improving social work students' understanding of health and social justice knowledge through the implementation of service learning at a free community health clinic. *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, 21(1), 97–108.

Royalty, A. (2014). Personal interview with the executive director of CASA for Clermont Kids. February 4, 2014.

Taylor, S., & Nitzberg, J. (2010). "The wild and wonderful Whites of West Virginia." United States: New Video Group.

Texas Tech University. (2003). Definitions and guidelines. Retrieved from <http://www.tlct.ttu.edu/servicelearning/definition.asp>.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Dr. Willie Elliott for assigning such an inspiring project, as well as for his unwavering support and discussion. I would also like to thank Dr. Jessica Averitt Taylor for her continued support, guidance, direction, and advice. Behind any great student are great teachers and mentors. I have some of the best. And to Dr. Patricia Friel: For everything.

About the Author

Christian J. Messer Gaitskill completed her master of social work degree at Northern Kentucky University in May 2015. She received her B.S. in paralegal technology from the University of Cincinnati.