Student Engagement:

Universities' Initiatives to Promote Student Community Involvement

North American Community: Uniting for Equity

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Abstract

Universities across the globe have been implementing a variety of service-learning strategies in the academic curriculum to integrate theoretical and practical knowledge. Encouraging students to be involved in the community is one of the many practical methods utilized by higher education institutions for that purpose. The literature supports positive outcomes from students and universities that are engaged with the community and evidence the idea of service learning as an effective educational tool. This paper describes a pilot and experimental course undertaken by the Department of Counseling at Texas A&M University-Commerce (TAMUC) that explores students' community engagement through service-learning activities. Students enrolled in the class will be expected to complete service events, research assignments, and participate in reflection of their experience. The authors of this paper advocate for universities to implement student involvement projects within the community that will create and preserve a sense of community engagement within students that will be maintained beyond graduation.

Student involvement within the community has been a long history in academia. As service learning becomes part of curriculum development, universities are investigating how students engaging and learning theoretical knowledge and transfer or convert those into practical social learning skills (Yardley, Teunissen, & Dornan, 2012). Service learning is a term describing an experiential tool that is used to enhance the student's learning development while at the same time contributing to the university's social community. This multifaceted practice enhances learning outcomes, provides community engagement, and creates a culture of education and community engagement that is preserved beyond graduation. This paper describes a pilot and experimental program undertaken by the Department of Counseling at Texas A&M University-Commerce (TAMUC) in response to a call from the University's administration to explore engaging university undergraduate and graduate students with communities in its rural service area with the objectives of preparing community leaders.

Service Learning

The authors embraced the definition of service learning as put forth by Cauley et al. (2001) as an academic curriculum of organized experiences that require active student participation in a series of behavioral acts of services to the selected community. This integration must benefit both parties involved and have clear service and academic goals. In addition, Cauley et al. provide the following attributes for service-learning strategies: the faculty member and the service site need to have an established relationship, promote ethics of service, provide an orientation for the students that discusses the culture of the population being served, the nature of the services being offered, and other appropriate organizational complexities, and finally, explore student reflections on their experience as an integrative part of service learning.

Although distinct from community service and community-based partnerships, service learning can be accomplished through community-university partnerships where community service is utilized as a strategy for learning. Service learning provides universities with the opportunity to help students learn from the community and apply their theoretical knowledge to the community in which they live. For that reason, students must be given the opportunity to reflect on the experience and the learning outcomes. This strategy builds a bridge between academia and the public while teaching students the importance of social

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contribution.

Universities' Initiatives

Literature shows that universities can make simple steps towards community collaboration, including being physically present within a community. Brown et al. (2010) discussed the initiative from the Graduate School of Public Health at the University of Pittsburgh to collaborate with a local community center, Hosanna House Inc., to provide students with a physical space for one of their courses, "Community Development Approaches in Public Health". The learning objectives of the course were all community-based, and the university proposed a geographical collaboration as a plan to introduce students to the community, without any practical or formal interaction with the community itself. Even though no active service-learning components were experiences, the study shows positive student outcomes from being physically present in the community, including a positive impact on the student's learning, and student's testimonials that indicated an increased desire to be more involved with the community.

From this perspective, the findings of Brown et al.'s (2010) study suggest that it can be beneficial to initially introduce students to the community setting and educate them on the community and the population, before necessarily implementing any practical interaction. This strategy is congruent with the educational piece of service learning, which focuses on developing orientation on community awareness, resources, culture, and identification of needs (Cauley et al., 2001). Additionally, this study provided an alternative for universities that cannot necessarily implement service-learning projects but want to make their students aware of the community's situationservice-learning. Furthermore, Playford & Puddey (2017) suggested that interest alone in engaging in the community is not a significant variable that ensures possible engagement but, specifically in rural communities, rural placement experience promotes future involvement in the area. When universities promote service-learning activities and students are exposed to the community, a sense of community engagement is formed within that individual.

When it comes to practical approaches, the literature has vast examples of how university involvement in the community has brought positive results. Reid et al. (2019) analyzed and reviewed the outcomes of a partnership between the University of New Mexico and a private foundation to bring health

professionals to a rural area in New Mexico to complete their degree's residency requirements. The institutional collaboration of the organization and the University demonstrated positive outcomes, including academic engagement of students, local health support, and reduction of local teen pregnancy rates. The service-learning model is widely used in the health sciences, and it extends learning outcomes and health care services for the community (Cauley et al., 2001).

From a global evaluation, research also indicates that educational institutions can be engaged with rural communities from across the world. Campbell and Baernholdt (2016) described the methodology and results of a United States university's partnership with a South African rural community to improve palliative care learning and training. The outcome demonstrated that the correct identification of the community's needs, along with the compatible educational method, resulted in a positive experience. On the other hand, through this project, the research group was able to identify that the community health workers demonstrated a need for emotional support, outside of academic knowledge, to perform their professional duties. Further research on how to provide emotional support was suggested. Although no university students were involved in the project, it successfully demonstrated a conscious partnership to promote the educational curriculum across countries. The literature reviewed gave the authors insights on how to develop the current project in the context of engaging diverse rural communities in Northeast Texas while delivering academic programs for involved and enrolled students.

Meaningfulness: Perspectives from Both students and the Community Served

In developing this project, the authors were interested in finding out how undergraduate students enrolled in this course perceive their experience in carrying out behavioral acts to serving the selected community, such as how they personalize their contribution and action in fulfilling the course requirements, their meaningfulness, and other thoughts and reflections consequential to their active engagement. The views from the community members that those students served also need to be reviewed and examined especially in meeting the objectives of community engagement as set the university administration.

Student involvement in the community has proven to be a successful alternative for rural development (Mbalinda et al., 2011; Moely & Ilustre, 2016; Thackrah, Fitzgerald & Thompson, 2017).

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Mbalinda et al. (2011) assessed the outcomes of student-led community intervention, where Makerere University in Uganda provided its health students with the opportunity to serve their community by developing public health interventions. Through a project called Community-Based Education and Service Programs (COBES), students who were enrolled in health-related programs were required through the curriculum to complete clinical community experience. The university made partnerships with specific sites on villages and communities around the region and provided them with students from various health-related programs. The students were responsible for studying the needs of the community, and later implementing methods, tools, and strategies. Community perspective on the COBES program were assessed by interviewing site tutors and community members. The feedback received from the community demonstrated that the program had a positive effect on the rural community, as students successfully developed and implemented programs across the regions, with community members indicating an increase in educational awareness and a decrease in major communicable diseases. The article also reflected that there were challenges involved in maintaining such a program, including cultural and language barriers, community fatigue, lack of remuneration, and a need for a structured curriculum.

On the other hand, Moely and Ilustre (2016) researched the student's perspective on required service-learning courses throughout their academic tenure. The need to include a service-learning module in the academic curriculum arose from the tragic events of Hurricane Katrina. During their first two years of college, students were required to complete one service-learning course. For the remaining two years, students were required to engage in a more challenging academic experience, which included one of the following: public service internships, upper-level service-learning courses, community-based projects organized by faculty, or engagement in a student-proposed service-learning opportunity. The longitudinal study verified a strong positive outcome from being engaged in those activities. After completing the program, students demonstrated engagement in community activities outside of academic requirements, an increase in civic knowledge, social justice attitudes, interpersonal skills, and cultural awareness. The research also mentioned that the university has a culture of community engagement and public service, which could have reinforced students' behavior. The authors of this paper were curious if this pilot program

would replicate the findings of Moely and Ilustre (2016).

In addition, Thackrah et al. (2017) studied the immersion experience of Australian university students who served in Aboriginal communities. Several universities in Australia hold specific departments for rural communities, including Rural Health and Rural Clinical Schools. The universities take a service-learning module approach towards clinical, educational practices. Students are given the opportunity to immerse themselves in Aboriginal culture while practicing in their field of expertise. Even though all universities followed different curriculua, all of them included instruction on Aboriginal health culture, which demonstrated an alignment regarding the universities' responsibility towards cultural awareness. All students indicated that the cultural training was essential to their experience, but confirmed that they had difficulties applying it to clinical practice. Even so, some students utilized the challenge to create new clinical strategies in practice. Another challenge documented was feelings of inadequacy, where students expressed doubts about their practice as well as fear of failure. These and other challenges were often counterbalanced by peer-support provided by other students and by the on-site cultural mentor. Lastly, students affirmed that being immersed in a cultural setting, having a present and resourceful cultural mentor, and being engaged in the community were essential parts of their service-learning experience. This study recognized the impact of rural community immersion as a successful resource for academic and service-learning integration.

After reviewing the literature, it is possible to see a pattern of engagement of health professionals in the theme of rural community service. This field provides a practical availability of professionals, along with required clinical interactions. The helping professions provide significant value in rural communities, but literature indicates that more structuralized curriculum, cultural training, and emotional support are conditional for a successful outcome. Furthermore, collaborative partnerships with local agencies seem to be an essential variable for measuring success. Overall, the literature studied shows overwhelming positive outcomes from students engaged with the community and reinforced the idea of service as an effective educational tool.

Texas A&M University – Commerce, located in a rural part of Texas, has a long history of

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engagement with the surrounding community. Taking into consideration the extensive literature around service learning, and the positive results of the experiences described in the literature, the university's College of Education and Human Services proposed the development and implementation of a service-learning course to undergraduate and graduate students of the institution, with the purpose of educational learning and community contribution,with a projected launch date in the Fall 2021 semester. It is our hope that students who enroll in the class will create a sense of civic engagement that they will carry throughout their lives.

The Concept of S.E.R.V.I.C.E

Texas A&M University-Commerce is dedicated to helping students become the best versions of themselves while simultaneously striving to make the world a better place. A recent study revealed that, across the nation, nearly 310 million hours of community service are completed by over 3 million college students (Schatteman, 2014). Given these numbers, faculty at the university set out to provide students with more resources to get involved in community service.

Year after year students leave their hometowns to reside in a new city for the next four years as they venture through the college experience. During these years, they become part of their college community, but often fail to interact with the town's long-term residents such as growing families, the elderly, and business owners. The need for a bridge between the college students and the community was evident. Thus, the class, Students Engaging Regularly & Voicing Interest in Community Excellence (S.E.R.V.I.C.E) was born.

This course will allow students to give back to their adopted community and invest in their mental health. Students will have the opportunity to increase a college town's interconnectivity by networking with the community members through various acts of service. In addition to bettering the town, the London School of Economics found through their research that those who spend time

volunteering are happier (Borgonovi, 2008). In today's world where college students' mental health is of great importance, finding effective activities to help this population is crucial as a college. Research done by Huml, Hancock, Bergman, and Hums (2019) found thatcommunity service performed by college students makes them feel like they are efficiently adding to society as well as providing them with feelings of satisfaction. Working within the community will also heighten the student's social skills, help them be more selfless, and witness how their actions affect others. After concepts of the creation of S.E.R.V.I.C.E were identified, the focus shifted to the development of the class.

<h2 style="text-align:center">The Development of S.E.R.V.I.C.E</h2>

Since S.E.R.V.I.C.E is a college course, certain aspects must be integrated in order to satisfy the requirements of a class. The duration of this course would be the average of sixteen weeks. It would only be offered in the Fall term as the planned service projects only take place during that period. However, as the course grows in size, expanding into other semesters could present the chance for more students to be involved. In addition to meeting as a class for planned events, the class will meet once a week for one hour to plan for and reflect on events. This will help the students identify what they are gaining emotionally from working in the community. At the end of the semester, students will be expected to give a presentation to the class regarding their favorite service event. The presentations will serve as feedback to identify events that were found to be most beneficial, which will be used in the development of this course in future semesters. Not only will feedback from this course give insight for the layout of S.E.R.V.I.C.E in the future, but a study at Harvard Graduate School found that providing students with the chance to give feedback makes them feel like the university prioritizes their opinion (Shafer, 2017). Therefore, the presentation assignment is a win-win for students and faculty. This course is available for any student classification as the positive emotional effects will be beneficial for freshman through seniors

(Huml et al., 2019). Maximum class size was set at 15, in order to provide significantly more reflection time as well as other opportunities (Mathis, 2016). As the class is implemented, the development will change on an as-needed basis to meet the needs of the community and the students.

The Implementation of S.E.R.V.I.C.E

For this class to reach the desired effect, a multitude of service events have been chosen to meet the core requirements. Initially, at least eight events will be implemented for the class. Students will be required to attend each of these events in order to receive credit for the course. While a semester is composed of 16 weeks, there will not be an event each week, since research has found that people with an excessive amount of leisure activities tend to get more stressed, even when the activities they are doing are not stressful (Brown et al., 2011). The first event of the semester is the silent auction for the Thalian Culture Club in early September. During the event, students will provide behind-the-scenes assistance like setting up, cleaning up, and so on. The Thalian Culture Club donates the proceeds to various organizations in the Commerce community and to a scholarship fund at the high school. Another event called Bois D'Arc Bash, which takes place on the last Saturday of September, will consist of students working behind the scenes to ensure it is running smoothly. This can vary from setting up a booth to directing people to restrooms. This is a massive event for the town and would be of great help to business owners. In October, students would partake in the Clean Up Commerce Campaign by spending one Saturday together picking up litter throughout the town. As the holiday season begins, students would actively participate in Toys for Tots by staffing donation booths, organizing gifts, or handing them out. The toys received during this event would go directly to children in the town. These are a few of the various ways this course will be implemented over the duration of four months. As corporate social responsibility becomes more prevalent, business owners/organizations will always be

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looking for additional volunteers to provide help in their giving-back events (Kim & Kim, 2016). Involving students in the volunteer process promotes the opportunity to give back and allow students to meet individuals that play a large role in the community in which they live.

The Outcomes of S.E.R.V.I.C.E

By the end of the S.E.R.V.I.C.E. course, the university expects that the students will have gained a number of outcomes. The main priority is that these students will harbor a love for helping others. Their semester of service learning should increase their communication, critical thinking, and sensitivity to diversity. Research conducted by Phelps and Kotrik (2007) supported a correlation between life skills and community service. College is a time when independence is a fresh concept and students learn to be concerned for themselves. This course will strengthen students' self-awareness by encouraging them to take responsibility, exposing them to other perspectives, and pushing them to value their own beliefs.

Students are not the only people who may benefit from this course, since their work will positively impact the community. Through the service projects, the town will have trash picked up, money flowing back into the economy from silent auctions, and kids interacting with the college students. Saletnik (2018) found that mentoring enables growth and confidence. By participating in all of these events, students will establish roots in their college town and build relationships with permanent residents. This will act as a window for networking. Research has found that networking is a crucial aspect of professional success (Jacobs et al., 2019). With an increased level of involvement, students will increase interconnectedness between the community and the college students.

Therefore, by implementing this course, the students and community can expect a variety of positive outcomes. Aspects that may be impacted as a result of the course include, career development, community awareness, commitment to service, and sensitivity to diversity. With

growth in these areas, students may experience an escalation in character as the community work transforms their hearts while transforming the town.

In addition to confirming the findings cited from literature earlier, the authors anticipate expanding the scope of this pilot project to possibly develop an inter-disciplinary degree program emphasizing community service and leadership, in alignment with the university mission of community engagement. The logistics of delivering such courses and supervising student activities, including related costs in terms of time, funding, and budgetingwould be taken into consideration. One big issue is the effect on employability of graduates from such programs. Feedback from the communities served would provide us with an indication of demand for graduates of the S.E.R.V.I.C.E. course. The authors plan to continue following the students after they complete this pilot program until they graduate from the university and during their initial gainful employment immediately upon graduation. The authors would continue to collect data and for further study and program development. Regardless, the authors believe the continuous data collected from various points in time, would supportthe merit of fostering student community engagement.

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