

ADDENDUM

This article originally appeared in *Journal of Intergenerational Relationships*, volume 2, issue 2. The original printing contained unintentional errors which have since been corrected. The article appears here as the author intended. The Haworth Press sincerely regrets these errors and any inconvenience they may have caused.

Assessing Impact of Service-Learning Project on Older, Isolated Adults in Rural America

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ABSTRACT. With help from a grant from the Corporation for National Service, service learning was infused into four classes of a graduate gerontology course, Aging Well. Thirty-one students were paired with 31 older adults for a period of up to twenty hours. The impact on the emotional and social wellness of the older adults was assessed through student journals, electronic e-mail reflection, and the administration of a survey to older adults. Analysis indicated that the service provided to the older adults had a positive impact on their emotional and social wellness. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service:*

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INTRODUCTION

Service Learning in Higher Education

Service learning is defined as a pedagogy that integrates community service activities into academic curricula. Students are not credited for service but for demonstrated learning that comes from service. They are involved in planned, course-relevant activities in partnership with a community organization. Students reflect on service experiences to better understand course content, to learn about themselves and the community, and to develop an understanding of civic responsibility. Students participate in structured, organized opportunities for learning, and the community is better served with this linkage to a higher education institution (Corporation for National Service, 2003).

Service learning differs from internships and practicum experience since the latter focus primarily on the development of students' skills or the enhancement of service delivery. Service learning, in contrast, is a philosophy of education that focuses on service to the community.

Service Learning in Gerontology

Gerontology, the study of aging, is a field that is both multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary across educational delivery systems. In higher education, gerontological course work is found across disciplines and the administration of gerontology programs is housed in a variety of departments.

The goals of gerontology education include the knowledge of aging as a natural and lifelong process; understanding the physical and psychosocial aspects of aging; empathizing with older adults challenged by illness and frailty; recognizing lifestyle and behavior issues affecting aging adults; and becoming aware of the historical perspective of older adults.

The joining of gerontology education with an intergenerational service-learning project is a perfect fit. Intergenerational service learning

focuses on issues affecting the community's older adults, from volunteerism and their contributions to society to the lack of supportive services and educational opportunities. Younger students gain exposure and experience with a population with whom they may interact throughout their careers.

Intergenerational service-learning opportunities are being realized with in the policy, practice, education and research communities nationally and internationally. There is a commitment to the idea that there is a special synergy between old and young, and that challenges facing each of these populations can be best met by facilitating the connection between the two groups. The old can find social and emotional support from the young, meaning in life, and the opportunity to share their wisdom. The young can learn important life lessons, gain firsthand knowledge about the challenges and the triumphs of getting older, and find a mentor to guide them.

A variety of intergenerational service-learning projects were completed under the *Sustaining and Expanding a National Model for Institutionalizing Intergenerational Service-Learning in Gerontology* grant from the National Corporation for Service to the Association for Gerontology in Higher Education. Generations Together (GT), an Intergenerational Studies Program at the University of Pittsburgh, joined with AGHE in this project to develop, promote, support and expand the service-learning opportunities for AGHE member institutions. The types of projects ranged from pet therapy, arts, and physical therapy activities in a nursing home to Retired Senior Volunteer Program members and college students visiting elementary schools.

Other projects sponsored by the *Sustaining and Expanding a National Model for Institutionalizing Intergenerational Service-Learning in Gerontology* grant involved low vision screening in homes of elderly adults, helping Asian immigrants preparing for citizenship, stress management and exercise programs with elderly public housing residents, and graduate students mentoring undergraduates in the development and implementation of service-learning projects (McCrea, Nichols, Newman, 2000).

In an evaluation conducted by Generations Together at the University of Pittsburgh (1999) based on interviews and questionnaires administered to community service providers, respondents indicated that service-learning students did chores, taught older adults new skills and involved older adults in new activities as part of a course. Ninety percent of older adults made friends with the students, and 100% reported one benefit: Someone cared for them. Eighty-one percent reported that

there were fewer negative stereotypes of youth as a result of the intergenerational involvement.

Older adults' participation in service-learning projects has been shown to improve life satisfaction, increase self-esteem, improve health, and provide opportunities to share their life experiences with a young person while helping to pass on their history and culture (Newman, 1988; Reville, 1989; Kuehne, 1992; Bringle and Kremer, 1993).

Ball State University Service-Learning Initiatives

Ball State University, of Muncie, Indiana, has been linking students with the community through service learning for over 30 years. In 2002, the Office of Leadership and Service Learning engaged 2000 students in service-learning activities.

The University is part of a strong, higher education network in service learning referred to as the Indiana Campus Compact. The Compact attracts funds for faculty development and student scholarships and has instituted an Annual Student Conference to showcase student achievement and their collaborative projects with community organizations.

Fisher Institute for Wellness and Gerontology Service-Learning Initiatives

The Fisher Institute for Wellness and Gerontology is a department in the College of Applied Sciences and Technology at Ball State University. Its mission includes an emphasis on service learning and it has a history of infusing service learning into its graduate assistantship program.

The Associate Director for Experiential Education, responsible for the graduate assistantship program, oversees the planning, implementation and evaluation of service-learning activities for all graduate students. Activities are developed and delivered through teams of students. Students select the service team that best fits their goals for practical application of their course work learning. Service-learning activities are offered on and off campus as described below.

On Campus

On campus, some service-learning activities are delivered by the Wellness Hall team. This team is based in a dormitory complex in which all residents sign an agreement to practice healthy behaviors. Service activ-

ities include workshops, yoga classes, smoking cessation programs, and exercise classes. Additionally, the Cardinal Wellness team, targeting activities for the whole university, orchestrates walking programs, wellness wagons on various topics in strategic locations throughout the campus, health fairs and a campaign to “stomp out” smoking. Wellness programming and service learning includes evaluation of student academic learning.

Off Campus

Off campus, graduate assistants on an Outreach team have the opportunity for service learning through the development, delivery and evaluation of wellness programming provided at senior housing complexes and participation in regional aging conferences and health fairs. Additionally, graduate students who work at the Community Center for Vital Aging in downtown Muncie focus on providing cultural, creative and intergenerational activities for persons 50 years and older. This team of students is responsible for implementing programming for aging adults at this site.

All graduate assistants provide a monthly report of their service-learning activities with detailed reports on the learning that has occurred. A portion of their monthly report asks the student what they have learned from the activities in which they have been involved. Bi-annually, all service-learning students are assessed by their peers and the Associate Director for Experiential Education.

While the Institute’s assistantships have provided excellent service-learning experiences, what has not been provided is a service-learning component in its academic curriculum. This deficit has been addressed initially through the course, GERON 605–Aging Well: A Systems Approach. The course required a service-learning component that was integral to the learning environment.

Infusing Service Learning into Gerontology Course Work

GERON 605–Aging Well: A Systems Approach is an overview course on aging through the lens of the Institute’s Seven Dimensions of Wellness: social, physical, emotional, environmental, spiritual, vocational, intellectual. The goal of the course is to examine the seven dimensions of wellness highlighting the potential for successful aging with an emphasis on mid-life to late-life challenges. The principle of systems theory which examines the interplay between and the fluctuation within

each wellness dimension deepens students' understanding of wellness and aging. The course is structured in a seminar format with selected readings, a Web site listing distributed to each student, and additional selected readings made available in the Institute's Learning Resource Center.

By the end of the course students are expected to describe the interactive effects of seven dimension of wellness on the aging process; recognize the variation in each wellness dimension among a group of aging individuals; discuss current research on each life dimension in a geriatric population; conduct wellness assessments on mid-life and older adults; and present a program on a specialized topic related to Aging Well.

As the instructor of the course, I was looking for more meaningful ways to meld theory and practice. As I began course preparation during the spring of 2001, I sought assistance for the infusion of a service-learning component from The Association for Gerontology in Higher Education (AGHE) through their Corporation for National Service funded project, *Sustaining and Expanding a National Model for Institutionalizing Intergenerational Service-Learning in Gerontology*.

In early 2001, I submitted a proposal to AGHE and Generations Together to develop a service-learning component in the graduate foundations course, GERON 605—Aging Well: A Systems Approach. The service learning would focus on one-to-one matching of students with isolated and lonely older adults to examine the dimensions of the wellness model in the lives of these older adults; ascertain if the pairing could increase life satisfaction and ameliorate any effects of isolation and loneliness; change students' attitudes toward aging adults; and to prepare the students for work in an aging world. I also proposed collaborating with the regional area agency on aging, LifeStream Inc., in order to provide students with a service-learning experience.

The proposal was funded beginning May 2001 through April 2002. The service-learning component was inserted into the course syllabus for the 2001 second summer session which began the third week of June. LifeStream Inc., the regional area agency on aging, agreed to be the community partner for the service-learning component of the class.

Collaborative Service-Learning Agency

The mission of LifeStream Inc. is "working together to improve and extend the quality of life for persons at risk of losing their independence." This vision presents a new paradigm of aging, one that moves from a view of illness and debilitation to one of maintaining wellness

and ability promotion; from isolation and loneliness to protection and security; and from unnecessary institutionalization to community involvement and independence (LifeStream Inc., 2002). The agency had more than 2000 people on their service waiting list, most of whom could benefit from social connections across the generations.

Of LifeStream's 15,000 service consumers across seven counties, 74% are age 65 and older, 42% are below poverty level, 66% are female, and 43% live alone. Their service customers experience chronic conditions such as cardiac/circulatory problems, blood disorders and diabetes, nervous system problems such as Parkinson's disease, dementias like Alzheimer's disease, cancers and other disease states. The typical client is an older, white female with limited resources who lives alone, and is at risk of institutionalization if community interventions are not in place.

LifeStream Inc. developed a program in 1999 called AngelWorx. This program is based upon the pen pal concept, which brings community volunteers into contact with lonely and isolated older adults who want to remain independent in their own homes. This program recruited 700 volunteers in 2002, who provided 21,727 hours of service (LifeStream Inc., 2002).

The older adults being served through this program are referred to as VIPs, Very Important Pals. The VIPs are largely concentrated within the city limits of Muncie, though a small percentage of the individuals live in more rural areas throughout the remainder of the county. The VIPs are identified through the case management system at LifeStream Inc. and are either on the waiting list for services or are not currently in need of services that the agency provides. Those who are paired with a VIP are called Angels.

Service Learning in GERON 605

The service-learning project evaluated in this paper required each student (Angel) to (1) keep a journal of their experience in order to evaluate the partnering experience with an older adult, (2) submit weekly e-mail reflections of the pairing and their relationship to class materials and discussions, and (3) to dialog with others during class about their service-learning experiences. A Service Log sheet was assigned to each student, and a set of questions were provided to prompt their written reflections. For example, students were asked to think about what they observed, what they did, what happened as a result of their activities, how the experience felt, and if they would do anything differently.

The AngelWorx Program Director visited class, gave an overview of the program, read descriptions of the VIPs who requested interaction with a student, explained the agency's service log requirement and matched the student with a VIP. The Program Director, along with myself, became a direct contact if any problems arose during the service-learning experience. For the fall 2001 and 2002 classes, the partnering experience between the VIP and Angel was 20 hours, while for the shorter summer 2002 class it was ten hours.

METHODOLOGY

This project consisted of two distinct samples: the students and the VIPs. Since the inception of the service-learning component in the summer 2001 class a total of 31 students have participated in the project. Seventy-seven percent were women, 83% were Caucasian, and 48% were gerontology majors. The students ranged in age from 22 to 54.

Of the 31 VIPs that were matched, 77% were women, 13% included a spouse or significant other, 94% were Caucasian, 6% were African American, and 80% lived within the Muncie city limits.

Instruments and Procedures

The student journals and weekly e-mail reflections were used to assess the student perception of their impact on the VIPs. Most journals did not have information about the impact of their pairing on all seven wellness dimensions. I limited my review, therefore, to comments relating to the two wellness dimensions that provided the most data: social and emotional wellness.

We also asked the VIPs to respond to the following 10 statements and probed them for additional details on all responses. This telephone survey was administered by an AngelWorx staff member.

1. I have enjoyed participating in the AngelWorx project.
2. The AngelWorx project addressed my needs.
3. When I first heard of the project, my immediate response was "yes" I am interested or "no" I am not interested.
4. I would recommend the AngelWorx project to a friend.
5. If I had the opportunity, I would participate in the AngelWorx project again.
6. My "Angel" and I turned out to be a good match.

7. I would chose the same “Angel” if I were to participate in this program again.
8. The questions that I was asked to answer were appropriate and acceptable to me.
9. I am interested in learning about additional services offered through LifeStream Inc.
10. I would be willing to participate in other service program or research studies sponsored by LifeStream Inc. and/or Ball State University.

The responses from the journals, e-mails and telephone survey were reviewed to identify statements that demonstrated impact on emotional and social wellness. Emotional wellness of a VIP was defined as the awareness and acceptance of a wide range of expressed feelings, indications of seeking support and assistance, and indications of how they dealt effectively with stress. An emotionally well person understands their personal limitations, how to seek support and assistance, and how to deal effectively with stress.

Social wellness was defined as statements about developing friendships with the student, about enhancing interactions with their family, and about making new contacts with others. Such statements were considered as indicators of the broadening of the social network of the VIP.

ANALYSIS

The gerontological literature is robust in documenting the impact of emotional satisfaction and social support on the lives of older adults (Neugarten, 1961; Spreitzer & Snyder, 1974; Larson, 1978; Brockett, 1987). The degree of emotional satisfaction is thought to be linked to attachments to family and community and health (George, 1981; Krause, 1993). Antonucci (1985; 2002), Krause (1988; 2002), and others (Wehry, 1995; Bondevik & Skogstad, 1996; Reker, 1997; Hinterlong, 2002) have studied social support as a significant buffer and resource for attaining and maintaining mental health. Although this service-learning project examined all seven dimensions of wellness, we decided to focus on these two dimensions because they appeared most prominently in the data.

Changes in Emotional Wellness of VIP

VIPs indicated their gratitude to students for interacting with them, whether it was for a gesture of bringing something to the visit, doing a

service while visiting such as cleaning, planting flowers, painting, running errands, or for a service provided outside the VIP's home such as being taken to dinner or being visited in the hospital. Many of these activities were designed to enhance emotional wellness, and they appeared to have succeeded.

The following student journal reflection is indicative of the development of trust over time. A ninety-year-old female was paired with an Angel in her twenties. The Angel made the following comment after a few visits from her VIP.

She asked me if I was evaluating her for my class project. I explained that I was not evaluating her and was just keeping a journal to record my experience each week we met. She seemed satisfied with this answer.

Early in the pairing, the older woman was leery of the questions being asked and expressed her concern about being studied. As the visits continued, she felt more comfortable with the relationship and began to feel that she was appreciated and was contributing to the student's knowledge. This same older woman made the following comment during a later meeting with her Angel about lack of contact with her.

She mentioned that she missed me yesterday when I did not call or visit. I will definitely make sure that in the future, I will call her if I am not able to meet with her on Sundays.

The older woman here was exhibiting the continued development of an emotional bond with the student. This bonding continued to grow as the visits increased. The following reflection indicates the emotional bond and the separation anxiety that the older woman had at their last meeting.

She told me how much she's enjoyed my company. Then she said she felt like crying. We hugged and she gave me a kiss on the cheek . . . She thanked me and told me that she had gotten a lot from me also.

Helping an older adult deal with a stressful situation is another indicator of emotional wellness that was identified multiple times. The following student journal reflection is one example.

She was concerned about having to take a trip with her family and didn't think that she could meet the physical demands of the trip. I

just listened and she came to the conclusion on her own that she wouldn't go on the trip. She feels badly about backing out of something she agreed to but feels that the physical problems would keep her from enjoying herself.

This woman was able to talk through her anxiety about feeling forced to do something that she felt was beyond her physical capacity. She was anxious since she had agreed to go but felt comfortable with the Angel to talk about the situation and come to a resolution of the problem that satisfied her.

The responses of one VIP to the survey conducted by AngelWorx staff indicated there were exceptions to increases in emotional wellness. One VIP indicated that she would not participate in a research project with students in the future. She felt uncomfortable by the questions being asked of her and felt the program was more for the students than for her.

All of the other respondents, however, indicated that they would participate in a future match, would encourage other VIPs to become engaged in the service-learning project, and would be willing to be matched again with their current Angel.

Changes in Social Wellness of VIP

The following statement in a student journal is indicative of improvement in social wellness.

She said that she would show the book I gave her to her son and thinks he'll enjoy it.

The student had brought a book that she thought the VIP would enjoy based on past conversations. The VIP thought that the book was very interesting and that her son would benefit from it as well. This resulted in an additional visit that she requested from her son.

The following student journal reflection indicated the inclusion of the Angel as an extended member of her family.

We have visited several of her relatives in the area and she introduced me as 'her angel.' Some of the relatives thanked me and told me she has been socializing more since our project began.

This reflection was written in the journal of an Angel who visited an older woman raising a 40-year-old disabled grandchild. Her family had

been distant from her and had some difficulty dealing with the disabled grandson. The Angel became involved with the family and helped reconnect the older adult and disabled grandson with them. Later the Angel ran into his VIP's granddaughter in the mall who thanked him for the improved outlook of her grandmother due to his visits and how it made visiting grandmother easier.

DISCUSSION

Time-Bound Pairings

We realize that the project design is limited to results documented over a brief single semester and that this limited time period could have negative consequences for a VIP. One VIP indicated that they felt like crying during the last visit from their Angel. Another asked her Angel if there was some way that they could continue to communicate. Another indicated that they did not want to continue with the project. The impact on the emotional satisfaction and the social support system of a VIP after the semester ends is of concern to us. We do not want the VIP to become more isolated and refuse to participate in the AngelWorx program altogether.

To address possible negative consequences on the long-term emotional satisfaction and support network of a VIP, efforts will be made to encourage additional connections between future classes of Angels and former VIPs that previous students worked with. Students will be encouraged to make phone calls or engage in written correspondence with former VIPs. Also, some of the Angels have continued to maintain contact with their VIP. They have sent cards for special occasions or have sent gifts for birthdays or during the Christmas holidays. Additionally, the pool from which a student can choose to be matched with a VIP includes former VIPs who have participated in previous class matches with students.

Limitations of the Evaluation Design and Assessment Instruments

It would be helpful to assess emotional and social wellness before the project begins in order to better assess changes over time. This could shed light on the VIP's perception of their current life situation and how changes emerge as the students help them deal with life changes and challenges.

The purpose of the study was to assess the impact of the service-learning project on the older, isolated adults. The student journal quotes for the older adults and the responses to the telephone survey from the older adults yielded evidence of the impact of the project on the VIP. It would have been beneficial to have utilized a standardized tool to assess the impact of the pairing on the emotional and social wellness of the older adults. It may be possible to utilize a team of students not involved in the service-learning project to initiate face to face interviews with each VIP pre and post service-learning project to ascertain their emotional and social wellness.

At the present time, I am working to incorporate a service-learning component into the Public Policy and Aging course that I teach each spring. Beginning with the spring 2003 class, I added a required 20-hour service-learning project. Students are required to choose among several 20-hour projects such as involvement in a "rally day" at the state capital on issues that affect seniors, or to make contact with a state representative about an aging issue. This service-learning project uses a group project design. Course by course, we hope to infuse service learning throughout the curriculum and will employ a one-on-one model or a group project in other courses.

CONCLUSION

Recent articles have pressed for additional research on the benefits of service learning (Glemon, Holland, Seifer, Shinnamom and Connors, 1998; Gelmon, Holland and Shinnamom, 1998; Vernon and Ward, 1999; Edward and Marullo, 2000; Roschelle, Turpin and Elias, 2000; Ward and Wolf-Wendel, 2000). Eyler, Giles and Gray (2000) in their review of higher education service-learning literature from 1993-2000 identified only eight studies that focused on community outcomes in service learning.

Though our collaboration with an aging agency went well, it can be difficult to collaborate with a community agency. Research may point to new directions for increasing the probability of success. Critical tasks include training field personnel in the collaborating agency, overcoming obstacles to participation by agency clients, and managing data collection (Pillemer K et al., 2003).

The gerontological literature regarding service learning is even more limited. The recent efforts by The Association for Gerontology in Higher Education and Generations Together to assess outcomes of funded gerontological service-learning initiatives in higher education should spur needed efforts in this area.

Their needs to be greater emphasis on intergenerational service learning in higher education as all students will be facing a work life that encounters a greater proportion of aging coworkers. Insight into the future work environment can benefit students in a wide variety of disciplines like business (marketing, advertising, and sales), science, communications, and health care.

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