Chapter 75

Community Service Learning:
Recruiting Psychology Majors for Service in a Low-Income Community

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ABSTRACT

Poverty and low-socioeconomic status can have negative effects on the academic and social outcomes of children and youth. However, despite the growing number of children and families from low-income communities, the American Psychological Association reports that the field of psychology has not contributed significantly to research, education, and advocacy initiatives for low-income families. The purpose of the START model was to recruit and train psychology majors to work in low-income communities by engaging them in service, research, and teaching activities in a middle school located in a high-poverty community. For one semester, psychology undergraduate and graduate students collaborated on a literacy and classroom management project with a local middle school in a low-income community. Results showed an increase in the number of psychology students interested in working with low-income populations and high rates of satisfaction for the teacher who participated. Barriers and facilitators to implementation are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Poverty and low-socioeconomic status can have a negative effect on children and their families. For instance, in the United States where approximately 44 percent of all children are from poor and low-income families (National Center for Children in Poverty, n.d), children are placed at a greater risk for negative social and academic outcomes than their peers. One academic factor that is impacted by socio-

economic status (SES) is reading. In 2013 low-income children in the U.S. were twice as likely to read below grade level than children who were not low-income (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). The failure to read proficiently in elementary school subsequently places these children at a higher risk for dropping out of high school (Levine & Rouse, 2012). Dropping out of high school results in a greater risk for employment opportunities and lower income as adults (Levin & Rouse, 2012). Thus, it is important to intervene in the lives of children from low-income families in order to impact the potential cycle of negative outcomes they may experience as adults.

The conditions experienced by individuals from low-income communities require an interdisciplinary approach to ameliorate them (American Psychological Association, 2006). Research in the field of psychology has made important and innovative contributions to these efforts (American Psychological Association, 2006). For instance, clinical psychologists have developed effective treatments for the prevention of child maltreatment and impaired child-parent relationships (Damashek, Doughty, Ware, & Silovsky, 2011; Eckshtain & Gaynor, 2011). Other subfields of psychology have developed innovative procedures to address behavioral and learning challenges that can be useful for children affected by the negative conditions associated with poverty and low-SES (Lonigan & Whitehurst, 1998; O'Donnell, Hawkins, Catalano, Abbott, & Day, 1995; Reynolds, Temple, Robertson, & Mann, 2001).

Despite the interventions developed by psychologists, psychology as a field has not adequately addressed the needs of individuals from poor and low-income communities. A report from the American Psychological Association (APA) on poverty and socioeconomic status recommended that psychologists need to "better understand the causes of poverty…to help prevent and reduce the prevalence…and effectively treat and address the needs of low-income individuals and families" (APA, 2000). In 2006, a subsequent APA report determined that psychology had not sufficiently contributed to societal initiatives designed to address economic disparities for individuals from low-income communities (APA, 2006). The report concluded with a recommendation for increased training and education on social class for psychology programs with an emphasis on service learning:

APA encourages an increase in training and education in psychology related to SES and social class. Encourage psychology departments to develop practicum and service-learning opportunities. At the undergraduate and graduate levels, students should be offered the opportunity to see firsthand the consequences of poverty; work with agencies and organizations that seek to reduce class inequality; experience the shortage and shortcomings of the services that are available to the poor; and work toward social change. (APA, 2006, p. 27)

At the conclusion of their report, the APA resolved that there was a need to use service learning opportunities to increase the number of researchers and practitioners trained to work in low-income communities in the field of psychology.

The current paper builds on the recommendations of the APA task force on socioeconomic status by describing a service-learning opportunity designed to help psychology students learn about low-income communities (APA, 2000; 2006). Specifically, this paper describes the START (Service, Teaching, and Research Training) service-learning project, which was used to recruit and train psychology students for work in low-income communities. By describing the START model and its outcomes, the current paper seeks to: 1) highlight the need for service-learning opportunities in psychology in low-income communities; 2) describe the START model and its outcomes; and 3) discuss the implications of the START model for recruiting and training psychology students to work in low-income communities.

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