Complexities of Coordinating Service–Learning Experiences in Rural Communities

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Explored from the viewpoint of the faculty member, nonprofit director, and service-learning staff, this chapter provides insight into the complexity of the service-learning relationship in rural communities. Specifically, it provides perspectives that highlight the cultivation and maintenance of a relationship with a local nonprofit, challenges of incorporating and implementing a e-service-learning project in a hybrid format, and the outcome of the e-service-learning project between a graduate level public health course and a free medical clinic that serves the medically uninsured. These highlights will be discussed through sections detailing the geographical location of the area, through an overview of the local nonprofit community partner, which is a free medical clinic, a review of the community partners various university partnerships, an overview of e-service-learning within the graduate level course, the faculty member perspective, the community partner perspective, and the service-learning staff member perspective.

INTRODUCTION

Cited by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (2019) as a high-impact practice that can improve educational outcomes, service-learning is a particularly meaningful form of experiential learning. Service-learning helps students apply their education through a direct contribution to society. Mennen (2006) describes service-learning as a structured pedagogy and a philosophy that incorporates both teaching and learning in social settings. An often-overlooked key to this pedagogy is access to the social setting. Access can only be granted by the agency and, even then, can often be limited. This requires a relationship and mutual understanding among the necessary parties—students, faculty, agency, and, at times, the service-learning personnel—to make this happen (Mills, 2012). Limited published studies regarding the development of the complex and multifaceted relationship between faculty, agency, service-learning students, and service-learning personnel hinders improvement in this field.

Finding time to develop a relationship between academia and the community and maintaining a rapport with a community partner comes with challenges. Faculty, especially those whose background training is not in community health, behavioral sciences, social work or related disciplines, must find time to invest in building relationships with community partners (Mills, 2012) but may not know where or how to begin. As faculty engage in the service-learning process, characteristics or factors that might have impeded its initiation turn into strengths: all of the parties—students, faculty, and agency influence the newly formed relationship with unique backgrounds and experiences (Darby, Ward-Johnson, & Cobb, 2016). Community partners are often unrecognized as co-creators or co-educators in this process (Darby, Ward-Johnson, & Cobb, 2016); however, based on the type of service-learning project, they are often the ones who witness firsthand changes in students while indirectly molding student's growth through this experiential form of learning.

Community partners want to take advantage of the ideas, knowledge, and resources service-learning can offer, but must be equipped for such tasks. The need for nonprofit agencies to meet and sustain organizational goals can easily lead to agencies being overrun by volunteers in addition to service-learning students. This predicament is not uncommon in rural areas, as partnerships take on additional significance due to limited resources available in local communities (Ferrari & Worrall, 2000). Unless there is a mature relationship between the organization and the faculty member or service-learning staff member, agencies may begin accepting everyone who seeks to assist them despite limited staff and space capacity. This can also lead to agencies lumping both volunteers and service-learning students together, thereby minimizing the experience for service-learning students as well as the benefits the agency could gain from their presence.

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