The End of LIFE: Thoughts on the Marginalization of Powerful Service-Learning in Higher Education

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Abstract

This article describes a university service-learning program with preservice teachers who volunteered as tutors to teach in an adult GED program. The adult participants were involved in a local drug court program, which is a branch in the criminal justice system. Project Literacy Instruction to Further Education (Project LIFE) was developed by the researcher, to teach literacy skills, provide GED tutoring and post-secondary test preparation to individuals who were nearing completion in their drug court program, or to adults referred by other social service organizations. The purpose of this mixed-method study was to evaluate an innovative program that offered a course for improving the adult literacy problem in its community while providing opportunities for preservice teachers to build skills for teaching in urban settings. Although this project was successful while in effect, questions remain as to why the higher education institution that originally funded it, was unwilling to continue funding this program. Several questions remain about how does ending Project LIFE impact and reinforce the community's opinions of an institution who fluctuates in its dedication and support of community programs? How does the closure of this program perpetuate disenfranchisement of marginalized populations who are otherwise incapable of receiving support to complete their GEDs? Finally, what message is the institution telling faculty about its true dedication to service-learning and its value in their professional practice when they encourage community programs, but are not willing to continue financial and faculty support?

Keywords: *service-learning, community-engaged learning, criminal justice, adult literacy, GED programs, teacher education*

The importance and impact of service-learning programs have shown significant benefits to both students and the community (Baca, 2012). Incorporating service-learning at higher education institutions has the possibility of creating not only graduates with real-world experience, but also individuals who have the potential of being civically minded throughout their lives (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996). According to a national longitudinal study that included data from over 22,000 undergraduates, service-learning showed significant positive effects in the following areas: academic performance, moral values, self-efficacy, leadership, selecting a service career, dedication to community, and a lifelong desire to participate in service (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000; Smolen, Zhang, & Setwiler, 2013; Stenberg & Whealy, 2009). By integrating the service-learning model into an urban-based adult literacy program, a symbiotic relationship forms where the university students have an opportunity to practice what they learn in the classroom while the adult learners benefit from their knowledge and skills.

Providing university students with the opportunity to expose them to individuals in the criminal justice system is not a new practice. Nearly two decades ago, Pompa (2002) began the "Inside-Out" program by taking students to prisons to "shake" them up in order to learn first-hand lessons from inmates about what life in prison was like, as well as how to build relationships with those different from you. The opportunity for on-going conversations between students and inmates taught the participants about how to build bridges to humanize those in prison, create empathy, and to reduce the critical judgment of those in the prison system. The students who participated appreciated having a platform to be able to discuss difficult conversations on race, criminality, poverty, as well as many other topics in the criminal justice area (Pompa, 2002).

> By engaging in dialog, people on both sides of prison walls can discover new ways of thinking about ourselves, our society, and the systems that keep us all imprisoned – some of us literally and for excessively long periods. If we are going to abolish this disturbing reality, we need to build relationships across class and race and other social barriers; we need to connect with each other through the walls, both literally and figuratively. (Pompa, 2011, pp. 253-4)

Additionally, other university campuses, such as Portland State, the University of Pennsylvania, Purdue University, and Stanford University, have been promoting service-learning and community-engagement programs for several years. Service-learning programs that involve education majors have typically included service in local schools and after-school programs. There is a critical need for more support in our local schools, which teacher preparation programs do not typically fill. For example, many public schools in high immigration areas struggle with not having the ability to educate their large numbers of students who need to learn English. This situation provides an opportunity that is reciprocal for preservice teachers and local schools. At institutions who integrated service-learning into their teacher licensure programs, the participants involved were specifically preservice teachers serving volunteering to help the English language learning (ELL) students through repeated school visits (Bippus, 2011; Cummings, 2009; Grassi, Hanley, & Liston, 2004; Roessingh, 2012).

Background of Project LIFE

As literacy standards rise, so are the increasing populations of adults with low literacy skills, which makes the need for adult literacy education programs more prevalent than ever (Cuban & Hayes, 2001). According to the U.S. Department of Education and the National Institute of Literacy (2013), 32 million adults in the United States cannot read. This statistic equates to 14% of our population. Furthermore, an additional 21% of adults read below a fifth-grade level, and another 19% of high school graduates do not read at grade level, while 70% of prison inmates cannot read at basic levels (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). In the urban community where Project Literacy Instruction to Further Education, (LIFE) took place in Ogden, UT, the local high school graduation rate in a recent year was only at 66% (When Just 66 Percent of Ogden Seniors Graduate, 2016). This statistic is similar to data gathered five years previously, which shows a significant need for intervention programs in high schools to ensure that graduating seniors are capable of reading and writing. The graduation rate also demonstrates a need to provide greater efforts in creating adult literacy programs in urban communities (2011 Cohort Graduation and Dropout Rate Report, 2011). Project LIFE contributed to both the community's need for adult literacy outreach programs as well as to other teacher education programs, by creating a service-

learning program that filled a need in the criminal justice system with an urban adult literacy and GED course.

Typically, individuals who are recovering from drug addictions are suffering from poverty as well (Hinders, 2020). They are most often the part of our population who are commonly cast-off by their own families and experience anger, shame, poor health, and depression (Barnard, 2007). Many urban universities recognize the poverty issues in their cities and provide a low-cost General Equivalency Diploma (GED) class as part of their community outreach programs. Even though GED programs are provided, they are not able to accept everyone who is interested in their courses due to applicants not being able to pay, or due to various regulations from grants or state funding. The inability to pay inevitably excludes individuals who possibly stand to benefit most from a GED program.

While working as an Assistant Professor at a large urban university, I was asked by my provost to design a literacy program to address this need, which he would help sponsor through grants and special project funds. Project Literacy Instruction to Further Education (Project LIFE) became the program that would invite university students to befriend and teach those referred by the local drug courts who needed help with their education goals. The university students who volunteered for the program were those interested in gaining teaching experience, as most were preservice teachers. Volunteering as a tutor was not a course requirement for any particular class, so those who participated did so by choice. Project LIFE became a free literacy course, framed by the principles of service-learning, to provide an opportunity for education majors to practice teaching in their content areas, learn about poverty, develop empathy, and create friendships with the participants who would benefit from personalized tutoring, free materials, and be challenged to achieve their educational goals. This program lasted for three consecutive years and due to lack of funding, is no longer in existence.

While Project LIFE was initially designed to provide an adult literacy program for those graduating from drug court, it quickly expanded to include referrals from local agencies who recommended individuals to the course who could not afford to pay for a class or tutor, but desperately needed their GED. Sine Project LIFE's mission was to design a class that would help its participants increase their literacy abilities to be able to improve their lives and achieve their educational goals, we were happy to serve as many in our community as possible. With their improved skills, the adults could continue to enroll in a post-secondary technical school, college, or university. When Project LIFE began, it was evident that many of those who joined the class needed individual help to complete their GED, as many of them got involved with drugs during high school and subsequently dropped out. The program quickly adjusted to focus not only on building literacy skills but also on preparing students to pass the GED exams, which would then allow them to apply for better jobs or training programs.

Word quickly spread to other local community service organizations, such as the department of workforce services (DWS) and the city's social services center. Both organizations began to send referrals for individuals who needed their GED but did not qualify for services at their center due to a variety of reasons, such as immigration status, no ability to pay, or living outside of the city limits. To avoid duplication of university-sponsored literacy programs, I collaborated with the personnel that direct the university's community education center, because they provided adult education English classes for a small fee. Within the first semester, students were being enrolled into Project LIFE based upon their level of poverty, status in a drug court program, or for not being able to qualify for a GED program offered by the city, county, or other university community education program (due to restrictions placed on the type of grant that funded them by the university or for other undisclosed reasons). Although this program has unfortunately ended due

to lack of university sponsorship, it may be able to provide ideas, hope, and inspiration to other educators who are seeking meaningful ways to incorporate service-learning into their courses.

Purpose

The primary objective that guided this study was to determine how the service-learning program of Project LIFE classroom impacted the preservice teachers' opinions and attitudes towards working with a marginalized adult population. Another objective was to ascertain which aspects of Project LIFE were most beneficial, motivational, and useful for the participants. Finally, this study wanted to ascertain if the course's central goal of assisting the students to receive their GED, or to continue on to post-secondary education, was being accomplished.

Review of Literature

Surviving high school is challenging enough without adding the additional factors of having a difficult home life, a learning disability or being an ESL student. If a student is a minority, in poverty, from a divorced family, or is living in a toxic environment, then that individual is more likely to drop out of high school (America's Promise, 2014; Babinski, Corra, & Gifford, 2016; Sterns & Glennie, 2006; Utah 2015 Graduation Rates, 2015). Even if a student does not identify with one of these marginalized groups, there still exists the typical challenge that plagues today's youth in the classroom, which is the lack of motivation (Babinski, Corra, & Gifford, 2016; Legault, Green-Demers, & Pelletier, 2006). Other challenges include lecture-only teachers, overcrowded classrooms, repetitive teaching methods, redundant worksheets, and impersonal learning environments. These ineffective methods which we have known about since the time of Dewey (1910), can also be contributing factors for students dropping out of high school. There is rarely just one reason why a student decides to stop attending, but often a compilation of factors (America's Promise Alliance, 2014). With the inability to resolve the dropout problem, local communities can provide services and programs for young and mature adults who need a second chance in obtaining their high school education.

While the ideals and practices of service-learning in higher education are rising in popularity, there are few institutions where the service-learning programs involve preservice teachers assisting adults in GED programs. In 2001, Cuban and Hayes shared their experience with Library and Information Science Majors who were required to provide 60 hours of service in a community-based literacy program for adults. Those who were being tutored by the university students came from different cultural backgrounds and experienced issues of drug addiction, poverty, and ignorance (Cuban & Hayes, 2001). The student tutors mentioned being mistreated by those they were tutoring. Tinkler and Tinkler (2013), discussed their service-learning experience involving "working with white, middle-class preservice teachers who have grown up in rural or suburban environments with very limited experiences with diversity," (p. 41). They felt that their service-learning program needed to foster a "social justice disposition" in order to open the "students' minds to ideas of diversity and social justice" (p. 41). To accomplish this objective, the preservice teachers were required to complete ten hours of tutoring adults who were studying for their GED diploma at a local Job Corps.

GED Tutoring Programs

Many GED programs struggle to show impressive completion rates due to the population of adult students that are in their classes. It is common for adult students to start and then stop coming halfway through the class, which is viewed as a negative statistic in the overall success of the course. Often, outside critics (such as policymakers, administrators, economists, and politicians) are too hasty to judge the "success" of a GED course because the program does not appear to be a good return on the investment of funds, when in fact, the opposite is often the truth. Many adults who stop attending GED programs, do so because they need to pick up an extra shift at work, for example, to feed their family and pay their bills. Ultimately, adults who attend GED programs (even if they do not complete them) and work on developing their life-long learning skills, benefit from improved health, literacy skills, and reduced crime rates (Rose, 2012).

General education degree programs take many forms in different communities. An adult learner can choose to be an independent student and study alone using websites, apps for smartphones, and even workbooks purchased online or at local bookstores. Some communities may offer free or low-cost GED classes specifically for ESL or low-income adults. Some cities offer classes that meet daily or once a week. Moreover, if an adult is serious about obtaining a GED certificate, there are usually several free or low-cost options to prepare for the test, and there may be even some programs that provide financial assistance in paying for the exams as well. Because there are more than 40 million Americans who need their high school diploma (Rose, 2012), as a community, we need to be creative about offering different types of educational programs that will appeal to different types of learning styles, social support structures, and schedules.

Many typical GED classes follow a traditional model, where the ratio is one teacher to a class of fifteen to thirty students. Very little research is published that identifies GED programs that reduced the typical ratio by utilizing tutors or volunteers to work with adult learners. One such program, known as Pathways to Persistence, is a program at Santa Fe College in Gainesville, Florida (Thompson, 2012). This program, although not a GED course, but a mentoring program that identified college students who had a GED instead of a high school diploma, and matched them with a faculty mentor who would meet with them once a week to provide guidance and assistance. Students in this program were given support with campus tutoring services and other peer volunteers to make sure they would be successful (Thompson, 2012).

Service-Learning and Literacy Programs

Across many college and university campuses in the United States, service-learning is becoming a more popular learning model to adopt in all types of courses due to its valuable educational benefits for the students in the course and for the community members who receive the service. This model of learning promotes the development of civic responsibility along with cultural competence (Jacoby, 2015). Instead of reading and discussing topics about culture and civic duty, students get out of the classroom and make a difference in their communities. Since service opportunities and activities can take place quite often in minority neighborhoods, poverty-ridden schools, or among individuals from different countries, students and instructors do not have to travel far to have meaningful experiences (Meany, Bohler, Kopf, Hernandez, & Scott, 2008). In an ideal partnership, a university faculty member collaborates with a nonprofit organization in the local community who has a need and can benefit from receiving service from college students. By establishing shared goals, both the faculty member and the community partner work together to help the students have a learning experience that would provide an opportunity for them to practice

and develop real-world expertise, learn job skills, reduce stereotypes, raise awareness, or just provide a needed service (Jacoby, 2015). Throughout the service-learning semester, the university students typically have one or more meaningful experiences and opportunities to apply and integrate what they are learning in the classroom at their community partner's site. In some courses, the students may spend several hours planning a single event or completing a project for the community partner. Other service-learning experiences may constitute donating several hours of volunteer work at a single location. The type of service provided depends upon the instructor's goals and the learning objectives of the course and varies greatly between courses.

Project LIFE followed a service-learning model through creating partnerships with local non-profit and government agencies to provide a needed service where university students could learn while serving. A critical part of the service-learning model is the reflection component. Throughout the semester, the university students who took the role of tutors, would meet with me multiple times to reflect upon what they were learning and discovering, as well as discuss the progress of the adults they were tutoring. Even though these students were not required to be there due to a particular course I was teaching, they chose to serve to either complete required service-learning requirements from another course, or because they were interested in the project to support their own learning goals. Service-learning is not just a curriculum model for a classroom but can take many shapes across a campus. Programs sponsored by a university which are managed outside of the classroom can provide valuable service-learning opportunities for students who are not involved in a course that requires it, but who still desire to gain experience through volunteering. To consider a volunteer activity a "service-learning" program, it needs to have clear goals established, provide a need to a non-profit organization, have identifiable responsibilities for all involved, and that the time required is appropriate (Jacoby, 2015). Those participating in the service should receive supervision and support to ensure the established goals are met. Students also need opportunities to critically reflect upon their experiences. Good service-learning partnerships should include an evaluation to assess if the service provided is meeting learning and service goals by all who are involved (Jacoby, 2015).

Lori Pompa (2002) is one example of a pioneer in service-learning, who for several years as part of the "Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program," would take groups of university students to prisons to conduct the class with the inmates. Her belief was to provide an immersive experience that would be mutually beneficial to both the prisoners as well as the university students. "This immersion engenders deeper interaction and involvement, often manifesting as a statement of solidarity with those who are struggling. It is the ultimate border-crossing experience. In taking a class together as equals, borders disintegrate and barriers recede" (Pompa, 2002, p. 68). This community-based service-learning model allows for two different groups of adults to learn from one another. It challenges the students' preconceived beliefs about who criminals, drug addicts, and adult students really are (Davis & Roswell, 2013). Embracing learning through experiences outside of the classroom can provide some of the richest and most meaningful lessons a student can have.

Teacher education programs have ideal classes where service-learning models are easily implemented, especially ones that are literacy-based. Programs that are set in communities, rather than on college campuses, reconnect undergraduates with the real world and help universities build partnerships with their local communities (Prosser & Levesque, 1997). In one teacher education program, professors organized an ESL program for new Karen refugees from Myanmar and Thailand. They worked closely with their community advocates to provide English classes and U.S. citizenship courses. The classes provided an opportunity for their university students to practice their ESL teaching and diversity skills by preparing and teaching lessons, interacting with the students, and allowing the refugees to share their personal experiences within a series of speaking

and writing activities. Through a collection of journals and reflections, the researcher could analyze the growth of not only the refugee participants in their courses, but also of the tremendous growth of their preservice teachers in their education programs (Smolen, Zhang, & Detwiler, 2013).

In another study that utilized a "social responsibility option" approach (similar to a service-learning model) in a college mathematics course, it discussed how their students tutored inner-city at-risk teens at an alternative high school (Zang, Gutmann, & Berk, 2000). The college students volunteered to help in a math class that was specifically designed to help former high school dropouts prepare for the GED exam. In addition to providing math tutoring, the college students would also serve as role models for the youth, thus fulfilling the "social responsibility" element of their service-learning model. By tutoring the high school students, the college students reinforced their learning of math, and both the students and the tutors did better in their courses (Zang, Gutmann, & Berk, 2000).

Theoretical Framework

Service-learning is not only an instructional model but also a viable theoretical framework. It can be traced back to the prominent works of John Dewey's (1916) belief in democracy and teachings of experiential learning. He suggested that students need concrete activities to learn and to be able to create an awareness of how they can change society and contribute in ways to improve it (Dewey, 1916; Giles, Jr., & Eyler, 1994). Dewey theorized that a student's education should be more than just acquiring content knowledge by also learning how to live and be a contributing member of society. Students need to be given experiences to learn to reduce their biased views and instead, learn to improve their community and society around them (Fishman & McCarthy, 2010). Service-learning "is a method whereby students learn and develop through active participation in thoughtfully organized service that is conducted in and meets the needs of communities" (Lake, Winterbottom, Ethridge, & Kelly, 2015, p. 95).

More specifically, service-learning includes the following criteria:

- Student learning outcomes that align with the course objectives.
- Community partnerships that provide students with the opportunity to create authentic relationships in meaningful ways.
- Students are heavily involved in the planning and execution of the project.
- The projects fill a need that is determined by the community partner.
- Students have opportunities to reflect multiple times throughout the semester.
- The program and students are assessed to determine if the project's and students' goals have been met. (Farber, 2011; Porter-Honnet & Poulsen, 1990).
- The benefits of the service are reciprocal to both the community partner and the student volunteers.

The framework of service-learning used in the Project LIFE program follows a co-curricular model whereby it is not attached to a specific course but operates "outside of the formal curriculum" (Jacoby, 2015, p. 122). Even though it operates independently from a course, it does obligate the tutors to attend the 1½-hour class each week for twelve consecutive weeks. Additionally, the tutors occasionally have training or planning meetings with myself as the program director. During the sixteen-week semester, the tutors have a possibility of volunteering 18-20 hours or more and can apply the hours to courses they are currently taking if any of them are requiring

service-learning hours. Students who accrued a significant amount of service-learning hours, also qualified for a special honor at graduation. The university that sponsored Project LIFE has a robust community-engaged learning program and encouraged faculty to develop service-learning courses and programs to not only benefit the university students but also to support the needs of the community. At the end of each Project LIFE semester, both the tutors and the participants completed a survey and reflection, which provided a means to not only evaluate the program but also to help complete the requirements of the service-learning framework that aligned with the community-engaged learning program at the university.

Methods

This study followed a multiphase mixed-method design that "combined both sequential and concurrent strands over a period of time" (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011, p. 72). This allowed the myself, as the researcher, to use the data to implement program improvements and changes to meet the objectives of Project LIFE. This research style was chosen due to its design that suited program evaluation research methods that "support the development, adaptation, and evaluation of specific programs" (p. 72). It is important to recognize that since the researcher also served and directed the program, a small amount of bias may exist when discussing the results. The participants in the study were the university student volunteers and the adult learners in Project LIFE." At the start of each semester, the adult learners filled out an application that provided their demographic information, asked how many years of school each completed, and what their educational goals were. At the end of each semester, the university student tutors submitted a written reflection and the adult learners were asked to voluntarily complete a program evaluation survey that provided the major source of data for this study (see Appendix A). Throughout the course, I met individually with the students to conduct personal interviews, reviewed their work, and assisted tutoring them in preparation for a GED or college placement exam.

The mixed-methods multiphase design utilized a triangulation approach "to obtain different but complementary data on the same topic" (Morse, 1991, p. 122). This style "generally involves the concurrent, but separate, collection and analysis of quantitative and qualitative data so that the researcher may best understand the research problem" (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007, p. 64). One of the many benefits of mixed-methods research is that "its central premise is the use of quantitative and qualitative approaches, in combination, provides a better understanding of research problems than either approach alone" (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007, p. 5). Since this study was a longitudinal, multiphase study, and due to the survey being the primary tool for gathering data, the amount and types of data required to make accurate assessments needed to be varied and ongoing. Finally, since the purpose of the research study was to understand how Project LIFE affected its participants; focusing solely on just the quantitative or just the qualitative data would not have provided sufficient data to attempt to understand the research questions.

Even though the multifaceted qualities and flexibility of the multiphase design have much strength, there also exist challenges to this design approach. The researcher must anticipate challenges that may occur during different phases of the study, such as maintaining a consistent number of participants in the program (which was an actual struggle that is common in adult education programs). Another challenge was being a program that was dependent upon university funding; it required financial resources to keep the program running each year. Another challenge to the study was determining the best way to interpret the results of the data each semester and then decide how to implement them into practice. Some changes resulted in developing and improving program materials, the class structure, changing texts, and the tutoring methods. Finally, one of

the greatest challenges to any adult education program was to determine the overall effectiveness of the class, despite the fluctuation in attendance, funding, and tutors.

Participants in this study were a purposeful sample that consisted of 23 adult students who were 18 years or older who were either in a drug court or family drug court program or who were in a state of poverty. To gather participants, in my role as the program director, I would often attend drug court to promote and recruit students for the program. Additionally, I would meet with representatives who were administrators at the local department of workforce services, probation officers, and social service employees, to publicize the program. These community partners were selected because they supported the program's mission by referring adults in the criminal justice system or who were in extreme poverty. These organizations were asked to send referrals to me, as the program director, when they met with someone who fit the criteria and required assistance. Additionally, I would regularly meet with the university staff and instructors who directed other GED programs for the community. Together, we established a referral system for each other to ensure that each program was unique and one program was not duplicating another at the university. Out of the 23 participants, 56% of them attended Project LIFE for three or more semesters. About 23% attended the program for at least two semesters, and 21% of them attended for at least one semester. Participants who dropped out of the program were not available to complete the evaluation. Research is inconclusive about who drops out of GED programs and why. The reasons for dropping out vary due to addiction, homelessness, employability, lack of motivation, a negative self-perception, among many others (Shannon, 2006).

There were three main types of data collected and triangulated for this study. The first type was the end of semester electronic survey that contained both qualitative and quantitative questions completed by the class participants (see Appendix A). A pilot survey was completed at the end of its first semester and the official evaluation survey was administered at the end of each subsequent semesters. The second type of data was from conducting open-ended, informal oral interviews. The third type of data included a compilation of documents that were reviewed and analyzed. These documents consisted of attendance records, reading proficiency assessments, writing samples, practice exams, class activities, oral readings, and finally the results of the GED exams or college ACCUPLACER tests. Each group of data was analyzed for similar themes and trends.

The final group of data in this study came from the students' classwork and new student assessment results. This pool of data was invaluable in helping to determine a student's readiness for taking one of the GED exams or an ACCUPLACER test, which was required by the university or technical school to determine the correct English and math class to place a new student. When a new student would begin Project LIFE (which could occur at any time during the semester), one of the tutors would administer an informal San Diego Quick Assessment to determine the student's reading level (LaPray & Ross, 1969). The next step was to complete the GED language arts pretest (if the student was there to earn a GED) and complete a writing sample. Based on each student's abilities, the tutor created a personalized study plan and began to work with the student to prepare him/her for the first test.

Program Outcomes

Project LIFE has now completed three years (six full semesters) with an average class size of 7.5 students each semester. The typical enrollment at the beginning of each semester ranged from 12-20 applications, but by the end of the semester usually only about half the students were consistent in their attendance and participation in the class. Throughout the six consecutive semesters, myself as the program director, met weekly with the tutors to discuss program issues, the

needs of the individual students, and challenges they were having with attendance, students' learning difficulties, and then together, we would problem-solve and collaborate on new lesson plans.

As an additional resource, all the tutors were loaned a Chromebook and taught how to use Google Drive and its different software programs. Folders were created and shared among the group to facilitate the distribution of lesson resources, materials, and to keep records of student achievements, tests completed, keep track of students' progress, and to organize the book groups. The Chromebooks were also an invaluable tool for researching information about test preparation questions, registering for exams, and researching college requirements. Many of the students in Project LIFE did not own computers, so by working with a tutor and having access to the Chromebook, they received an opportunity to develop their computer literacy skills, which was an additional benefit for many of them. Furthermore, by way of motivating students to attend class, each week there was a small prize drawing for those students who attended. All the weekly entries were saved until the final class of each semester when a drawing for a new Chromebook would be given away. As an additional incentive, the students could also receive a Chromebook by completing their GED.

To avoid the confusion of navigating a large university campus, the Project LIFE class met at the university's community education center, which was about a five-minute drive from the main campus and closer to the community's downtown area. This location also eliminated the issue of students having to worry about parking passes, following directions to an obscure building and classroom, and of having to feel intimidated by a large campus. Both tutors and students had easy access to the community education center, which was also within a very short walking distance of two bus stops. The center provided two classrooms and a childcare room. The Project LIFE class utilized one classroom and received permission to use the childcare room in case an adult student needed to bring a child to class. The childcare room was also utilized as an overflow study area when the main classroom became too crowded or when the book groups needed to divide up and have space to discuss their weekly readings.

Each week, Project LIFE met for 1 hour and 30 minutes. The first 30 minutes was utilized as a whole-group instruction time for teaching lessons in reading, writing, grammar, or a focus lesson in one of the other major content areas, such as social studies, math, or science (depending upon which GED test most of the group was working towards). The group lesson sometimes was used for a team-building activity, a learning competition, or another motivational, game-based learning activity that helped the students associate learning with enjoyment and success. After a short group activity, the book groups would meet for about 10-15 minutes to discuss what they read for the week, identify difficult vocabulary words, or talk about other sections they struggled with and then set a reading goal for the following week. For the remaining 45-50 minutes, students would study with their tutors. During class time, if a student felt ready, I would register the student for a GED exam, the ACCUPLACER exam, or a practice test. Before class was adjourned, we would hold the prize drawing and then remind students to complete their reading and study assignments.

Program Challenges

Trying to make any non-profit program an on-going one, poses several challenges. Foremost, securing reliable funding to provide the resources necessary for a free adult education course, was the most difficult and eventually, was the reason why the program ended. The university that initially provided the funding, withdrew it after three years. As the director, I applied for various

grants from the university, government, as well as private businesses and organizations, and was unsuccessful.

The other challenge was maintaining consistent attendance with the adult students. Although each one understood at the beginning of the course that their attendance was expected each week, in reality, the course was free and they had nothing to lose but the services and education that was being provided. Other challenges included tracking down students who stopped attending as well as the need for on-going recruitment efforts through attending drug court and visiting with parole officers and social service workers to discuss their referrals.

Results

The primary objective that guided this study was to determine how the service-learning model made a positive reciprocal impact on Project LIFE participants and student tutors. Community-based service-learning has been gaining precedence over the last couple of decades, not only in teacher education programs but also in programs across college and university campuses due to its powerful learning abilities (Lake et al., 2015; Meany et al., 2008; Prosser & Levesque, 1997; Roessingh, 2012).

Lessons Learned from the University Student Tutors

In compliance with the service-learning model (Ash, Clayton, & Moses, 2009; Farber, 2011; Jacoby, 2015), the tutors participated throughout the project from start to finish. They were expected to: engage in the service and implement the goals of the program, examine the experience via reflection, and articulate their learning through assessment or an evaluation. The university student tutors shared several positive outcomes from participating in this program. The most common reaction was from their personal reflections about what changed in their personal bias from working with individuals who were recovering drug addicts and with those who were in extreme poverty. This is evidenced in a comment made by one of the university tutors who volunteered additional hours to help recruit new students. She said:

> I am so sheltered! When we went to drug court to recruit applicants, it opened my eyes like never before. I was so impressed as the graduates (of drug court) tearfully spoke about their success and how many days they've been clean. They were so proud of themselves, and I was too! I could see that they needed something next in their lives to keep them on a path of self-improvement so that they don't repeat the same pattern. I was so glad to be able to offer them a chance to further their education! I don't look at people like that, the same way anymore. I'm much less judgmental than I was. I have a heart for them and love to see the hope in their eyes.

These student tutors learned lessons they could never have by sitting in a classroom on campus or by student teaching. They each learned how to build personal relationships with people very different from themselves. They learned to look beyond the labels, the struggles of their students, and how to get to know the real person. The university student tutors did not expect to form friendships and become personally invested in the success of those they were tutoring. One tutor commented that: "I want to volunteer again next semester (even though I'll be student teaching) because I really want to see my 'student' succeed! I want to keep helping him because he is ON A ROLL and I don't want him to stop!"

Another common theme the university student tutors shared was how beneficial it was to practice the content they would be teaching after they graduate. The Project LIFE program provided a pressure-free environment that allowed them to be able to teach, explain, as well as mentor their adult students for each GED exam. The university tutors shared how valuable it was to have Chromebooks to use with their students to access important information, find examples, and watch educational videos to help explain the different topics. One university tutor stated:

> Participating in Project LIFE has helped me prepare to be a teacher in many ways. I have learned a lot of very effective teaching strategies by observing Dr. Solano as she teaches the short lessons for the day. I also have been able to apply teaching strategies that I have learned in my own classes and have been able to further improve my teaching practice.

Another tutor shared how by participating in Project LIFE, their decision to now look for a teaching position in an inner-city school has changed. "It has made me really think about where I want to teach and why. I want to have the most impact and really make a difference, and I think Ogden City School District is where I will have the most success." This change is really impactful, since many teacher education candidates at this university came from suburban areas and tended to not feel adequately prepared to teach in inner-city schools. Additionally, another university tutor shared that: "It has made me aware that students are being graduated without the level of learning needed. Once graduated, it is hard for them to proceed onto higher education because they lack a lot of the core education skills."

Results from the Adult Project LIFE Participants

Out of the 23 adult participants, six of them completed their GED, seven students completed 1-3 of the 4 required GED tests. Five other students who already had their high school diplomas were accepted into a post-secondary program of study, one of which has successfully graduated with her Bachelor's degree in Business. At the end of Project LIFE, there were five remaining students who were left without continuing support, which were preparing to take an exam or to retest for one they did not pass. Many of the adult participants reported during private interviews, that their literacy levels improved due to increased studying and also by increasing their reading to prepare for the book groups. The students who struggled more with their reading were encouraged to read aloud so that their tutors could help if needed. They also appreciated the grammar and writing instruction that was provided at the start of each class.

In the results from the adult learner evaluation survey, 92% of the students responded between "important and very important" (the top two answers) to have a tutor to work with during class. In response to a survey question that asked: "Do you plan to continue participating in the Project LIFE class? Why or why not?" One student responded: "Yes, I love the one-on-one tutoring with a tutor who specializes in a certain area which I may need help with on any particular week." In response to another question that asked students to discuss ways in which they felt that Project LIFE may have helped them so far, another adult learner commented that: "[They are] nice people and I like getting help when needed. The tutor helps me to understand something when I don't get it." In a personal interview, another participant (who became a tutor after starting at the university) remarked about the value of the tutors and said that she:

> ...couldn't do it without them. That's why I'm so happy to be a tutor. I wanted to help others have a better life. I loved them. I had all the tutors to myself the first semester, and

it was great. I won prizes and awards, and I received help to begin at the university. They helped me with that.

This successful student attended Project LIFE since its first semester. She graduated from drug court and began at the university during the second semester of the class, which was Project LIFE's fifth semester. Once she became a university student, she eagerly volunteered to be a tutor because she experienced first-had how the program changed her life and she wanted to help others have a similar experience.

Another student who has been attending Project LIFE for three semesters reflected about the impact the tutors had on her experience by saying that:

> When you were in school, you already experienced having just one teacher and 30 [or more] students in a class. I've already failed in that environment. It's so nice to have that support when you need help. In school, you know the teacher doesn't have the time to actually help you.

This same adult learner shared in her interview about how she has enjoyed and benefitted from working with a personal tutor. She commented:

> …I loved the one-on-one attention. Some tutors click better with other [students] and I loved that you could always find someone that you could work with well. Plus, I think it was good for some of the tutors that were shy to help them learn how to teach. So, it felt like it was good for everyone, not just me.

This is an example of the tutors' influence and the bond they shared with the students.

The second objective was to ascertain which components of Project LIFE were beneficial, motivational, and useful for the participants. The survey indicated that 100% of the students marked that they would recommend Project LIFE to others who need help with their GED or college preparation. They also marked 100% for its location being convenient and accessible, and 85.7% thought the length of the class was the right amount of time. In following up with students about the length of the class, some students suggested holding class twice a week or holding it later in the evening to accommodate work schedules a bit easier. When students responded about how much their reading habits have improved, 50% marked the top category of "a great deal," with even numbers in the next two categories of "much" and "somewhat" at 21.43% each, leaving 7.14% at "little."

In evaluating the whole group literacy lesson at the beginning of the class, 85.6% of the students marked between the highest two scores of "very useful" and "useful." Further questions in the oral interview were not asked about the group lesson, but in a review of records, students' participation was 100% during the group literacy activity, and all of them were engaged, asked questions, and mentioned several times about how much they appreciated the handouts and explanations of difficult grammar topics. The group lessons were kept short, so students could work with their tutors on individual assignments, studying the GED test booklet, or in other college prep activities. In the observational notes, the group lesson was extremely popular. The students would often make special requests during this time for their favorite learning games, or for special lessons in areas they were struggling, such as in persuasive writing, lessons in math, history topics, or in science and technical terms.

Since the Project LIFE class was purely optional and most of the students were not required to attend (although some students were court-ordered to obtain a GED before granting them graduation from a drug court program), as the program director, I put in place several motivational strategies to encourage students to attend each week. One was the weekly prize drawing and the second was the possibility of winning a Chromebook at the final class of the semester (entries were earned based upon weekly attendance). In the survey, 92.8% of students responded that the weekly prize drawings were "motivating" to "very motivating," and the possibility of winning the Chromebook was equal at 92.8% in "motivating" to "very motivating." Along with the chance of winning a Chromebook, any student who had at least an 80% attendance rate for the semester could qualify for a scholarship to have Project LIFE pay for all their GED tests or could use it to apply towards college tuition (if funding was available). On the evaluation survey, the students all agreed at 100%, that this was an "extremely valuable" incentive.

The final purpose of this study was to investigate how Project LIFE helped the participants achieve their educational goals. The overall objective was for each student to reach their educational goal of completing the GED or staring a post-secondary program. At the end of Project LIFE, there were a handful of students who were close to fully completing their GED. Because the GED consists of four individual exams (language arts, social science, science, and math), it can take an individual anywhere from a few months to a few years to complete it. The electronic survey showed that 100% of the students ranked Project LIFE between the highest two scores of "effective" and "extremely effective" at helping them to accomplish their goals. In an oral interview (see Appendix B), one student remarked about how the Project LIFE program has made a difference in her life:

> I'd still be on my couch watching TV each day if it wasn't for [the professor] coming to drug court that day. She should keep going and telling all those people this is available to them. She might need to push them. They just don't have the motivation, I guess, or maybe they aren't ready to give up the drugs and change their lives, but she should keep trying.

Another student commented how Project LIFE helped her to achieve her educational goal by stating that:

> I haven't ever felt comfortable in education since 9th grade. I had a horrible experience. I couldn't do this without Project LIFE. I don't even know where I would be without Project LIFE. I wouldn't be able to pay for this. [That's] why it's called Project LIFE - because it truly changes people's lives! I moved here from Alaska and was labeled the "dumb kid." I was stupid to everyone. I'm grateful I get to come to Project LIFE. Everyone is so happy I'm here and treat me like I'm smart and I'm doing it. One test away from college!

This student has been attending the class for three semesters and was able to complete her GED in her fourth semester. She has also successfully graduated from family drug court and was reunited with her children.

Overall, adult GED classes and the tests are a huge challenge; much more than the regular struggles of k-12 education (Strauss, 2015). Many GED classes have students who struggled with the public school system when they were younger for many reasons, such as having an undiagnosed learning disabilities that could have contributed to their original lack of success in school the first time (Rose, 2012). Now as adults, they have the responsibilities of work, family, childcare, transportation issues, and with Project LIFE students, some (not all) are still recovering from drug

addictions, have expensive fines, and weekly court appearances. Those that have managed to be resilient and were successful in the program have finished or nearly finished with their GED, have enrolled or are currently attending college, or have gone on to better employment or schooling opportunities by the end of program. There is no information for those who attended sporadically and stopped attending.

Final Thoughts

Unfortunately, the Project LIFE program stopped receiving funding from the host institution after only three years, which was disheartening. The end of LIFE came to a sudden halt after various attempts to receive grants from outside the university, as well as denied petitions for continued funding from the university's college of education, the service-learning institute on campus, and the provost's office (who had originally funded the project). What happened with Project LIFE is not unique to other university initiated service-learning or community-engagement programs. "The system we are all in is all too often uninterested, unhelpful, or even antagonistic to our vision," (Sarofian-Butin, 2017, p. 170). Similarly, in my experience, I was unsupported by my department chair and dean, who never asked about the program and did not see value in Project LIFE. They were both unattached, and unconcerned with the benefits that their preservice teachers could receive in this program, nor the additional work that myself as a faculty member was investing. While the administrators in the college had major concerns about how to better prepare their graduates to teach in inner-city schools, they failed to recognize the impact and benefits of Project LIFE.

Sadly, the university student tutors were left without an inner-city service-learning program. The adult participants were left without any transitional support to another program. At the start of a new semester, students arrived at class, only to find an empty room and were told by an assistant at the community education center, that the program had been cancelled. Several of them reached out to me with pleas for assistance because this was the first program that truly helped and supported them to be successful on the GED exams. Although my former university was proud of their Carnegie Classification for Community Engagement, and provided courses to train faculty how to integrate service-learning into their courses, there was no support from the administration in education department. The service-learning institute on campus also failed in providing any information or guidance to help a faculty member when a program had to end.

Project LIFE had the potential of becoming a well-established adult GED program that served the needs of several drug court and family drug court programs in the surrounding urban communities while providing additional educational career service opportunities to teacher candidates. Despite the program's challenges of funding, recruiting tutors and students, it was a unique service-learning experience that combined university students with struggling adults in poverty or in the criminal justice program into a unique learning environment.

When I look back on the experiences I had while directing this program, it causes me to doubt the effort required to develop civic literacy in my students. I am concerned about how the ending of LIFE has perpetuated the disenfranchisement of the marginalized populations we worked with as well as how it fed into the bias about their lack of importance. How is it that institutions of higher learning that spout ideals of developing graduates who are instilled with a civic duty, treat the very members of their community with such little concern? This begs the question of what types of service-learning programs should higher education institutions be supporting, especially if a project requires long-term funding? Why was it impossible for this institution to make a sustained commitment to a program that was showing so much success? Where was

the administrative support for a faculty member who was willing to go above and beyond their contractual responsibilities and design a program to benefit both university students and marginalized community members? Ending this program only reinforced in the community about the real disconnect between themselves and the local university. Instances like this also reinforces faculty assumptions of how community engagement projects may not be highly valued towards tenure and promotion.

  Project LIFE may not have made huge headlines, and even though it had it challenges, it did make a difference in the lives of the tutors and myself included, who worked hard to improve it every semester. The program made a significant difference in the participants' abilities, who for the first time for some, were able to believe in themselves and realize that they were smart enough to read, write, solve math equations, and understand history. They discovered that there was hope and a future worth dreaming about. In the words of one student: "That's why it's called Project LIFE because it truly changed people's lives!"

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Appendix A

Electronic Survey Questions
1. What is your age?
2. What is your gender?
    a. Male
    b. Female
3. How many semesters have you participated in Project LIFE?
    a. 1
    b. 2
    c. 3
    d. 4+
4. Which of the following best represents why you are attending Project LIFE?
    a. To complete my GED.
    b. To prepare for college or technical school.
    c. Other:
5. Please select the areas below that are the biggest struggle for you. Select all that apply.
    a. Reading
    b. Writing
    c. Speaking
    d. Computer Skills
    e. Math
    f. Studying
    g. Vocabulary
    h. Other:
6. Would you recommend this program to others who need help with their GED or college prep-
    aration?
    a. Yes
    b. No
    c. Maybe
7. How do you feel about the length of the class period (1.5 hours)?
    a. The length is too long.
    b. The length is too short.
    c. The length is just right.
8. Is the location of the class at the WSU Community Education Center convenient and accessible
    to you?
    a. Yes
    b. No
    c. Suggestion for a different location:
9. The class is currently taught on Wednesdays from 4:00-5:30 PM. Is that a good time and day
    for your schedule? If not, please suggest a different day or time.
    a. Yes
    b. No
    c. Suggestion for a different time or day:
10. Do you feel comfortable and welcomed in the class?
    a. Yes
    b. No

11. How much have your reading habits and skills improved since you began Project LIFE?
    a. A great deal
    b. Much
    c. Somewhat
    d. Little
    e. None, no change
12. How important is it for you to be able to work in a small group or one-to-one with a tutor?
    a. Very important
    b. Important
    c. Somewhat important
    d. Slightly important
    e. Not important
13. How useful is the whole group literacy lesson at the beginning of each class?
    a. Very useful
    b. Useful
    c. Somewhat useful
    d. Slightly useful
    e. Not useful
14. How motivating do you find the weekly prize drawing in encouraging you to attend the Project LIFE class?
    a. Very motivating
    b. Motivating
    c. Somewhat motivating
    d. Slightly motivating
    e. Not motivating
15. How motivating do you find the Chromebook drawing at the end of the semester in encouraging you to attend the Project LIFE class?
    a. Very motivating
    b. Motivating
    c. Somewhat motivating
    d. Slightly motivating
    e. Not motivating
16. How valuable is the scholarship you can earn to help pay for the GED tests or to apply tuition?
    a. Extremely valuable
    b. Valuable
    c. Somewhat valuable
    d. Slightly valuable
    e. Not valuable
17. How effective has Project LIFE been in helping you to accomplish your educational goals?
    a. Extremely effective
    b. Effective
    c. Somewhat effective
    d. Slightly effective
    e. Not effective
18. Please explain your answer above. Include as many details as you can and examples to describe why you answered the way you did.
19. Do you plan to continue participating in the Project LIFE class? Why or why not?

20. What is the most important reason you attend Project LIFE each week?
21. What have been the challenges, if any, of participating in Project LIFE?
22. Please discuss the how you feel Project LIFE may have helped you so far.
23. Please discuss any of the ways in which Project LIFE may have made a difference in your life.
24. What suggestions do you have to improve this class?
25. Overall, please describe your satisfaction and experience with Project LIFE.

Appendix B

Open-ended Interview Questions
1. What is your opinion of the Project LIFE program?
2. What is your education goal? (GED, vocational degree, college degree)
3. How has Project LIFE helped you in your education goals?
4. How is Project LIFE different from other GED and adult education classes you have attended?
5. What additional services or content areas do you need help with?
6. What is the benefit of studying with a university student tutor?
7. Do you have any suggestions for the tutors or the program director?
8. Do you have any suggestions for improvement?
9. How did you learn about Project LIFE?
10. What is your biggest challenge in obtaining your education goal?