Student Perceptions of a Service-Learning Course in a Rural Setting

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Abstract: *The primary purpose of this study was to explore students' perceptions of a service-learning course at a small, rural, state college. Throughout the semester-long course, the students learned about how to improve afterschool programs and childhood obesity in rural areas similar to the community that encompassed them. The class format consisted of both online discussions over articles, along with in-person meetings. Students then had the option to participate in a paid service opportunity to apply their knowledge in an after-school program; however, no students took part in this component of the class. Reasons the students could not participate in the afterschool program were discussed but most students believed participation would have been beneficial.*

Key Words: Service-learning, rural, afterschool program

INTRODUCTION

Service learning courses are a pedagogical practice that is increasingly being used in post-secondary institutions (Salam et al., 2019). Service learning courses typically consist of a traditional classroom component where students learn about the courses key objectives as well as a service component where students are able to apply this knowledge within a real-world setting while working with a community partner. Service learning courses have proven to have a variety of benefits for both students and community partners (Rosenkranz et al, 2012). Student benefits include such items as being able to apply course content thus allowing for more concrete learning opportunities. Community partners also benefit by receiving a service or other deliverable that they may not have had the resources to complete on their own.

Despite the potential benefits of service learning at post secondary institutuions, some institutuions may experience additional barriers to offering such courses. Rural institutions typically have fewer organizations to work with and students may experience barriers related to travel time to these organizations (Paulson, 2018). Thus, innovative efforts are needed to be able to successfully implement service learning courses in rural settings. One innovative effort may be to offer the service component of class as a paid optional opportunity. However, little research has

explored how such a class could be successfully implemented. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore students' perception of a service learning course at a small, rural, state college.

LITERATURE REVIEW

SERVICE LEARNING OVERVIEW

Service learning is a teaching methodology that blends in-person classroom time and community service projects. Service learning provides students with the opportunity to experience education in a real-world scenario and explore their future career pathway. Service learning courses are often comprised of two components: 1) a lecture component, which allows students to reflect and discuss with their instructor and peers any issues or concerns they may have with the in-class material or the community service project; and 2) a service component, which allows for the students to work with their peers and community members on a service-related project. This allows for mutual benefit for the students and community (Rosenkranz et al, 2012; Lee et al., 2018). Thus, service learning integrates the common post-secondary education missions of teaching, research, and service (Johnston et al., 2004; Rosenkranz et al, 2012).

Studies on service learning with college students have found strong positive impacts (Harris, 2004; Paulson, 2018; Rahn et al., 2018). More specifically for students, the benefits of service learning include being able to directly apply course content to real-world settings, fostering students' potential career interests, and improving personal qualities such as social skills, self-efficacy, and empathy (Carson & Raguse, 2014; Paulson, 2018; Whitley et al, 2017). Students have also established strong connections and partnerships with their fellow classmates and organizations within the community which was conducive to an overall enjoyable experience for all entities involved (Ní Chróinín et. al., 2018; Whitley et al., 2017). Additionally, in one study students who were enrolled in a service learning course during their first year of college, were predicted to graduate within the typical college timeline of 4 years demonstrating that service learning courses are also beneficial to students' educational progression and achievement (Song et. al., 2018).

Despite these benefits, students have reported shortcomings such as feeling ill-equipped with the necessary resources or knowledge prior to engaging in the service component of class (Paulson, 2018; Rahn et al., 2018). Further, enough classroom time may not be allotted for students to engage in constructive dialogue and reflection with their instructor about their service learning experience, which is a vital piece of any service learning course. For instance, in a study of 45 psychology undergraduate students, some students felt that there was not enough in-class instructional time to address any of their questions or concerns therefore warranting the need for more time spent on in-class discussion and reflection (Paulson, 2018).

CHALLENGES OF SERVICE LEARNING IN RURAL COMMUNITIES

While overall post-secondary service learning courses have proven effective, much of the service-learning evidence to date has focused on urban settings with little attention given to rural settings. Due to the location, additional challenges may arise for students within rural communities. Service learning courses at rural, post-secondary institutions are often faced with the challenge of limited access to community organizations that have the capacity to host college students in service learning opportunities. However, when service learning is made available additional challenges may arise such as an increased travel time and distance to reach organizations that are located in nearby communities and retaining the confidentiality of program participants in

smaller, close-knit communities (Harris, 2004; Paulson, 2018). Therefore, innovative approaches are needed to accommodate service learning opportunities and to overcome the challenges for college students located in rural areas.

One such approach is to separate the service component of the class into an optional, autonomous, paid opportunity for students to gain experience while also being funded for their time in the community. By allowing students to decide on whether they wish to pursue the paid, service learning component this may serve as leverage to maximize the student's learning experience by providing them a choice as well as help to alleviate barriers of transportation or lack of time by paying the students. However, little research has examined a course designed to separate the two components (lecture and service) of a traditional service learning course due to the challenges of living in a rural community. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore students' perception of a service learning course at a small, rural, state college.

DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This explanatory case study consisted of semi-structured interviews with students participating in a grant-funded service learning course (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

SERVICE-LEARNING COURSE

The service learning course was developed by three faculty members, 2 from the small rural state college in which the course was offered and another faculty member from a metropolitan university located within the same state. The class was designed to complement a grant that the lead faculty member at the rural state college had from AmeriCorps and Serve Nebraska (NE). AmeriCorps is a national organization which engages both men and women in service opportunities across the state in various locations through nonprofits, community and faith-based groups, and schools. Serve NE allows for Nebraskans to strengthen their communities through volunteer, collaboration, and service programs. The grant provided opportunities for AmeriCorps volunteers, who were also Peru State College students, to work in a nearby town at elementary and middle school afterschool programs. The course was designed to fill a knowledge gap as these volunteers/students did not have knowledge on childhood obesity and physical activity. Thus, the course was designed to emphasize knowledge and skills about childhood obesity, the importance of physical activity, and promoting physical activity particularly within afterschool programs.

The course was offered in the Spring semester of 2019 in a blended format with both online and in-person portions. The online portion of the class consisted of reading weekly articles, participating/leading discussion boards, and completing quizzes. In-person class meetings occurred five times throughout the semester. During this time, the class discussed topics from the online coursework. As an extension of the course, students had the option to be paid to work at an afterschool program in a town ~20 minutes away to apply class concepts, gain experience, and add to class discussion.

DATA COLLECTION

At the end of the semester, a convenience sample (n=10) of all enrolled students (n=13) were asked to take part in a semi-structured interview. Students that agreed to participate were interviewed in a private room during the last in-person class meeting. Interviews were conducted by a trained male doctoral student, from the same metropolitan university as the one faculty member, with three years of qualitative data collection experience who had no previous contact

with the students. Interviews were audio recorded, lasted roughly ten minutes, and consisted of seven questions regarding students' perceptions of the following topics: experience with the course, children's health behaviors, community interventions, the option to work at an afterschool program during the semester, and ways to improve the course in the future. Participants were assigned a unique numerical code to deidentify them from the collected data prior to analysis.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using a general inductive approach for program evaluation (Thomas, 2006). An experienced qualitative researcher who had over 10 years of experience conducting qualitative research and two undergraduate students new to qualitative research completed the analysis. First, transcripts were studied and read through several times by all three members of the analysis team. Then, the two peer undergraduate students individually developed a list of potential themes. Next, the students and qualitative researcher met to discuss themes and come to a consensus on codes. They developed a codebook based on these themes and used the codebook to independently code the first two interviews. All three researchers met again to review coding and determine if new or different codes emerged as well as discuss any discrepancies. Minor changes were made to the coding frame, and the peer researchers returned to the transcripts to revise and individually complete coding of the remaining interviews according to the new codes. After coding all of the interviews, the two peer researchers met to review coding, discuss any discrepancies, and reach a consensus on all coding. Data were validated through the process of peer debriefing and thick description (Creswell, 2007).

RESULTS

In total, 10 undergraduate students (1 male, 9 females) agreed to participate in this current study. None of the students in the class took part in the service opportunity. Three major themes were found: service learning opportunity, students' experience and knowledge gained, and improving the class.

SERVICE LEARNING OPPORTUNITY

All of the students said that they did not take part in the afterschool program because they were either too busy (n=8), it was too much of a drive (n=5), they were unsure of the pay (n=3), the hiring process was too challenging (n=2), or they had other priorities (n=2). Students said they would have participated if they had a better understanding of all the details (pay, application process) and if the hours and days were more flexible for them. Most students thought participating in the afterschool program would have benefitted them (n=8). For example, one student stated, "It would have given me a more hands-on feel, and it would have allowed me to apply what I've learned in this course to real life."

STUDENT'S EXPERIENCE AND KNOWLEDGE GAINED

Overall, all students stated that they had a good experience with the class. One student said, "I loved the course. I don't have anything bad to say about it at all." The topics students mentioned that were most memorable from the course were the importance of promoting health (n=9), the differences in health between rural and urban communities (n=8), and childhood obesity (n=6). All of them agreed that they could use these statistics and topics for their future profession or their future in general. For example, "Being a future physical therapist... you can start giving health

tips... spread the knowledge we obtain this semester to all of our patients." Another student said, "For like my future children, I could just use it, like teach them how to eat healthy and then the physical exercise and then keep them in shape."

IMPROVING THE CLASS

As stated earlier, all students had a relatively good experience with the class. Most students would not change anything about the class, but some gave some ways to better it. Suggestions included meeting in-person more than once a month (n=4), having more video learning instead of reading (n=1), and having the students give presentations (n=1).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study was to explore students' perception of a service learning course at a small, rural, state college. In the present study, students were enrolled in a blended course that provided them with the knowledge and skills to utilize in a paid opportunity for students to assist in an afterschool program to promote children's physical activity and obesity prevention. The option of participating in the service learning component of class was given to students rather than made a mandatory component of the class to hopefully leverage student's autonomy in their learning. Previous research has found that incorporating learner autonomy was efficacious in students becoming more independent and taking ownership of their learning to benefit their long-term career aspirations (Henri et al., 2017). However, students did not choose to pursue the option of the service learning component offered in the course.

Based on findings from this study, there is an evident need for rural faculty and instructors to develop innovative ways to improve service learning opportunities for students. Service learning classes offered at post-secondary institutions in rural areas have proven to be challenging (Harris, 2004; Paulson, 2018). In our study, the afterschool program was offered at an elementary school located ~20 minutes from the college and the students enrolled in the service learning course had to go through a hiring and payroll process in order to work in the afterschool program. This contributed to reasons why students did not participate in the service learning activity, which included lack of time and the challenge of being in a rural area (i.e. driving distance) and some students perceived the hiring process and payroll system to be overly complicated. To address these concerns, course instructors may want to consider ways to increase the compatibility of the service learning component so students are able to see the value in offering up their time and perceive the service learning opportunity as worthwhile. For example, students could carpool and funding could be used to reimburse the driver for gas. Course instructors may find it beneficial to work with the community partners and students simultaneously to develop a mutual agreement in order to simplify the process of making connections and working together. Additionally, instructors may find value in developing ways for students to trial their participation prior to fully committing to the actual service learning project. The course instructor may find it useful to put students through a simulation of the project during in-person class time to pique students' interests and improve their confidence in delivering services.

Further, given the increase in virtual learning due to COVID-19 including virtual service learning opportunities, rural areas could develop innovative projects that do not rely on in-person opportunities which can also expand their circle of potential organizations they could work with. For example, students could develop videos that could be shared with the afterschool program or conduct virtual activity sessions via Zoom. Virtual service learning has shown to be a promising

and effective educational practice that incorporates real-life learning with technology use to expand students capabilities, all while being able to provide supplemental material to the community partner from the campus of post-secondary institutions (Harris, 2017; Purcell, 2017). These two options, simulated and virtual service learning, can then serve as a topic of discussion amongst the students and their instructor to talk about the benefits or any concerns and potential shortcomings in comparison to in-person service learning projects.

Despite students choosing not to partake in service learning, they reported a relatively good experience with the high-impact lecture component and most would not change anything; although, some gave ways to improve the course such as meeting in-person more than once a month, having more video learning instead of reading, and having students give presentations. The findings on the student's positive experiences and knowledge gained is similar to other findings of studies on health-related service learning courses (Carson & Raguse, 2014; Paulson, 2018). Although, no students pursued the service opportunity in the afterschool program, students may have been able to apply course content to their current work commitments and did not feel the need to pursue additional hands-on experience. Often times college students are already working lower-level jobs that align with their career interests, therefore instructors may consider using these or past experiences to facilitate class discussions, a process known as work-integrated learning, to supplement for the losses in service learning participation when made voluntary (Drysdale & McBeath, 2018; Helyer et al., 2014).

There are several limitations to this study. First, this was a small sample size from a single college and additional research is needed. Second, students understood that the faculty member teaching their class was a part of the research team and thus students may have responded in a way that was not accurate to their actual perceptions of the course. Ultimately, service learning is a well-documented learning model that can be beneficial to students. Colleges in rural areas likely experience more barriers to service learning than their urban counterparts; thus, innovative efforts are needed to identify ways to practically offer these opportunities in rural settings.

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