Project Panama:
An International Service Project

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Participation in service learning projects is a growing phenomenon at universities and colleges. Research indicates service projects are beneficial for college students and adults. There is little data investigating developmental differences in how younger versus older participants perceive the service learning process. In this project, older adults joined high school and university students on a ten-day service mission to Panama to provide humanitarian aid. Using both qualitative and quantitative data, participants were assessed on their motivations for volunteering, their belief in a just world, and their emotional experiences from working in a service learning setting. On the Volunteer Functions Inventory, there was no significant difference between the students' and the adults' motivation to volunteer, but as evidenced on the Global Belief Scale, students were more likely to endorse the belief that life is fair and predictable and that people get what they deserve than were the older non-students. The Aids Caregiver Scale indicated younger and older participants reported similar levels of satisfaction in their work on this project. The qualitative analysis involved a paper synthesizing the experience from a strict service learning perspective. Suggestions and recommendations for similar projects are included.

Literature Review

In the last decade, collegiate service learning has become an integral part of the student experience (Kronick, 2007). Service learning involves achieving academic and personal goals through community service. Typically, service opportunities are integrated into a curriculum, along with guided reflection, to enrich student learning. Such projects can be implemented at the college level through service in the local community or through service abroad.

Universities are usually the cornerstone of their surrounding communities, and service learning helps universities fulfill civic responsibilities (Einfeld & Collins 2008). Engagement in the community also has a reciprocal effect in that the community benefits from the service, and the university benefits through an increase in the community's perception of the university as an involved community partner. The learning environment extends from the classroom to the community, where there are valuable resources fortifying student learning that cannot be obtained through participation in college classes alone (Baggerly, 2006).

Traditional Aged College Students

Research on service learning has emphasized positive outcomes in several areas. For example, an increase in civic engagement has been shown (Prentice, 2007), appreciation for diversity (DiMaria 2006) has been noted, personal growth has been reported (Ehrlich 2005), and even enhanced academic achievement has been observed (Strage, 2004; Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Wulsin 2008). Furthermore, Nazarova (2008) found that service learning "enhances skills such as personal efficacy, ability to work well with others, as well as leadership and communication skills."

Enhancing a student's multicultural knowledge is another important learning experience associated with service learning projects. Increasing multicultural knowledge and awareness can be accomplished in the local community as well as in locations across the world. John Dewey (1933) stated that true learning only occurs when students must grapple with true dilemmas. Students often arrive at college with preconceived dispositions towards other cultures, races, or socioeconomic groups. McHatton, Shaunessy, Hughes, and Ratliff (2007) described a disposition as the tendency to act in a certain way that is defined by values, commitments and ethics that influence our interactions with others.

Service learning has the power to change student values by helping them form positive dispositions for people from many diverse backgrounds. Carney (2004) states that experiences in diverse community settings allow participants to gain a better understanding of the people within the community in quest for multicultural

understanding and social justice. Experiential learning is one of the best ways for a student to face personal and societal ignorance, prejudice, and injustice (Kronick, 2007). Service learning provides these experiences and allows students to leave their comfort zone as a college student.

Multicultural awareness and appreciation can happen locally, but it oftentimes occurs through travel abroad. Learning that takes place in distant locations presents unique opportunities for student development. Pisano and Rust (2007) focus on the transformation of students participating in an international service learning program. Their research indicates the impact of such programs to be positive, allowing students to expand upon their motivations and goals, as well as achieve insightful benefits in the areas of cultural adaptation, knowledge acquisition, values, and future career plans. King (2004) found that students involved in international service learning activities learn to critically examine their assumptions about others in society, which caused the students to raise critical questions about inequity and prejudice. These ideas are corroborated by others who study the effects of international service learning (Ngai 2006).

Adult Learners and Service Learning

The benefits of service learning for college students are important areas of study, but service learning extends beyond the college years. Because adults want to continue learning and utilizing their skills, lifelong learning and service has emerged as an important area of an active lifestyle for adults as well (Holland & Robinson, 2008). Programs such as Elderhostel and Lifelong Learning Institutes have provided many opportunities for active adult learners to participate in service learning both in the United States and abroad (Simson, Wilson, & Harlow-Rosentraub, 2006).

In recent years there has been a substantial increase in the number of adults participating in service learning (Okun, Barr, & Herzog, 1998). This may be due in part to improved health, greater opportunity for service, and a favorable shift in society's view of aging.

There are a number of positive outcomes related to adult participation in service learning. Mudel and Schugurensky (2008) found that adult volunteers increased their leadership skills and their ability to work with others. Furthermore, many adults surveyed experienced a major shift in their attitudes toward people who were different from them. This type of transformative learning has been addressed by Mezirow (2000), who notes that such shifts in frames of reference involve experiencing a disorienting dilemma, engaging in a critical assessment of one's assumptions, exploring new roles and relationships, building confidence in those new roles and relationships, and reintegrating one's life experiences into the new perspective.

Research clearly shows the benefits of multicultural development related to service learning in a college/academic setting as well as benefits in other areas of social and emotional development. This research suggests that service learning programs should be implemented as an educational experience because of their positive outcomes and because of our changing world situation. Globalization has resulted in increased diversity throughout most of the world. Developing multicultural competence is imperative as we find ourselves interacting with individuals who hold values, customs, mores and belief systems different from our own. Service learning may be one of the more effective tools for achieving this.

A question in the research on service learning is whether there are differences in how students and older adults perceive the service learning process. Although there have been a number of studies that discuss intergenerational service learning, these studies have focused on young people providing a service to adults. Few studies have examined projects in which college students and adults were working *together* on a service learning project. Furthermore, researchers have not looked at the differences in growth and development that might occur among different age groups participating in service learning projects.

The research appears to be clear concerning positive outcomes for those participating in service learning activities. However, there is little data that has investigated the possible developmental differences and the effect a service learning project may have (i.e., are there differences in how younger versus older adults perceive the service learning process?). To investigate this question, one of the researchers proposed Project Panama (PP). In this project, older adults joined high school and university students on a ten-day service mission to Panama to provide humanitarian aid. Both qualitative and quantitative data were examined.

Method

Participants

Participants included 13 students and 18 non-students. The students were enrolled in special topics service learning courses appropriate for their academic level. The participants included seven high school students, four undergraduate and two graduate students. All received college credit for the course. The students were 16 to 25 years old. The non-students were adults whose ages ranged from 25 to 70. All were college graduates and eight had post-graduate degrees. Their professions included business, medicine, academics, construction, and art. Students and non-students were administered the quantitative assessments, and the qualitative analysis was derived from student papers synthesizing their experiences. All were voluntary participants in the project.

Academic and Teambuilding Component

Project Panama was a college course designed around the concept of increasing multicultural understanding using a structured experiential model of learning. Six weekly 3-hour meetings/classes were held before the trip, and two were held afterwards. The pre-trip classes included Spanish language lessons, Panamanian meals prepared by adult-student teams, and presentations by the students on the culture, history, geography, economy, educational system, health care system, and the plight of the indigenous population. The post-trip classes included students sharing from their journals (students were required to write in journals daily during the on-sight portion of the course).

Service-learning Project

The international service learning project titled Project Panama provided services in two Panamanian towns, Boquete and Bocas del Toro. The team worked with local missions and Rotary clubs in each community over the University's Spring Break. The service projects undertaken fell in two broad categories, medical and construction. The group assisted medical professionals with 5 medical clinics, providing service to 537 patients, 364 of whom were children. The group provided construction work at three schools, a mission, and an orphanage. They constructed a kitchen, dining room, a block wall fence base, and a concrete walkway. They built and installed roof trusses, cleaned and painted three schools, cleaned the grounds of an orphanage, and wired a bus garage for electricity. Participants worked and traveled together, but were all housed by and worked with ex-patriots from the US and other countries as well as native Panamanian members of the local Rotary clubs.

Procedures and Measures

Demographic information was collected and surveys were administered to the entire group immediately prior to departure. Posttest data was collected at the first meeting after the group's return. Two quantitative instruments were used to gather pretest and posttest data, and one additional quantitative instrument was used as a service follow-up measure. In addition, qualitative data was collected through students' written responses.

Qualitative Measures

The Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI) (Clary, Snyder, Ridge, Copeland, Stukes, Haugen, & Miene, 1998) is a 30 item questionnaire. Answers are scored on a 7-point response scale anchored with *not at all important* to *extremely important.* It is designed to examine six different functions or motives that the act of volunteering can reflect. The six subscales are: values, understanding, social, career, protective, and enhancement. For the purposes of this analysis, only total scores were used to reflect the overall level of motivation to volunteer. The Volunteer Fuctions Inventory has been used in other pre and posttest analyses of service learning projects in studies of motivation in paid and nonpaid volunteers (Gerstein, Wilkeson, & Anderson, 2004) and in research on the relationships among moral judgment, self-understanding, and moral actions (Derryberry & Thoma, 2005)

The Global Belief in a Just World Scale (GBJWS) (Lipkus, 1991) is a 7-item scale with responses based on a 6-point scale (*strong disagreement* to *strong agreement*). The GBJWS assesses the general belief that "people get what they deserve" in life and that the world is basically fair. The GBJWS was chosen to see if scores varied by age/student status and if the scores changed as a function of the volunteer experience. The GBJW Scale has a higher reliability than other scales measuring just word beliefs (Hellman, Muilenburg-Trevino, & Worley, 2008).

The Caregiver Scale, also known as the AIDS Caregiver Scale (Ferrari, McCown, & Pantano, 1993)

was administered after the service-learning experience to assess respondents' emotional experiences from working in a service learning setting. The two subscales comprising the scale are satisfaction, which measures personal fulfillment from helping others, and stress, which measures negative affect or depression from helping others. This is a 14-item scale with each item on a 7-point scale ranging from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*. Although this scale was developed for use with AIDS caregivers, it has been adapted and validated for use in many other settings (Bringle, Phillips, & Hudson, 2004). It was chosen in this study to investigate differences in consequent stress and satisfaction in older and younger participants.

All students were required to write a paper synthesizing the content gained from their pre-trip classes, the experience on the trip, and their perceived growth or change as a result of the experience. Two independent evaluators categorized student responses from the papers.

This study asked four questions: (1) To what degree and in what ways were students affected by the service learning project? (2) Were motivations and beliefs of the students different from those of the non-students? (3) Did students gain more satisfaction and suffer more stress than nonstudents from the service experience? (4) What categories of the experience were most meaningful to the students?

Results

The purpose of the quantitative analysis was to determine the differences between older and younger participants in attitudes, motivation, and response to the provision of services and to document any changes in attitudes over the course of the experience.

On the Volunteer Functions Inventory, there was not a significant difference between the students' and the adults' motivation to volunteer. Students' overall mean was 145.5 with an SE of 8.38; the nonstudents' mean score was 127.7 with an SE of 10.02 (F= 1.38, sig =.258). The differences between the means were likely affected by the variability and the small sample size. Further, there was no significant overall pretest posttest difference with this instrument (F=1.38, sig=.258).The pretest mean was 135.35 and the posttest mean was 141.056. This indicates that although students and adults tend to differ in their volunteer motivation, the differences are not great enough to reach significance. Further, the group did not significantly change in their

motivation from the pretest to the posttest measures, although there was a trend in the direction of increased motivation.

On the Global Belief in a Just World Scale, high scores indicate a belief that people get what they deserve, that the world is basically fair and predictable. Although there was no change in scores from pretest to posttest (F=.028, sig=.869), there was a significant difference between the beliefs of students and those of non-students (F=7.91, sig=.013). Students were more likely to endorse the belief that life is fair and predictable and that people get what they deserve than were the older non-students.

On the Aids Caregiver Scale, younger and older participants reported similar levels of satisfaction in their work on this project (t=1.01, sig=.326). However, student participants reported experiencing significantly more stress related to their service than older participants. (t=2.17, sig=.046). This may indicate that younger people do not yet have the life context into which to place their experiences.

The purpose of the qualitative analysis of the students' papers synthesizing their experiences was to determine from a strict service learning perspective how the participants conceptualized the project. All the participants recognized the increase in their knowledge of the country. They reported learning about Panamanian history and geography, the country's political and economic issues as represented by the degree of rural poverty, the Panamanian educational system and its difficulties the in educating children who are rural and poor, and the culture of the country including the food, dance and dress.

Of the student participants, all reported that their perspectives were broadened. They expressed themes of appreciation of "our circumstances in America and how much we take for granted." They observed that Panamanians demonstrated a heightened sense of family and friendship and that they (PP participants) faced obstacles they could not have imagined before the trip.

Ninety-one percent of the participants reported enhanced cultural awareness as evidenced by the recognition of the obstacles Panamanians face, "the immense divide between the wealthy and poor, the unique culture and heritage, the lack of a middle class, and transportation by horse or on foot as the rule." In reflecting on the meaning of the project for themselves, the students commented on the sense of

accomplishment and pride that they felt as a consequence of the service project. Some recognized their untapped skills or abilities – a sudden awareness of "what I can do." Some said that they had changed their goals and others that they had changed their view of their own life. One wrote that she felt touched by and benefited from her service "as much as the children we helped." Half of the students remarked that they want to continue their service learning activities in the future.

Discussion

The purpose of Project Panama was to expose students and non-students to the experience of serving two communities in Central America and to assist them in learning about the culture, economics and physical reality of life in Panama. This purpose was accomplished as documented by student descriptions of what they learned about the Panamanians, what they learned about themselves, and how they were affected by the experience. As previous research has indicated, international service learning does provide the participant with a global perspective (Pisano and Rust, 2007).

In addition, the students were joined by a group of non-student adults who engaged in the same training and service components as the students. The non-students were used as a comparison group for the qualitative analysis. The students and the non-students did not differ significantly in their overall motivation to volunteer, as measured by the Volunteer Functions Inventory. They were equally motivated, and the level of their motivation did not change over the time covered by the trip. This may be too short an experience for change in motivation to occur and, because the group members were volunteers, they may have been relatively homogeneous in their motivation.

The Just World Hypothesis indicates that the students have a belief system that assumes that the world is a predictable place with causal relationships between events, e.g., if you are poor, you have done something to deserve it (Bringle, Phillips, & Hudson, 2004). Consequently, they believe that good people like themselves will experience good in their lives. This belief provides them with a defense against the belief that things happen randomly and are uncontrollable and unpredictable. In this study, although the just world hypothesis was not significantly heightened or reduced by volunteer experiences in Panama, there were significant differences between younger people's scores

and those of older volunteers. This indicates that, with age and life experiences, people come to understand the capricious nature of fate and the uncertain links between human actions and human plight.

The similarities between the younger and older volunteers in the satisfaction gained from providing services to those who need them indicate that the group as a whole found the experience meaningful and personally fulfilling. It is interesting that the student group was more likely to find the experience to be stress-producing than the older group. Doubtless the older group members were more experienced than the younger group and had more experience in coping with the types of stresses evoked in the provision of services. In addition, they were more likely to have acquired more skills than the younger volunteers in solving the problems that they confronted.

Service learning advocates are encouraged to incorporate the pre-trip courses this project included. This component of the project ensured that participants learned about the country's culture, its people, customs, language, and food. More importantly, the meetings served the purpose of integrating a very heterogeneous group into a cohesive cohort. Several other components of the present study would also be repeated including: (1) solicit a heterogeneous group of individuals – all of whom have different skills, abilities and attitudes, (2) use qualitative and quantitative assessments that will allow both an objective and norm referenced and subjective/personal perspective.

Researchers who would like to develop international service learning courses in the future may wish to implement a prescreening in order to help determine what may be motivating the potential participant to complete a service project in a foreign country (e.g., just wanting to travel is probably not best motivation). Future researchers should also understand that there are few if any instruments that will assess the long-term impact of such an endeavor. The instruments may provide some insight into the short term changes and projected attitudinal and behavioral changes, but longitudinal research is the only way one might determine if the immediate changes observed would be permanent.

Conclusion

Today's college students are looking for opportunities to serve their communities, and many students feel they can make a difference in the local

community as well as around the world. Immersing a student into this situation through service learning is beneficial to them immediately, but it is also beneficial in their future careers. Baggerly's (2006) research focuses on multicultural competence through service learning. He concludes that "service learning is a powerful pedagogical process that may not only facilitate students' multicultural competence and civic responsibility but it may also revitalize universities, communities, and the counseling profession."

Finally, incorporating individuals of different developmental stages may be one factor that expands the benefits of service learning activities. Exposing individuals to good models of service at varying ages may have a significant effect on one's own continued efforts to serve others. Future research should continue to investigate the potential positive benefits that this model may offer.

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