

## Article 7

### **Collaborative Learning: The Effects of Service Learning on Personal and Professional Development for School Counselors-in-Training**

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#### **Abstract**

Service learning has long been regarded as an instructional tool for educational enhancement. Lacking from the research, however, is the impact of service learning for school counselors-in-training. As school counselors-in-training are charged with the task of partnering in advocacy, leadership, and as agents of change for children, families, schools, and communities at large, the question then becomes, "what impact does service learning have on the developing school counseling professional?" The current study involved 12 graduate school counselors-in-training writing reflective journals following their 10-hour service learning experience. From qualitative data analysis, four overarching themes emerged from the participants' experiences. Service learning (a) challenged assumptions; (b) supported gaining new knowledge, resources, and networking; (c) was a positive experience; and (d) encouraged self-reflection of the future focused professional. Findings support that implementing service learning into graduate curriculum for school counselors-in-training can lead to meaningful gains in personal and professional development.

## **Introduction**

Service learning is a valuable instructional method first introduced in the early 1990s by Dewey and Kirkpatrick (as cited in Conrad & Hedin, 1991) with the intention of connecting what is being taught in the classroom into real life practice in the community (Nikels, Mims, & Mims, 2007). Conway, Amel, and Gerwien (2009) suggested that service learning is a necessary element to promote in graduate level training due to the production of positive changes in academic, personal, social, and citizenship outcomes. As professional school counselors are responsible for the academic, career, and personal/social development of students in school settings (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2012), it could then be argued that each of these developmental tasks must first be in place for school counselors before they can be promoted in the lives of students.

Various disciplines define service learning experiences differently, and in fact, some may suggest that the term “service learning” is “over-defined” (Sheffield, 2005, p. 46) thereby opening the door for nearly any activity outside of the classroom to be considered a service learning experience. The same author noted that “the service in service-learning demands that teachers and students leave the classroom to encounter other living communities where strangers might become familiars” (p. 51). Such a philosophy challenges students and faculty alike to stretch their experiences, and subsequently their worldview, for a more open-minded and cooperative understanding of people.

Godfrey, Illes, and Berry (2005) echoed the notion that leaving the classroom to experience others can contribute to a meaningful, deepening learning experience for students. The authors suggested three elements that underlie successful service learning outcomes, including reality, reflection, and reciprocity. *Reality* is the concept of learning taking part in a real world setting followed by *reflection* which involves the student considering the impact of the service learning on him or herself personally and/or professionally. Lastly, *reciprocity* involves having a mutually beneficial relationship in which both the host site and the student gain from the experience. The importance of each element of service learning—reality, reflection, and reciprocity—contributes to a learning experience that links knowledge (content) with experience (application), which could be a constructive learning opportunity for students in a number of academic disciplines. While this aforementioned article (Godfrey et al., 2005) was written to conceptualize the benefits for business students, this notion of reflective learning through service learning experiences is particularly relevant for counselors-in-training—those helping professionals who dedicate their lives to impact the personal development and betterment of people with whom they serve. As such, the current study sought to explore the potential benefits of service learning for school counselors-in-training.

## **Background of the Study**

Accreditation and ethical standards of the counseling profession promote multicultural awareness and competence to work with diverse clients (American Counseling Association [ACA], 2005). In the United States there is a pressing need for professional school counselors to have multicultural awareness since the school population is diverse in many different areas including, but not limited to, race, gender,

ethnicity, sexual orientation, ability, social economic status, age, religion, language, and experience (ASCA, 2012). Beyond multicultural competencies, it is also important that professional school counselors maintain a rich network of resources and organizations beyond the school scene to support student and family development (ASCA, 2012). In an attempt to articulate the necessity of counseling competencies, including skills, leadership, and advocacy, various counseling organizations and accrediting agencies have identified best practice standards for the professional school counselor (Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs [CACREP], 2009).

The American School Counselor Association [ASCA] has “a long and valued history of helping counselors be more effective and efficient in their work” (ASCA, 2012, p. 9). One way of promoting said effectiveness is by outlining the school counselor’s role and responsibilities within a school setting through a comprehensive school counseling program. Chief among the responsibilities of the school counselor is promoting services for all students, which can be accomplished largely through advocacy and leadership both within the school and within the larger community (2012). Dollarhide and Saginak (2012) contended that when community professionals and organizations can work in alliance with the professional school counselor, meaningful resources and services can be offered to students through “wraparound services” (p. 204), or services that are often interdisciplinary or are offered in conjunction with other organizations or community service groups. In order to facilitate the extension of such opportunities for students, it is pertinent that school counselors are aware of the organizations and leaders in the community that can offer these support opportunities for students and their families.

Similarly, the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs [CACREP] articulated the need for school counselor training programs to promote not just knowledge, but *skill*, in providing counseling, promoting resources, and serving as leaders for school systems. CACREP standards denote that school counselors-in-training must demonstrate the ability to advocate for the learning and academic experiences necessary to promote the academic, personal/social, and career development of K-12 students (CACREP, 2009). Furthermore, they must advocate for school policies, programs, and services for all students, regardless of demographic status or ability (CACREP, 2009). One way to build a repertoire of said knowledge and skills could be through the use of alternative *and* additive learning experiences, including those opportunities that exist beyond the classroom walls.

Conway et al. (2009) compiled a meta-analysis of the outcomes of service learning based on an extensive history of service learning research in psychology or related disciplines (23% of studies included) and other disciplines (77% of studies included). The authors reported that service learning produces the following results for participants: (a) academic outcomes: knowledge and motivation to learn; (b) personal outcomes: personal awareness about the self, including values and self-efficacy; (c) social outcomes: relationships to others, including thoughts about others and leadership toward others; and (d) citizenship outcomes: “personally responsible... participatory... and justice-oriented” beliefs and behaviors (p. 235). Noticeable in their results, the authors found that academic outcomes and social outcomes were the most impacted areas of development for students. As accrediting bodies, such as CACREP, promote the progression of knowledge and skill development through effective learning experiences,

Conway et al.'s (2009) findings concerning the relevance of service learning are particularly illuminating. Through this meta-analysis, it becomes clear that service learning may be one meaningful way to link the *academic* (knowledge) with *social* (relationships to others).

### **Service Learning and Counselor Training**

Various studies have demonstrated the impact of service learning on general counselor training. Jett and Delgado-Romero (2009) qualitatively assessed the impact of a prepracticum service learning opportunity on graduate counseling students. Results from the analysis indicated that students demonstrated improvements in their professional development, specifically through understanding the professional counseling roles and environments. Relatedly, Baggerly (2006) voiced her rationale for implementing service learning with graduate counseling students who provided play therapy services to African American children at a community center. The author noted that the counselors-in-training demonstrated improvements in multicultural competence and “develop a sense of social responsibility” (p. 253).

Additionally, Burnett, Hamel, and Long (2004) argued that a service learning experience during a multicultural course demonstrated an exploration of bias based on culture, provided participants with support from the community, and provided participants with an influential experience. In the aforementioned study, participants completed 6 weeks of service learning and were evaluated through journaling and a survey, which conveyed that some participants felt the service learning experience was “one of the best experiences from my graduate counseling program” (p. 187). Yet another study described the relationships built with others during a service learning project which became a catalyst to the participant’s progressing personal awareness (Jones & Abes, 2004). Jones and Abes (2004) also argued that the impact of the service learning experience on the construction of identity for the participant was long-term.

Current research highlights the impact of service learning on graduate counselor development (e.g., Baggerly, 2006; Burnett, Hamel, & Long, 2004; Jett & Delgado-Romero, 2009) and even promotes the benefits of service learning for student recipients in school settings (e.g., Brigman & Molina, 1999; Nikels et al., 2007; Stott & Jackson, 2005). Anecdotal research also provides strategies and methods for implementing service learning for school counselors-in-training (e.g., Rowley, Sink, & MacDonald, 2002) though such studies often lack an assessment component to determine the effectiveness of said service learning experiences on counselor development. From this exploration of current research, what was noticeably absent from the literature were studies that explored the impact of service learning specifically for *school* counselors-in-training. As accrediting bodies and professional organizations support the development of counseling skills paired with leadership and advocacy (ASCA, 2012; CACREP, 2009) and as professional school counselors are charged with the task of linking resources between students and their families to the greater community, it is imperative that school counselors-in-training have the opportunity to work alongside community partners during their graduate training program. From this deficit in the research came the conception of the current study.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The current study sought to answer the question, “In what ways are school counselors-in-training impacted by service learning?” The purpose of the current study was to qualitatively investigate the self-reported impacts of service learning in graduate level school counselors-in-training.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Graduate school counseling students in a school counseling foundations course at a Midwestern university were invited to participate in the current study. Demographics included 12 females ( $n = 11$ ) and 1 male participant ( $n = 1$ ), with the mean age being 33.75. When asked about the number of service learning experiences completed in other courses, 8 participants (67%) reported “zero,” 2 participants (17%) reported “one,” 1 participant (8%) reported “two,” and 1 participant (8%) reported “15.”

### **Procedure**

For the school counseling foundations course requirements, graduate school counseling students were instructed to participate in 10 hours of a service learning experience. Following their experience, students were invited to reflectively narrate their experience for the purposes of the current study. Conway et al. (2009) suggested that structured reflection produces greater change outcomes for service learning experiences and can be achieved through journaling, written assignments to connect experiences from service learning to course related concepts, or various other writing/expressive methodologies. To promote reflection in participants, journaling was the structured reflection choice selected for the current study. As such, participants of the current study were asked to answer the following prompts: (a) what was your service learning experience and (b) in what ways were you impacted by the experience? Reflective narratives were electronically submitted to the course instructor at the end of the semester.

Following the end of the semester, a research team consisting of the principal investigator (faculty) and 3 graduate students who were also students in the course, began coding the data for common themes. Coding is a rigorous set of activities that invited the researchers to a deeper understanding of the patterns within each participant’s experience and between the participants involved in the study. This form of analysis allows the data to speak to both the similarities and differences in participant experiences. “Data” in the current study involved the reflective narratives from the service learning experiences written by each participant. All data were coded using three phases: (a) open coding, (b) axial coding, and (c) selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

It is important to note that as the research team was comprised of participants in the study, the inner-awareness of being both a participant and a researcher was valuable. For this reason, triangulation and peer debriefing with the course instructor and principal investigator (Keller-Dupree) was not only encouraged, but imperative during data analysis.

## **Summary of Findings**

The data collected and coded in the current study served to answer the primary research question “In what ways are counselors-in-training impacted by service learning?” Reflective narratives written by 12 graduate school counseling participants following 10 hours of service learning experience were used to answer this question. The following section details the themes that emerged in the data through a grounded theory approach to data analysis.

From open to axial to selective coding, four overarching themes emerged from the participants’ experiences: (a) service learning challenged assumptions; (b) service learning supported gaining new knowledge, resources, and networking; (c) service learning was a positive experience; and (d) service learning encouraged self-reflection of the future focused professional.

### **Service Learning Challenged Assumptions**

Participants of the study reflected upon the impact of the service learning in that it “challenged assumptions” of what they believed about people and organizations. One female noted that “I feel that Department of Human Services [DHS] gets a bad reputation sometimes” but that in her service learning experience, she met DHS workers who were “very passionate about helping children” and “wanted other children to feel that they belonged,” thereby changing her belief about this helping system. Another participant who volunteered at a learning service program for youth shared that this experience “opened my eyes to people who are different from me” and led her to feel “more aware of my preconceived ideas more now than ever.” Similarly, another participant who worked at a church-sponsored meal donation for low-income families shared that “...I came into this expecting to see mostly church members taking advantage of this service. I saw completely the opposite.” A different participant who volunteered at a school mentoring program of Hispanic students voiced that “I had never worked with a primarily Hispanic population of kids before and found it very interesting and educational.” She furthered that she was “impressed by the difference in attitude the children had toward teachers and each other in comparison to the students at my school.” Another participant, who attended and volunteered at a Muslim festival, shared that witnessing Muslim women at the festival “changed my perspective of what I assumed [about the female’s role]”.

Through a variety of learning sites, the shared experience began to emerge that students entered the service learning opportunity with one idea in mind of the organization or population with which they would be partnering; after their experience, their ideas and preconceived notions shifted, largely for the better.

### **Service Learning Supported Gaining New Knowledge, Resources, and Networking**

Each participant was invited to choose a service learning experience of his/her choice to complete the class requirement, and what became apparent from the data was that students left this experience with more knowledge, resources, and networking than they had acquired prior to the experience. While this finding of the second theme seems somewhat intuitive, the implication for this finding is rather meaningful. As beginning counselors-in-training, this service learning experience allowed participants to begin

creating their own collaborative partnerships with others that may be used in their future work as counselors.

One participant who served dinner for low-income families at a church noted her “skepticism” of the experience due to the service learning being “provided to others by a church.” She contrasted this experience at this end, however, with the reflection that she was “moved by the graciousness” and that “this is an organization that I would feel completely comfortable recommending to any of my students and their parents if they ever needed an evening meal.” Another participant who volunteered at a Mothers Against Drunk Drivers [M.A.D.D.] race event shared that the M.A.D.D. representative with whom she worked for the service learning experience was “very friendly and informative” while another participant who volunteered with the American Red Cross for her experience shared that attending the orientation alone was “very informative about the history, the structure, the operations, and the services of the American Red Cross.” One participant shared that in her service learning experience, she was “able to openly ask any questions” and she left with having “someone I could contact that knew first-hand of what a child goes through after a school counselor makes a disclosure to the police.” Another voiced that after her service learning experience, “I feel like I have two mentors I can call on now if I ever need help.” After volunteering at a Muslim festival, another participant shared that she was “hoping that I can continue to build a friendship with [event person] because I find her to have an interesting mixture of acculturated and traditional beliefs.” Whether the networking opportunities, resources, and knowledge were for personal or professional use, the overarching theme became that participants found value in various forms from these experiences. These experiences offered them a “take away” of resources and interpersonal connection.

### **Service Learning Was a Positive Experience**

The next emerging theme from the data was both interesting and exciting as a counselor educator (EKD). Participants were required to spend a minimum of 10 hours volunteering, partnering, or assisting with an event or organization for their professional service learning. In doing so, and in reflecting on their experience, participants shared about the joy and benefits gained from their positive experiences.

In the simplest of terms, one participant who volunteered at dances for adults and children with disabilities shared that “this service learning impacted my happiness” and that “every time I give my time and volunteer at the dances, I leave feeling happier and more fulfilled than I did when I got there.” Another shared that “this service learning project blew me away; I was so impressed...” She furthered that she was “incredibly happy to have been a part of this...” One participant who volunteered at a grief and loss camp for children noted that “this service learning was a great learning experience” and that “this was an experience that I will remember forever...” Another participant relayed feedback she received from a community recipient during her service learning experience. She shared that a man stated “I truly appreciate you all and what you are doing here.” The participant reflected on this by stating, “It was the best feeling to have him say that. I felt like I really did make a difference for one person, even if it was just for that one night.”

Participants shared throughout their narrative journals about the joy they felt and the intangible, affective gifts they received from offering their time and services to

various organizations and people. The themes across these reflections were that the experience was positive, uplifting, and meaningful.

### **Service Learning Encouraged Self-Reflection of the Future Focused Professional**

The fourth and final theme that emerged in the data was that through the service learning experience, participants began to self-reflect about their future role as a professional school counselor. One participant who volunteered at a child advocacy house stated that “In essence, this is what school counselors strive for, to be advocates for their students. And this activity taught me how I could do that beyond what is required of a school counselor in a school setting.” Similarly, another participant noted that her interest in advocacy became piqued as she shared that the service learning “stirred up a desire to be more involved in non-profit organizations and volunteer more with these groups.” A third participant echoed that following her service learning experience, she “...want[s] to work hard to help dispel any negative connotations that might confront [Muslim clients].” A different participant shared that after her experience, she had an awareness that “I hope to make a difference in the lives of those I teach and care for. Now I look forward to the next place to serve.” After volunteering at an after school program and observing a current school counselor, one participant reflected that “I look forward to working in a school setting and assisting the teachers to help the students become productive citizens. Being able to see the school counselor’s job duties has motivated me to work in the school setting. I notice that the counselor was the middle man that got the job done.” One participant reflected on the future clients she will serve and she shared that her service learning site “would possibly be very therapeutic for my future clients.” She furthered that she “hope[d] to utilize my training and experiences with the Red Cross to supplement my training and professional experiences in practicing the art of counseling.”

Participants continued to share their reflections as future professional counselors—through advocacy, client resources/referrals, and personal direction in the professional field—following their service learning experiences. It became apparent that participants were able to use their experiences from the service learning to consider the big picture, professional implications as developing counselors-in-training.

## **Discussion**

Service learning has been promoted in a variety of professions for several decades (Conway et al., 2009; Sheffield, 2005). However, lacking in the research are the specific impacts of service learning on school counselor development. As counselors-in-training are responsible for defining their personal and professional values, their evolving counseling theory, their beliefs about change, as well as other elements of the counseling process, it is imperative that counselors-in-training are afforded the opportunity to connect with real people in real life to unfold their answers to these fundamental questions. Even more specifically, school counselors-in-training are asked to serve as advocates, leaders, and agents of change for children, families, and the school in which they serve. Through the emerging themes in the data, it became clear that participants gained many benefits from their service learning experiences including (a) challenging

assumptions, (b) gaining resources and knowledge, (c) having a positive experience, and (d) considering future professional implications.

While professional values and standards drive the mission of ASCA and CACREP, position statements, training standards, and professional imperatives continue to be revised and adapted to meet the growing needs of the school counseling profession. In fact, in the newest version of the ASCA model (2012), the authors note that “some of the major changes from the previous edition include expanded sections about the four themes of leadership, advocacy, collaboration and systemic change” (p. xi). This adaptability of the profession is truly in response to the needs of an ever evolving student body, school system, and society at large. At the most basic level, participating in service learning opportunities aligns directly with the profession’s core value of the school counselor as a collaborator. At an equally consequential level, participating in said opportunities helps school counselors-in-training bridge classroom knowledge with community resources and community members who are equipped to assist in supporting K-12 student development. This experience could have meaningful implications on the developing professional—the developing leader, advocate, collaborator, and agent of systemic change needed in school counseling settings (ASCA, 2012).

Results from the current study also suggest that graduate school counselors-in-training were able to challenge assumptions and critically reflect on themselves as the future focused professional. Skovholt and Ronnestad (1992) noted that effective professional development is a lifelong learning mission and that continual reflection on the self as a developing professional is necessary to optimally grow in counseling skills. Through the data, it was revealed that service learning experiences invited students to challenge themselves in their worldview and to initiate an exploration of who the student desires to be professionally in the helping field. The reflective narratives relayed the graduate students’ processes of growing and developing both personally and professionally as a future school counselor.

The findings from the current study also spur a greater dialogue of the multifaceted approach to effective counselor training. While research exists highlighting the benefits of service learning experiences for counselor training (e.g., Baggerly, 2006; Burnett, Hamel, & Long, 2004; Jett & Delgado-Romero, 2009), to date, a paucity of research exists exploring these opportunities for school counselors. The design for the current study suggested implementing the service learning experience in the school counseling foundations course—a course offered during the first graduate semester. This model is echoed by Baggerly (2006) who implemented service learning in a diversity course, another core and often entry-level class for counselors-in-training. Other authors such as Jett & Delgado-Romero (2009) have supported the use of service learning in prepracticum courses. As continued research illuminates the effectiveness of service learning for counselor development, counselor educators may begin to advocate for these experiences to be threaded throughout their students’ entire graduate program of study.

As mentioned in the results section, one of the most unexpected yet repeatedly voiced experiences from the participants of the current study was that the service learning opportunity was a “positive experience.” As a counselor educator (EKD), I understand and value the importance of positive affective experiences in counselor training. Furr and Carroll (2003) researched critical incidents in graduate counselor development and identified belief, cognitive, affective, and behavioral clusters for activities that served as

impacting training moments. Responses from their participants overwhelmingly supported that “experiential learning activities had a greater emotional impact than did courses based on cognitive learning strategies” (p. 487). The authors further contend that both positive and negative affective experiences can serve as a critical incident in counselor development. Furr and Carroll’s (2003) study offers support for the impact that emotionally charged learning experiences can have on counselor development. As the participants in the current study relayed the positive emotions experienced through service learning, it could be posited then that such opportunities could serve as a catalyst for a deepened and more meaningful incident in counselor development.

While these findings support the use of service learning as a component of school counselor training, limitations do exist to the study and to the findings. First, the reflective writings were composed by 12 participants from one school counseling program at one university in the Midwest. Each of these demographic variables decreases the generalizability of results to a larger population. Secondly, as the reflective writings were a requirement for completion of the service learning assignment within the school counseling course, students may have written their reflections to indicate a more favorable experience, perhaps out of concern of the instructor’s impressions of reviewing the narrative outcomes. The chance of this occurrence was intentionally mediated by the instructor (Keller-Dupree) separating reflective writings from any identifying information by the participants and with the instructor not reviewing or coding the data until the semester was completed.

### **Conclusion**

Service learning was shown in the current study as an opportunity for school counselors-in-training to debunk their personal biases, to challenge their beliefs, and to work with people who were different from themselves. Furthermore, the experience offered tangible gains, including resources and networking connections, as well as intangible benefits, including positive experiences and directions for future-focused thinking. In the simplest form, these findings speak to the use and effectiveness of alternative learning opportunities outside the classroom; in a more valuable and worthwhile scope of understanding from this study, these findings reveal the meaningful impact for the developing person and professional school counselor. If service learning can create more accepting and open-minded views of working with people, more resources, and more direct visions for future professional contributions as a counselor, then the scope of impact for the counseling profession can be further reaching. Service learning may just be one means to enhance the personal and professional development of school counselors-in-training, and the dividend paid from that experience may contribute to the betterment of services offered for children, families, schools, and communities at large.

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