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Article 34

A Guide to Incorporating Service Learning into Counselor Education

Paper based on a program presented at the March 2010 ACES Conference, San Diego, CA.

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Service learning is a valuable instructional method that may be used to incorporate experiential learning in counselor education programs, and provides an appropriate venue for linking theory and practice while enhancing collaboration with the greater community (Burns, 1998). The Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (ACES) recommends counselor educators incorporate service learning into their programs by fostering collaborative partnerships between universities, schools, and community agencies (ACES, 1990). In addition to educational and community benefits, service learning can positively influence personal development in counselor education students through increasing social competence and self-esteem (Williams, 1990). Participants in service learning have the opportunity to enhance their self-awareness, engage and interact with peers and diverse members of the community, and develop a community-centered perspective (Burnett, Hamel, & Long, 2004). Service learning experiences also help students translate theory into practice (National Service Learning Clearinghouse, n.d.), develop effective communication skills (Wells & Grabert, 2004), promote social responsibility (Burnett, Long, & Horne, 2005), and foster compassion for others (National Service Learning Clearinghouse, n.d.).

Importance of Service Learning

Definition of Service Learning

Burnett and colleagues define service learning as “structured learning experiences that facilitate the acquisition of awareness, knowledge, and skills while promoting a commitment to personal, social, civic and professional responsibility” (2005, p. 158). Service learning provides opportunities for students to connect theory and practice, enhance skills, reinforce learning, and contribute to the larger community. Bringle and Hatcher (1999) emphasize components of addressing community-defined needs, reinforcing course content, and promoting student reflection in service learning. Service learning in counselor education is focused on service in and with the community coupled

with opportunities for guided reflection to reinforce the connection between service and learning (Roysircar, Gard, Hubbard, & Ortega, 2005). Kraft (1996) suggests that service learning is the most recent method of integrating educators and communities in active learning together.

Unlike community service or volunteerism, service learning is directly linked to the curriculum, emphasizes sustained engagement, and relies on student reflection as a way to reinforce learning (Furco, 1996). Clinical experiences are similar to service learning; however, clinical practice primarily focuses on needs of students as they develop their professional identity and roles (Furco, 1996). In service learning the emphasis is on addressing community-defined needs while integrating field experiences with course content for participating students.

Benefits of Service Learning in Counselor Education

Prepracticum service learning is an effective way to enhance student learning, connect theory and practice, and orient students to professional settings prior to clinical work (Burnett et al., 2004; Mattox & Hurt, 1992; Woodside, Carruth, Clapp, & Robertson, 2006). Service learning experiences offered prior to the practicum promote microskill development (Mattox & Hurt, 1992) and enhance cultural knowledge and awareness in counselor education students (Baggerly, 2006; Burnett et al., 2004). In addition, prepracticum service learning supports career development and decision-making in counselor education students by providing exposure to various settings and encouraging informed decision-making regarding areas of counselor specialization (Arman & Scherer, 2002).

Although counselor educators are encouraged to incorporate service learning into their programs, the counselor education literature offers little guidance regarding how to effectively design, implement, and evaluate effective service learning experiences (Baggerly, 2006). Our counselor education department has programs in school counseling and college student development and recently developed a prepracticum service learning experience. Recommendations regarding how to design effective service learning experiences in counselor education coursework are described in this “how-to” guide, which is illustrated with examples from our experiences.

Designing a Service Learning Experience

Determine Counselor Education Program Needs

Counselor educators interested in developing a service learning experience should first determine existing needs in their counselor education program and consider how service learning might address these concerns. In our program, annual surveys of alumni and their supervisors indicated a need for opportunities to promote increased cultural awareness and understanding in our graduates. The need to enhance cultural competence in counselor education students is well documented in the literature (Arredondo, 1998; Carlson, Brack, Laygo, Cohen, & Kirkscey, 1998; Whitfield, 1994; Yeh & Arora, 2003). Although our citizenship and educational institutions are becoming increasingly diverse, the majority of students enrolling in our counselor educational programs are White females (Arredondo, 1998). Enrollment in our program reflects this trend. Enhancing the multicultural counseling competence of future counselors is one way to better meet the

needs of an increasingly diverse citizenship. Counselor education programs need to provide experiences where pre-service counselors may work in meaningful ways with diverse clients to enhance their comfort levels and develop cultural competence with a variety of clients.

Service learning experiences may offer one avenue for prepracticum counselors to gain experience working with diverse populations, practice clinical skills, and gain valuable professional experience. Research suggests that White students generally report lower levels of cultural competence and less cultural awareness compared to students of color (Yeh & Arora, 2003). In addition, Whitfield (1994) and others remind us that a single class in multicultural counseling is not enough to ensure cultural competence in counseling. Several authors have found that increased contact and interaction with clients from diverse backgrounds results in enhanced cultural competence based on students self-reports. (Carlson et al., 1998) Recommendations include providing more opportunities for immersion in diverse settings and supporting increased interactions with diverse clients in clinical experiences (Abreu, Chung, & Atkinson, 2000; Carlson et al., 1998).

A second concern of our department was that the majority of our students had little or no professional experience in educational settings prior to the practicum and internship. Some students struggled to manage the clinical demands of the practicum classes while adjusting to professional roles in educational settings. Arman and Scherer (2002) share similar concerns, and promote prepracticum service learning experiences as one avenue to provide pre-service counselors with “the opportunity to gain valuable school-related experience” (p. 71). Finally, although school counselors in our state are licensed to provide services from pre-k through grade 12, we offered our students no pre-k opportunities in our practicum and internship settings.

Develop Broad Student Learning Outcomes

The next step is to develop broad student learning outcomes for the service learning experience (Rubin, 2001). For example, we expected prepracticum counselor education students to begin integration of counseling theory and practice, enhance microskill development, begin orientation to educational settings, gain experiences with children in pre-k settings, and increase their comfort levels and exposure to diverse clients. It is important to develop specific student outcomes, while being open to other potential benefits such as increased self-esteem and social competence of participants (Williams, 1990).

Determine Counselor Educator Research Focus

Opportunities for research should also be considered early in service learning development (Rubin, 2001). Counselor educators might choose to investigate the effectiveness of service learning as an instructional methodology and its impact on student learning, have the students gather data or test theory in the field, or combine both discipline-focused and pedagogical research. Community partners may make valuable contributions as research partners and may be involved with determining research questions, design, direction, and data collection.

Our research design used a mixed methodology to look at ways in which cultural competence might be impacted through service learning experiences with diverse populations and settings. Responses to guided reflection activities and journal prompts, service learning analysis papers, and focus groups provided qualitative data and were added to the syllabus at appropriate collection points. In addition, students completed a pre-and post assessment of their cultural knowledge and awareness to provide quantitative data at the beginning and end of the semester.

Reach Out to Potential Community Partner(s)

Once broad student outcomes and potential avenues for research are determined, it is time to consider prospective community partners (Rubin, 2001). Some campuses have office for community engagement, service learning, or volunteerism and can be valuable resources for identifying potential partners. Community mental health settings, schools, and other educational settings may be potential service learning partners, as may practicum and internship sites. Organizations such as the United Way or other state and local service providers may also assist in identifying potential service learning settings.

Establish communication with potential community partner(s).

Initial contacts with several potential community partners should be made well in advance of the start of the semester, with follow-up meetings at the potential service learning sites to collaborate regarding the proposed service learning project. Stoecker and Tryon (2009) found that a lack of communication was one of the most important concerns of community partners they surveyed. Recommendations included communication with partners early and frequently throughout the semester.

It is also important that community partner(s) have opportunities to clearly describe their needs during planning meetings. Service learning opportunities should be designed around meeting the partners' goals and objectives. In addition, initial planning meetings should include introductions of key staff; a tour of the site; and discussions of student learning outcomes and goals, site needs and expectations, and how these might be meshed to form an effective and productive collaboration (Rubin, 2001).

Define service learning and expectations.

During this initial meeting, it is important to clarify the difference between service learning and other types of field work such as volunteering or clinical experiences (Rubin, 2001). Many agencies are familiar with volunteers who do not expect their service to be directly linked to learning objectives. Other agencies frequently host practicum and internship students and understand their important role in supervising clinical students and orienting them to their professional roles. Service learning emphasizes meeting community-defined needs, providing clear connections with learning objectives, and opportunities for student reflection, and may not be a familiar concept to community partners.

Determine community partner needs.

It is important to involve the community partners as co-educators and to respect them as experts regarding agency needs, populations they serve, and effective ways to develop a service learning project. Allow time in preliminary meetings with potential community partners to explore and establish ways in which agency needs might intersect with the general student learning outcomes and objectives (Rubin, 2001). Collaborative planning and discussion are important as the university and community representatives

must agree on what the service learning opportunity should look like from both perspectives. All proposed agency needs will not line up with the broad student outcomes of the service learning experiences and such expectations should be uncovered early in the planning formation. During our initial planning sessions, several requests from community partners did not meet our general student outcomes goals and were initially declined. Although activities such as reviewing transcripts of seniors to determine eligibility for graduation, offering professional development for staff, and offering academic tutoring to children might be appropriate volunteer experiences, these activities did not support our broad student goals and outcomes.

Develop relationship and define responsibilities with community partner(s).

Establishing relationships and effective communication between faculty and community agencies are essential elements of successful service learning partnerships (Sandy & Holland, 2006; Stoecker & Tryon, 2009). Results from a survey of over 100 community partners indicated that regular and accessible communication; clearly defined goals, responsibilities, and roles; and understanding the perspectives of the community partners was essential to developing effective service learning opportunities. Forming personal connections; sharing in the goal setting, planning, and orientation; and providing continuity of university leadership were also important factors (Sandy & Holland, 2006).

Collaborate to establish mutual service learning goals.

Developing positive relationships is viewed as a vital component of successful service learning partnerships according to involved agencies (Stoecker & Tryon, 2009). Clearly defined guidelines, time commitments, and behavioral expectations are important components of establishing good working relationships. Sandy and Holland (2006) found that partners commit to educating college students, improving client outcomes, and enhancing community capacity as well as enriching their staff and organization. Community partners also support social justice efforts. One recommendation from the partners was increased involvement of faculty members in the partnership (Sandy & Holland, 2006).

Finalize Community Partner(s)

It is also important to determine how many community partners are needed and to clarify how many students each organization can accommodate effectively during the semester. Rubin (2001) recommends five or fewer community partners in order to facilitate coordination, communication, and monitoring of student progress. We decided to initially implement the service learning experience as one component of our second semester individual techniques of counseling course, and to require counselor education students to serve as mentors for an hour each week with one or more students in their choice of four educational settings.

In our case, several potential partnerships emerged including a child care center with a pre-school component located in a local public housing complex, a private elementary school serving only children from limited and lower income families, and two urban high school programs asking for support in helping their seniors make the transition to college. Working with first generation college students, college students on academic probation, and international students interested in improving their English speaking skills were opportunities developed for graduate students in our college student development and counseling track.

Establish Service Learning Policies and Procedures

A number of community partner and university procedures and guidelines need to be identified prior to the beginning of the semester (Rubin, 2001). For example, site locations, contact names, numbers and e-mail addresses; appropriate days and times for service learning opportunities; transportation, sign-in, and emergency procedures; and any special requirements such as completing a volunteer application, tuberculosis screening, or criminal background check need to be shared. University and site calendars should be coordinated to determine beginning and ending dates for the service learning experience and how many hours need to be completed weekly. Evaluation criteria need to be established including indicating who is responsible for assessing student efforts. Additional training needs should also be discussed. Community partners also need guidelines regarding expectations for supervision and evaluation of participating students, clear deadlines, and efficient and streamlined ways of handling paperwork (Stoecker & Tryon, 2009).

Most of these procedures and guidelines were shared by representatives from each community partner who came to the first class meeting to describe their program, clients, and needs related to the service learning experiences. Counselor education students asked questions, gathered additional information, and determined which setting best suited their interests, needs, and schedule. Each community partner also established several orientation session options during the first and second week of the university schedule for students to become familiar with the location, review procedures, submit required paperwork, and meet the staff. Another option is to hold class at the community partners' location (Stoecker & Tryon, 2009).

In addition, we decided to offer mentoring training through a local organization to all students so that they would have some initial understanding of their roles and responsibilities as mentors in educational settings. This was important because counselor education students would begin their service learning work as mentors early in the semester, despite not yet learning all of the individual theory, techniques, and microskills that would be presented in class during the semester. Mentoring training early in the class provided a framework for discussing the range of uses of individual counseling skills; allowed discussion on the differences between conversation, mentoring, and counseling; and established a common thread for class discussion and reflection. As the semester progressed, counselor education students had immediate opportunities to integrate theory and skill practice as they continued to work as mentors.

Design Course, Syllabus, and Related Documents

The Joint Educational Project (n.d.), a service learning center at the University of Southern California, recommends designing course documents and syllabi to reflect integration of the course content, student outcomes, research components, and community partner's needs. These factors need to be carefully linked throughout the course and syllabus so that service learning requirements are viewed as an essential component part of the course objectives and are not viewed as separate course requirements (Rubin, 2001). The Joint Educational Project (n.d.) also recommends that syllabi include course objectives related to service learning, service learning requirements, logistical information, assignments promoting reflection, and service

learning evaluation criteria. Our syllabus also included mentoring logs; a description of mentoring activities; and reflection, analysis, and evaluation prompts.

Develop Opportunities for Student Integration of Learning Through Reflection, Analysis, and Outcomes

Providing opportunities for student reflection and integration of service learning experiences with course content is a critical component of service learning, and one that distinguishes it from volunteering and other field work. Howard (2001) suggests that “careful thought must be given to learning activities that encourage the integration of experiential and academic learning” (p. 16). The instructor should make decisions regarding how students will process and integrate their service learning experiences with course content. Opportunities for integration may take the form of reflection activities, such as small or large group discussion topics, writing reflective journals after service learning experiences, or responding to specific prompts. Analysis and critical thinking activities may further integrate course content with service experiences. Bringle and Hatcher (1999) recommend class presentations, critical incident reports, ethical case analyses, and experiential research papers as additional ways to support student reflection and integration of service learning experiences with course content. Opportunities to synthesize material might occur through discussion boards or blogs, formal papers, or other writing assignments. Additional integration experiences might include creating products for the community partner.

In our program, we asked for students to reflect on their development of individual skills through their one-on-one mentoring services. Other prompts asked about their awareness and understanding of issues related to diversity and cultural competence, their enhanced understanding of future professional roles as counselors in educational settings, goals and critical incidents in their mentoring experiences, and how theory relates to practicing skills with children, adolescents, or college students.

Assess, Evaluate, Revise, and Repeat

Another key component of the service learning experience is assessing and evaluating the service learning experience and incorporating feedback in future courses. Rubin (2001) indicates assessment should be formative, ongoing, and yield improvements in the service learning experience each semester. In addition to course evaluations, some universities ask participating students to assess their service learning experiences with a separate evaluation that may be reviewed at the university or course level in order to make recommendations for improvement. Pre- and post-evaluations may be used to document changes in students’ knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors.

All participants should have the opportunity to evaluate the service learning experience. In addition to instructor evaluation of student efforts, engagement, and learning, students should evaluate the faculty member, course requirements, and service learning opportunities. Community partners should evaluate student participation, responsibility, services provided, and the service learning design. Students can evaluate and make recommendations about communication, supervision, and duties at partnership sites. Evaluations should be reviewed to modify site and program expectations and to improve the service learning experience for students and partners.

We used mid-semester and end of course feedback regarding service learning experiences to enhance the service learning component of the techniques course. Based on student feedback group listservs were developed to promote student-to-student communication as well as emergency notifications for such incidents as power outages, flu epidemics, and other unanticipated closings. One community partner formalized mentoring by assigning graduate students to a single high school mentee based on student feedback of having little opportunity to practice skills when participation varied from week to week. Additional feedback was incorporated to refine reflective journal prompts, adjust diversity training, and to orient mentees to the concept of mentoring.

Analysis of research outcomes is not the focus of this manuscript; however, community partners reported positive responses in mentee behaviors and engagement. Participating counselor education students reported benefits such as better preparation for practicum and for working with diverse clients, opportunities to practice individual counseling skills and incorporate theory in real settings, and increasing commitment to service and advocacy. Quantitative data analysis revealed that multicultural knowledge also significantly increased for participants.

Expect the Unexpected

Faculty who implement service learning experiences in their courses should also be prepared for unexpected results. For example, despite heavy course loads and other demands on students' time, a number of students involved in service learning extended their participation through additional semesters and summers to provide on-going support to children living in poverty. Another result has been a noticeable increase in requests for clinical placements in diverse schools and settings by both graduate students and our local school divisions. Area supervisors voiced appreciation for our visible efforts in better preparing counselors to work with diverse students and in pre-k settings through the service learning options.

Counselor education students report increased comfort with transition to practicum, especially regarding entry into the professional setting, and feel well prepared for individual counseling experiences. As a result, we have provided additional prepracticum opportunities for our students to develop and lead counseling groups or offer classroom guidance sessions to meet additional evolving needs of community partners, to enhance opportunities to link theory and practice, and to ease the transition to practicum and internship.

Providing early exposure to educational settings at different levels also allowed participating students to confirm or change their school counseling or college student development program track. After interacting with mentees at various educational levels through prepracticum service learning, several students changed focus with no loss of credit or need for additional requirements, as changes were made early in their program of study prior to program specialization.

Participating faculty members also shared fully in community partnerships and secured grant funding for mentoring supplies and materials, provided professional development for community partners, and consulted with partners regarding other site-based concerns. In addition, several alumni of our program have requested mentoring training and developed mentoring programs at their educational settings after participating in the service learning experiences.

Conclusion

“The implementation of service learning courses in counselor education programs requires considerable time, effort, and commitment on the part of the faculty and students (Burnett et al., 2005, p. 162). Benefits include enhanced and real-world learning opportunities for participating students, prepracticum exposure to professional settings and clients, opportunities to develop increased awareness, understanding and appreciation of diverse communities and populations, and opportunities to relate theory and practice. Burnett and colleagues (2005) emphasize the valuable educational opportunities as well as enhanced collaboration with the community service learning provides. Arman and Scherer (2002) concur, suggesting that the prepracticum service learning practice of both learning and applying theory simultaneously “helps create a more integrated learning experience for students” (p. 70).

Designing effective prepracticum service learning experiences requires that counselor educators take the time to integrate broad student outcomes in collaboration with needs of community partners. Recommended practices for conceptualizing, designing, implementing, and evaluating prepracticum service learning experiences for counselor education programs will result in more effective and successful service learning opportunities.

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