A Comparative Analysis of Academic-Based Service-Learning Programs: Students' and Recipients' Teachers' Perspectives

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Abstract

A pretest and posttest survey was used to measure differences in personal and interpersonal development for 622 students enrolled in educational psychology and criminal justice courses from the beginning to the end of the semester. Results indicate that service-learners have higher ratings of their social justice attitudes and problem-solving skills by the end of the term. Teachers' appraisals of service-learners also revealed that they thought students were dependable and competent.

Institutions of higher education have incorporated academic-based service-learning (ABSL) courses as a means to enhance both student development and civic engagement (Vernon and Foster 2002). In fact, the term "service-learning" is used to classify a wide array of activities ranging from volunteer and community projects to practicum and internship programs (Association for Experiential Education 2009; Furco 1996). Research pertaining to service-learning as a viable strategy for promoting university-community partnerships documents the impact on students' personal and interpersonal development, social responsibility, and community engagement (Ammon 2002; Eyler and Giles 1999). This research also documents the impacts from students on community recipients. For instance, Simons et al. (2008) found that most teachers were generally satisfied with student tutors and mentors because their individual attention assisted with instructional and classroom management, allowing them to work with children in small groups and utilize pedagogical techniques that would be inappropriate for large classrooms. Academic-based service-learning courses that provide learning opportunities for both undergraduate students and service recipients in disenfranchised communities serve as a strength-based approach for promoting successful university-community partnerships.

Few studies have compared the impact of academic service-learning programs across disciplines. Research suggests a difference between psychology and criminal justice majors. Hirschinger-Blank, Simons, and Kenyon (2006) hypothesize that criminal justice majors, as compared to psychology majors, may view their careers as serving the community in the immediate role of protector or guardian with less emphasis on long term social-justice holistic healing or rehabilitation of the served population.

The purposes of this paper are to determine if students' attitudes and skills change from the beginning to the end of a service-learning program and to describe service recipients' teachers' views of service-learners and the ABSL program. Specifically, this study sought to answer two research questions:

1. Are there differences in interpersonal and personal development (i.e., civic action, political awareness, problem-solving, leadership, social justice, diversity, and course value) between service-learners in educational psychology and criminal justice courses from the beginning to the end of the semester?
2. What are teachers' views of service-learners' performance, awareness, and skills? What are teachers' perceptions of the service-learning program?

Academic-Based Service-Learning Research

Investigations on academic-based service-learning (ABSL) have noted both improvements and maintaining of students' diversity and social justice attitudes that result from their service experiences with recipients who differ from them in race and class at placement sites located in culturally diverse communities. Eyler, Giles, and Braxton (1997) conducted a pre-post survey with 1500 students at twenty colleges and universities and discovered service-learning influences students' attitudes, values, and skills. Moely et al. (2002) also conducted a pre-post test study on civic action, problem-solving abilities, political awareness, leadership skills, social justice attitudes, and diversity attitudes of 217 service-learners and 324 nonservice-learners enrolled in a college of arts and sciences. These researchers found that students did not differ in scores at the beginning of the semester, but by the end of the semester, service-learners had higher civic action, social justice, leadership, and problem-solving scores than did nonservice-learners. In contrast, Boyle-Baise and Langford (2004) observed that students enrolled in a social justice seminar acquired limited information about their own privilege or oppression from the beginning to the end of service. Baldwin, Buchanan, and Rudisill (2007) similarly found that some students improve while others maintain their attitudes about the children they tutored. Failure to find ABSL effects on students' diversity and social justice attitudes reflects a program limitation (Moely et al. 2002). ABSL may not sufficiently encourage students to think about how race and class influence their interactions with recipients; therefore, service experiences reinforce the "power dynamic" between White students and service recipients (Moely et al. 2002, 24).

Scholars further suggest that the reciprocal partnership between undergraduate students and service recipients influences both students and recipients' attitudes and skills (Eyler and Giles 1999). The few studies that have been conducted on the impact of service-learners on community programs indicate that an overwhelming number of agencies have positive views of students (Miron and Moely 2006). Vernon and Ward (1999) surveyed sixty-five directors of community service agencies and found that 82 percent of respondents were generally satisfied with the students' work. Ferrari and Worrall (2000) similarly detected that community-based organization supervisors unanimously rated students as helpful and evaluated their work skills favorably. Miron and Moely (2006) interviewed forty site coordinators and found that interpersonal relationships influence their perceptions of the university. Their research indicates that coordinators who had an active role in planning and implementing the service program and those who detected positive interpersonal relationships between recipients and students positively appraise both the service-learning program and the university-community partnership. In addition, Schmidt and Robby (2002) examined the value of service-learning to the community by focusing on service recipients. They found that tutoring as a service-learning activity produces academic change in children. Vernon and Foster (2002) evaluated the impact of service-learning and discovered that service-learners enhance academic learning and confidence skills for at-risk youths. Elson, Johns, and Petrie (2007) also investigated the effect of mentoring on at-risk children and suggest that gains in early language, literacy, and social skills were greater for children paired with service-learners than for those who were not paired. Moreover, Muir and van der Linden (2009) found that elementary teachers were satisfied with and provided constructive feedback to undergraduate students who worked with them as part of the service component in an introductory psychology course. Undergraduate students also rated their service experiences with elementary teachers as an educational method that assisted their understanding of psychology and as an enjoyable and valuable learning experience that should be a regular part of the course. The American Psychological Association provides recommendations and guidelines for incorporating ABSL courses in an undergraduate psychology curriculum (Halonen et al. 2007). There is little research on how service-learners assist community-based organizations and evidence is lacking as well on how community placement it relates to the development of students' attitudes and skills. Academic-based service-learning courses provide opportunities for students to develop cultural competence and critical thinking skills; therefore, student development may be related to service experiences. Thus, the assessment of students and recipients' teachers in the service context is warranted.

The Present Study: The Service Context

The academic-based service-learning course objectives were to contribute to students' personal and interpersonal development (i.e., civic action, problem-solving, leadership, social justice, diversity, and political awareness). Students were required to tutor or mentor children who differed from them in race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status at either an elementary public school or a community-based program in a district that consistently ranks low on state performance indicators (Pennsylvania Department of Education [PDE] 2007). In fact, all public schools in the district qualify for Federal Title funding for basic academic programming, because standardized test scores reveal that in the third grade less than 40 percent of the children score at a proficient level in Mathematics and only 46 percent score at a proficient level in Reading (PDE 2007). The school district serves children from one of the most racially segregated and economically distressed cities in the United States (US Census Bureau 2000).

Method
Participants

College Students: College students from a private teaching university in a northern metropolitan area completed a survey concerning their attitudes and beliefs about service-learning in either the educational psychology or the criminal justice course. Data were gathered from 622 students at the beginning and at the end of the semester during the past six academic years (2002–2008). Academic-based service-learners in the educational psychology (n = 517) course did not differ from those in the criminal justice (n = 105) course in terms of age, race, and service activities, according to independent t and *Chi-square* tests used to measure possible differences between the two groups. Most students identified themselves as White (71 percent) and female (66 percent), as shown in Table 1. Students worked with children or adolescents at public elementary schools (72 percent) or community-based programs (28 percent) in the Chester-Upland School District.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Academic-Based Service-Learners

	Students	
	Educational Psychology (n= 517)	Criminal Justice (n= 105)
Variables	%	%
Age (M, SD)	19.72 (3.16)	20.21 (1.08)
Gender**		
Male	30	53
Female	70	47
Ethnicity		
White	84	85
African-American	11	9
Latino	1	1
Asian	3	---
Biracial	1	4
Did not wish to report ethnicity	---	1
GPA (M, SD)	3.05 (.51)	3.02 (.47)
Year in School		
Freshman	27	3
Sophomore	47	45
Junior	17	38
Senior	9	14
Service Placements		
Public School	80	49
Community Organization	20	51
Service Activity		
Tutor	41	27
Mentor	55	49
Tutor/Mentor	4	24
Continued to volunteer at the placement after meeting the required hours	50	53
Kept in contact with placement after meeting the required hours***	46	67
Future service-learning***	72	55

Note. Asterisk indicates χ^2 was statistically significant. *$p<.05$, **$p<.01$, ***$p<.001$.

Community Recipients' Teachers: Teachers completed a posttest survey about their views of the academic-based service-learning program for psychology courses only. Most teachers identified themselves as either White (54 percent) or Black (45 percent) and female (86 percent). Thirty-two percent of them reported that they had taught at another school in the district prior to their current place of employment. Teachers' average length of time teaching in the district was 17 years and their average length of time teaching in their current position was 11 years.

Measures

A demographic questionnaire developed by the researchers was used to gather information on gender, race, age, GPA, area of study, and year in school.

The Civic Attitudes and Skills Questionnaire (CASQ), developed by Moely et al. (2002), was used to assess civic attitudes and skills. The CASQ, an 84-item self-report questionnaire, yields scores on six scales: (1) Civic Action (respondents evaluate their intentions to become involved in the future in some community service); (2) Interpersonal and Problem-Solving Skills (respondents evaluate their ability to listen, work cooperatively, communicate, make friends, take the role of the other, think logically and analytically, and solve problems); (3) Political Awareness (respondents evaluate their awareness of local and national events and political issues); (4) Leadership Skills (respondents evaluate their ability to lead); (5) Social Justice Attitudes (respondents rate their agreement with items expressing attitudes concerning the causes of poverty and misfortune and how social problems can be solved); and (6) Diversity Attitudes (respondents describe their attitudes toward diversity and their interest in relating to culturally different people. Internal consistencies for each scale reported by Moely et al. (2002) ranged from .69 to .88, and test-retest reliabilities for each scale ranged from .56 to .81.

The Service-Learning Performance Checklist, developed by Payne (2000), was used to measure teachers' views of service-learners. This 25-item self-report questionnaire assesses teacher satisfaction with students' performance on a specific task. Alpha coefficient for 25 items is high (α = .81). Teachers and supervisors completed this checklist on academic-based service-learners in the educational psychology course during three academic terms (2002–2003, 2003–2004, and 2004–2005).

The Three Aspects of Engagement Scale, developed by Gallini and Moely (2003), was used to assess students' views of their engagement. This 27-item self-report questionnaire yields scores on three scales: (1) Community engagement (respondents evaluate the extent to which their attitudes changed as a result of course participation, working with people of different backgrounds, and feeling connected to the community); (2) Academic engagement (respondents describe their satisfaction with the academic course and university, and their connectedness to their studies and field of interest); and (3) Interpersonal engagement (respondents evaluate the course's influence on their ability to effectively work with others, communicate with other students, and make friends). Items are added together to produce three subscale scores.

Cronbach's coefficient alpha for each scale ranged from .85 to .98. Individual items were analyzed for this study, and teachers and supervisors completed this survey on academic-based service-learners in the educational psychology course during three academic terms (2005–2006, 2006–2007, and 2007–2008).

Course Content

The educational psychology course and the criminal justice course are three-credit courses. The educational psychology course prepares students to work with children at a public school or a community-based program, while the criminal justice course prepares students to work with justice-involved populations. For both courses, most students worked at the public schools. The remaining students in the educational psychology course worked at an after-school program and the remaining students in the criminal justice course worked with youth detained at a county juvenile detention center and youths detained at probation. For both courses, in-class time began with a lecture on service-learning. The next two classes consisted of a two-hour orientation on mentoring and tutoring by guest speakers representing placement sites. The rest of the course was devoted to lecture, activities, and discussion. Students were required to complete three examinations, a cultural competence paper, and a journal assignment. The cultural competence paper and journal requirements in the educational psychology course were identical to those in the criminal justice course.

Procedure

A pretest and posttest survey was used to evaluate differences in interpersonal and personal development for academic-based service-learners enrolled in educational psychology and criminal justice courses from the beginning to the end of the semester. All of the respondents completed an informed consent form, a demographic information sheet, and the Civic Action Skills Questionnaire (CASQ). Students completed the demographic information sheet and the CASQ, placed it in a coded, confidential envelope, and gave it directly to the researchers. Surveys took about 30 minutes to complete. Students were required to complete the CASQ again postservice (i.e., after completing 15 hours of service). Teachers also completed a posttest survey that measured their overall level of satisfaction with this service project and evaluated each student's performance. The surveys were administered anonymously to teachers or supervisors at the site; they completed it at their own pace and returned it in a coded envelope to the researcher. Teachers who worked with students from 2002 to 2005 completed the Service-learning Performance Checklist, while those teachers who worked with students from 2005 to 2007 completed the Three Aspects of Engagement Scale. The Three Aspects of Engagement Scale was used instead of the Service-learning Performance Checklist because questions inquired about teachers' perceptions of students' interpersonal skills and university-community partnerships, an element central to the university's mission. Each survey took approximately 20 minutes to complete. The teacher evaluation rate of service-learners in the educational psychology course was 93 percent (i.e., 480 students were evaluated by their teacher or supervisor).

Results

Differences in Interpersonal and Personal Development

A repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) with planned orthogonal contrasts was conducted to evaluate attitude change from the beginning to the end of the semester for students enrolled in either the educational psychology or the criminal justice course. The pretest and posttest scores for the CASQ served as the dependent variable and the course served as the independent variable. As indicated in Table 2, students increased their problem-solving skills and social justice attitude scores over time, regardless of course enrollment.

Table 2. Pre- and Posttest Mean Scores, Standard Deviations, and F Ratios for CASQ Scores as a Function of Educational Psychology and Criminal Justice Course Enrollment

| Measure | Time Points | | | | F ratios | | |
| | Pretest | | Posttest | | | | Time x |
	M	SD	M	SD	Time	Course	Course
CASQ							
Civic Action	29.54	3.87	29.85	4.54	.00	3.08	4.73
Criminal Justice	30.54	3.96	30.07	4.54			
Psychology	29.30	3.81	29.80	4.54			
Problem-Solving[1]	36.14	3.80	39.67	4.48	226.39***	21.36	.65
Criminal Justice	37.82	3.29	41.05	3.69			
Psychology	35.75	3.80	39.34	4.59			
Political Awareness	17.99	2.99	17.84	3.01	.00	3.72	3.26
Criminal Justice	18.26	3.27	18.51	3.09			
Psychology	19.93	2.92	17.67	2.98			
Leadership Skills	10.52	1.91	10.58	1.91	.13	3.35	2.71
Criminal Justice	10.93	1.97	10.75	1.99			
Psychology	10.52	1.89	10.53	1.90			
Diversity Attitudes	19.53	2.06	19.47	2.13	.83	1.02	.39
Criminal Justice	19.76	1.96	19.58	2.37			
Psychology	19.47	2.08	19.44	2.07			
Social Justice Attitudes[1]	26.17	2.66	26.55	3.29	5.58*	2.96	.22
Criminal Justice	26.49	2.50	27.00	2.55			
Psychology	26.09	2.69	26.43	3.44			

Note. [1]Differential change as a function of time, at ***$p<.000$, *$p<.05$. ANOVA F ratios are Wilk's approximation for Group X time interactions.

Teachers' Views of Service-Learners and of the Service-Learning Program
Teachers were generally satisfied with service-learners' work at the placement. Their evaluations of service-learners enrolled in the educational psychology course from 2002 to 2005 (n = 260) revealed that they thought students were responsible (98 percent), dependable (97 percent), and competent (97 percent), as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Community Recipients' Teachers' Views of Service-Learners Enrolled in the Educational Psychology Course during the 2002–2005 Academic Years

Items	Extremely Satisfied	Somewhat Satisfied	Satisfied	Somewhat Dissatisfied	Extremely Dissatisfied
Attendance	68	31	1	0	0
Reports to site on time	69	29	2	0	0
Responsible	75	24	1	0	0
Enthusiastic and interested	73	24	3	0	0
Appropriate appearance and dress	63	35	2	0	0
Courteous and cooperative	79	21	0	0	0
Emotional maturity	77	23	0	0	0
Exercises good judgment when working with the children	72	28	0	0	0
Sincere	76	23	1	0	0
Relates well to the children and staff	70	27	3	0	0
Shows initiative	63	32	10	0	0
Assumes responsibility for his own learning	68	28	4	0	0
Asks appropriate questions	64	33	3	0	0
Begins work on time	65	32	3	0	0
Appreciates suggestions	67	32	1	0	0
Completes assigned tasks	66	32	2	0	0
Exhibits competence	76	24	0	0	0
Progressively requires less supervision	75	23	2	0	0
Dependable	72	27	1	0	0
Follows directions carefully	72	27	1	0	0
Interactions are appropriate with children and staff	69	28	3	0	0
Develops a good rapport with children and staff	68	29	3	0	0
Level of empathy	65	32	3	0	0
Level of concern or compassion	65	32	3	0	0
Level of commitment	68	30	2	0	0

Teachers and supervisors made similar evaluations of service-learners enrolled in the educational psychology course from 2005 to 2008 (n = 220). In fact, 94 percent of teachers were satisfied with service activities and 95 percent of them were satisfied with students' work. Their evaluations revealed that they thought students were prepared (97 percent) and competent (96 percent) to work with recipients of a different race, social class, and culture, as shown in Table 4. Teachers made favorable evaluations of the university-community partnership, as also shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Community Recipients Teachers' Views of Service-Learners Enrolled in the Educational Psychology Course during the 2005–2008 Academic Years

Items	5 Excellent or Extremely Satisfied	4 Very Good or Somewhat Satisfied	3 Good or Satisfied	2 Fair or Somewhat Dissatisfied	1 Poor or Extremely Dissatisfied
Student activities	78	16	5	0	1
Student work	81	15	4	0	0
Organization and preparedness	85	12	3	1	0
Class needs related to student's responsibilities	72	21	7	0	0
Student effective in helping you meet your classroom/program goals	79	17	4	0	0
Benefits of having a student in your class	63	29	8	0	0
Student interactions with your children or agency's clients	80	19	1	0	0
Student understanding of school/program's mission	70	27	3	0	0
Student interest in learning about the context of the community	64	23	12	1	0
Student's assumptions changed over the course of the semester	60	26	11	0	3
WU is sensitive to the needs of the Chester community	54	25	13	4	4
WU is dedicated to a real involvement in the community	54	23	13	6	4
Perception of university-community relationship	48	28	13	7	4
Student enjoyed working with people of a different race, social class, or culture	81	16	3	0	0

Student valued working with people of a different race, social class, or culture

76	20	3	0	1

Student was sensitive to the needs facing this particular community

59	30	11	0	0

Discussion

The current study contributes to new information about the connection between academic-based service-learning and community resiliency. In fact, this is one of the first studies to demonstrate with an extremely large sample of community recipients that academic-based service-learning influences teachers' perceptions of the university-community partnership. The incorporation of a sizeable sample of undergraduate students also allows us to generalize our findings about the value of academic-based service-learning beyond a single course.

The first objective of this study was to measure differences in interpersonal and personal development between students enrolled in an educational psychology course and those students in a criminal justice course from the beginning to the end of the term. Students had higher ratings of their communication and problem-solving skills and their comprehension and understanding of social disparities in the community by the end of the semester, regardless of whether they were enrolled in an educational psychology or criminal justice course. The absence of difference may be attributed to unequal sample size. It is also plausible that the criminal justice participants represented a select group characterized by an interest in helping professions rather than the more supervisory roles of police or correctional officers. Moely, McFarland, Miron, Mercer, and Ilustre (2002) found that service-learners increase their problem-solving skills and social justice attitude scores from the beginning to the end of the semester. Increases in social justice attitude and problem-solving skills scores indicate a deeper understanding of the power distributions in public institutions that contribute to inequities in our societies. Most students worked as tutors or mentors with ethnically and economically diverse children with substandard academic performances in a public school system. Service-learning gave students an opportunity to observe how children are affected by social and economic disparities, thus increasing their critical thinking skills about educational disparities and social injustices in a public institution.

A second objective was to describe teachers' perceptions of academic-based service-learners and of the program. Tutoring and mentoring as service activities by students were seen as having positive effects on the community, consistent with previous studies that found tutoring promotes academic change (Schmidt and Robby 2002) and social skills (Vernon and Foster 2002) in children. Teachers were generally satisfied with tutors and mentors, and their evaluations of them suggest that they thought academic-based service-learners were effective in helping students. Most teachers made positive appraisals of academic-based service-learners' preparedness, dedication, and competence to establish a rapport and work with service recipients who differed from them in race, social class, and culture. The service-learning program assisted

teachers in meeting their class or program goals, which in turn influenced their favorable views of the university-community partnership. Service recipients teachers had favorable ratings of the university as being sensitive and dedicated to the needs of the disenfranchised community.

While the study adds to the academic-based service-learning research, the results should be viewed in light of a few key limitations. First, the Widener student population is demographically homogenous. Student participants were predominantly white, came from middle-class backgrounds, and usually were the first generation to attend a four-year college. Second, students worked in public schools and community organizations in urban areas where the majority of children were African-American or Hispanic and came from lower-income backgrounds. Third, data were collected with pretest and posttest surveys, and there are likely social desirability or self-report biases associated with the results. Finally, the lack of randomization methods precludes us from inferring causality between the service context and student development, as well as student impact on service recipients. Future research should replicate this study with randomization methods to draw conclusions that are more definitive.

Despite the mentioned limitations, there are a few important contributions made by this study that have direct implications for ABSL practitioners and researchers. First, students acquire a deeper understanding of social inequities in the community and learn to solve social problems from the beginning to the end of an ABSL course. It is therefore necessary for faculty to match the course content to the service activities so students can comprehend and apply the course content to the service context. Faculty will need to forge partnerships with agencies to ensure that service is not simply an extra activity but an integral part of the course. For instance, teachers/supervisors should be involved in the planning and implementation of service activities, and these activities should foster interpersonal relationships between students and recipients by allowing them to work together toward a common goal. This will require faculty to spend a great deal of time establishing partnerships with community agencies prior to incorporating an ABSL component into a course. Second, reflection is a necessary component for fostering students' attitudes and skills. Faculty will need to develop structured reflection activities that occur in and out of class so that students can become aware of their attitudes about service recipients at the community placement. Structured reflection activities should also challenge students' attitudes so that they experience cognitive dissonance to modify their preconceptions. It may be further important for students to reflect on their thoughts and feelings throughout the course so they can identify how their attitudes changed over time. Third, service recipients in public schools and community-based organizations influence students' attitudes and skills. Students should work with recipients who differ from them in race, social class, and culture so they can critically think about how social disparities disproportionately affect culturally diverse individuals. For example, students enrolled in the educational psychology course were required to read about privilege and oppression, tutor or mentor children from disadvantaged backgrounds, and connect their service experiences to the course content. These requirements forced students to evaluate their

thoughts and feelings about service recipients, as well as making them think critically about educational disparities and social inequities in an urban public school; thus contributing to increases in both their social justice awareness and problem-solving skills. Fourth, the relationships between service-learners and service recipients influences teachers' views of students, the program, and the university-community partnership. Teachers made positive appraisals of students' attitudes and skills, and they rated their performance as a method that helped the children and assisted with the class or program goals. It appears as if teachers formed positive perceptions of the university because of the students' dedication and competence in their work with them. Teachers planned activities for the students and relied on them to assist them. The assistance from students serves as a way to not only form university-community partnerships, but also to foster resiliency in a disenfranchised community. Therefore, it is critical for faculty to allow community partners to have autonomy in planning service activities that meet their own institution's mission, goals, and needs. Finally, the large sample of students and teachers provides an opportunity to generalize about the influence from ABSL on the development of students' social justice awareness and problem-solving skills, and the impact of students on teachers' views of them, their work, and the university in the community context.

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