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Service Learning in Counselor Education Programs: Combating Truancy

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Introduction

Service learning is a very important initiative in today's higher education arena (Baggerly, 2006; Burnett, Long, & Horne, 2005; Goodman & West-Olatunji, 2007; Kaye, 2004; Murray, Lampinen, & Kelley-Soderholm, 2006). Service learning is not volunteerism, community service, or community-based learning (Burnett et al., 2005; Kaye, 2004). Service learning, according to the Institute for Global Education and Service Learning (2008), is "made up of activities that connect serving the community with the learning already being done in a school, program or organization. Service learning provides a hands-on application of knowledge and skills to real life community needs." Service learning combines service objectives with learning objectives with the intent that the activities change both the recipient and the service provider. This is accomplished by combining service tasks with structured opportunities that link the task to self-reflection, self-discovery, and the acquisition and comprehension of values, skills, and knowledge content. Service learning is unique in that it benefits the students,

university, and community (Burnett, Hamel, & Long, 2004; Burnett et al., 2005). Students involved in a service learning curriculum have opportunities to develop collaborative and empowering relationships with the community (Goodman & West-Olatunji, 2007; Kaye, 2004). Students reap the benefits of their involvement in service learning in areas such as curriculum enrichment, professional skill development, and personal growth (Burnett et al., 2005; Murray et al., 2006). Universities benefit from service learning because of the community outreach, improvement of college curriculum, the response to community and employer needs, and because it supports the college philosophy and mission. Lastly, communities benefit from service learning through improved service-delivery and by developing future citizenship support.

Service learning provides valuable learning experiences for students in counseling programs via engaged activities (Goodman & West-Olatunji, 2007) while increasing essential multicultural competence (Burnett et al., 2004) and aiding in the development of clinical skills (Arman & Scherer, 2002; Murray et al., 2006). Counseling trainees' service learning typically occurs during practicum and internship classes (Baggerly, 2006; Burnett et al., 2005). These field experiences are frequently more aptly defined as community-based learning and students would benefit from service learning throughout the curriculum (Burnett et al., 2004). In addition to increasing candidates' readiness for clinical interaction with clients (Burnett et al., 2005), utilizing these and other experiential methods enhances the learning process and offers practical application of classroom knowledge (Murray et al., 2006). Baggerly (2006) distinguishes between service learning assignments and similar tasks. Counseling students providing a guidance curriculum at a school servicing low-income students and reflecting on the experience could be called service learning, while simply interviewing students from such a school would not since such an assignment does not clearly benefit the students being interviewed. Both experiences could augment multicultural competence and other learning objectives, but the second lacks the reciprocity present in service learning (Kaye, 2004).

There are many ways service learning can be integrated into counseling programs. Service learning can be included in specific courses or may be implemented via supplemental activities throughout the curriculum (Burnett et al., 2005). Effective service learning requires preparation by involved counselor educators. Objectives and assignments for the course must be tied to service learning goals, and assessment should be ongoing. The counselor educator, as a facilitator of the learning experience, should provide opportunities for student reflection (Murray et al., 2006), connect theory and practice, and apply knowledge gained from the experiences. Counselor educators can maintain awareness of the growing field of service learning through the numerous continuing education opportunities currently available or by reviewing relevant literature. Finally, counselor educators must also maintain connections with service-learning coordinators at their respective institutions in order to maximize resources and utilization of service learning.

The process of implementing a service learning component or activity involves four separate and distinct stages: (1) Preparation, (2) Action, (3) Reflection, and (4) Demonstration. These stages will be further discussed through the lens of an extensive service learning project, *Combating Truancy*.

Preparation

The preparation stage lays the foundation for the stages that follow and includes steps such as identifying a real community and identifying potential partnerships. “Investigation, discussion, and analysis lead to plans for action” (Kaye, 2004, p. 10). Several key “events” occurred in this phase for the Combating Truancy project. First, the grant stipulated that the proposed project must in some way assist in hurricane recovery. For this reason, the project director, along with students, identified the New Orleans Recovery School District (RSD) as a potential partner. The issue of truancy was identified by the Counseling Coordinator of the RSD as one of the biggest problems with the schools, thus, the focus of the project

became apparent. The next step was to examine ways the project could be incorporated into existing coursework, meeting both the needs of the District and the educational requirements of the counseling curriculum and instructors. In keeping with the roles and duties of a professional school counselor, the following assignments were proposed in order to provide a prevention and remediation component for the District: (1) parent workshops, (2) parent brochures, (3) guidance curriculum units, and (4) small group plans. Also, the rotation of the curriculum was examined to identify the courses in which the project could be incorporated.

The project was designed to follow the rotation of the counseling curriculum and involve students throughout the program. It was integrated into four courses: (1) School Counseling, (2) Multicultural Counseling, (3) Group Counseling in Schools, and (4) School Counseling Practicum.

With the need, the project, and coursework identified, it then became necessary to begin to prepare students to work on the identified learning products. For example, students researched the impact of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita on the educational system. In researching the current state of affairs, students read several articles and visited web sites related to recovery efforts in the various parishes in Louisiana. Additionally, students were encouraged to post research articles and web sites that they had found. Students then responded to several discussion board questions such as, “*What was the impact of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita on the educational system?*” Using this information and other information researched over the next three weeks, students then moved into the action phase.

Action

Students worked in groups to create the learning products for each of the identified courses.

Parent Information Brochure. Students enrolled in the Multicultural Counseling Course on-line participated in the service-learning project. Each group created an educational brochure for the

RSD that could either be distributed to parents or to members of the community. The brochure was to be a unique product that addressed the issue of truancy in the RSD. Each group chose its target population: (1) parents or (2) community members. If a group chose to target parents, they then chose a grade level on which to focus (i.e., elementary, middle, or high school). Three to five references/resources were cited in the brochures. If they selected community members, the students were then responsible for identifying agencies and/or specific groups of people who may benefit from the brochure.

Parent Workshop. Students enrolled in the beginning School Counseling on-line course created parent workshops that school counselors in the RSD could present to parents in their district. The students worked in groups of four and communicated with one another about the project via BlackBoard, e-mail, telephone, and fax.

The Parent Workshop the students designed were 30 minute presentations that school counselors could give to parents of a specific grade level (i.e., elementary, middle, or high school). The Workshop included: (1) an Introduction, (2) the Plan, and (3) Counselor “Talking Tips.”

The Introduction consisted of the following elements: (1) an introduction stating what the workshop was about, (2) background information establishing the importance of the workshop, (3) a statement of purpose describing how the workshop was to be used, (4) the overall goals of the workshop, and (5) a comprehensive listing of materials needed for the workshop. The Plan was the actual workshop, organized through a PowerPoint presentation for parents. The workshop included learning objectives, an introduction to the workshop, activities that actively involved parents, and a conclusion detailing how the school counselor could assess parent learning and suggested ways to follow up with parents. The Counselor “Talking Tips” was a script that corresponded to each of the PowerPoint slides.

A total of seven workshops were created by students in the course (i.e., three elementary, two middle school, and two high school).

Truancy Curriculum Unit. Students enrolled in the beginning School Counseling on-line course also created truancy curriculum units that school counselors in the RSD could present in large-group classroom guidance lessons. The students worked in groups of three to five and again communicated with one another about the project via BlackBoard, e-mail, telephone, and fax.

Each curriculum unit included the following components: (1) an introduction stating what the unit was about, (2) background information establishing the importance of the unit, (3) a statement of purpose describing how the unit was to be used, (4) the overall goals of the unit, (5) a comprehensive listing of materials needed for the entire unit, and (6) a listing of additional references and resources. Each unit consisted of three to five guidance lessons on truancy that built on one another.

Each of the guidance lessons within the unit were required to state the American School Counseling Association (ASCA) standard(s) and competencies and contained learning objectives for the cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains. Each lesson consisted of an introduction, developmental activities that actively involved classroom students and targeted multiple intelligences, a conclusion that required students to think about how the lesson applied to life outside of the classroom, and formal and informal assessments. Students were responsible for creating all materials that were mentioned in their lesson plans (e.g., samples of work, questionnaires, assessments and answers, etc.).

A total of seven curriculum units were created by students in the course (i.e., three elementary, two middle school, and two high school).

Small Group Plans. Two sets of five session integrated small group counseling plans were developed by students. One set was designed to be used with upper elementary students and the other set was designed for use with junior or senior high school students. Specific goals for each group session were given in the group plan, as well as all the activities that would take place in the group in that session. The sessions developed for the elementary students covered topics such as: reasons for truant behavior; consequences for missing

school; getting ready for school in the morning; prioritizing reasons why “T” miss school; and overcoming the biggest personal obstacle to school attendance. The junior/senior high school group plans focused their sessions on: self-esteem; peer pressure (as a reason to miss school); relate attendance in school to graduation and occupations students are interested in; how truancy affects academic success – start visualizing their personal goals; and the role of family support in school attendance.

Reflection

After the learning products were created in each of the courses, students were asked to complete learning reflections. Reflection is an important component in the service learning process, because it “integrates learning and experience with personal growth and awareness” (Kaye, 2004, p. 11).

Students’ learning reflections varied greatly. Although all reflections focused on what was learned in the process, several reflected how students were beginning to make connections to the real world and the profession. One student stated:

On a personal note, the project was meaningful to me as a counselor. Although my school does not have a truancy problem as does New Orleans, it still has students and parents that don’t feel school should be a top priority. Teachers of truant students spend countless hours trying to catch the student up to where the others are in class. Often the student becomes so far behind that it is impossible to complete all the assignments missed.

Another student found that not only did she learn information that was helpful in her day-to-day life, she was beginning to see some development in the remediation of the problem:

Working on the truancy project was eye opening. Not so much in the fact of how prevalent truancy has become, nor in how earning a high school diploma or GED impacts future earning potential. These things I have seen first hand. I was surprised at how many different factors contribute to truancy. For example, poor school climate, negative peer influences, child abuse and neglect, lack of family support for educational goals, poor academic performance, lack of self-esteem, and teen pregnancy are just a few.

Several themes were apparent in the students' reflections on their work: connection to future work, purpose, and empowerment. One theme in the reflections was the connection the projects had to the students' future work as professional school counselors. One of the students wrote that *having the opportunity to create these products allows me to feel comfortable, so when I do produce such products as a school counselor I will be competent in this area*. The project reflected a part of the real demands and expectations of what school counselors are expected to do, and the students appreciated the chance to have this learning experience. One of the students stated, *This was an exceptional learning tool and an experience towards becoming a well-equipped professional school counselor*.

Most students spoke of feeling purposeful and empowered in the products they created. In the words of a student, *the projects were more purposeful knowing that they were to be created for other school counselors in the New Orleans Recovery School District to use*. Students felt rewarded and empowered in their work. *Creating products that will actually be used by school counselors made me feel empowered and effective*. The students found and made meaning of the work they did. *Overall, I found myself not only learning about creating the lesson unit, but realizing that the purpose of the assignment is to make a difference in the life of a child*.

So, in participating in this service learning project, students were able to learn invaluable information not only about what was

going on in New Orleans but also how to begin to address the issues they will face as future counselors.

Demonstration

Demonstration is the final stage of the service learning process and shows what the students have accomplished through their work. Kaye (2004) recommends that students show their expertise through public presentations (e.g., displays, performances, presentations) that demonstrate each of the previous stages (i.e., preparation, action, and reflection). In this particular project a group of students presented their learning products and met with the Counseling Coordinator of the Recovery District. The following are some excerpts from two of the reflections.

As I was putting the materials together, I began to understand the amount of work that has gone into the service learning project. It wasn't until the group actually met with the Counseling Coordinator, however, that I really "got it." The work that students had done was truly going to make a difference. Everything that was done was so much more than a grade, it was material that would be passed on to counselors—counselors who are already struggling with truancy in their schools and who don't have the time to create the things that the students did.

The Coordinator's gratitude and the look on her face as she flipped through the binder was the best "grade" anyone could ever get. I believe that this project is what service learning is all about—providing a service to a community in your own backyard and not only learning about the subject matter but learning what it feels like to know that you and your school community have potentially impacted lives.

The student reflections revealed that the gratitude of the Counseling Coordinator made a strong impact on them. Every one of the reflections mentioned this aspect and reflected on how her gratitude made them even more grateful that they had been a part of the project.

Conclusion

Service learning continues to grow in popularity and is an active and rewarding form of learning. Service learning has many positive effects and benefits for students, universities, and the communities they serve.

School counselors must be prepared to effectively deal with the difficult and unending problems they will face in today's schools. It is for these reasons that this model of service learning which integrates real community needs with coursework has been presented. This project focused on the issue of truancy. However the model is easily adaptable to other school issues, such as violence, test anxiety, and organizational skills. Despite its popularity and usage, much about service learning remains unknown. It is hoped this project can add to the growing body of knowledge and ideas about this movement within education, especially within counselor education programs.

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