

## **Integrating Service-Learning in an Undergraduate Family and Consumer Sciences Adolescent Development Course**

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*Service-learning is an instructional method in which students learn course content by actively participating in thoughtfully organized service experiences related to the content. Effectively linking service-learning to course content not only maximizes students' academic learning, but also promotes their personal growth and instills a commitment to lifelong, civic engagement. Service-learning was integrated into a Family and Consumer Sciences Adolescent Development course. In addition to completing the traditional course work, students completed a service-learning experience at a community agency that served adolescents. When surveyed at the end of the semester, all students agreed they had learned more about course concepts as a result of their service-learning, and most felt their service-learning activity provided a needed service to the community.*

Educators have increasingly embraced opportunities to prepare college students for future leadership roles by integrating service-learning into their courses (Ash, 2003; Batchelder & Root, 1994; Boss, 1995; MacDonald, 1994; Smith, 2002; Truesdell, 2001). Service-learning is an instructional method in which students learn course content by actively participating in thoughtfully organized service experiences related to that content. Research has shown that service-learning helps students retain more of the concepts learned in class and that students have greater satisfaction with the course (Eyler, 2002; Hamner, 2002; Payne, 2000). In addition, service-learning helps students develop more community awareness, changes students' stereotypical beliefs, and increases their understanding of diversity (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Hamner, 2002; Jones & Abes, 2004).

Service-learning is distinguished from other approaches to experiential education by its intent to benefit both the provider and recipient of the service, giving equal focus to the service being provided, and the learning that is occurring (Furco, 1996). The service must be linked to course learning objectives; it is not simply volunteering. Experiences that enable students to think, write, and/or discuss what they are doing during the service activity are integrated into the course. Effectively linking service-learning to course content not only offers students a powerful opportunity to maximize academic learning, but also promotes their personal growth and instills a commitment to lifelong, civic engagement.

Service-learning does, of course, involve challenges. Depending on the course and its content, educators may need to invest considerable time in locating appropriate service-learning sites and preparing effective service activities. The reflective experiences, which are necessary in helping students create connections between course content and their service-learning, require time and may mean a reduction in the amount of class time available for content coverage. Also, educators may occasionally need to assume the role of mediator between students and their service-learning sites if miscommunication occurs.

A public university in the southeast integrated service-learning into an upper level undergraduate course, Adolescent Development, to enable students to connect research and

theory with active practice. The purpose of this study was to evaluate the service-learning component of the course.

### **Methodology**

In the original Adolescent Development course, students examined the basic changes, contexts, and developmental tasks of adolescence through textbook readings, lectures, discussions, videos, and guest speakers. The course outline indicating the content is provided below:

- Basic changes of adolescence
  - Biological transitions
  - Cognitive transitions
  - Social transitions
- Contexts of adolescence
  - Families
  - Peer groups
  - Schools
- Psychosocial development during adolescence
  - Identity
  - Autonomy
  - Intimacy
  - Sexuality
  - Achievement
- Psychosocial problems in adolescence
  - Substance abuse
  - Externalizing problems
  - Internalizing problems

In the revised Adolescent Development course, students continued to address course concepts through readings in the textbook, lectures, discussions, guest speakers, and videos. In addition, students chose a service-learning experience that would enable them to observe and apply course concepts through association with adolescents. Students worked with adolescents two hours per week for nine weeks of the semester by serving at community agencies that assisted adolescents. These agencies were: Watauga Youth Network, a big brother/sister program for adjudicated youth; Watauga Youth Network Resource Center, an after-school program for adjudicated youth; GEAR UP, an after-school program for high school students planning to attend college; Upward Bound, a program assisting first-generation beginning college students from low-income families; Mountain Alliance, an outdoor experiential program for at-risk youth; Watauga County after-school programs; and Cherokee Park Youth Center, a residential treatment program for adjudicated adolescents.

Depending on the site, students engaged in a variety of experiences with their adolescents including tutoring, sports activities, arts and crafts, hiking, canoeing, caving, and just “hanging out.” Although students were often engaged in group activities, they selected one adolescent to focus their observations and reflections upon and generally had ample one-on-one time with the adolescent.

Throughout the semester, students engaged in class activities that enabled them to reflect upon their service-learning and connect it to course content. For example, as the concept of

physical development was addressed, students not only read about and discussed it, but they also assessed the physical development of the adolescent upon whom they were focusing. In the study of adolescent peer groups, students not only identified the typical cliques and crowds in schools today, but also analyzed their adolescent's social standing in his or her school. In addition to the class activities, students prepared a report in which they applied the concepts they were learning in class to their particular adolescent. They used the theories and research to explain their adolescent's development and behavior.

### **Findings and Discussion**

At the end of the semester, all 24 students completed a survey that evaluated the service-learning component of the course. Thirteen students were seniors, nine were juniors, and two were freshmen. They represented the following majors: child development, family and consumer sciences education, sociology, and psychology.

The findings revealed that a majority of students felt that the academic projects associated with their service-learning helped them to more effectively learn and retain the course material. On a 4-point scale, with 4 being "strongly agree," the average response was 3.5. Their level of satisfaction seemed particularly significant considering the additional time commitment for the typical student outside of class associated with the service-learning. Other findings included the following: 84% of the students agreed that they had been adequately prepared for their service-learning experience. Ninety-six percent agreed that the service-learning made the course more interesting and applicable to "real world" issues. Eighty percent agreed that their time was effectively used while serving at their agency. Eighty-eight percent agreed that the class had helped them to become more aware of social issues that existed in the community. Eighty-eight percent felt their service-learning activity provided a needed service to the agency and community. All agreed they had learned more about the concepts presented in the course as a result of their service-learning experience.

Almost all students agreed that service-learning made the course more interesting and applicable to the "real world." One student noted, "It is different to see things rather than just read about them in a textbook. It was interesting to get to see how the adolescent I was observing exemplified the concepts we were learning in class." Others noted the value of gaining experiences related to their futures: "I am a prospective teacher, and the service-learning put me in that role;" and "Observing at-risk adolescents helped me to see who I will be working with in the future."

With the inclusion of the service-learning, students seemed more satisfied with the course, noting many times how they were actually experiencing what they were learning as shown by the following statements. "Situations were presented in real life instead of just out of the book." "I got to apply the discussion in class to the actions of the adolescents, and that made the information meaningful." "The adolescents taught me many different things that the book couldn't." "I saw better for myself what we were talking about in class."

Several students noted the personal growth they experienced through the service-learning as shown in the following. "I felt like I made a difference to the girls with whom I worked." "I got to take a look at what it was like to be a teenager again. Adolescents are just trying to find out who they are, and a lot of people forget about that." "I found that I could learn as much from the adolescents as they could from me!"

The service-learning helped many students to become more aware of social issues that existed in the community. One commented, "I never realized there were so many adolescents

who came from bad homes. My service-learning experience showed me that there are kids out there who need help and I can make a difference by being involved.” Another stated, “More kids drink and do drugs than I thought.”

This service-learning experience seemed to give many students their first meaningful experience with diversity and helped them to question some previous assumptions and stereotypes they had held.

- “The service-learning experience caused me to look at adolescents differently than I had before and also to understand better that a person’s lifestyle does not always dictate the person that they are inside.”
- “I believe that it made me more empathic to other people’s situations.”
- “I became more accepting towards others and realized that they aren’t much different from me, other than they might not have been given the opportunities I have.”

Upon completion of their service-learning experience, many students felt an increased sense of responsibility toward their community. One student reported, “I feel a greater responsibility to work with young people in my home town.” Another added, “I definitely feel that I can help make a difference in the lives of these kids, and I need to give of my time.” Some students even planned to continue their service-learning beyond the course requirements: “I have been a role model for these kids, and I feel a special bond and responsibility toward them. So I will continue to work with them.”

In a final open-ended question, students were asked to share the most important thing they had learned during their service-learning experience. Responses including the following:

- “How adolescents think and work”
- “That I love getting to know all kinds and ages of people”
- “That I do enjoy service”
- “How blessed I am to have the family situation and opportunities that I do”
- “You can’t learn everything from a textbook; it can’t prepare you for the real experiences”
- “That all adolescents have their own unique personalities”
- “That not everyone had a good life like me”
- “Positive interactions can greatly influence adolescents in the right direction”
- “Adolescents are unique and interesting individuals who deserve respect and a chance to express who they are”

No formal evaluations were completed by service-learning site supervisors; however, several commented on the success and helpfulness of the project. One site supervisor shared, “The service-learning enabled our agency to better carry out its mission of helping young people.”

### **Conclusions and Implications**

In this Adolescent Development class, the service-learning enabled students to not only apply course concepts in the real world and bring the lessons learned back to the classroom, thus enriching the learning environment for all. Therefore, the service-learning component will continue to be a part of this class. Efforts will be made to secure additional sites to provide further diversity for future service-learning experiences. Further reflection of activities will also be developed to provide even more opportunities for students to connect the course concepts

with their service-learning. Data will continue to be collected in order to assess the effectiveness of the service-learning experience and any changes that are implemented.

Other family and consumer sciences programs could also utilize service-learning to enable students to better understand course concepts, as well as broaden the student's perspectives. There are numerous opportunities in all communities to "give back" by allowing students to apply what they are learning in class. For example, students in foods and nutrition classes could provide menu-planning and even food preparation services for agencies, such as women's or homeless shelters. Child development projects might be geared toward providing quality child care at these same sites for parents who are actively looking for work. Apparel and textiles students might assist by creating an "interview" wardrobe that residents might access during their job search. An interior design service-learning experience might involve the remodeling or redecorating of one of the rooms at the homeless shelter. Family and consumer sciences education students might offer basic instruction on a variety of helpful topics, such as parenting and child development, consumer education, appropriate interview dress, or basic meal planning. Such service-learning experiences would require students to "humanize" the information they were learning in class, and in the end, benefit not only the community, but themselves.

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