Evaluation of Community Partner – Student Relationships in the Service-Learning Context

Cassandra Cable, Indiana University
Rachel Ryder, Indiana University
Eric Knee, Adelphi University
Hope Zeller, Indiana University

Teaching/Learning - Teaching Pedagogy (Physical Activity)          virtual asynchronous
Poster
Abstract 2020-295

Service-learning programs are course-based experiential learning opportunities that aim to address an identified community need (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996). Research within service-learning has focused predominantly on student outcome, showing that service-learning courses contribute to positive impacts for students (ex. Bruening et al., 2010; Bruening et al., 2015; Conway, Amel, & Gerwin, 2009; Kendrick, 1996). Despite the positive benefits to students, there is a lack of understanding of the strategies that lead to these outcomes and a dearth of research regarding the community partner contribution to the service-learning experience (Walsh, 2006).

The management of service-learning programs is essential to a more holistic understanding of outcomes. One manner in which this can be addressed is through an examination of the relationships between service-learning constituents: students, organizations, faculty, administrators, and residents (Bringle, Clayton, and Price, 2009). The SOFAR Model highlights the dyadic relationship between these stakeholders and allows scholars to explore the relationship between the various dyads. For this study, the relationship between the student and community partner was explored using the following research guide:

(a) Identify ways in which community partners and students build relationships
(b) Identify the relationship-related activities that students and community partners engage in during a service-learning experience
(c) Determine how community partners structure their engagement with students to better understand how relationships are built and maintained

The study was conducted with a service-learning course that takes place at a community-based physical activity program. Twelve students and one community partner participated in semi-structured interviews. The interview guide was based on the E-T-T Model outlined by Bringle, Clayton, and Price (2009) which explores the closeness, equity, and integrity of the student and community partner relationship. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and two coders familiar with the study analyzed the data.

Preliminary results indicate the quality of the relationship between the community partner and student was limited for most students. In terms of closeness, students indicated they did not frequently interact with the community partner in a meaningful way. In terms of equity and integrity, students noted the abilities they contributed to the service site and community members and the benefits they received from their service. Overall, equity appeared to be dependent on the individual student and the willingness and desire to provide more than the minimum service to the assigned client. Students did not attach learning or career decision making to the community partner and instead discussed internal influences, the influence of the instructors, or the influence of the client.

This study addresses research with community partners that is relatively unexplored in the service-learning literature (Geller, Zuckerman, & Seidel, 2016). This study moves past the individualized exploration of stakeholder benefits and explores the underlying frameworks that influence the outcomes of various service-learning stakeholders. By examining the manner in which the community partner and student engage, or fail to engage, those involved in service-learning can design and implement ways to manage and build relationships between key stakeholders in the service-learning partnership.