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Students' job satisfaction in a therapeutic recreation service learning project



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ABSTRACT

Service learning in higher education links college campuses with the community using unique engagement opportunities. The purpose of this case study was to: (a) measure student job satisfaction in the hands on portion of a service learning course that links course work with a week-long outdoor therapeutic recreation camp and (b) determine whether the satisfaction in the work experience at the camp influences future involvement in similar activities. The study employed Spector's Job Satisfaction Scale and found that students were satisfied with the work experience and the nature of the work was a predictor of future service learning involvement.

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1. Introduction

Service learning in higher education links college campuses with community agencies using unique engagement opportunities. Engagement in higher education has been defined as "redesigned teaching, research, and extension and service functions that are sympathetically and productively involved with the communities universities serve" (Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities, 1999, p. 27). Engagement, such as this, enhances many facets of the student's college experience such as their personal and interpersonal development (Peterson, 1998; Wang, 2000), cultural and racial competence (Boyle-Baise & Kilbane, 2000), and social responsibility and citizenship (Nnakewe, 1999) to name a few. However, there is a need to determine if the students themselves value such experiences, specifically questioning whether they are satisfied with the work experience part of the service learning course. While the community benefits are integral in the service learning relationship, this study highlights the learner/provider side of the service learning continuum.

Emphasis is placed on outreach and engagement with a push towards creating and maintaining academic courses that involve service learning at the University of Tennessee. This motivation to connect curriculum and student engagement is reinforced at the college and departmental levels across campus. Specifically, at the college level this emphasis is mirrored in its vision statement as the college strives "to achieve extraordinary results in the areas of learning, research, outreach, diversity, and enrichment of quality of life" (Vision Statement, n.d., para.1). The importance of engaging in service and outreach activities is further illustrated in the colleges' mission and values. Several programs within the college offer students opportunities to engage in service learning. One notable effort is the Therapeutic Recreation emphasis that is part

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of the Recreation and Sport Management program. The Therapeutic Recreation emphasis area has been offering courses infused with service learning for more than 25 years and can serve as a model of service learning for other programs.

The purpose of this case study was to examine student work satisfaction in the hands on portion of a service learning course and whether the satisfaction with this specific work experience influences potential future involvement in similar activities such as other therapeutic camping opportunities or service learning programs that work with people with disabilities. It is important to understand students' satisfaction in this area as research indicates that satisfaction with one's work experience lends itself to increased commitment, productivity, creativity, and indicates areas of the service learning course that need improvement (Grant, Fried, & Juillerat, 2010; Kerber & Campbell, 1987; Syptak, Marsland, & Ulmer, 1999). Since universities have an increased interest in outreach and engagement and the benefits that students derive from the participation in service learning programs are numerous, ensuring that students are satisfied in their work experience is critical as it may influence their engagement in the future. The following research questions guided the study:

- Were students satisfied with the work experience of serving as a camp counselor/staff?
- Did students intend to continue in similar activities based on their satisfaction with the work done at camp?

2. Literature review

2.1. Service learning

Service learning is not a novel approach to teaching and learning as many educators have been connecting community needs with classroom learning throughout the Twentieth century.

Service learning has been defined as

a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and development. Reflection and reciprocity are key concepts of service-learning (Jacoby, 1996, p. 5).

Other definitions of service learning include service learning as “a method of teaching that enriches learning by engaging student in meaningful service to their university or communities through careful integration with established curricula” (Chesney, Samuel, & Fuller, 2009, p. 68). Service learning has been viewed as a form of experiential learning; however, there are key differences: (1) service learning places increased importance on learning that is reciprocal and reflective in nature; (2) service learning emphasizes engagement that can affect genuine and long-term social change; and (3) service learning benefits both parties and is not driven by the focus on individual and technical skill development as one would see as part of an internship (Seifer & Connors, 2007). Although there are numerous variations on how to define service learning, most scholars can agree that it should include:

active participation, thoughtfully organized experiences, focus on community needs and school/community coordination, academic curriculum integration, structured time for reflection, opportunities for application of skills and knowledge, extended learning opportunities, and a sense of caring for others (Bhaerman, Cordell, & Gomez, 1998, p. 4).

Issues surrounding how service learning is defined occur when attempting to differentiate between other forms of experiential education such as in volunteering, community service, internships, field studies, and peer tutoring (Billig, 2000). Furco (1996) developed a model that defines the differences between the types of service programs. In this model, internships and field education fall on the side of the continuum where the intended beneficiary is the student and the emphasis of the service provided is on students' learning. At the other end of the continuum is volunteerism and community service. On this side the recipient of the service provided is the primary beneficiary and the emphasis is placed on the provided service itself. The middle of this continuum is where service learning is located. The intention of such programs is to equally benefit both the provider of the service and the recipient while focusing equally on both the service provided and the learning of the student. Further disagreements surrounding the definition of service learning manifest from scholars' beliefs of whether service learning is more of a philosophy of education (education reform), a tool that guides curricula (form of reciprocal teaching and learning linked to curriculum and standards), or a way to design an educational program (short term service activity with connections to the community) (Billig).

2.2. The value of service learning

Students, universities, colleges, and the community benefit from service learning. For the student, service learning has been noted as a transformative learning experience that elicits benefits such as a lifelong commitment to community engagement, enhanced learning, stronger appreciation for citizenship, and improved social capital (Forbes, Wasburn, Crispo, & Vandever, 2008; Seifer & Connors, 2007). Furthermore, scholarship in the area of service learning highlights positive impacts for students such as personal development (e.g., identity, moral development, and spirituality) (Astin, Sax, & Avalos, 1999; Eyler & Giles, 1999;

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