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Research paper

## Increasing positive attitudes toward individuals with disabilities through community service learning

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### ABSTRACT

Providing equal-status contact between those with and without disabilities can improve attitudes and reduce discrimination toward individuals with disabilities. This study investigated community service learning as a means by which to provide college students with equal-status contact with individuals with disabilities and increase their positive attitudes toward those with disabilities. A total of 166 college students in one university in the United States enrolled in an Introduction to Disability course received content on disability in society and participated in community service involving 20 h of direct contact with individuals with disabilities.

Findings indicated that college students who had prior contact with individuals with disabilities had more positive attitudes toward individuals with disabilities than college students who did not have prior contact at the start of the course. For the college students who did not have any prior contact, their attitudes toward individuals with disabilities became significantly more positive at the end of the community service learning course. Implications and suggestions for future research are discussed.

### What this paper adds?

Prejudice, discrimination, and negative attitudes toward individuals with disabilities can prevent those with disabilities from access to services, full community integration, and the opportunity to achieve personal and professional goals. Allport's (1954) contact hypothesis suggests that contact between in-group and out-group members can reduce prejudice and discrimination, though studies on improving attitudes toward those with disabilities through contact have produced mixed results. This paper examines the impact of community service learning, which is an initiative at many institutions of higher education to connect learning with a commitment to civic engagement, social justice, and advocacy, on college students' attitudes toward individuals with disabilities. Students who enroll in an Introduction to Disability course with an embedded community service learning component have the opportunity to receive content related to disability and experience contact with individuals with disabilities that meets Allport's optimal conditions. Results from this study can inform those in a variety of fields who prepare future professionals to interact and engage with individuals with disabilities in a positive manner.

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## 1. Introduction

Historically, individuals with disabilities and their families have advocated for inclusive and accommodating practices that allow all individuals to participate meaningfully within their communities, but negative attitudes toward those with disabilities serve as a major barrier to community integration, inclusion, and access (e.g., Hammel et al., 2008; Hergenrath & Rhodes, 2007). Research indicates that societal attitudes can negatively impact persons with disabilities' full participation in civic life (World Health Organization, 2007), and a lack of understanding regarding disability can lead to stereotypes, prejudice, and other forms of discrimination (Werner, Corrigan, Ditchman, & Sokol, 2012). These discrimination mechanisms may prevent persons with disabilities from accomplishing life goals, such as access to higher education, desired career paths, and employment and community services (Wehmeyer & Bolding, 1999). Thus, improving attitudes and reducing discrimination toward persons with disabilities is necessary to promoting their full community participation and goal attainment.

### 1.1. The contact hypothesis

The contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954), also known as Intergroup Contact Theory, posits that interpersonal contact with others—in a cooperative and equal-status framework—is one way to reduce discrimination and improve interactions between majority and minority group members. The premise of the theory is that when group members have the opportunity to communicate with each other, they develop an appreciation and understanding for alternate points of view and ways of life. This understanding and appreciation displaces what may previously have been stereotyping and prejudice. A robust body of research has established that intergroup contact typically reduces prejudice (see Pettigrew and Tropp (2006), for a meta-analysis).

The contact hypothesis has been tested as a framework for improving attitudes of those without disabilities (i.e., majority group) toward individuals with disabilities (i.e., minority group), but results have been mixed. Yaker (1988) found that only half of 318 studies involving contact demonstrated modified attitudes toward persons with disabilities. In a systematic review of the association between children's contact with persons with disabilities and attitudes, MacMillan, Tarrant, Abraham, and Morris (2013) found that of 35 studies, 22 reported a statistically significant association between contact and increased positive attitudes toward persons with disabilities, two studies reported a negative association, and 11 studies reported no association. Results may be mixed in part because the extent of contact, the context under which contact occurs, and the types of disabilities studied vary widely in the literature. For example, some studies have focused on school-level contact, such as inclusive classrooms, but the whole amount of contact individual students experience may not be adequately captured (MacMillan et al., 2013). According to Pettigrew and Tropp (2006), studies that have tested intergroup contact theory are highly diverse in terms of methods, participants, situations, and targets, which may all serve as potential moderators for the relationship between contact and prejudice.

It is suggested that, for an increase in positive attitudes and reduction in prejudice, the contact should occur under certain conditions: equal status of in-group and out-group members; cooperation in the pursuit of common goals; and the support of authorities, custom, or law (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). While Allport's conditions are not essential for contact to increase positive attitudes, studies that included carefully structured contact situations that met Allport's optimal conditions achieved higher effect sizes than those that did not (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). It is also suggested that information be combined with contact to produce an experience in which knowledge is built upon through meaningful interactions with group members. Krahé and Altwasser (2006), for example, found that engaging in a series of collaborative sports activities with athletes with disabilities in addition to receiving information about individuals with disabilities reduced secondary school students' negative attitudes toward individuals with physical disabilities. There is still a great deal of work to be done on the best methods for educating the general population about disability causes, effects, and common misconceptions (Scior, 2011), but contact appears to have some influence on improving attitudes, and the integration of meaningful contact with information under the right conditions may lead to the greatest gains.

### 1.2. Community service learning

An existing framework that would allow for contact between groups in a cooperative and equal-status framework, and integrate that contact with content, is community service learning. Service learning is a central component of many higher education institutions' efforts to connect learning in a particular discipline with a commitment to civic engagement (Felten & Clayton, 2011). It is defined as "a course-based, credit-bearing education experience in which students (a) participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and (b) reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of personal values and civic responsibility" (Bringle, Hatcher, & McIntosh, 2006, p. 12). Service learning can include short-term modules, semester- or year-long activities, as well as multiyear projects (Felten & Clayton, 2011). The hallmark of service learning is that it involves reciprocal relationships and provides conditions under which transformative learning can occur (Felten & Clayton, 2011).

The benefits of service learning are well documented in the literature. Service learning has been shown to impact feelings of civic responsibility (Brandes & Randall, 2011), promote racial understanding (Vogelgesang & Astin, 2000), contribute to a greater understanding of poverty (Seider, Gillmor, & Rabinowicz, 2011), and lead to unique positive effects over and above the effect of volunteer service not attached to a course (Astin et al., 2006). The positive outcomes associated with community service learning are attributed to the meaningful integration of knowledge acquisition with engagement in the community and the requirement that students critically and thoughtfully reflect on their experiences (e.g., Eyer, 2002).

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