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Abstract

This paper explores how service-learning projects provide university students experiential learning opportunities to participate in innovative activities. While educating and fostering development through mentoring and teamwork, university students enhanced critical thinking and interpersonal skills, gained background knowledge of the elementary school, implemented the project, reflected on their experiences, and evaluated the project. The project encouraged elementary students to achieve their goals by instilling the expectation of furthering a higher education after secondary school. In addition to providing a service to the children, university students identified through their reflections the connection between their service and what they have acquired academically.

T-shirts For College Bound Students: A School-University Service-Learning Project

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Author Biographies:

Kathryn Wallert, formerly an instructor in the Department of Psychology at Fort Hays State University, is currently a personal counselor in the Kelly Center, which offers support services at FHSU.

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Authors' Note:

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Abstract

This paper explores how service-learning projects provide university students experiential learning opportunities to participate in innovative activities. While educating and fostering development through mentoring and teamwork, university students enhanced critical thinking and interpersonal skills, gained background knowledge of the elementary school, implemented the project, reflected on their experiences, and evaluated the project. The project encouraged elementary students to achieve their goals by instilling the expectation of furthering a higher education after secondary school. In addition to providing a service to the children, university students identified through their reflections the connection between their service and what they have acquired academically.

Key words: school-university partnership, service-learning project, reflecting, Fort Hays State University, Mary Todd Elementary School

Introduction

Professional Development Schools (PDS) were formed across the nation between pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade schools and colleges and universities, which allows the possibility of different service-learning projects. The purpose of the PDS partnership is to provide a forum for learning about the profession, foster a spirit of collaboration, support efforts to enhance pre K-12 student achievement, and to promote Kansas as a leader in the PDS movement (Walizer, 2004). Strait and Sauer (2004) note that these interactions are known as experiential learning experiences, which are academically related work opportunities that bridge the gap between classroom and job learning. Activities in experiential learning can include cooperative learning, internships, student teaching, and service-learning projects. Several benefits of experiential learning include the ability to complete work at one's own pace in his or her own environment. It also has some challenges, which include student interaction, collaboration, and effectiveness of learning without being on campus.

Literature Review

Professional Development School alliances provide school district and university faculty members the opportunity to meet the needs of all students. PDS partnerships encourage the support of Pre-K-12 student learning by engaging family and community members in the learning process. Community can be defined as a local neighborhood or any location around the world. These partnerships maintain that adults and children learn best when they develop and implement experiential learning experiences, demonstrating what they were able to accomplish (Walizer, 2004). Therefore, it is important for university students to engage in experiential learning experiences they enjoy in order for them to retain what they have learned.

Service-learning projects, one type of experiential learning experience, are possible through on campus or online learning at Fort Hays State University (FHSU) and these projects have been carried out by exposing university students to communities and PDSs. Online learning is defined as the ability to learn from an institution via discussion forums, virtual chats, networking, etcetera, without being physically present and can be conducted anywhere there is Internet access (Strait & Sauer, 2004).

Fort Hays State University (2002) defines service-learning projects as a "method of teaching and learning that integrates community service activities into academic curricula and expands the learning of students from the classroom to the community." The mission is to promote civic engagement, which directly aligns with the goal of the Kansas Board of Regents to improve community/civic engagement. Each fall, a campus and community service fair showcases those partnerships and promotes the benefits of service-learning projects and innovative teaching.

The service-learning projects provide university students with the opportunity to participate in activities that can benefit a community, school, or an individual while educating and fostering student development through mentoring and teamwork. Therefore, university students enhance their critical thinking and interpersonal skills as well as provide a service to the community, school, or individual, reflect on the service provided, build team-working skills, and understand the connection between the service and what they have acquired academically (Strait, 2008).

According to Duffy (2002), there are four key components of a service-learning project. Those key components include preparation, action, reflection, and assessment. When preparing for a service-learning project, students need to have the background knowledge of the community in which they will be interacting. The action component is the actual service performed outside of class time. Students then reflect on their attitudes and experiences through written or oral communications, which may include journals, portfolios, group discussions, or class discussions. Assessment is continuous as students evaluate their projects and determine whether or not they have met their goal.

Before the project begins it is essential to the planning that a timeline, rubric describing the many levels of reflection, and budget plan are developed. The timeline will help instructors see the chain of events, which need to take place. Strait (2008) suggests starting a project with one class in the beginning and iron out the details before starting other coursework. Proper training includes; defining service-learning projects, recognizing participants involved, identifying the project, implementing the project, and determining why the project is important. Strait suggests finding ways for community partners to contact the instructor or person in charge of the project. The budget for a project is another important aspect, which takes extensive planning (Strait & Jones, 2009). The budget proposal for any project should be very detailed and specific. Finally, Strait (2008) suggests allowing students time for reflection so they may process what was learned and apply it to situations yet to come. It is important for instructors to plan ample amounts of time and allow for flexibility while working on the project.

There are challenges, but the benefits are very rewarding and projects are possible through on and off campus learning in online environments. The interactions during a project bridge the gap between classroom and job learning. Service-learning projects integrate community service activities into academic curricula, expanding the learning of students from the classroom to the community and promoting the benefits of service-learning projects and innovative teaching.

Method

Participants

In fall 2012, Kathryn Wallert, instructor of Psychology 225, Introduction to Therapeutic Skills, heard about a service-learning project through a national radio station. The radio show host and hostess told listeners about an elementary school in another state asking for gentle or used college or university T-shirts for their elementary school's College Bound Bulldogs program. Every Wednesday, faculty and staff at Mary Todd Elementary School wear college or university gear to educate their students about higher education programs and encourage them to pursue choices after high school. The teachers at the school were asking for T-shirts from post-secondary institutions in children's sizes S – XL so their students could also wear university apparel on Wednesdays.

The T-shirts for college bound students service-learning project involved 30 FHSU students enrolled in Introduction to Therapeutic Skills and the course instructor. The project also included 546 students and 70 faculty and staff members at Mary Todd Elementary School. FHSU students raised enough funds to purchase and send Fort Hays State University T-shirts for all students, faculty, and staff members. In return, Mary Todd Elementary School sent their school T-shirts to all university participants. Ed Hammond, former President of FHSU, participated by creating a video about higher education specifically for the students at Mary Todd Elementary School. Additionally, the former FHSU Provost, Larry Gould, sent a message to all participants stating that the service-learning project is a way for our university to incorporate service projects into the classroom that not only benefit the party we are helping, but the students as well.

Procedure

The semester course, Introduction to Therapeutic Skills, began with the instructor inviting the university students to develop a list of Common Threads of Successful People (Table 1). Many characteristics from this list were developed when students implemented the service-learning project. Additionally, FHSU students looked at the Big Brothers Big Sisters model and determined that they would adopt the mission of being empathetic, not sympathetic, by giving others a hand up, not a hand out.

The project served two purposes, one for university students and another for the elementary students. The course instructor hoped to raise the awareness of university students on issues that they, as psychologists, will come across in the profession. Reaching out to others, distinguishing between what is or is not being communicated, and acquiring therapeutic skills when dealing with individuals are services they will use in the profession. Mary Todd Elementary School students will be encouraged to go into

higher education through this program. The ability to take control of their personal lives will be instilled in elementary students. By taking control of their personal lives, the elementary students should come to the realization that continuing their education after secondary school and working hard will have rewards. In addition, elementary students will discover there are people willing to help them through difficulties that they will encounter in life.

After determining the purpose of the T's for college bound service-learning project, FHSU students worked on building trust between themselves, the instructor, and Mary Todd Elementary School faculty and students. One portion of the project included connecting the university students with the elementary students. The communication amongst the two groups continued throughout the semester through mentoring and positive feedback. Additionally, the service-learning project opened the door for professional networking by staying connected with Mary Todd Elementary School.

In order to inspire team-building skills, the university students took a business approach when working on the project. Committees were formed and one of the university students enrolled in the course surfaced to become the project leader. Other students in the course joined one or more of the committees such as the T-shirt design, advertisement, fund raising, and financial. As the university students worked through the project, the project leader oversaw all of the groups and brought back information to the course instructor.

The design committee decided on a slogan as well as a basic design plan for the T-shirts. After some major editing, the class reached a consensus for the T-shirt slogan and design (Figure 1). The T-shirts featured the slogan "helping children achieve goals using resources to motivate higher education." Each word has one letter highlighted to spell out "encourage." The university mascot, Victor E. Tiger, is promoted on the front of the T-shirt with the "encourage" slogan on the back. The university mascot is on one sleeve and Mary Todd Elementary School on the other sleeve.

The advertisement group developed posters displaying the service-learning project, slogan, and design. These posters were distributed throughout the university and community, encouraging people to purchase T-shirts or make donations to this particular project. In addition, university students on the fund raising committee established booths on campus to encourage sales and/or donations and contacted multiple businesses within the community to make contributions to the project. The financial committee collected the funds needed to purchase the T-shirts, determined the number of purchased and donated shirts needed, ordered, and delivered the T-shirts.

Throughout the semester, students were instructed to journal on a daily basis over their participation in the service-learning project. At the end of the semester students submitted a cumulative reflection paper over their attitude and experience gained throughout the project. Some suggested points to be considered when reflecting included; reaching out and working with others, setting up a business, communicating with all parties involved, and determining what he/she learned about him/herself throughout the process. Most importantly students were to reflect over the connection made with the university and elementary school through the project.

Results

Summary

Overall, qualitative responses to the service-learning project were positive from university and elementary students (Tables 2 and 3). Other university and elementary students' responses are similar to those seen in the two tables. Fort Hays State University students' reflections showed that their T's for college bound service-learning project made an impact not only on themselves but also on the faculty, staff, and students at Mary Todd Elementary School. The university students were excited to see the results of their project when they received T-shirts from Mary Todd Elementary School in return along with thank you cards from each student and a school picture of all students, faculty, and staff members wearing the Fort Hays State University T-shirts (Figure 2). Furthermore, Lane (2013), website editor for Fayette County Public Schools, wrote about the service-learning project and include pictures of the elementary students and staff wearing the T-shirts, which can be viewed on the Mary Todd Elementary School website at <http://www.fcps.net/news/features/2012-13/kansas-shirts>.

Closure

In closing, this service-learning project provided Fort Hays State University students with experiential learning opportunities to participate in an activity that benefitted Mary Todd Elementary School students. While educating and fostering development through mentoring and teamwork, university students were able to enhance critical thinking and interpersonal skills. The service-learning project allowed them to gain background knowledge of the community and school, implement the project, reflect on their attitudes and experiences, and evaluate their project. In addition to providing a service to elementary students at Mary Todd Elementary School, FHSU students were able to identify through their reflections the connection between the service and what they acquired academically.

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Table 1

Common Threads of Successful People Developed by Fort Hays State University Students

- | | |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 1. Develop definitions of purpose | 10. Think accurately |
| 2. Develop a mastermind alliance | 11. Control your attention |
| 3. Go the extra mile | 12. Inspire teamwork |
| 4. Use applied faith in yourself | 13. Learn from defeat |
| 5. Develop a pleasing personality | 14. Cultivate creative vision |
| 6. Take personal initiative | 15. Maintain sound health |
| 7. Keep positive mental attitude | 16. Budget time and money |
| 8. Be enthusiastic | 17. Use cosmic habit force |
| 9. Use self-discipline | 18. Building trust |

Table 2

Qualitative Reflective Responses from University Participants

“I took several things out of this class, but one of the biggest things I took out was the importance of empathy not sympathy.”

“The project was to provide t-shirts for an elementary school in Lexington, Kentucky. The intent was to provide a framework for encouragement in life centering on higher education. Attending college or our university was not the intended focus instead the focus was to encourage these children to believe and dream in something more than just getting through life. The project’s goal was to assist these children in becoming more than what their circumstances dictate.”

“If it’s one thing I’ve learned in this class, it’s that almost every profession deals with people whether physically in person or via the phone or somehow virtually. It’s amazing how many occupations deal with people and how important it is to learn to deal or react to people in various different situations. Perhaps the most beneficial part of the class for me in particular was the service-learning project. It was fantastic to see how the project went from our classroom, to psych club, to campus, and then across the community. I learned that teamwork and cooperation really helped us thrive. Most importantly though, this project truly made me feel like we were doing something – I realize the kids are of a young age, but I definitely think it will help them to realize such a big group of people have so much faith in them to succeed and better themselves with higher education.”

“Since we took on this service-learning project back in October, I have grown in many aspects. When we started the project we had to really plan and organize what we were going to do and how we were going to get it done. This helped sharpen my organizational skills. ... After the organization process we had to start the promotion process. This really helped me get out on campus and meet new people, learn where certain buildings are, and who to talk to for certain things. ... Making flyers to hand out and hang around buildings was another tactic I learned. Next we went into the fundraising and selling process. ...I also found a higher amount of respect for certain fellow classmates. To see them committed and really put in the work to accomplish this project was inspiring and was one of the reasons why I worked so hard for them. ...This project also confirmed all that I thought about how stressful a business is. I was really able to see the inner work of a business and how complicated it can get. ... This project was interesting, a bit stressful, but helped me grow overall as a person. I am very thankful I was able to get involved in something like this and I really hope we continue to stay in contact with these children in the future.”

“The purpose of this particular project by the Intro to Therapeutic Skills class is to encourage the value of education in young minds. Not only are we demonstrating the opening of doors to the next generations, but we also close gaps between the schools and the community. We have high hopes to maintain contact with your school, open communication is encouraged and we would be thrilled at any other opportunities to help you in the future. We feel strongly about encouraging the opportunities and benefits of higher education and value the knowledge we’ve gained from this service-learning project.”

Table 3

Qualitative Responses from Elementary School Participants

“Thank you for the college T-shirts! We like the word encourage on the back. We know going to college is important. We saw your website. Your college is awesome.”

“It was so generous of you to give the whole school a college T-shirt. When I go to college, I’m going to think about you.”

“Thank you for donating all of the T-shirts to our school. I felt proud to be wearing a college T-shirt. Everyone at school is thankful for your kindness. My dream when I grow up is to finish school and go to a college far away from home.”

“Thank you for reminding us that college is important. It was very nice of you to give us the shirts. They are nice shirts. We love them. We wear them on our college Wednesdays.”

“What you did was remarkable! We are honored to wear the beautiful t-shirts

representing your college. We promise to work hard so that some day we can consider becoming a Tiger!”

Figure 1

T-shirt Slogan and Design For College Bound Students



Figure 2

Mary Todd Elementary School Faculty, Staff, and Students

