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# Balance Across Boundaries: Service-Learning from an International Perspective

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## ABSTRACT

*Int J Exerc Sci* 2(4): 223-229, 2009. Service-Learning provides students, faculty and community partners an opportunity to go beyond classroom and laboratory instruction to the application of theoretical principles, and the development of civic responsibility by forging meaningful relationships with community partners. Service-learning also enables faculty to broaden the cultural sensitivity and international exposure of students by engaging students in directed, purposeful projects aimed at supporting the goals of both the college and the international partners. We have a unique opportunity in Exercise Science to make lasting changes and improve global conditions relating to student learning and the physical inactivity crisis. The purpose of this article is to define service-learning, describe different types of service-learning projects, and discuss service-learning opportunities in international settings.

**KEY WORDS:** Service learning, civic responsibility, global partners

## SERVICE-LEARNING DEFINED

Service-learning as a teaching methodology has roots in the experiential education movement of the 1950's and 1960's. Experiential education was based on the concept that the quality of student learning was measured by the meaning students placed on their experience (3). Developing knowledge through action, specifically through actions that benefitted the community have long been hallmarks of experiential education.

Bringle and Hatcher defined service-learning as a "course-based, credit-bearing educational 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 civic responsibility" (2).

According to the National Service-Learning Clearinghouse, almost 30% of the 6.7 million students in public and private 4 year institutions of higher education report participating in a course where service is part of the curriculum (10). Service-learning in the medical and allied health professions has been a critical component of the curriculum with projects aimed at providing a service to the community and hands-on experience for students.

Bentley and Ellison described a service-learning project designed to teach nursing students key elements of delivering community services to pregnant teens (1). Nursing students (N = 20) partnered with

Early Head Start to address the needs of pregnant teenagers and help them transition from pregnancy to parenthood. Specific course objectives were outlined in advance to give students, faculty and community partners clear guidelines for evaluation. Student assignments ranged from "Make an appointment with the adolescent once per week for six weeks to implement nursing interventions identified from the supporting data following the assessments." to "Attend the adolescent's delivery if she happens to deliver during this semester." Bentley and Ellison found that students were able to understand the at-risk population at a deeper level, overcoming preconceived ideas of pregnant teens. In addition, the faculty found that student's commitment to community service following the class increased. Health education programs have also included service-learning projects in their curricula as a means of enhancing the preparation of health educators.

Geiger and Werner described a service-learning assignment completed by undergraduate health and elementary education students (N = 27) (4). The assignment was designed to reflect the competencies outlined in the National Commission of Health Education Credentialing. Students engaged in learning by attending lectures on relevant topics, assisting health teachers with instructional planning, and presenting information to elementary school students. Several different methods of evaluation were conducted to rate student performance and teacher effectiveness. Student evaluations reflected a positive experience and an ability to overcome preconceived barriers relating to teaching

in an inner-city school environment. Co-operating teacher evaluations provided valuable feedback to both faculty and students relating to future course preparations. Service-learning projects have also been described in fields relating to Exercise Science.

Romack outlined a program entitled, "Free-Wheelers" designed to increase the mobility of wheel-chair bound nursing home clients (N = 15) through a stretching and strength training program facilitated by Kinesiology students (N = 22) enrolled in a Motor Development laboratory class (8). Clearly articulated learning objectives relating to motor development education as well as community service needs were provided. In addition, students were challenged to consider and reflect upon their stereotypes around aging adults. Each nursing home resident was assigned to three students from the class with one hour sessions scheduled three times a week on Monday, Wednesday and Friday for eight weeks of the 15-week semester. Several quantitative and qualitative measures were administered to evaluate the success of the program. The nursing home clients exhibited increased mobility and less hopelessness. The students reported greater understanding of motor development over the life span and a deeper appreciation for older adults.

In this section, a definition of service-learning was proposed, with examples provided of service-learning projects from nursing, health education and kinesiology. While the spectrum of service-learning projects is broad, all contain some structure of objectives, accountability, and partnering.

## EXAMPLES OF SERVICE-LEARNING PROJECTS FROM WESTFIELD STATE COLLEGE

Some service-learning projects take place over the course of a 15-week semester, while other projects are event-based with students completing assignments in preparation for a single event. In this section, a brief description of three service-learning projects conducted by faculty and students from Westfield State College will be provided.

### *Homeschooler's Field Day*

The original *Homeschooler's Field Day* was a collaborative effort with students enrolled in an Analysis of Teaching Physical Education class, Sport Promotions class and a community-based homeschooler's programming organization. The now annual event has grown to include faculty and students from the Biology Department, as well as students enrolled in a Kinesiology Laboratory class.

*Homeschooler's Field Day* was a collaborative event organized and implemented by students and faculty for homeschooler's in the New England area to engage in fun, motor-skilled activities. In this one day event homeschooled children (N = 162) ages 5-13 pre-registered and participated in an organized field day scheduled from 11:00 a.m.- 2:00 p.m. Homeschooler's divided into younger (ages 5-8) and older (ages 9-13) groups progress through a series of eight 15-20 minute stations. Learning objectives for students were developed relevant to their course. Physical Education students focused on developing age-appropriate activities and teaching methods. Kinesiology students developed

stations relating to biomechanical principles that could be taught and practiced in a 15-minute station. Biology students developed a station teaching homeschooler's about heart rate and exercise. Sport Promotions students developed objectives and implemented strategies relating to event promotion, logistics and risk management. Movement Science majors not enrolled in the classes responsible for the field day were invited to participate as volunteers.

Parents were invited to join in any activities, adding to the complexity of the teaching for the students in charge of each station. Homeschooler's, parents, students and faculty reported positive experiences, with all participants providing valuable feedback for future events. Although not one of the original objectives, student stereotypes and attitudes about homeschooler's and the structure of education were challenged. In addition, students reported greater appreciation for the level of planning and preparation required for a successful event.

### *Hope for Hollie*

*Hope for Hollie* provides an example of a service-learning project that not only engaged students and the larger community, but made a meaningful and lasting difference in the world. *Hope for Hollie* was a Sports Promotions class service-learning project that was undertaken to raise funds for a student who was recovering from meningitis. The students in the Sports Promotion class were offered an opportunity to apply the principles of sport event management by envisioning, initiating, planning, organizing, implementing and evaluating a real event. The upper-level class (N = 18)

consisted of Movement Science, Business and Communications seniors. Because of student internship and work commitments, the event—a run/walk was planned for a Friday in April, during the scheduled class from 12:30 p.m. - 1:25 p.m.

Students embraced the project with dedication and enthusiasm. A financial objective of raising \$5,000 was decided. Participation objectives included the registration of 100 participants and awareness objectives relating to risks associated with meningitis were also developed. Because of the interdisciplinary nature of the class, students were able to draw on their strengths to achieve a successful outcome. Movement Science majors assisted with risk management, developed pre-walk exercise programs for participants, and contacted exercise-related sponsors. Business majors assisted with the marketing plan and logistics. Communications majors assisted with the development of a logo, news releases and attractive flyers/promotions. Outcomes far exceeded expectations with \$25,000 raised and participation from over 500 walkers.

Students reported learning about sport promotions, but also learning life lessons about the goodness of humankind. One student wrote, “The day of the walk was one of my best days all year, actually of my life. I had no idea how good it would feel to be able to give Hollie the check. This was the most rewarding class I have ever taken, not only academically but also on a personal level”. Another student wrote, “..we bonded with our classmates on a level that usually never happens in a class, we were able to work closely and learn from students from different majors and we were

able to take what we learned in the classroom and put it to use in the real world.”

### *Balance Across Boundaries: An International Perspective*

Elementary school students (N =84) in the Pioneer Valley Chinese Immersion Charter School (PVCICS) begin their kindergarten and first grade education with 75% of their day taught in Mandarin Chinese. Drawing on the successful experiences from the Homeschooler’s Field Day and Hope for Hollie events, two faculty from the Movement Science Department at Westfield State College initiated, organized and implemented a service-learning event to be taught primarily in Chinese. *Balance Across Boundaries* was the collaborative effort of students (N = 30) enrolled in Movement Science classes in Kinesiology, Rehabilitation for Special Populations, Supervising Sport and Fitness Programs and a Physical Science class for teachers preparing to teach physics. A series of four stations were developed to teach balance using simplified Chinese characters for numbers and animals. For example, one station, entitled, “Balance Bingo” had the simplified Chinese characters for numbers 1-5 marked in large squares with the characters Chinese symbol for an animal at the heading. The elementary school students who landed on a specific square called out the name of the animal and number in Chinese. The college students repeated in Chinese and performed a balance activity for the elementary school student to copy. While the pronunciation of the elementary school students was superior to that of the college students, the ability to communicate movement in another language both challenged and

simplified the event. Students were able to consider movement as a medium of communication when languages differ. Several students reported an inability to understand the elementary school students, but an ability to overcome the language barrier by performing a movement. Likewise, students reported admiration for the efforts of the kindergarten students to communicate in Chinese. While not an objective of the program, students reported a positive shift in attitude toward Chinese-speaking individuals. Elementary School students expressed pride in their ability to communicate in their immersion language, and their ability to learn new skills relating to balance.

Several examples of service-learning projects have been presented in this section. Some projects have involved only one class, while others have involved several different classes and disciplines. Service-learning provides a methodology and structure that embraces interdisciplinary, intergenerational and international experiences.

### **OPPORTUNITIES FROM AN INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE**

One of the primary purposes of service-learning education is to expose students to diverse individuals and cultures. Preparing students to live in a global community enables them to transition from academia to the workplace more smoothly. Traditionally, this exposure to different cultures has taken place in the context of study abroad programs. Community service programs designed to assist an under-served population have long been a part of campus ministry and study abroad

programming. While worthy and useful, many such programs could be defined more as volunteer than service-learning. Service-learning requires structure, preparation, reflection and evaluation (9). However, structured, service-learning projects that provide students an opportunity to learn about different cultures have been developed throughout the world.

Parsi and List described the powerful experiences reported by medical students involved in a service-learning project in Nairobi, Kenya (6). The authors recommended designing service-learning programs that promote cultural sensitivity, individual and community empowerment and provide education about the historical and global forces that shape communities. Riner and Becklenberg described a partnership with a Nicaraguan community and the Indiana University School of Nursing that provided a rich opportunity for nursing students to learn about working in a multi-cultural, interdisciplinary team of healthcare professionals (7). Ngai described a service-learning project implemented at the Chinese University of Hong Kong in which students provided services to needy individuals within the context of a general education class (5).

While service-learning projects are often designed to assist an at-risk population, many provide students an opportunity to move beyond the confines of a classroom or case study to real people in real situations. As exercise science professionals, we have ample opportunities to develop cultural sensitivity and provide diverse experiences for our students to gain exposure to the global community.

## CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS FOR THE FUTURE

In this paper, service-learning has been defined and several examples of service-learning have been provided. Suggestions for implementing internationally focused service-learning opportunities for students will be presented.

### *Developing Community Partnerships*

A challenge of developing effective service-learning projects is the logistics and ongoing evaluation. Many colleges and universities have an office dedicated to service-learning education. Working in unison with a service-learning coordinator may provide a useful beginning.

Many study-abroad programs provide service-learning opportunities for students. However, not many such programs are discipline specific. The spectrum of assignments relating to exercise science is very broad. Educating and collaborating with study abroad coordinators to educate, envision and organize exercise science related service-learning programs may increase the likelihood of students having discipline specific opportunities.

The number of international students enrolled at colleges and universities in the United States has grown exponentially. International student organization leaders can make connections for students to participate in collaborative service-learning projects. For example, international students who are active in sports and physical activities not often played in the United States can partner with exercise science students for a series of laboratory activities. The international students will

have an opportunity to teach a skill, take pride in their sport, and forge new relationships. Exercise science students can analyze the skills necessary to be successful in the sport, learn more about the origins and history of the culture and sport, or develop specific training programs for athletes involved in the sport.

In addition to on-campus opportunities, locally-based, culturally diverse communities provide another opportunity to engage students in service-learning projects focused on physical activity and exercise science. Language need not be a barrier to program development. Some examples of simple, service-learning projects that can be conducted with minimal language skills are: a student-directed, 8-week walking program with individuals from a local international community at a designated time and place; a 4-week playground project in which students engage caregivers and children from a local international community in motor skill activities; a stretching and/or strength program designed to increase mobility of a given population, perhaps from a local ethnic church.

While examples of effective service-learning projects abound, it is critical that objectives relating to increasing cultural sensitivity and exposing students to diverse cultures be articulated in advance.

As advocates for healthy lifestyles and ambassadors of the *Exercise is Medicine* campaign, we have a unique opportunity to envision, create and provide service-learning programming that challenges students to be agents of change. Service-learning education provides a vehicle for

applying theory to practice and engaging students in programs that develop reflective, global citizens prepared to face the relevant issues and challenges of the future.

[resources/online\\_documents/research/the\\_status\\_of\\_service\\_learning\\_in\\_the\\_united\\_states\\_some\\_facts\\_and\\_figures/index.php](http://www.servicelearning.org/resources/online_documents/research/the_status_of_service_learning_in_the_united_states_some_facts_and_figures/index.php).

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