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Short Communication

Essentials of Service-Learning for the Community Partner Nurse Leader

Emily Havrilla*

Assistant Professor, Passan School of Nursing, Wilkes University, 84 W. South Street, Wilkes-Barre, PA, USA

***Corresponding Author:** Emily Havrilla, PhD, CRNP, ANP-BC, CRRN, Assistant Professor, Passan School of Nursing, Wilkes University, 84 W. South Street, Wilkes-Barre, PA, USA, 18766, Tel: 570-408-4069; Fax: 570-408-7807; Email: emily.havrilla@wilkes.edu

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Abstract

Background: Service-learning, congruent with the Kolb Model of Experiential Learning, is an educational strategy that includes instruction, service, and reflection. Through this process students formulate connections between knowledge and service. Service learning courses are developed and implemented through a reciprocal partnership between an academic institution and a community organization.

Discussion: Nursing leaders often serve as the community partner contact for a service learning course. The nurse leader has an integral role to fulfill in course development, implementation, and evaluation. The nurse leader needs to be aware of key responsibilities and benefits of the service-learning partnership.

Conclusion: Partnership with an academic institution in the implementation of a service-learning course promotes relationships within the community. Through the reciprocal nature of service-learning, agency outcomes may be positively influenced.

Keywords: Service-Learning, Community Partnership, Nurse Leader, Nursing, Nursing Education

service-learning is developed from the academic perspective, the nurse leader representing the clinical agency should play a crucial role in course development, implementation, and evaluation.

Service within the community associated with nursing practice has been traced back to Florence Nightingale [2]. Nursing, as a traditional service discipline, is well-suited to provide educational experiences that engage students in the community. The concept of service-learning echoes the motivation of many nurses to provide care for others in their own career development.

Service-learning in education first appeared in the early 1900's and evolved over time [3]. In the United States, the development of service-learning mirrors the history of national service. Early examples of service include: the Civilian Conservation Corp, 1933; the Works Program Administration, 1935, and the Servicemen's Readjustment Act, 1944. The 1960's and 1970's were decades of activism that blended well with service-learning. During this time frame the Peace Corps was established in 1961 and the War on Poverty included the formation of the Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA) organization [4]. During the late 1970's and early 1980's the concept of service-learning diminished in popularity and programs lost support and funding [3]. Despite this decline in support, the National Student Volunteer Program and the National Center for Service-Learning were established in 1979. A resurgence in service-learning occurred in the late 1980's concurrent with increased national support for service leading to the passage of the National and Community Service Act of 1990 and the National and Community Service Trust act of 1993. The national support of service was further seen in the passage of the Edward M. Kennedy Service America Act of 2009

Introduction

Service-learning is an educational strategy implemented through a relationship between an academic institution and a community partner. The integration of didactic preparation, service, and reflection fosters not only learning, but also civic engagement [1]. The aim of this article is to frame service-learning from the community partner perspective. Although

which provided for the continuation of programs under the Corporation for National and Community Service [3, 4].

Although service and volunteerism are recurrent themes on the national level, they are not synonymous with service-learning. Defined as “a structured learning experience that combines community service with preparation and reflection”, service-learning is based upon a reciprocal relationship between academia and the community [5]. The value of service-learning is grounded in the methods’ ability to foster in students, through reflection, the establishment of links between academic knowledge and service [6]. Service-learning is designed to address a community partner need and integrate strategies to address that need with academic goals and objectives. Within this context, the service experience should address a need that is defined by the community partner. Reciprocally, the community organization provides a service to the academic partner by facilitating the learning experience. Authentic partnership is built around the reciprocal nature of service-learning.

Student learning occurs through didactic content, service experience and reflection. Learning associated with the service experience may include leadership skills, teamwork, and community partnership skills [7, 8]. Reflection is structured for students to identify connections between the service experience and the didactic content. Through this experience, students move beyond factual learning to experiential learning. Subsequently, in experiential learning students develop an increased sense of civic engagement [1].

Service-learning may be designed at any level of education and it is often utilized at the university level. Service-learning experiences are structured in a variety of formats such as service hours included within a traditional course; service trips with academic content, service preparation, project implementation, and debriefing; and service over the course of a semester. Service-learning courses are found in many disciplines and may also be inter-disciplinary at the faculty and student levels. Service may be at any community agency or organizational partner. Examples of service-learning courses found in the literature commonly are designed to serve vulnerable populations in community settings [9]. Although this may be common, courses are designed based upon the educational goals and outcomes; therefore, a health care agency may be the ideal partner for student service for a specific course.

The nurse leader will most often encounter service-learning courses developed by a health care discipline at the university level. Service-learning courses have been developed by faculty from a range of disciplines for students in a specific major such as nursing or pharmacy, and there are also courses in which students in a class are from multiple disciplines.

Partnership Development

Frequently healthcare agencies are contacted by academic organizations to explore the opportunities for service-learning. The courses developed are designed to meet student learning objectives that originate within the academic setting. However, this does not preclude the healthcare agency from initiating a service-learning partnership. Consider the following:

- Does your organization have an established relationship with an academic institution?
- Does your agency serve as a site for clinical hours for professional programs?
- Is there a healthcare explorers program or volunteer program within your agency?

These types of existing relationships may serve as the foundation for a formal service-learning course. Consider approaching the academic partner with your agency’s interest in further collaboration as a service-learning site. The organizational strategic plan may include future programs, projects, or activities that would be ideal opportunities for students to provide service to the organization.

Once the organization and academic institution agree to collaborate, there are many factors to consider from the agency perspective in addition to course development and implementation. These may include:

- Contractual agreement between the clinical agency and the academic institution. These contracts are often similar to agreements in place for clinical rotations and may include specifications for student criminal background checks, child abuse clearance, physical examination and health screenings, and an outline of faculty requirements.
- Commitment of staff resources. Will staff members serve as student mentors when the service-learning students are on site? The role of the staff member should be determined in planning for the service-learning course and an estimation of the requirements for staff time should be completed.
- The design of the service activities will impact the organization’s commitment of support for the course. For example, will the service consist of ongoing clinical practice versus guidance for the implementation of a project?
- The role of the faculty member responsible for the service-learning course should be vetted. Both partners should review requirements for student supervision in the provision of service. Will the faculty member be available onsite when the student is present or will student super-

vision and evaluation be performed through other mechanisms? The academic partner may request that the agency provide a preceptor for the student in the mutual interest of both parties.

- Organizational operational resources required to support the partnership should be identified. These may include use of resources such as space, equipment, and supplies, as well as personnel time in addition to the clinical preceptor or mentor.
- Internal and external communication regarding the planned course and service hours will familiarize staff with the partnership, cultivate staff and community support for service-learning, and facilitate further development of the partnership.

Overview of Course Development

The course development process flows from the establishment of the agency-academic partnership. Community-Campus Partnerships for Health (CCPH) has developed a faculty toolkit to aid in the creation of service-learning courses in higher education. The toolkit is now available as the *Engaged Faculty Institute Curriculum* [1]. It provides comprehensive resources for the development of service-learning courses. Fundamental steps in the process in addition to the formation of an agency-academic partnership include the identification of course objectives, learner outcomes and competencies, and assessment strategies. This step is followed by planning of the course components and activities, text selection, and the determination of course evaluation plan. Other important steps address infrastructure and sustainability, and the need to provide culturally competent service [1].

Service-learning as an educational method is grounded in the Kolb Experiential Learning Model [1]. This model views experiential learning as a cycle of concrete experience, reflection, abstract conceptualization and active experimentation [10]. These steps from the model are integrated into service-learning courses. There are many resources available that discuss service-learning as an educational strategy and further delineate the process of creating a service-learning course or experience. Both the Community Campus Partnership for Health and the National Service-learning Clearinghouse provide multiple resources [5, 11].

Recommendations for the Nurse Leader

Although each service-learning course is unique, there are common aspects of the agency-academic partnership for which the nurse leader is accountable.

1. Participation in the design of the service-learning course or experience is crucial to insuring that outcomes are consistent with the agency's outcomes. Are they consistent

with the organization's mission and philosophy, strategic goals, standards of practice, evidence-based protocols, and individual client outcomes?

2. The specific service-learning course goals should mutually benefit both the academic partner and the healthcare program or agency. The "win-win" focus of service-learning is accomplished through meeting mutual goals.
3. Service-learning course activities range from professional student service to projects that meet needs identified by the community partner. Examples include direct clinical practice, development and implementation of evidence-based practice projects, health policy advocacy, community outreach, and fundraising. The service activities should be congruent with standard operational procedures within the organization.
4. Commit to participation in not only course planning and development, but also develop a mechanism for regular communication with the academic partner. As the course is implemented, the nurse leader should be willing to be flexible. Much like other projects, the partnership and course implementation will require ongoing oversight and revision as often as necessary to be successful.

Key Points from the Leadership Perspective

The resources available for service-learning speak to the partnership development and course design. Other important points to consider as the nurse leader would include:

- Opportunities to create a service-learning partnership may be with academic programs from a variety of disciplines and program types, as well as educational levels. The "win-win" component is typically viewed as the service component. All types of partnerships may positively impact the organization.
- Measure and assess the impact of the partnership and service hours. Does the presence of students in a service-learning role positively influence the culture of the organization and provide educational experiences for the student? Is there a link between client satisfaction and the presence of students in an agency for service-learning? Is there an influence on measurable health outcomes that are able to be linked to service-learning? Is the addition of a preceptor role for staff members perceived as a professional development opportunity?
- Leverage the experience and the relationships to formulate future professional and academic relationships: Student exposure to the organization may lead to future recruitment of these individuals as healthcare professionals. This may be in professions where there is a shortage, or perhaps, the benefit is the recruitment of

an employee with a vested interest in the organization and a commitment grounded in a student experience within the organization. Student exposure may lead to future professional relationships as former service-learning students begin their careers. The development of professional networking relationships may begin as students in service-learning courses transition into career roles. Student exposure to the organization may lead to future referrals of peers to the organization for employment or perhaps influence the agency's standing within the community of interest and with all levels of stakeholders.

- Relationships with academic partners are developed and enhanced through partnering on service-learning projects. This may lead to additional collaboration with the academic partner for consultation, continuing education, course development, on-site university programs tailored to the healthcare agency needs, and research projects. The outreach to academic partners and the welcoming of students to the organization has the potential to extend to a broader community engagement and an increased knowledge and awareness of the organization's services. The working relationships developed through partnership may lead to specific joint ventures to meet the needs of the community of interest.

Conclusion

Service-learning partnerships and course development are traditionally initiated by academic institutions to facilitate experiential learning of students. However, the nurse leader serving as the community partner representative should be knowledgeable about the process of service-learning course development and the role of the community partner agency. Service-learning partnerships may also be initiated by community agencies. These partnerships have the potential to provide the healthcare agency partner with positive outcomes related to the achievement of care outcomes, program development, development and recruitment of staff, and increased engagement with the community of interest and stakeholders in the organization. These outcomes will enhance organizational strengths and generate opportunities within the community.

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Declarations

Conflict of Interest: The author reports no conflicts of interest.

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