

IMPACT OF AN URBAN SERVICE LEARNING EXPERIENCE ON AGRICULTURAL EDUCATION STUDENTS

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Abstract

As society becomes more diverse, it is critical that educators provide multiple levels and types of experiences for our students to engage and interact in a multicultural environment. Due to institutional, geographic, and/or departmental demographics, many collegiate students can complete their baccalaureate degree program with limited interaction with individuals from different cultures or ethnic groups. This study utilized a service learning activity as a bridge between a minority-based collegiate organization and an adolescent leadership development class. Participants provided input and reflection on their participation in this event. Four themes: fear of the unknown, moving out of your comfort zone, group activity, and personal impact, emerged from this study that will be used to shape and direct future multicultural service learning activities. Findings support the use of service learning as a positive vehicle to expose students to individuals from different cultures and as a model for future multicultural learning activities with youth based organizations.

Introduction

It is becoming increasingly evident that as students graduate from colleges and universities today, they are facing a pluralistic society (Anguiano, Viramontez & Harrison, 2002). Nearly 23% of the workforce is over the age of 55, and minorities make up only 26% of the total workforce (Department of Labor, 2005). A great number of employees in the private and public sector reflect the various faces found within the general population. In addition to an increase in the numbers of individuals, workplace cultures are changing to reflect the diverse population. Take for instance, the creation of prayer space in businesses and schools for Muslim employees and students (Kurylo, 1999) or the addition of "ethnic" foods items on lunchroom menus. Despite the changing demographics, a paradigm shift has begun to take place within the political, social, and cultural fabric of America. Individuals are moving towards a global society rather than a monocultural society. Employees are beginning to understand that businesses and organizations can be strengthened by having

a diverse workforce (Nagar, 2005; Wood, 2005). One specific sector of society that has begun to realize the importance of diversity has been individuals involved in secondary education.

Diversity in Secondary Education

Schools at the secondary and higher educational level are not only challenged to stimulate intellectual learning, but to prepare citizens for life. For many universities this means preparing young people for a world that is much different from their academic institutions. Universities recognize part of this process is exposing students to domestic and international cultures. For example, the Pennsylvania State University requires all undergraduate students to complete one three credit course related to United States cultures and one three credit course related to international culture. The U.S. culture courses are intended to raise student awareness of social identities in the U.S. and their relationship to one another (e.g., the interaction of gender with socioeconomic status). The international culture courses are intended to raise students' knowledge and relationship

between nations and cultures (Pennsylvania State University, 2005).

Student preparation is vital to becoming a productive and engaged citizen, but many educators are questioning how this can be effectively done without preparing teachers to be culturally sensitive individuals. Many teachers who are entering the workforce do not have a sense of working with students who are different from themselves. For example, Segun Eubanks, director of teacher quality for the NEA argues that,

...when you have that kind of disconnect, teachers are significantly more likely to give discipline referrals and to place kids in special education... and they're more likely to come in with predisposed assumptions and teach down to a perceived academic ability. It impacts the kids' chances to excel" (Associated Press, 2004, p. 1).

This problem causes a critical question to be raised by those who are preparing preservice teachers for their teaching careers—are preservice students prepared to teach in a multicultural society? If preservice teachers are ill-prepared to teach in a multicultural world, it will be difficult for them to become truly engaged as productive citizens in their classrooms and connect with their students. Higher education departments that are prepared to address these issues in an engaging and proactive manner are in prime positions to prepare new teachers for their academic careers.

While the majority of preservice students are required to take courses that address teaching youth with disabilities, some preservice programs require students to enroll in courses that address teaching diverse populations (University of Florida, 2005). The experiences in university classrooms can begin to expand students' scope of thinking and challenge them with innovative, interactive, and engaging relationships (Bambenek, Enderle, Wagner, & Weaver, 2000; Gabelnick, 1997) that will prove invaluable when they begin teaching. Student development and intellectual growth will increase as students are exposed to various cultures, backgrounds, opinions, and environments. By providing these

experiences, universities challenge students to engage in actions and thoughts which may be quite different from what they have known their entire lives.

Departments such as Agricultural and Extension Education provide an environment for students to become engaged with others and their surrounding communities, given the land-grant mission of the university. By incorporating the mission of land-grant universities into the curriculum and foundation of departments, students have an advantage of being an integral part of the outreach, scholarship, and service integral to extension education. Through classroom assignments, group projects, and a variety of other activities that require group work and connection to the community, individuals are enabled to learn from their immediate environment and peers. This concept is ideal if the student body reflects the diversity found among the general population, but at many land-grant institutions, this is not the case. In 2003, The Food and Agricultural Education Information System reported that only 136 (7.6%) of students enrolled in preservice agriculture education programs at 1862 land-grant universities were minorities (Food and Agricultural Education Information System, 2005). Given the lack of diversity and limited number of underrepresented students in 1862 land-grant agriculture education departments, are preservice students truly prepared to deal with the diversity in their classrooms and schools?

Although there are opportunities for interaction among students within classrooms, are the interactions limited because of a lack of understanding between majority and underrepresented students? Perhaps it can be argued that educational institutions are planting the seeds for preservice students' classroom preparation, but what more can be done given some of the limitations of the student body? Are students really learning skills needed to work within diverse schools and classrooms? The challenge is to provide preservice students with the skills needed to interact and engage in meaningful relationships with diverse audiences and

apply these skill sets to their future classrooms.

Preservice Preparation and Service Learning

One way to prepare preservice teachers for the diverse workforce and life is through service learning activities. The developmental process that takes place through an experiential learning experience gives students the chance to think more critically, seek answers to unrequited questions and develop their own sense of self. This idea is supported by Gurin (1999) who states that, "Late adolescent and early adult experiences, when they are discontinuous enough from the home environment and complex enough to offer new ideas and possibilities can be critical sources of development" (p. 2.). Universities provide an opportunity to incorporate service-learning activities into preservice teacher curriculum.

Recent studies have shown that service learning has the ability to increase cultural awareness and diversity, challenge notions of societal and institutional racism, and increase awareness about diversity in K-12 education, especially for white preservice teachers (Boyle-Baise & Kilbane, 2000; Tellez, Hlebowitsh, Cohen & Norwood, 1995) Through service learning activities, students gain personal and social responsibility; have a greater acceptance of diverse cultures and gain leadership skills (Astin, 1998; Boss, 1994; Bringle & Hatcher, 1996; Giles, 1999; Stukas, Clary, & Snyder, 1999). Service learning is a process that connects participants to the heart and soul of individuals by addressing the real needs of the community. O'Neil and Lima (2003) suggest that service learning is an excellent teaching model for agricultural students because of the historical roots between service and the community. This basic principle supports John Dewey's philosophy on service learning – community engagement for life preparation. Connecting college students to a community and its needs provides a learning laboratory for democracy, social justice, and civic involvement. In the context of preservice teachers, service learning is a

valuable teaching and learning tool. Researchers such as Boyle-Baise and Kilbane point out that service learning "...offers a viable, affirmative way to connect teacher educators and prospective teachers with youth and families from constituent groups for multicultural education." (p. 54).

One approach to preparing students, especially preservice students, for the changing demographics in the world is to provide a multicultural service-learning experience into the curriculum (O'Grady, 2000). This paper explores the creation and implementation of a service learning project within an agricultural extension and education department.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this study was to explore how a service learning activity could be used as a tool to build collegial relationships between preservice teachers and underrepresented students. The qualitative study was conducted to find ways in which to actively prepare preservice college students for a culturally diverse workforce.

Participants and Service Learning Site

All of the participants for the service learning experience were undergraduate and graduate level agriculture students at Pennsylvania State University located in University Park, Pennsylvania. Thirty-eight of the participants in the service learning experience were enrolled in an adolescent/youth leadership development course, with 25 of them identified as preservice teacher education majors. Fifteen other participants were active members in the Minorities in Agriculture, Natural Resources and Related Sciences (MANRRS) organization. Of the youth leadership students (YLS) most were white; with the majority from rural/suburban communities located throughout the state. Most grew up with connections to agriculture and agricultural activities. Participants from the MANRRS organization were African American students who were from urban areas who had either attended an agricultural based high school or were introduced to the

agricultural field through targeted college recruitment programs. In total, 53 students participated in a two and half day event that involved exposure and immersion in an inner city environmental educational center in southwest Philadelphia.

The environmental center was chosen as the service learning site because it fit the initial requirements the researchers set forth in the research design. (1) It was in a cultural and social environment that was different from the majority of the students; (2) it allowed for a total student immersion; and (3) removed students from their comfort zone during the service-learning experience. The 53 students were separated into 8 work groups that focused on projects or activities identified by the environmental center. Each group consisted of 2 MANRRS students and 5-6 youth leadership students.

Methodology/Procedures

A qualitative research method was used in order to obtain manageable pieces of information using reflection papers, a group reflection process, and informative posters. These data gathering techniques allowed the researchers to use the information to better understand the actions and behaviors associated with the activity (Beyer, 1985; Bock, 1999; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). In qualitative research one can address issues related to individuals through their interactions, stories, and social behaviors (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The group reflection process helped individuals transform the service learning experience into genuine learning about their own values and goals and about larger social issues (Bock; Kegan, 1982, Love & Guthrie, 1999).

The reflection process promotes a sense of connection to the community and a deeper awareness of community needs, reflection increases the likelihood that students will remain committed to service beyond the term of the course (Baxter Magolda, 1992, Bock, 1999). Reflection enables students to critically think about their service experience and challenge students to test assumptions about their values and to explore, clarify, and alter their values (Hatcher & Bringle, 1999). By using

a structured and purposeful format that guides responses, the reflection process transforms the experience for the learner. Unlike other group processes used in qualitative research, reflection allows for private and public reflection, links the experience back to the community, is connected to course content, and is challenging and contextual. Reflection also allows facilitators to develop background information about the people and problems the students may encounter in the service situations to sensitize them and help to revise any misconceptions, develop and practice any skills that will be required, including being active observers and questioners of experience, provide closure on emotional/affective issues by the end of each reflective session, and leave some cognitive/topical issues open until the next session to give group members an opportunity to think more about them (Giles & Eyler, 1998; RMC, 2004). A successful reflection experience is not only dependent upon the learner, but how it is facilitated (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Kolb, 1985).

In the study, the facilitators fostered the learning process by providing a framework for guiding the discussion, actively engaging each student in the discussion, establishing norms of behavior, clarifying students' responsibilities, assessing the values, knowledge, and skills that each student brought to the project (Kolb, 1985; RMC, 2004). The facilitators also provided the direction at the start of the class that guided the students to develop their posters and reflection journals. Students were told that the final part of the class project was the group reflection which was scheduled two weeks after the service learning event. Although the reflection was not a mandatory part of the program, only six of the 53 students were not able to participate in the reflection activity. The reflection session consisted of a one hour forum in which semi-structured questions (Table 1) were used to gain candid responses from the preservice teachers and underrepresented collegiate students. Students were asked about their experiences during the service learning activity and their feelings about working with a different racial group. One researcher facilitated the process of asking

questions and the other researcher recorded responses. These comments were then triangulated with the comments from the class posters and reflection papers. Triangulation uses multiple methods of data to confirm constructs and ideas (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). At the conclusion of the session, notes were transcribed and four categorical themes were created which

served as the qualitative results for the study. Trustworthiness was established through data triangulation, an auditing trail of field notes and raw data, and an analysis of the process and the product (Patton, 1990; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Approval for this research was granted by Pennsylvania State University's Institutional Review Board.

Table 1
Reflection Questions

1. How did you feel when you found out you would be participating with people of a different race/ethnicity?

 - 2a. How did you feel when you saw the service learning site?
 - 2b. How did you feel about the actual service learning project? (emotions, projects, satisfaction)

 3. What was your initial reaction regarding the integrated service learning project?

 - 4a. What did you learn about yourself from participating in this project?
 - 4b. What did you learn about others from participating in this project?

 5. Do you think projects like these are valuable? If so, why?

 6. What suggestions would you provide for the coordinators, if this type of project were done again?

 7. Did you see the value in your participating in this project?
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Results

The objectives of this qualitative study were to explore the impact of a multicultural service learning activity between youth leadership students and underrepresented

students. Four themes emerged from the student's reflection exercises and post reflection written survey—fear of the unknown, moving out of your comfort zone, group activity, and the personal impact (Table 2).

Table 2
Themes from Reflection Activity

Fear	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not knowing what to expect (include the service learning activity and classmates) • Limited or no interaction with diverse people
Moving out of Comfort Zone	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Working with people who were different from selves • Working in a new environment- very different from home community
Group Activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More time needed for service learning project • Integrated downtime wanted to see the city • More social activities needed prior to event- to assist in group dynamics
Personal Impact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Service learning activities should be part of the curriculum • More activities like this needed for students to learn about diverse backgrounds and organizations • Learned about self and others

Students identified *fear of the unknown* as the major obstacle when interacting with groups of diverse people. The reflection exercise revealed that students were hesitant about talking to someone who was different from their race because of past experiences or limited interaction. Some students commented that they felt awkward riding in the van with individuals because they had never had such an intimate experience with a person of another race. For example, one student commented that she had never been in a "mixed setting" until she came to the university. All her life experiences had been in a white homogenous community and school. Students commented that they did not feel comfortable talking or interacting with someone of a different race because "they didn't really know what to say." Both the youth leadership students and the

MANRRS students commented that more social events prior to the service learning activity would have helped to "break the ice" and would have helped everyone feel at ease while working in groups during the service learning activity. Students suggested that immersion projects such as the service learning activity were helpful to begin the process of breaking down walls and "learning about different backgrounds and getting to know people and other organizations within the college." Students in the youth leadership class also suggested this opened their eyes to the diversity of experiences among people in urban areas who "knew about environmental education and cared about their community."

The second issue that emerged from the reflection process was *moving out of your comfort zone*. Students shared their

frustration and fear of moving out of the known (their friends and environment) into the unknown. This feeling began from the time the students left the university to the time they reached the urban service learning site. Some youth leadership students commented this was the first time they had been in an urban city and been in the minority. Their impression of an urban area was “drugs, bad neighborhoods, and people who did not care about anything.” A few of the youth leadership students felt uncomfortable in their surroundings which caused discomfort when talking with the MANRRS students and African American group leaders from the service site. Other YLS thought that some of their white colleagues “did not want to try to move outside their comfort zone and didn’t want to deal with it [the urban experience].” MANRRS students commented that they felt comfortable in their surroundings because it was either their hometown or they were the group majority. Despite this, MANRRS students did express that some parts of the service learning experience were uncomfortable. These students felt they “were working with some people [preservice students] who did not want to be a part of the service learning activity- they were just there for the grade.”

Other MANRRS students commented the main reason they were out of their comfort zone was due to the transportation arrangements. Some students expressed that they “did not want to ride in the van with someone they didn’t know because that meant listening to country music or talking about agriculture.” One suggestion given by students to resolve this issue was to incorporate a social prior to the event and to schedule a “meet and greet time during the service learning activity.” Although this was suggested, not all students felt it would have helped because of negative comments that were made by both groups of students prior to the event.

The third issue which emerged from the service learning activity was *group activity*. Students expressed that due to the structure of the service learning project there was little time to bond in the established work groups. Reflection participants commented that due to the lack of downtime and prior

group experience students did not have a significant amount of time to bond. The reflection revealed that students would have preferred to participate in a two day service learning program that included time to explore the city. The YLS expressed the desire to have a greater opportunity to experience the city and see how people lived outside of rural/suburban communities. Although some of the YLS had previously expressed negative feelings about urban life during the orientation exercise, they revealed a change in their attitude during the reflection. The reflection process also revealed that students had a desire to engage in group bonding during their downtime. For example, one group visited Independence Hall with a MANRRS student who was from the city. Group members expressed “this was one of the best experiences to walk and see the people who live here.” The MANRRS students commented that they wanted to “show off their city” to their classmates.

Another point which emerged within the group activity theme was the feeling that the service learning activities were not challenging enough which lead to a breakdown in group morale. Students commented that they wanted to be given “meaningful tasks that used both physical and mental labor.” For example, some of the MANRRS students stated their discontent with the projects because of the nature of the work. “We wanted to work indoors in the computer labs because we felt more comfortable working [with computers] rather than working outside with the kids from the country.” The YLS felt that some of the activities were “too basic” and reflected some of the work done on their own homes and/or farms. Students suggested giving people a choice of activities so they can feel a part of the process and “feel more connected to the group and the activity.”

The fourth issue which emerged from the reflection group process was *personal impact*. Students expressed the need for greater activities in the college that brought together people “from different races and organizations.” Students felt it was important to step out of your comfort zone because “you will have to work in that

situation anyway.” In addition, students felt it was important to meet new people and see life from another perspective. The idea of working with diverse backgrounds was appealing and students expressed that it was a concept that should be incorporated into other agricultural classes within the college. Students also commented on how the service learning experience changed their perceptions about programs and organizations which focused on diverse audiences. Take for example the YLS student who commented how she was “reconsidering the value and importance of the Peace Corps- a program that is really important in the process of helping others who are extremely different from her background.” The reflection also revealed students’ feelings on how traditional agricultural youth organizations such as FFA and 4-H should be involved in service learning activities that give students a chance to work with people from diverse backgrounds. As a result of their participation in the service learning activity, students expressed a desire to make the service learning activity more engaging. Students suggested a longer timeframe, a face to face dinner with all program participants after the event, and inclusion of other groups and ethnicities within the agricultural sciences.

Conclusion

According to Vogelgesang & Astin (2000) “participation in service-learning is one of many potential situations in which students deal with diversity while in college, but it has important implications for college and community relationships in general...”. (p. 34). As suggested, service learning opportunities within higher education curriculum can add to the depth of class experiences by making the connection between the real world and the student. Benefits to the student range from learning about themselves to connecting with their communities to dealing with diverse audiences. As students incorporate these experiences into their lives, they will begin to see how the world is comprised of diverse backgrounds, culture, and communities. The ability to interact with diverse audiences

(Coles, 1993; Korgen, Mahon, & Wang, 2003; Lum, 2003) is integral to the learning process of all students, especially those who are going into classroom situations.

hooks (1994) supports this transformation of learning by encouraging the removal of the safety net of students and challenging their thinking through other experiences. Although the initial experience may seem uncomfortable, the overall service learning experience includes the creation of a safe environment for the student to participate in discussions, personal growth, reflection and development. Immersion experiences, such as service learning, assist students’ learning about issues such as economics, politics and social nuances that shape the world. Opportunities that immerse students in the diverse settings will help to strengthen their understanding of others. The process moves them beyond the point of mere tolerance to that of greater understanding and acceptance of other ethnicities and cultures.

Given the reflection comments and suggestions from the participants, the service learning experience had an impact on the learning and interaction between the two groups of agricultural students. The service learning experience began candid discussions on diversity and preconceived notions around race and culture among traditional agriculture students and minority students. Students spoke about their feelings and attitudes about the other race during the reflection exercise. In addition to discussions, the activity provided a grounded experience for students to learn from their own peers and the community in which the service learning activity took place. Students were able to reevaluate myths and stereotypes they held about communities and people of color. The impact of the activity challenged students to think beyond what they had been taught and heard. Students in both organizations had the opportunity to see agriculture education from a new perspective. The preservice/youth leadership students saw that agriculture was not just farming in a rural community. The MANRRS students saw that African Americans were involved in agriculture and natural resources even within urban communities and had the

expertise and knowledge to make policies that impact large metropolitan cities. The ability for students to work together in a community outside of campus environment created a valuable learning situation. Students suggested that by developing this type of engaging activity, such as a service learning project should be incorporated into the core curricula and foundation of agricultural departments.

Future activities that could be used in higher education classrooms could include a number of collaborative efforts between the student and the community. Instructors of youth leadership or preservice courses could build in a service learning class activity in conjunction with campus or community service based activities. For example, the local United Way may sponsor a day devoted to community based service activities. Students could engage in a service learning activity and gain a different perspective on how community based organizations benefit from volunteer contributions and service. Other activities could connect various student groups to community agencies to deal with issues that impact all students. The focus would be on a creating a change in their immediate environment and working collectively on an issue.

The findings of this study showed that service-learning can be a positive tool used to introduce agricultural college students to diversity in higher education courses and preparation for employment. As can be seen from the results of this study, it will require multiple types of interaction among students to begin to build sustainable bridges. A one-time experience working together is the start to building relationships and preparing preservice teachers for the diversity they may encounter in their classes, but should not be the sole activity. In order to foster relationships, students need opportunities to work and learn from one another outside the classroom. Experiences such as these begin to build a cadre of individuals who are ready to work in a diverse workforce. As suggested by the newsletter which prompted this work, students of all races and ethnicities will be working side by side sooner or later- why not start now.

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