Effect of a Comprehensive Service-Learning Program on College Students’ Level of Modern Racism

Scott J. Myers-Lipton
Saint Mary's College of California

The effect of a comprehensive 2-year service-learning program on students' level of modern racism was assessed. A nonequivalent control group experiment was conducted with students from a large, Western state university. The results of the multivariate analysis generally supported the hypothesis that students who are involved in service-learning show larger reductions in modern racism than students involved in voluntarism or no service.

Racial polarization on college campuses has continued to plague higher education. Recently, racial incidents have occurred at the University of Colorado, University of Michigan, and Stanford University (Pence, 1991). Moreover, some have argued that racism has been escalating on college campuses. Sowell (1993) reported that, “Increasing hostility toward blacks and other racial minorities on college campus has become so widespread that the term 'the new racism' has been coined to describe it…” (p. 5). Sowell added that while racism was not new, what was new was “the frequency, the places, and the class of people involved in an unprecedented escalation of overt racial hostility among middle-class young people, on predominantly liberal or radical campuses” (p. 5).

Some empirical data have supported the claim that race relations have been deteriorating at colleges and universities. Astin (1992) reported that college students from 1970 to 1989 have continued to lose interest in promoting racial understanding and equality. In addition, Bunzel (1993) showed that 70 percent of the seniors at Stanford University believe that racial tensions had risen during their college years. In the study, Bunzel described how Euro-American and African-American students were not even speaking the same language when it came to race. Euro-Americans defined racism in personal terms, whereas African-Americans defined it in institutional terms. Furthermore, a Carnegie study reported that 25 percent of all college and university presidents felt that racial tensions were a problem on their campuses. At large research institutions, 66 percent of the university presidents reported that racial tensions and hostilities were a problem. Because of this continuing social problem, the same presidents stated that greater racial understanding was one of their top priorities (Carnegie Foundation, 1990).

In response, some colleges and universities have been attempting to build racial and cultural understanding, both outside and inside of the classroom. Outside of the classroom, colleges have been sponsoring speakers, events, and plays that introduce students to a variety of ethnic cultures. Inside the classroom, faculty have been altering the curricula to encompass histories and traditions other than Western Civilization. These changes have included courses and programs in ethnic and women studies.

Changes within the classroom have also included the development of service-learning projects. Service-learning is an educational philosophy and pedagogy which is based on the integration of academic coursework and community service. The Southern Regional Education Board has defined service-learning as “a program that emphasizes the accomplishment of tasks which meet human needs in combination with conscious educational growth” (in Kendall & Associates, 1990, p. 20). Advocates of service-learning feel that it provides students with the opportunity to reduce their racial prejudice. Wallace (1991) stated:

...service can provide a common ground of concern and shared experience in the context