Student Effects of Service-Learning: Tracking Change Across a Semester

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Four sections of a pharmacy communications course were randomly assigned to include either a traditional laboratory project or a service-learning project. Beginning and end of semester data was collected, and there were no significant differences between the non-service-learning and service-learning samples at the outset. Data collected late in the semester revealed significant positive changes for the service-learning participants in cognitive complexity, social competency, perceived ability to work with diverse others, and self-certainty. Service-learning participants also showed a significant decline in global self-esteem. Analyses of students’ written work illustrates important differences between the two groups of participants on major course learning objectives.

Faculty and institutions may have many goals for incorporating service-learning into the curriculum. But what are these goals and what evidence do we have that service-learning actually achieves these goals? Although it is not our intention to summarize the entire service-learning literature, a brief review will illuminate what effects service-learning appears to have on students, and the gaps that still exist in our knowledge about service-learning outcomes.

Studies on the impact of service-learning have concentrated on three areas: (1) documenting student perceptions of the impact service-learning placements have had on them (e.g., Giles & Eyler, 1994), (2) assessing long-term outcomes on specific constituencies of students (e.g., Batchelder & Root, 1994; Oberlin College, 1997), and (3) delineating the impact of service-learning experiences on student learning of course content and fulfillment of course goals (e.g., Osborne, 1998; Osborne, Weadick, & Penticuff, in press).

Student Perceptions of the Impact of Service-Learning. Some studies have addressed the impact of service-learning on student perceptions of their learning of course content. Dr. Catherine Howard, Director of the Office of Community Programs at Virginia Commonwealth University, reports on students perceptions that they understood and synthesized course material better when placed in the broader context of a service-learning experience (1997).

Osborne, Weadick & Penticuff (in press) compared service-learning and non-service-learning stu-

dents’ perceptions of their self-worth, social competency, and ability to work with diverse others across a semester course on emotional and behavioral disorders of childhood and adolescence. Though two groups did not differ significantly on any of these three measures at the beginning of the semester, at the end the service-learning students rated themselves more positively on all three than their non-service-learning counterparts.

Long-Term Outcomes on Students. Questions of interest in the area of the impact of service-learning on long-term change include: (1) are the differences documented between service-learning and non-service-learning students sustained over time?, (2) do proximal changes in students as a function of service-learning experiences predict important behaviors such as civic responsibility later in life?, and (3) do service-learning experiences affect long-term awareness and understanding of broader problems facing a community or a nation? (e.g., Batchelder & Root; 1994; Giles & Eyler, 1994).

Oberlin College (Roose, 1997) reports that the strongest predictor of graduation was community service involvement. Myers-Lipton (1996) reports that serving in the community illustrates for students the subtle but still present aspects of modern racism. And Eyler, Giles, Root, & Price (1997) report a positive impact of service-learning on students as “expert citizens.” These latter two studies demonstrate that service-learning experiences “open the eyes” of students to challenges and circumstances.