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ABSTRACT

Service-learning has been covered extensively in the literature and, to a lesser extent, in social work curricula. What is missing from the discourse is a discussion of students' perceptions of service-learning, particularly as it is situated within a human diversity course and occurs at their field education site. Based on the qualitative reports of 43 social work students, the findings highlight the strengths and weaknesses of such an effort and provide insights into students' perceptions of service-learning. These insights serve as a useful resource for educators, researchers, and administrators. Lessons learned, recommendations, and implications for education are presented.

Social Work Students' Perceptions of Service-Learning

Elaine M. Maccio and Roxanne A. Voorhies

Field education is one way for social work students to practice the skills they learn in the classroom. Indeed, field education is required by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE, 2010b), the accrediting body for schools of social work. Since the essential nature of social work is to serve individuals in need, it is crucial that social work students gain as much experience outside the classroom, in actual helping situations, in order to become astute, prepared helping professionals. Although field education serves this purpose, it is a one-way experience that primarily serves the student in meeting his or her educational goals. Service-learning, on the other hand, is a two-way experience that serves both student and community partner, providing a particularly meaningful educational experience for the student that is not always realized in either the classroom or in the internship.

Although both are geared toward providing hands-on experience for students, field education and service-learning provide learning opportunities distinct from each other. Internships provide students with an opportunity to apply social work practice skills in a prescribed manner to real-world situations defined by the field setting, for example, a human services agency. Service-learning offers students a chance to be creative in their service, while meeting needs that are defined by the group or population to be served. Both offer opportunities for students to learn and to serve others with whom they work. However, the

definition of needs and creativity in meeting those needs vary by delivery method.

Because field education and service-learning are so distinct, it is possible to embed one inside the other for a unique, intensive learning experience. Indeed, CSWE encourages innovative teaching methods as a means of meeting the educational standards it is charged with defining and regulating (CSWE, 2010a). Service-learning is such a delivery method, an approach to teaching and learning that promotes civic engagement through community service and meaningful reflection. With its commitment to social justice, service-learning seems a perfect fit for social work curricula and for a course on human diversity and oppression. This article reports on students' perceptions of service-learning, particularly as it was implemented in a social work course on diversity and situated within their field education.

Literature Review

Service-Learning

> Bringle and Hatcher (1995) define 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.
> (p. 112)

Service-learning pairs students with community members in a reciprocal relationship, meaning that the student and the community member are both teacher and learner. Ideally, the service occurs in balanced proportion to the learning (Eyler & Giles, 1999), which, for the students, comes primarily from critical reflection (Jacoby, 1996). It is this reflection that differentiates service-learning from volunteerism, community service, and other forms of experiential learning, such as cooperative education and internships.

Differentiating service-learning from field education. Although service-learning and field education share some similarities, such as in situ exposure and hands-on experience, there are a number of distinct differences. Furco (2003) reduces these to focus and beneficiary. First, CSWE (2010b) describes classroom and field education as interrelated yet separate elements of the social work curriculum. In service-learning the community element is an inseparable component of the classroom experience. Second, internships exist to benefit students (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996), whereas service-learning exists to benefit both students and communities (Blouin & Perry, 2009). Although communities may indirectly benefit from students' field education, it is not the intent. In addition to Furco's conceptualization of focus and beneficiary is the idea of purpose. CSWE identifies field education as the profession's signature pedagogy, whose purpose is to socialize students "to perform the role of practitioner" (p. 8). In contrast, the purpose of service-learning is to promote lifelong civic engagement (Gray, Ondaatje, Fricker, & Geschwind, 2000; Lee, Olszewski-Kubilius, Donahue, & Weimholt, 2007).

Service-learning in diversity courses. Service-learning has been incorporated into courses on human diversity in several academic disciplines. Psychology (GreyWolf, 1998; Hagan, 2004), human development (Blieszner & Artale, 2001), human service education (McClam, Diambra, Burton, Fuss, & Fudge, 2008), family and consumer science (Toews & Cerny, 2005), counselor education (Burnett, Hamel, & Long, 2004), and teacher education (Hones, 1997) are just a few that have benefited from service-learning being introduced into courses specific to human or family diversity. Regarding her Cross-Cultural Psychology course, for example, GreyWolf (1998) explained, "Psychology in many aspects became alive for

students through the combination of working with people from other cultures and reflecting on the applicability of theoretical concepts" (p. 176). Like psychology, social work helps others, with a particular emphasis on those from vulnerable populations, typically minority cultures.

Multicultural understanding is often cited as a learning goal or by-product of service-learning. In the recent literature alone, several articles describe the ability of service-learning to enhance cultural competence (Bentley & Ellison, 2007; Hunt & Swiggum, 2007; Larson, Ott, & Miles, 2010), broaden students' understanding of diversity (Baldwin, Buchanan, & Rudisill, 2007; Bell, Horn, & Roxas, 2007; Lee, Olszewski-Kubilius, Donahue, & Weimholt, 2008), promote cultural sensitivity (Sensenig, 2007), and change perceptions (Conner, 2010; Hamner, Wilder, & Byrd, 2007; Hunt, 2007), which, coincidentally, are all ambitions of social work education. This strengthens the argument for situating service-learning in a course on human diversity.

Service-Learning in Social Work

Service-learning pedagogy has already been put to use across the social work education spectrum. Several authors have documented service-learning in social work curricula. Social welfare policy (Anderson, 2006), macro practice (Sather, Weitz, & Carlson, 2007), research methods (Knee, 2002), human behavior in the social environment (Ames & Diepstra, 2006), statistics (Wells, 2006), group work (Bye, 2005), and specific topics, such as gerontology (Cohen, Hatchett, & Eastridge, 2006), disability rights (Hayashi & Favuzzi, 2001), and working with burn-injured children (Williams & Reeves, 2004) are just some of the many areas covered using a service-learning framework. Lemieux and Allen (2007) present a systematic review of eight studies on service-learning in social work. These works were published between 1994 and 2004, and reflected primarily indirect contact between students and their service-learning partners. Attitudes, perceptions, satisfaction, and benefits were just some of the variables that were assessed using qualitative focus groups and pretest/posttest and posttest-only designs.

Although there is no shortage of social work courses incorporating service-learning as a means of curriculum delivery, there is a dearth of literature on service-learning in social work diversity courses in particular. Bliss and Meehan (2008) describe how 20 students from several social work courses, one of which was a cultural diversity course, in a majority White school of social work, chose a Hurricane Katrina disaster response service-learning project, while other students in the courses chose a traditional assignment. In a follow-up survey, students commented how diversity course content helped them recognize the roots of the negative stereotypes they had about the Hurricane Katrina evacuees, as most of the people they were helping were Black and living in poverty. In this scenario, service-learning helped make real the issues of racism and poverty and served as a vehicle for tying the issues back to classroom learning. Blundo (2010) also reports on a shared service-learning experience, this time interdisciplinary, with communication studies. The author describes the course only as a social justice course and one in which students chose one of three video documentary projects focusing on African Americans' and Native Americans' experiences during desegregation of the 1950s. Blundo (2010) summarized students' experiences of learning history first-hand from those who lived it and the nuances—the details, the emotions, and the personal stories—that were absent from the students' grade-school textbooks.

These two examples demonstrate the utility of pairing service-learning with social work's diversity curricula. However, neither provides a clear picture of students' own perceptions of service-learning in social work in general or in a diversity course in particular. The present article seeks to fill a gap in the knowledge base by providing insight into the service-learning

experience from social work students' perspective. Thus the objectives of this examination are to present social work students' a) likes and dislikes about service-learning, b) thoughts about service-learning's place in the curriculum, c) time spent on their service-learning projects, and d) comments and suggestions.

Method

Participants

This study relied on a convenience sample of 45 graduate social work students in two sections of a diversity and oppression course taught using a service-learning framework. These students, nearly half (47%) of the full-time foundation-year cohort, were invited to voluntarily complete the end-of-semester survey. The University's Institutional Review Board approved this study.

Two surveys were excluded because of the students' failure to consent to have their responses included in the study; thus, 43 participants, or 95.6% of the original sample pool, were included in the final sample. Participants' signatures were not obtained, as no identifying information was collected; instead, students were provided with a written informed consent script. Demographic data were obtained later in aggregate form from a department administrator. Omitting demographic data items from the survey protected students' anonymity, but in turn, item responses cannot be analyzed with regard to personal characteristics and patterns of nonresponse cannot be gleaned, making the failure to collect such data a limitation of this study. The final sample was 93.4% female, 73.7% White, and an average age of 23.9 years (*SD* = 3.41). This primarily young, White, female demographic is common in graduate social work education (CSWE, 2011) and should be addressed (McPhail & Sidvah, 2008), but it limits the discussion and interpretation of their service-learning experiences as relevant only to others who are young, White, and female. This narrow demographic also poses several pedagogical factors that must be considered. For example, a classroom discussion of race and racism, typical in a course on human diversity and oppression, is not complete without one also on White privilege, regardless of the racial makeup of the instructor and students. Instructors must carefully facilitate the conversation so that students are challenged yet remain engaged. Service-learning can be not only a conduit for such a discussion, but also a context for "doing diversity" that challenges preconceived notions and promotes social justice for both students and instructors (Baldwin et al., 2007).

Measures

The survey was designed by the first author, also the course instructor, and consisted of nine items: a "yes/no" checkbox for participants to indicate their consent to have their responses included in the research and eight qualitative questions pertaining to service-learning in the course. These last eight items are presented in their entirety below. Briefly, the items asked the students to comment on the positive and negative aspects of the service-learning component, the placement of service-learning in the curriculum, and the amount of time they spent on their service-learning projects, and to provide suggestions and comments.

Procedures

Survey sampling relied on students enrolled in two course sections taught by the first author (also referred to henceforth as the instructor). The survey was administered at the beginning of the last class meeting of the fall 2006 semester and was one of five questionnaires, among them course and service-learning evaluations. All questionnaires were voluntary and could be completed in any order. Students were to read the survey study's consent and instructions and were allowed as much time as they needed to complete all questionnaires. The instructor left the room once the forms had been distributed.

The course, Human Diversity and Oppression, is a requirement for foundation-year graduate social work students. The objectives of the course are to provide students with a historical overview of prejudice and discrimination and to place human experience in a contemporary social, political, and economic context. Three of the more salient course objectives outlined in the syllabus are to train students to fight discrimination and promote social justice, apply course learning to their field and professional experiences, and engage in ethical, culturally competent practice.

The service-learning activities for the two fall 2006 sections of this course were to take place at students' internship sites. Students were required to identify, with their field supervisors, a gap in the agency's or organization's service to its clients or constituents from vulnerable populations. The service-learning project itself was to design a remedy to fill that gap. Projects that students decided on ranged from intervention activities for children and elderly clients to information brochures regarding sexual assault and end-of-life care to resource directories of child grief counselors, cancer services, and addiction treatment.

Service-learning assignments composed 70% of students' course grade. The remaining 30% was composed of class participation (10%), and four 1–3-page experiential labs (5% each). Assignments included three 1–2-page journals (5% each), one 5–8-page paper (20%), one class presentation (15%), and engaging in the project itself (i.e., designing a remedy to fill a service gap; 20%). Students were graded on the project by submitting to the instructor a one-page summary of their project or, if the project was a one-page product, such as a pamphlet, directory, or resource list, then the product itself. At the end of the semester, these one-page documents were compiled into a spiral-bound brochure, and a copy was given to each of the field supervisors overseeing the students.

Research Design

This study used a cross-sectional design to gather and analyze qualitative data, which, through the depth that qualitative data provide, will help establish the groundwork for future studies regarding the outcomes of diversity content delivery via service-learning.

Data Analysis

This study used thematic analysis, in which data are coded according to emergent themes. The first author began the coding process by aggregating by item number the responses from all surveys. Data were then coded according to theme by both authors working independently. This inductive approach allowed themes in the data to emerge (Patton, 2002). Next, the first author compared the two sets of themes for agreement and consistency. Themes that were similar in title and focus were combined, along with their individual participant responses, to form one new overarching theme. The authors reviewed 35 responses on which

the two disagreed with regard to the original themes, with the purpose of recategorizing these responses within the newly created themes.

Missing data are defined as those items for which the respondent marked a line through the answer space or left it blank. Responses of "NA," "Nothing," "None," and the like were treated as valid responses and included in the analysis. Most items achieved a greater than 88% response rate.

Results and Discussion

Survey item response rates ranged from 48.8% (item 7) to 100% (item 5b); however, seven of the eight items had rates above 80%. Survey items appear in italics and are numbered as they were on the survey, and their responses follow. Each item's themes are reported in order of their prominence; themes with the most student endorsement appear first under each item.

Miscellaneous categories, which contained responses that did not fit into a theme, and minor categories, those that fewer than 15% of students endorsed, have been omitted.

2. What did you like about service-learning? What worked well? What would you like to see continued?

In their comments on what they liked most, students touched on several service-learning norms: serving others, applying classroom knowledge, learning experientially, and working creatively (see, e.g., Eyler & Giles, 1999). Lohman and Aitken (2002) found similar patterns among their students, who included helping others and developing skills as the most positive of their service-learning experiences.

Serving others. Students most liked service-learning for its focus on serving others. Given that the course was composed of graduate students of social work, a profession dedicated to serving, this finding is not surprising. Subthemes include making a difference, serving oppressed populations, benefiting others, learning while serving, and serving several stakeholders simultaneously. Students were able to see outside themselves and appreciate that their efforts helped others; similarly, they were able to see the bigger picture and recognize the contributions they were making not only at the personal level but also at the organizational and community levels. As one student stated, "I liked service learning because I felt like I was contributing to both my community and my agency." True to their future professions' calling, students also recognized the attention that service-learning and their efforts paid to oppressed populations in particular.

Applying classroom knowledge. Students' second most common theme was the knowledge they gained from the service-learning experience and their ability to apply that knowledge. Students cited targeted learning, local issues, and current and future application as recurring subthemes. Service-learning provided a context for students to gain in-depth knowledge about their internship agency, their clients, and available and needed resources. "I feel that it does enhance the learning experience," remarked one of the students, a sentiment echoed by freshmen service-learning students who partnered with inner-city children and at-risk adolescents (Stavrianopoulos, 2008). Two students in the present study spoke to the background research they needed to do for their projects, which is exactly what other students have found beneficial (Amtmann, 2004). Service-learning also gave them an outlet for applying course content in a real-world setting, which McClam and her colleagues (2008) found is valued

by service-learning students. As one student explained, "I liked how the project gave me an awareness of community needs and how to apply class learning into the community."

Working creatively. Creativity and flexibility, another common theme, refers to the latitude that service-learning and this particular project provided with regard to autonomy and diversity of ideas. Graduate education, more so than undergraduate, encourages and promotes independent thinking and creativity. Additionally, service-learning encourages creativity and improves problem solving (McCarthy & Tucker, 1999) in which students and community partners must engage in order to meet the community's identified needs. Students identified this as "thinking outside the box" and "cultivating our own ideas on issues that needed to be addressed." This creativity also benefits community partners, whose needs cannot always be met through conventional means.

Learning experientially. Tied for third most-common like was the hands-on, alternative learning experience that service-learning offers. Although fewer students cited the experiential nature of service-learning as their favorite aspect of the experience, several used the term "hands-on" to express their liking, which Hagenbuch (2006) also found. Service-learning as an experiential teaching and learning method, though, may be somewhat lost on graduate social work students who are perpetually immersed in field education internships. More students may have cited this aspect as their favorite had they not already been involved in experiential learning.

3. What didn't you like about service-learning? What didn't work well? What would you like to see changed?

Three main themes tied for the top spot: time commitment/workload, internship/ interpersonal issues, and assignment requirements.

Time commitment/workload. First was the time commitment/workload issue. Students commented that service-learning, or perhaps this particular project, was taking them away from other responsibilities at their internships, explaining that it "took up a lot of time" and was "not realistic due to full-time [student] status." At least one student commented that "asking students of social work to volunteer was extra work in addition to internships and the heavy workload." The same difficulty among students has been reported elsewhere (Bordelon & Phillips, 2006; Hagenbuch, 2006; Weglarz, 2004). Taking students away from their internship responsibilities was an unintended consequence of the project and one that could have been avoided with better planning on the instructor's part. However, service-learning as extra work and requiring extra time was perhaps students' misinterpretation of the course requirements. That is, service-learning assignments actually replaced, rather than added to, traditional coursework such as papers, exams, and other assignments. Although course assignments included three journals, a paper, and a presentation, the work was derived from the service-learning experience, and it was quantitatively less than the traditional workload in order to accommodate the time students would need to spend on their projects. This perhaps was not adequately explained to the students at the start of the semester.

Internship/interpersonal issues. The second most-common theme was related to internship/interpersonal issues. Most complaints centered on a lack of involvement by students' field supervisors and other agency staff whose help they needed. One student lamented, "I feel that most supervisors did not have the time to help the students." In a previous study, students cited "lack of cooperation" as the number one factor discouraging service-learning participation (McCarthy & Tucker, 1999, p. 562). In the present study, this may have resulted from the instructor's not having reached out to the supervisors with more than a letter introducing the

supervisor to service-learning, the project, and his or her role in the process. With such a project in the future, the instructor should personally connect with each field supervisor, either by phone or agency visit. Two students disliked service-learning being linked with their internships. This number, however, is outweighed by the number of students who liked service-learning at their internship sites. Interpersonal issues arose primarily among those students who did not at the time have an internship and were therefore required to work with a peer who did.

Assignment requirements. The last of the top three dislikes was the theme of assignment requirements. Students explained that they would have preferred working in groups on a "bigger finished product" and that they disliked some of the assignments. Complaints varied from one student feeling as though he or she was "doing busy work for my agency," to one student each disliking the one-page summary, the journals, the paper, and the presentation.

4a. How do you feel about service-learning being linked with a graduate social work course on human diversity and oppression?

Responses were coded simply as good idea, mixed feelings, or bad idea.

Good idea. The overwhelming majority of students felt that incorporating service-learning into a graduate social work course on diversity and oppression was a good idea. Students cited the obvious fit between a course on diversity and oppression and serving clients from oppressed groups through service-learning. "It helps link social-work students to diverse and oppressed groups who we will be working with in the future." They also felt that the pairing "gives us exposure to many aspects of our internship, diversity, and oppression" and "makes one more aware," perhaps with regard to real-life social problems. Eighty-six percent of Weglarz's (2004) student sample also felt that service-learning increased their ''awareness of community needs'' (p. 128).

Mixed. Some students had mixed feelings, believing either that service-learning would be a better fit with a different course or that service-learning is appropriate in spite of the perceived additional workload, such as, "It was a lot of extra work, but it was also a good learning experience." Again, this latter problem could be overcome with a more thorough explanation early in the semester of the work that is required in service-learning and how it is comparable to that of the workload in a non-service-learning course. Others gave qualified approval, for example, "Very good idea as long as it doesn't overload the student."

Bad idea. Most students who perceived the link to be a bad idea considered service-learning to be what they were already doing at their internships and therefore unnecessary. Another student viewed service-learning as more appropriate for undergraduate education than graduate. "I think it's a good idea [with] undergrad courses because you don't get much hands-on experience but in grad school I think it's redundant." Here again, students are voting against "too much of a good thing," seeing that their internships give them all the hands-on experience they need. This raises the point that instructors of social work and other related helping professions, especially those that require internships or practica, must take extra care to differentiate for their students formal field education from service-learning. Internships and practica, for example, focus on professional skills and primarily benefit the student (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996). Service-learning, on the other hand, promotes critical reflection (Jacoby, 1996) and civic responsibility (Lee et al., 2007) and benefits students and community partners alike (Blouin & Perry, 2009). Both experiential methods provide students with equally valuable opportunities for academic, personal, and frequently professional growth, and one method need not be excluded in the presence of the other.

4b. Should a different course be considered in addition to or instead of this course?

Students had several suggestions for incorporating service-learning. Some considered service-learning appropriate for other courses, particularly a foundation-year practice course, in addition to or instead of the diversity course, while other students suggested making changes to the existing service-learning/diversity course pairing. Some students were unclear in their answer whether they were referring to adding to or replacing human diversity as a service-learning course. Therefore, responses are grouped by a general yes/no theme.

Yes, in addition to/instead of. Most of the students suggested keeping service-learning in the social work curriculum, but they differed on where to include it. Students felt strongly about pairing service-learning with a foundation-year practice course either instead of or in addition to a course on diversity and oppression. A few others suggested research methods, human behavior and the social environment, and grant writing courses for service-learning. The pool of possibilities as viewed by these students is a relatively shallow one given their status as first-semester, first-year graduate students. Asking this question of second-semester, second-year students in the same program may have yielded a broader, more informed cadre of appropriate courses. To his or her credit, one student did assert, "All of our courses could incorporate service-learning into their curriculum." This bodes well for community partners who have the advantage of various inter- and intradisciplinary options to match their constituents' needs.

No. Most students who did not feel a need to switch or add service-learning courses simply said "no." Only two students elaborated, one of whom advocated for the removal of service-learning altogether: "Social work is already a helping profession—offer [service-learning projects] to schools who traditionally are not service oriented."

5a. How many hours do you believe you spent working on your service-learning project (not including the time you spent on your journals, final paper, and presentation)?

Responses varied, as students were not provided with options from which to choose, nor were they asked to report in a certain manner, for example, providing a single number, not a range. This made quantifying their responses difficult, one of the study's limitations. To do so, range responses were averaged (e.g., "10–15 hours" equals 12.5 hours). Three students provided nonspecific responses that could not be quantified.

Time spent on the projects ranged from 0–5 hours to 60 hours. Of 33 students who responded, most (78.8%) spent between 5 and 25 hours working on their projects, with an estimated average of 17.23 hours (*SD* = 11.85), and an estimated median of 12.5 hours. This is in line with the amount of time typically put in by service-learning students (Bennett, Henson, & Drane, 2003; Brunick & Kennedy, 2007; Segrist, 2004; Toews & Cerny, 2005). Weglarz (2004) found that the more time that was spent, the greater the satisfaction with service-learning. In the current study, students were not required to devote a certain amount of time but were instead required to simply fulfill the service-learning project requirements of designing and developing a product that fills a gap in existing services to persons from vulnerable populations. This is one example of autonomy afforded by the project, that students could determine for themselves how much time and effort they wanted to devote, knowing they were going to be graded on their one-page product or summary. However, autonomy may not be necessary for success or for students to perceive service-learning as valuable (Lester, Tomkovick, Wells, Flunker, & Kickul, 2005).

5b. Do you believe that the final product was worth the time spent? If no, why not?

Having just reflected on the hours they put into their service-learning, students were asked if they thought their final product was worth the time spent. Major emergent themes are simply yes and mixed/qualified.

Yes. Virtually all of the students who responded to this item felt that, yes, the time they spent working on their project was worth it. Several spoke to the benefits they, their agencies, and the clients had realized or will realize because of their efforts. "It was definitely worth the time spent due to the many benefits I personally received [and] the benefits my agency [and] clients received." Others simply were pleased with the outcome. "Even if no one ever utilizes my project, I still worked hard on the idea and I liked the outcome." McCarthy and Tucker (1999) found that, among students, the most important factor that encourages service-learning is getting results.

Mixed/qualified. A few students had mixed feelings about the worth of the end product in light of the time they spent on it. Others had positive feelings, which they qualified with their concerns. Although responses varied, the majority wondered whether their hard work would ever reach the clients. "I feel the project turned out okay, but I have doubts as to whether the agency will use it." Other students felt that they did more work on it than was necessary. This may have been due to the grading being applied to the one-page summary and not the project itself, the time the project took away from their internship, and the lack of clarity within the assignment. These pitfalls could easily be avoided in the future by the instructor addressing each point carefully. For example, grading could be applied to the entire project, time could be allocated away from the internship to work on the project, and the assignment instructions could be restated clearly and in greater detail.

6. What suggestions do you have for future service-learning projects?

Several themes emerged from the students' responses, but one in particular stood out among the rest. The majority of suggestions revolved around the service-learning needing more clarity and structure. Other, less common themes included different assignments/project, different grading, and different field involvement.

More clarity/structure. Students by far wanted to see the assignment instructions improved. They requested more "direction," "guidelines," "structure," and "clarity," specifically more detail with regard to the assignment instructions, the type of project, and the instructor's expectations. No fewer than four students used the word "specific." One rather astute student articulated his or her desires in some detail. "Make instructions a little more understandable as to what is expected of the students and how it relates to the course." Lohman and Aitken (2002) similarly had students who suggested that better organization was needed and that students in organized sites had positive perceptions of service-learning. The lesson learned here is to provide students with enough detail to convey the purpose, required elements, and expected outcome of the assignment. Carefully reviewing the assignment with the students at the start of the semester and again later as needed may help to lessen students' anxiety created by unclear or vague instructions.

Different assignments/project. Students recommended changes to the service-learning assignments. Rather than each student working individually on his or her own project, two students suggested that "the entire class work on a big project." For those who would have preferred working collaboratively and not individually, future students could be given the option to work alone on their own project or with others on a joint project. Conceivably half of the class could work individually, while the other half worked together on one project, or perhaps small

groups of students could work on several projects. One third of the students suggested a more hands-on project, "as opposed to creating a resource list," for example.

Other students questioned the value and utility of writing journals and papers. At the time, students were asked to journal about any topic related to their service-learning experience. Since then, the instructor has supplied service-learning students with journal topics, which has resulted in more favorable evaluations by students of journal assignments. The paper serves a similar reflection purpose, but also helps students tie the various aspects of the service-learning experience together. This purpose may not have been adequately conveyed by the instructor.

Different grading. The third most common suggestion addressed grading. Students again expressed concern a) that the project was not graded, and b) that the project or perhaps the service-learning itself carried substantial weight towards the final grade.

Regarding the former point, two students rightly pointed out, "I worked very hard and I would like [the project] to be graded," "NOT just a 1 pg. summary of our product." The instructor's original intent was not to grade the project, essentially the students' efforts towards producing their product. The instructor would have no idea how much time and effort the students actually devoted to their projects, so the instructor determined it unfair to attempt to grade them. Instead the instructor chose to grade the one-page summary (or, if the product itself was a one-page document, then to grade the product), since the document could itself be seen and evaluated. The document was evaluated for originality, creativity, and product utility. In the future, it will be necessary to develop a plan for evaluating students' projects, not just the summary.

Regarding the latter point about the weight of the service-learning grades, it is unclear whether the students considered the project grade, worth 20% of the final grade, or the entire service-learning component, worth 70%, as too much weight. This uncertainty is evidenced by one student who suggested "not to make it worth the majority of our grade in the class." What may remedy either scenario, the project or the service-learning as a whole, is to provide a thorough introduction to service-learning, including an explanation that service-learning is an approach to teaching and learning, not an add-on to the course. Service-learning offers alternative means for students to acquire knowledge, not only through written and oral communication, such as papers and presentations, respectively, but through hands-on learning, as well. If weighted evenly, in this case four assignments worth 15%–20% each, service-learning affords students with varying learning styles a fair chance of academic success.

Different field involvement. Another third-place theme spoke to the need for greater communication among all involved, especially "[between the] teacher [and] field supervisors." At the start of the semester, the instructor provided supervisors with nothing more than a letter introducing herself and inviting supervisors to participate, along with a brief explanation of service-learning and the proposed structure (i.e., supervisors and students identifying a gap in service to clients from vulnerable populations). Field supervisors would have benefitted from, and indeed deserved, a more thorough introduction to service-learning, clearer guidelines on how to support their students, and a collaborative effort to fit the service-learning into the existing internship. A student recommended that the instructor "[c]onsult with supervisors and make sure all agree and are willing to 'somewhat' participate." A personal visit to the agency by the instructor, or at least a phone call, would have better met these objectives.

7. What else would you like us to know about your service-learning experience?

Few students added any final thoughts to their service-learning evaluation. Of the eight students who did, six commented on the benefits of service-learning, and two reiterated the lack

of clarity in the assignments. Benefit themes are arranged into benefits realized by the student and those realized by others.

Helpful/beneficial for me. Students who spoke of benefits viewed their service-learning experience as valuable to their education. “It was challenging but a valuable learning experience,” remarked one student. “Whether or not it is used, I learned a lot [of] various treatments,” reasoned another.

Helpful/beneficial for others. The experience was seen as beneficial to others, as well. Two students commented, “I was glad to help these parents with the handout. It [gave] me such a great feeling of accomplishment,” and “It was a great tool to become involved at my internship and to help empower those I work with of low [socioeconomic status].”

Clarification. Students again articulated the need for clarity regarding service-learning project assignments. “Need more specific direction [with] paper and presentation.” “It was confusing at first to figure out what kind of service to provide, and what kind of service was expected.”

Conclusions

This exploratory study sought to elicit students’ attitudes toward service-learning in a course on human diversity and oppression in the context of a service-learning project undertaken at their internship sites. Overall, students reported positive experiences and attitudes toward service-learning, the course, and the project, a finding that is similar to other studies of students’ perceptions of service-learning (Amtmann, 2004; Connor-Greene, 2002; Hagenbuch, 2006; McClam et al., 2008; Weglarz, 2004). Most of the critical comments students made were with regard to the specific project (e.g., not collaborative, time-consuming) and the accompanying assignments (e.g., unclear, vague).

Implications for Service-Learning Stakeholders

The effect of service-learning can be generalized beyond the social work discipline and diversity curriculum to disciplines, curricula, and benefactors across the academic and service-learning spectrums. Student participants benefitted from this research first by having their voices heard, engaging them as equal partners in the process rather than as subordinates who must simply carry out an assignment for a grade, and second by making their feedback a priority and using it to improve how students are presented with, engaged in, and allowed to shape service-learning. Other students can benefit from their predecessors’ insight in answering the questions “What might I expect?” and “How might I contribute to making this a positive and worthwhile experience?” Instructors stand to gain from the first-hand accounts of 43 students who shared their perceptions of and suggestions for service-learning, as well as a faculty member who presented lessons learned from which other faculty can benefit. Regarding service-learning settings and partners, it has been demonstrated here how field educators need not be excluded from service-learning partnerships as long as one delivery method is not mistaken for the other. Likewise, community partners serving as field education sites can also engage in service-learning partnerships using this same logic of distinction. Field educators and classroom instructors must work closely to ensure that field learning and service-learning are separate activities each with its own purpose and goals. In these scenarios, the field setting’s constituents are the ultimate benefactors of the service-learning partnership. Last, colleges and universities are increasingly promoting civic engagement among their students, faculty, and administrators (Gibson, n.d.). Service-learning helps to further institutional missions by providing a structured

approach to bridging higher education institutions and the communities in which they are situated.

Implications for Education

Service-learning is an experiential method of teaching and learning that offers students a hands-on approach to education. Students have reported here and elsewhere (Hagenbuch, 2006) that they prefer such hands-on experiences, which may promote students' engagement and investment in experiential courses. Service-learning is also an outlet, in addition to field education, for students to apply classroom knowledge to real-world scenarios. Despite a small portion of students perceiving service-learning as redundant in light of their internships, service-learning does what field education does not: promote civic engagement among students and encourage personal reflection on their experiences and how they and their community partners are situated in a larger social context. This serves the purpose of a diversity curriculum that explains oppression, discrimination, and prejudice as functions of power within a society comprised of competing social, political, and economic realities.

Service-learning also encourages creativity, since community-identified needs are often unique to the environment and do not come with a pre-established, prescribed remedy. Fostering creativity in social workers and other mental health and social service providers is vital. For example, clinical social work practice with clients from vulnerable and traditionally underserved populations requires openness on the part of social workers who are not familiar with the clients' racial, ethnic, class, or religious background, among others. In order to respond sensitively and competently, providers are well served by their ability to think and problem solve creatively, outside of a dominant paradigm. Service-learning offers a chance for students to stimulate and enhance their creativity in advance of professional practice.

Recommendations for Education and Research

Hosting service-learning at field education sites brings its own rewards and challenges. To begin, a clear distinction between the two experiential methods must be made for students and field supervisors. Students' internship hours must be protected while also allowing students time to meet the service-learning project's goals and requirements. This might mean the student arrives earlier to the site or leaves later than his or her regularly scheduled times. It might also mean, with the field supervisor's permission, working on service-learning activities when there are no immediate internship duties to be completed. For those students who view service-learning as a duplication of their field education, a further distinction should be made that field education teaches students specific skills and often includes no self-reflection, while service-learning is predicated on self-reflection and teaches students broad skills that the instructor ties to course content.

Students should also be informed that service-learning is an approach to teaching and learning, not an add-on component to the course. Service-learning assignments are intended to replace, not accompany, traditional course assignments. At most, these traditional assignments can be modified to fulfill service-learning objectives, for example critical reflection, but service-learning assignments are meant to enhance course material.

Instructors would do well to reach out personally to field supervisors who will be responsible for supporting students' service-learning activity at the field site. The first author engaged supervisors only through a handwritten form letter, which likely did little to endear them to her or to service-learning. A site visit or at least a phone call would have benefitted not only

the supervisors but also the students, some of whom commented on their supervisor's inability to guide the service-learning activity.

A substantial recommendation, one that applies not only to service-learning assignments but to educational assignments in general, is to build in structure, make instructions clear, and clearly convey expectations. Students' most significant complaint was that the project's instructions were unclear and the instructor's expectations vague. Although autonomy is important, students in the present study made it clear that structure is just as important. Structure may include specifying a minimum number of hours to be logged, generating project suggestions, requiring pre-approval of project ideas, and standardizing project evaluation.

This particular service-learning venture—identifying a gap in service and devising a product to fill that gap—proved to be a successful one. Despite its limitations, this exploratory study provides useful insights into social work students' perceptions of service-learning, particularly with regard to service-learning within a diversity course. These insights serve as a resource for education and educators.

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