

## Chapter 4

### Service-Learning and Diversity Issues

National-Louis University's statement on diversity:

*National-Louis University values diversity within its own community and in the national and international communities it serves. We experience and envision our own diversity in a manner that extends beyond the formal definitions, such as ethnicity, race, religion, to embrace the contributions all members bring via their unique heritage, political views, lifestyle, education, nationalities, differing abilities, and life experiences. We are committed to recruiting, hiring and retaining diverse, highly qualified faculty, administrators, staff, and students in order to continue planning, developing, supporting, delivering, and graduating from our programs. Our commitment to diversity stems from our belief that our community members serve to respect, appreciate and advocate diversity. National-Louis University has a strong commitment to diversity. Such diversity promotes the inclusion of multiple perspectives and ideas, as we prepare our students to interact with diverse populations in our ever-changing world.*

### Facing Diversity Issues and Challenges in Service-Learning Activities

We have seen issues of diversity raised in our service-learning endeavors at NLU. Students experience diverse pedagogy and they are acquainted with this particular aspect of experiential learning. As our students go out into the community to do their research projects in conjunction with service endeavors they encounter diverse locations and diverse populations. Student reflections often indicate these experiences as eye-opening, providing clarity and a sense of understanding not gained through text or other media. Depending on the projects, service-learning can lead to diverse cultural awareness and understanding.

Service-learning research and literature often address the complexities of diversity. According to the *Diversity Digest*:

Throughout the 1990s, campuses have continued to expand their service learning programs. Many are now explicitly connecting these programs to efforts to diversify their curricula. While more research is needed to determine the impact of explicitly addressing diversity or justice issues in service learning programs, current research reveals that existing programs are having a positive impact on students' attitudes and abilities.

According to a new study by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at the University of California, Los Angeles,

30 percent of more than 22,000 students surveyed nationwide had participated in course-based community service during college, and an additional 46 percent participated in some other form of community service. The study also found that service participation had a significant positive impact on several different outcome measures including academic performance, critical thinking skills, leadership, and students' commitment to activism and to promoting racial understanding. Qualitative findings from the study also suggest that both faculty and students involved in these programs develop a heightened sense of civic responsibility and personal effectiveness through participation in service-learning courses.

Service-learning is used to increase preservice teachers' understanding of diversity. According to Donald F. Hones (1997):

Service learning in preservice teacher education helps students to understand themselves and diverse members of the community, develop intercultural competence, and investigate more deeply what it means to be a member of the community. "Human Diversity, Power, and Opportunity in Social Institutions," is an introductory course that requires reading, writing, discussion, and a 10-week service learning project in the community. The students, mostly middle class, European Americans from small towns and suburbs in Michigan, volunteer in settings that bring them into contact with diverse ethnic, socioeconomic, and linguistic groups. To study how students' lives were affected by their community experiences three exemplary stories were constructed using narrative analysis. These stories suggested that the narrative is a form through which preservice teachers can better interpret the educational lives of diverse learners and their own roles in those lives. By linking their personal stories with those of children and adults in schools and communities, preservice teachers can learn to recognize the needs, aspirations, and contributions of diverse Americans.

Assessing the dispositional knowledge of diversity learning can be complex. Jo Paoletti, Eden Segal, and Christina Totino (2007) tell us:

Teaching--and assessing learning--about diversity through service-learning is full of challenges, especially if the learning goals are affective. The teacher has no good way of knowing exactly where the starting point is for each student. The student may only know where the starting point was once he or she has moved beyond it and sees it in retrospect. Students may be reluctant to share or analyze negative feelings or experiences. They may even attempt to perform "desirable" learning. It may be difficult to gauge affective learning under these circumstances, but it is not impossible. Careful use of student writing and observation, combined with on-site observation, can help the instructors--and the students themselves--capture epiphanies and connect experience and reflection to document new learning.

It is important to note that, although typical service-learning endeavors involving people enhance the understanding of human diversity, there have been brief service encounters which have reinforced stereotypes for certain individuals. Erickson and O'Connor (2000), for example, have found the frequency and quality of contact is extremely important in determining if stereotypes are dispelled or intensified. Well structured service-learning endeavors with properly planned pre, during, and post reflection components can assist in eliminating stereotyping. Whereas a one-time visit to a soup kitchen or homeless shelter with little or no structured reflection components may have the opposite effect on an individual with rigidly stereotypical conceptions.

## **Service-Learning as “Lived Through” Multicultural Experience**

Well planned service-learning endeavors which place students in diverse locations can enhance their multicultural understanding by allowing for firsthand experience amid unfamiliar cultures. Service-learning can enhance diverse human experiences as students work with people who are ethnically, racially, and socioeconomically different from them. Such a well structured experience places students in the position to interact more deeply than typical daily encounters with others who might be culturally divergent from them.

In his essay, “Service Learning, Multiculturalism, and the Pedagogies of Difference,” Gregory Jay (2008) argues that a pedagogy of "dialogue across differences" should be infused into the core curriculum and function as the link joining multicultural education to service- learning. Close examination of student reflections and journal writings reveals how such dialogue can enhance learning, strengthen community partnerships, and enrich antiracist pedagogy.

## **Service-Learning as Responsive and Socially Aware Practice**

A basic tenet of service-learning pedagogy is reciprocity. There should be mutual benefit between the community partner and the student(s) engaged in the service endeavor. When seeking a community partner, faculty and students practice social awareness in seeking a true community need. Often faculty members will link with particular community partners for an extended period of time in order to continue to be responsive to a genuine need. Jane Kendall (1990, p 20) tells us “Service-Learning programs explicitly include features which foster participants' learning about the larger social issues behind the human needs to which they are responding.”

Carolyn O'Grady (2000, p. xiv) proposes combining service-learning with critical multiculturalism as a pedagogy with the power to be transformative and create social change. "The academic rigor of multicultural education in tandem with service learning requires students to examine taken-for-granted assumptions and to think critically and comprehensively about human issues that are basic to the quality of human life".

## **Service-Learning as Social Justice Activism**

The Banneker History Project (BHP) reconstructed the history of the Benjamin Banneker School, which operated as a segregated school for African Americans from 1915 to 1951. It was a project in social justice education with community service as its base. In their article, “Social Justice Perspectives on the History & Philosophy of American Education Improving the Human Condition: Leadership for Justice-Oriented Service-Learning,” the authors, Marilynne Boyle-Baise; Betty Bridgwaters; Leslie Brinson; Nancy Hiestand; Beverly Johnson; and Pat Wilson provide an insider perspective of group dynamics among core leaders for the BHP. Building relationships, working for social justice, and confronting racism are key themes for the group.

Leaders recall moments of discomfort, particularly related to issues of race and racism, and describe ways they worked through them. Based on their wisdom of practice, authors offer suggestions for those who might do similar work.

In their article, "What Teacher Candidates Learned About Diversity, Social Justice, and Themselves From Service-Learning Experiences, Shelia Baldwin, Alice Buchanan, and Mary Rudisill (2007) examine how service-learning provides undergraduate teacher candidates opportunities to cultivate deeper understandings of diversity, social justice, and themselves. Participants were from a mid-Atlantic university and a rural southeastern university. Although from different regions, the teacher candidates shared predominantly White, middle-class backgrounds. Three themes framed the discussion—preconceived notions about teaching in diverse settings, how preconceived notions were overcome (or reinforced), and "learning about myself as a teacher." Findings suggest that service-learning, emphasizing multiculturalism and social justice, has the potential for empowering prospective teachers to confront injustices and to begin deconstructing lifelong attitudes and constructing socially just practices.

### References

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