Students Serving the College Community Through Research: A Course Model

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Introduction

Understanding the research process is critical to an effective undergraduate Psychology program that prepares students for graduate or professional work. Experiential learning within the context of the larger community can provide students with a deeper understanding of the discipline and the application of knowledge to real world issues (Smirles, 2011). Taking a service learning approach to undergraduate research meets students' academic and professional needs, while also benefiting others.

In 2007, the American Psychological Association (APA) developed critical learning goals and competencies for undergraduate programs. These include content area knowledge, critical thinking, information and technological literacy, the understanding and application of research methodology and statistical analyses, and effective communication skills. PSYCH 4100 Experimental Psychology was designed several years ago to address all of these goals. Students had the opportunity to engage in independent, primary research. Providing appropriate levels of autonomy and responsibility to students over the direction and outcome of their work can enhance their confidence to accomplish significant tasks (Stukas, Clary, & Snyder, 1999). However, while students gained a distinct advantage over most graduates from other Psychology programs, they often expressed a desire for their work to have greater meaning by helping others.

In order to address both the need for a rigorous academic experience and student interest in work that can serve others, a partnership was developed with the Director of Residence Life and PSYCH 4100 was redesigned to include a service-learning component. This pedagogical approach purposefully integrates community service into the structure of a course in order to foster meaningful knowledge for students, encourage their personal development, and address real community needs (Slavkin, 2007). Additionally, it can cultivate a stronger sense of civic responsibility (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996).

There is great value in the service learning approach of student research to the goals and mission of Residence Life. Student research and its impact on the community breaks down into two areas, each contributing to a broader understanding of college student needs. The first is the research of the students themselves. Even if the samples are not representative enough to draw definitive conclusions, the data can provide direction for areas of further study within the community. Furthermore, the research literature that the students have gathered can educate Residence Life staff and administrators, providing them with theoretical and empirical explanations for the student issues that they encounter. The second impact on the community involves the student researchers as students themselves, going through their own developmental process. Benchmarking their areas of concern and interest can create a greater understanding for Residence Life of the larger student population.

Course Design

The purpose of the course was for students to develop, implement, and present an empirical study on a topic of interest to them that could provide useful knowledge to Residence Life on issues facing college students.

To assist students in developing projects feasible to conduct in a single semester, and address the immediate needs of the specific college community, the summer months were spent planning the course structure and content. The faculty member and the Director of Residence Life read the student development literature and discussed the research in terms of behavior being observed by Resident Assistants and Resident Life administrators. Based upon these conversations, general research categories were defined as parameters for the student research projects. For each category, research articles were selected and provided to students to serve as a starting point from which they would develop a specific focus of interest to them. Students were also provided guidelines for projects that were allowable (or prohibited) by the College's IRB.

During the first few weeks of class, students read the literature and engaged in discussions with one another, the faculty member, and the Director of Residence Life before selecting a general research category. Class lectures reviewed key issues to consider in the research process as students developed their projects (e.g., operationalizing research variables with appropriate measures that could test their hypotheses).

Students within each category collaborated to combine their unique interests into a cohesive survey that could provide a richer dataset and facilitate more efficient data collection. Working together, they found overlapping interests and shared ideas on measurement. For example, many students who selected stress management wanted to examine coping strategies, so they located one scale that met all of their needs. The final survey also included measures assessing their individual interests (e.g., Emotional Intelligence, social support).

To gain the experience and maintain the independence of their projects, students drafted individual IRB proposals. The faculty member integrated these into larger proposals for each research category. This not only resulted in more comprehensive surveys, but it expedited the IRB review process. Once IRB approval was obtained, students worked together to collect data.

Most aspects of the projects were individual endeavors, which alleviated grading concerns often seen in group projects. With regular feedback from the faculty member, students wrote their own literature reviews, developed hypotheses, ran analyses on their variables, and evaluated the relevance of their findings. Each student produced an APA style manuscript and gave a formal research presentation. Their final work was formally presented to Residence Life.

Research Categories & Articles

1. Millennials in College

Bourke, B. & Mechler, H. S. (2010). A new me generation?: The increasing self-interest among millennial college students. *Journal of College & Character, 11* (2), 1-9. doi: 10.2202/1940-1639.1034.

Brownlow, S. & Reasinger, R. D. (2000). Putting off until tomorrow what is better done today: Academic procrastination as a function of motivation toward college work. *Journal of Social Behavior & Personality, 15* (5) 15-34.

Possible topics: attachment style and coping strategies, decision-making , attributional style, intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation.

2. Stress management

Brougham, R. R., Zail, C. M., Mendoza, C. M., & Miller, J. R. (2009). Stress, sex differences and coping strategies among college students. *Current Psychology, 28,* 85-97. doi: 10.1007/s12144-009-9047-0

Friedlander, L.J., Reid, G.J., Shupak, N., & Cribbie, R. (2010). Social support, self-esteem, and stress as predictors of adjustment to university among first-year undergraduates. *Journal of College Student Development, 48* (3), 259-274. doi: 10.1353/csd. 2007.0024

Possible topics: sources of stress, unhealthy vs healthy coping strategies, support systems, role of Emotional Intelligence, personality factors, attachment style

3. Social networking, the virtual social world, and student well-being

Kramer, N.C. & Winter, S. (2008). Impression management 2.0: The relationshiop of self-esteem, extraversion, self-efficacy, and self-presentation within social networking sites. *Journal of Media Psychology: Theories, Methods, and Applications, 20* (3), 106-116. doi 10.1027/1864-1105.20.3.106

Valenzuela, S., Park, N., & Kee, K. F. (2009). Is there social capital in a social network site?: Facebook use and college students' life satisfaction, trust, and participation. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 14*, 875-901. doi: 10.1111/j. 1083-6101.2009.01474.x

Possible topics: cyberbullying, texting behavior, identity development, academic performance

4. Roommate relationships

Berg, J. H. (1984). Development of friendship between roommates. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 46* (2), 346-356.

Lovejoy, M. C., Perkins, D. V., & Collins, J. E. (1995). Predicting fall semester breakups in college roommates: A replication using the Social Satisfaction Questionnaire. *Journal of College Student Development, 36* (6), 594-602.

Possible topics: matching first year students as roommates, sources of roommate conflict, factors affecting roommate satisfaction.

Outcomes & Conclusion

Three sections of the course were run during the 2010-2011 academic year. Student projects varied widely despite the overlaps in theme, for example:

Predictors of Academic Success: Performance, Parenting Style, and Perfectionism, L. Cyr
*Relationships among Perceived Stress, Job Satisfaction, and Self-Care in College Resident Assistant*s, F. DeCusati
Facebook Jealousy and Attachment, A. Ferlisi
The Relationship Between Emotional Self-Disclosure and Perceived Stress in College Students, A. Guptill
Relationship Between Exercise Motivation and Stress Perception in College Students, L. Lam
Effects of Body Dissatisfaction and Social Comparison on Motivations to Exercise, B. Merrill
Roommate Relationships: Attachment Style, Self-Disclosure, and Quality of Relationship, A. Roberts

Two students were accepted to present their research at the 2011 APS convention, and several others have decided to continue their research as part of their senior capstone.

This model has several advantages and disadvantages:
Advantages
• The application of methodology and statistics is helpful to understanding the research process.
• The experience of going through the IRB process is valued by graduate schools and professional institutions.
• General topics assist in narrowing the research focus.
• The format develops *both* the ability to collaborate and work independently.
Disadvantages
• The IRB review process limits the time to collect data
• IRB restrictions on student research limit the complexity and scope of the designs.
• Research categories can be restrictive for some students.

General Conclusion
The course model (a) meets necessary student learning goals articulated by the APA, (b) addresses the needs of the college community, and (c) provides students with invaluable experience that makes them more competitive for graduate programs and professional employment. Student research can lead to practical applications (e.g., R.A. training, educational programming) that better serve the undergraduate population. Students themselves have a sense of ownership of their work and develop a deeper appreciation of the value of research.

References

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