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Author(s):	*Patricia Hrusa Williams and Audrey Falk*
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Service Learning and Millennial Students: Benefits and Challenges to a Team-Based Approach

Patricia Hrusa Williams and Audrey Falk

Service learning is defined as community activities that integrate academic coursework, student learning goals, and opportunities for reflection (Cress, 2005). Service learning experiences are designed to encourage real-world problem-solving, to develop students' interpersonal and civic skills, and to enhance student understanding of academic content (Eyler & Giles, 1999). For students in social work, family studies, and related majors, it provides an opportunity to gain exposure to human service organizations, non-profits, communities, and diverse client populations. It has been found to be a valuable complement to more traditional teaching methods in these fields (Galbraith, 2002; Murray, Lampinen, & Kelley-Soderholm, 2006; Whitbourne, Collins, & Skultety, 2001). The rate of college students performing service in the U.S. is growing twice as fast as for the general adult population (Dote, Cramer, Dietz, & Grimm, 2006). In addition, college students are twice as likely to volunteer as their college-aged peers who are not in school. Thus, it appears that service is an important component of American students' educational experience (Dote et al., 2006). However, what is not known is what students perceive to be the potential benefits and challenges of service learning. What can we learn by putting ourselves in students' shoes?

The goal of this paper is to describe the service learning model implemented in a family studies department at a comprehensive, metropolitan university in the U.S. This model will be placed in the context of the matrix of service learning opportunities offered at other colleges and academic departments, focusing on how experiences vary in formal learning and value to the community and whether they are undertaken individually or in groups (Mooney & Edwards, 2001; de Montmollin & Hendrick, 2006). The role of service learning in the academic experience of today's students will be considered. Today's typical student is most often a member of the millennial generation, born between 1982 and 2002, a group thought to have their own unique strengths and weaknesses as a cohort (Howe & Strauss, 2000). These student characteristics have important implications for perceptions and outcomes of service learning experiences. This paper highlights the need to consider student and site characteristics to fully understand the benefits of service learning and to optimize engagement.

A Model of Service Learning

De Montmollin and Hendrick (2006) and others (Mooney and Edwards, 2001) propose that student service experiences vary in the degree of formalism in the learning and degree of service to the community. Four categories emerge from their model: basic volunteerism, community service, community-based learning, and service-learning. Basic volunteerism is low in both formal learning and service to the community while service-learning is high in both areas. Community service provides a high level of service but offers a low level of formal learning while the reverse can be said about community-based learning.

Towson University's Department of Family Studies and Community Development offers several courses with service components. Furthermore, the department's mission emphasizes the importance of service-learning, civic responsibility, and community engagement. Community Services for Families is a three-credit, required

Patricia Hrusa Williams, PhD is an Assistant Professor at Towson University Department of Family Studies and Community Development.

Audrey Falk, PhD is an Assistant Professor at Towson University Department of Family Studies and Community Development.

course for undergraduate majors. With both high formal learning and service, this course fits into de Montmollin and Hendrick's (2006) service learning category.

In Community Services for Families, teams of students work on service learning projects in community agencies. The course meets for 2 hours and 45 minutes weekly so that students receive a high-degree of classroom-based support, supervision, and guidance. Typically, students provide between 40 and 60 hours of direct service during the semester, conducting a needs assessment, developing and implementing an action plan, and then evaluating their project. Since the course is intensive in both academic and service requirements, it is likely to promote students' social and intellectual development, critical thinking, problem-solving, and integration of academic concepts in the field (Mooney & Edwards, 2001).

The group or team-oriented component of this course makes it a unique opportunity for students to learn how to work collaboratively as they will need to once they begin their professional careers. Research on employers' perspectives in fields like human development and family studies show they are looking for transferable skills such as the ability to work in a team (Benson et al., 2006). A study of all employers noted that 60% report that students are not very well prepared in this area (P.D. Hart Research Associates, 2008).

The Generation of Millennial Students

The students in our course are typically part of the millennial generation. A generation is defined by not only their time of birth but the circumstances and common experiences they share (Zempke, Raines, & Filipczak, 2000). Millennial students are unique in their experiences. They are technologically savvy, raised by a generation of parents that advocated for the needs of children, and have experienced threats both to safety at school and in society by the Columbine school shootings and the terrorist attacks of September, 11, 2001, respectively. Given their experiences, Howe and Strauss (2000) and others have suggested that millennial students have many positive traits that lend themselves to participating in service learning. Among those mentioned include their high expectations for success, familiarity with group work and being part of a team, relative affluence, good conduct and their interest in helping and being engaged in the real world (Elam, Stratton, & Gibson, 2007; Howe & Strauss, 2000; McGlynn, 2005; Taylor, 2006; Twenge, 2006).

However, it is unclear whether this generation is ready for the challenges involved in service experiences. Millennial students have been somewhat sheltered by their parents and as a group are focused on achievement and obtaining good grades (Elam et al., 2007; Howe & Strauss, 2000; McGlynn, 2005). Are they ready for the changing circumstances, clashes in ideas, and the general "hiccups" that can come with working in the field and when working in groups? Similarly, while familiar with the concept of multitasking (Elam et al. 2007), they have also been raised in a sheltered and scheduled environment (McGlynn, 2005). Given that, how will they manage the demands of balancing class time, service hours, course assignments, and the other demands on their time independently and in a group?

Group Work

Group work experiences are extremely valuable for undergraduate students to prepare them to work as teams in the human service field and with communities to promote individual and social change. Working in teams and developing partnerships is also crucial to student leadership skills (Des Maris, Yang, & Farzanehkia, 2000). Although millennial students may be familiar with teamwork experiences, group work is fraught with challenges for students and faculty alike. Since millennial students are achievement-oriented, group work can be stressful. In group work it is often difficult to identify who has actually completed the work, what amount of effort each individual has contributed, and how to implement an equitable process for grading individual effort. These experiences can make achievement-oriented millennial students less receptive to group work as pedagogy. Social loafing is also a perennial problem (Revere, Elden, & Bartsch, 2008; Tu & Lu, 2005). While millennial students may have had experiences playing on teams or learning through group activities, the pressure

they feel to get good grades and their sheltered upbringing may make it more difficult to cope with these experiences. Wilson (2004) cautions that while millennials' team orientation may make them more receptive to active and collaborative learning, millenials may struggle when group work puts them in an ambiguous situation that calls for them to be more self-reliant.

Further, millennials' high expectations for success necessitates mechanisms to provide students with clear, timely and repeated means of feedback about their progress (Wilson, 2004) Faculty must decide whether to grade the group process, group product, or some combination of the two (Boud, Cohen, & Sampson, 1999). Student self-assessment and peer assessment have been used as vehicles for addressing challenges in group work (Kuisma, 1998; Tu & Lu, 2005). However, no matter the strategy chosen, group work puts an extra burden on instructors and courses which need to have in place systems for evaluating both individual students and groups operating within the same class.

The Present Study

The generation of millennial students found on most college campuses has been conceived of having seven core and often contradictory traits (Howe & Strauss, 2000). They have been conceptualized as sheltered and used to being perceived as being special. They are observed to be confident, team-oriented yet conventional, and accustomed to structure and rules being followed. Finally, they are a generation that feels a great deal of pressure and need to achieve, raised in affluence and better educated than their predecessors. Given these traits, what do millennial students think about service learning experiences? How do millennial students think service learning experiences contribute to their learning? What are important considerations in structuring experiences for them so group-based service learning experiences can prepare them for work in the fields of social work and human services?

Given what is known about the millennial generation, we hypothesize that millenials will view group work, opportunities for networking, and the chance to participate in real-world experiences as strengths of service learning. As a group that values achievement, however, millennial students may feel challenged by critical feedback that is received during the service learning process and by being dependent on a group for their grade. As a group who often is multiply-engaged in service, academics, and extracurricular activities (Elam et al., 2007), will it be difficult for them to figure out how to schedule and anticipate the multiple demands that come with being enrolled in a service learning course with both significant classroom and service components?

Method

Data on student perspectives of service learning was obtained from exit interviews with 201 seniors who graduated in Spring 2005-Spring 2008 in Towson University's Department of Family Studies and Community Development. Students were asked in exit interview surveys to provide open-ended feedback about Community Service for Families and how it contributed to their learning, including ways the course could have been strengthened. Students' free response comments were analyzed and coded to examine the frequency with which students mentioned both positive and negative aspects of their experience. The frequency with which students noted each of the following topics was recorded:

1. *Group Work:* Any phrase that mentions the group or team aspect of the course, project, or experience completed.
2. *Agency:* Any phrase that mentions the agency where the service project took place or the supervisor at that agency. Comments may involve the type of agency, type of work, the size and scope of the project to be completed, the demands/requirements the agency imposed on them, and the student's working relationships with their supervisors, including whether the supervisor was professional, organized, clear, or gave appropriate feedback.
3. *Course and Its Goals:* Any phrase that mentions the course, its assignments, requirements, activities, and how the course linked/failed to link classroom learning with practice. Comments on specific instructors were

not coded.

4. *Real World Active Learning and Rewards:* Any phrase that mentions the real life, real work, active learning aspect of the course and/or the tangible benefits received/not received by the student from the service learning experience. Comments may involve doing actual work with children, individuals, families, or agencies, getting the opportunity to go out into the community, and the degree to which the experience helped them find a job, internship, or gain a specific, marketable skill.
5. *Social or Networking:* Any phrase that mentions the social benefits of the course or experience including meeting people, developing connections with classmates, and those in the field/work world.
6. *Personal Fulfillment:* Any phrase that mentions personal or self-related benefits of the experience, other than those that are tangible. Comments may mention how the course helped/did not help students to learn about themselves or career possibilities, or to meet personal goals. Students could have also mentioned how the experience provided them the opportunity to "do good" or help others, whether in a specific or general way.

Qualitative content analysis of transcripts was completed by three independent coders. A total of 176 students had comments about the course related to the above-mentioned topics, yielding a total of 290 codable phrases. There was 99% agreement in identifying the codable phrases across the three coders. Reliability or percent agreement in assigning codes to phrases ranged from 62-84% depending on the coding category.

Results

Table 1 contains the percentage of student responses that contained information on the positive and negative aspects of their service learning experience in the Community Services to Families course. Overall students' comments centered more on the positive aspects of the service learning experience (68.9%) than the negative (31.1%). Data show that 30%of students reported that a positive aspect of the experience was the real world, active learning component of the experience; only 1.7% reported this to be a weakness of the experience. Negative comments reflected students' observation that things can be more difficult in practice than in theory.

Over a quarter of students (26.6%) noted that course expectations, demands, and responsibilities could be both strengths and weakness. Some students (16.6%) discussed difficulties they had in balancing course and service requirements, integrating class/field experiences, and the amount of work required. However, 10% felt positively challenged by the experience, stating that the course prepared them to go out on their individual internship later in their academic program. Working in groups was also mentioned as both a positive and negative aspect of service learning. While 17.6% of students reported that it was helpful to work in teams since it is what happens in "the real world", 7.2% also felt this was challenging. Issues in group dynamics, equity, and scheduling were all noted.

Discussion

This study examined students' perceptions of the benefits and challenges in a service learning course. Results suggest that the benefits of group-based service learning experiences for undergraduate students outweigh the challenges. More than two-thirds of students in open-ended interviews spontaneously mentioned the gains accrued from these experiences The benefits of of this type of service learning noted most frequently include the opportunity to gain real-world, hands-on experience and to work as part of a team to affect change. The challenges most frequent mentioned related to the demands of participating in a course with an intensive academic and service component, difficulties in working in team, and issues in engaging with human service agencies in the field.

The chance to participate in real-world experiences was most commonly reported by respondents as a positive aspect of service learning. In one student's words, "I... enjoyed how this class was a hands-on experience. I think you learn

better by doing/practicing than sitting in a class listening to a lecture or reading a book." Similarly, Chapman and Morley (1999) found that the desire to better understand their own beliefs and those served are important motivations for participating in service activities.

Even students who acknowledged the challenges of the real-world experiences they encountered found them to be valuable opportunities for learning and personal growth. For example, one student wrote, "Learned a lot about how challenging human services can be. Opened my eyes to the difficulties faced and why non-profits have a hard time implementing their goals; great preparation!" Similarly, Dreuth and Dreuth-Fewell (2002) also found that service learning experiences force students to confront their fantasy of working in agencies with the reality of the challenges and problems inherent in this type of work. Service learning can also assist students in better understanding how social processes contribute to social problems (Eyler, Root & Giles, 1998).

While more students acknowledged the benefits of group work, they also acknowledged the challenges of the experience. One student commented, "Group work provided good insight into future careers (working with co-workers, etc.)". However, another stated, "This was a hard class for me. The group element was a struggle. My group didn't work well together and it caused [us to have] a long semester." While students were not challenged by critical feedback they received from agencies, as hypothesized, the comments mentioned about group work illustrate how critical students were of each other and their contributions to projects. For example, one student wrote "Community Service[s for Families] was challenging. My group members did nothing, so I was stuck doing the work." Another stated "[I] Didn't like the group work. Some people didn't do any work, yet got the same grade." Students were critical of the inequities in workload and ultimately in grading, perceiving some students as doing little work but still receiving credit for group activities.

The challenges students noted in the area of group work are consistent with what is found in the literature. Student concerns about social loafers and grading equity are raised by Conway, Kember, Sivan, and Wu (1993) and others (Cheng & Warren, 2000; Kuisma, 1998). Bourner, Hughes, and Bourner's (2001) students enjoyed working together but they disliked group negotiations, working with unmotivated peers, depending upon one another, the inequitable distribution of work, and time constraints associated with group work. In a study of team-based service learning in a Bachelor's level social work course (Singleton, 2007), students were critical of the inequities in student productivity and unfairness related to students receiving the same grade for different levels of contribution to group projects.

However, as with real world experiences, some students were able to see even the challenges of group work as positive learning experiences. For example, one student wrote, "This was good for me because it force[d] me to work in a group and make it work." Studies have found students generally like group work and action-based team approaches despite the challenges they pose (Bourner et al., 2001; Haberyan, 2007). One strategy to make the group work experience more comfortable for achievement-oriented millennial students is to move toward individualized grading which includes peer assessment as a vehicle for addressing student concerns (Cheng & Warren, 2000; Conway, 1993; Fellenz, 2006; Kuisma, 1998; Tu & Lu, 2005). Another strategy is to utilize personality and work style assessments as well as student schedules in configuring and balancing student groups. Finally, it is crucial for faculty to utilize multiple forms of feedback including agency supervisor, student, and group member assessment forms on projects and assignments.

The demands of taking a course which requires both a traditional lecture component plus community-based fieldwork was also noted as challenging to students. Specific comments were that it was "hard to find the time to spend out of the classroom" and that the course should "not require as many [service] hours. Scheduled millennials may have a hard time learning how to

integrate service learning into their schedules since they need to expand their view of learning from being "... a scheduled activity from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. in which the teacher lectures and the students take notes" (Des Maris et al., 2000, p. 680). Eyler (2002) reminds us that service learning can be a labor-intensive exercise, requiring resources for faculty development, creating and sustaining community partnerships, and even practical resources to help transport students to sites. Further, Wilson (2004) cautions us that this generation of students has high expectations for success, but unrealistic expectations regarding the amount of work and effort required. She suggests that we need to help students to better understand the quality of effort and quantity of time needed to be successful.

Providing students with tools to assist in time management is key. For example, having students develop detailed timelines and project plans for service learning efforts may be necessary so students can better manage their responsibilities both individually and as a group. Faculty in service learning courses also need optimal times to offer their courses so students have enough access to sites when they are open. Scheduling courses during the evening or even the weekend may help to this end. It is also crucial that course assignments give students tools to help them learn how to integrate data from the field with that obtained in the classroom so the two aspects of the course do not feel separate and disjointed. Eyler (2002) highlights the importance of building into assignments opportunities for reflection and to tie learning to academic content. Examples of these types of assignments used in Community Services for Families include a project action plan which incorporates scholarly sources and a final project evaluation report.

Fewer students identified social and networking opportunities as positive aspects of the service learning experience. This is in line with research by Chapman and Mooney (1999) which finds social motives less important to participating in service activities among college students. However, several students acknowledged that working at the site helped them network to find an internship site later in their academic career. One stated that the course provided "Good exposure to making contacts/networking". Students also commented on how the course experience provided personal fulfillment. One stated that it was a "very helpful class in helping develop the personal and professional self of student" and another mentioned how it served as a "positive growing experience."

Although less frequently mentioned, challenges of service learning mentioned by students also centered on the readiness of agencies to benefit from their assistance. Some experienced their sites as disorganized or their site supervisors as unavailable. One student wrote, "…some community service supervisors are burned out and not willing to deal with volunteers." Another wrote about restaffing issues at the organization. Eyler and Giles (1999) highlight the need for us to consider the quality of placements and the supervision provided. Further, Elam et al. (2007) suggest that millennial students need "authoritative support" including high but clearly communicated expectations for independent and group work and recognition that their concerns are being listened to. The literature on field experiences from the perspective of sites is limited. One such study (Peacock, Bradley, & Shenk, 2001) points to the importance of partnership between school and field site staff, involvement of field staff in the conceptualization of service learning projects, and clarity around managerial issues, including supervision and evaluation, and legal and ethical issues.

In addition, more attention needs to be paid to the characteristics of sites and supervisors that may impact student experiences. The authors have developed and utilized a site vetting survey to assess the characteristics of the site, supervisor, and project so that better matches between students and sites can be made. It also helps to identify the types of high-quality placements which Eyler and Giles (1999) suggest are key to producing positive student outcomes in service learning. The tool examines the degree to which the service site has adequate supervision for the group. It also assesses if the site has a tangible, appropriate project with learning value that can be completed

with the timeframe allotted. Additionally, it asks sites to consider whether they have the resources and supports necessary to complete the project and engage students for 50 hours during the semester.

It may also be appropriate to consider ways that the university can support field sites to more effectively utilize students, for example, through the provision of training to faculty members and site supervisors in how to effectively supervise students. On the other hand, there are limits to the amount of time and effort that faculty can expend on developing and nurturing relationships with field sites, given the other demands on their time. Pedersen (2001) and Eyler (2002) suggest that we need to carefully consider the burdens that service learning puts on faculty time and resources in developing courses and programs.

Limitations

It is important to note that the data for this study were gathered from open-ended exit interviews with graduating seniors. Students were asked to comment on their general perceptions of the course, Community Services for Families. They were not explicitly asked to comment on the benefits or challenges of service learning. Thus, more students may have experienced a particular positive or negative aspect of service learning but may not have thought to include it in their comments.

Furthermore, it is important to realize that the students completed exit interview when they were graduating, which is typically about one year following completion of the course. In some ways, this is advantageous as students are able to reflect on the value of the service learning experience with some temporal distance from the experience. On the other hand, they may have forgotten some of the strengths or disadvantages of the experience over the passing year. It would be useful to develop a more specific, targeted survey of these issues: group work, agency course and goals, real world and rewards, social/networking, and personal fulfillment that could be administered at the time of course completion.

More generally, Hoover (2007) cautions us that we need to be cautious about the generalizations and stereotypes we have about millennial students as a group. What is reported here are group trends. There may be individuals within the group that do not reflect this pattern of response to service learning.

Finally, this study only examines students' perceptions of the benefits and challenges of service learning. It does not examine the actual outcomes of service learning experiences, such as whether service learning impacts students' academic learning or civic attitudes.

Conclusions

The results of this study suggest that millennial students appreciate the value of the real world, teams, and networking (Elam et al., 2007; Howe & Strauss, 2000; McGlynn, 2005), but their focus on achievement can leave them unprepared to deal with the need to multitask, be flexible, and deal with ambiguity that can be part of group experiences in the field. Best practices in service learning suggest that service learning ought to have three key components, preparation, service, and reflection (Eyler, 2002). As part of the service preparation, it appears to be very important that students are given realistic expectations about the service experience they are about to embark on. For example, students ought to understand that site supervisors likely have enormous responsibility and little time, and students' service may have only modest impact on the site. Ultimately, the service learning experience is not about changing the world but about gaining basic skills and gaining initial exposure to individuals, organizations, and issues. If students approach service learning with a modest and reasonable outlook, they may be more satisfied with the experiences. Faculty also need to design and implement programs that respond to the real-world concerns of millennial students in order to produce a generation of graduates that will continue to value service after they leave college.

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Table 1: Benefits and Challenges of Service Learning for Undergraduate Students (n = 201)