

## **Reaching Outside the Classroom: Service-Learning and Community Awareness Projects**

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In an effort to expand learning beyond the classroom, a Victimology course used service learning and a Victims' Awareness Fair to engage students in volunteering with victim-related agencies and reaching out to the community. This paper discusses the details of the service learning requirement and the Victims' Awareness Fair, and offers a number of suggestions for improving these types of activities in the future.

Service-learning has increased dramatically over the past several years. Campus Compact conducted a survey in 2000 and found that 712,000 students were participating in service-learning, which was 24,000 more than the previous year (Steffes, 2004). Service-learning has been defined as a "course-bearing educational experience in which students participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs, and 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" (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996, p. 222). Service-learning has been shown to be effective and to have many benefits. These include (a) enhancing "student engagement with and commitment to school," (b) preparing "students to be contributing citizens in their community," (c) impacting "students' social and emotional development," and (d) enhancing "achievement of the curricular goals of the courses in which it is embedded" (Strage, 2004, p. 257).

In the spring semester of 2004, my Victimology course utilized a service learning project. Victimology can be defined as "the scientific study of the physical, emotional, and financial harm people suffer because of criminal activities...[including] the impact of the injuries and losses inflicted by offenders [and] the handling of victims by the criminal justice system" (Karmen, 2004, p. 9). The experience was specific to the course, in that students in the course were required to volunteer 12 hours with an agency that helps victims of crime or works to decrease victimization. The goal of this project was to help students learn what is useful in helping victims of crime and ways to decrease victimization in our society, which pertains to the objectives of the course. The course objectives included (a) demonstrating an understanding of the role of victims in the criminal justice system, (b) discussing social implications of victimization, and (c) offering policy ideas to improve treatment of victims and reduce victimization in our society. This project provided students with hands-on experience in order to gain a further understanding of victims in our society.

Students completed a write-up of their experiences and submitted a form verifying their hours. The information in the write-up included an overview of the agency, program description, administrative structure, and their individual experience. Questions relating to program description included purpose/mission of agency, who were the clients, what outreach did they have, and how did they measure success.

Administrative structure included discussing the organizational structure, funding source(s), and whether the agency was public, private, non-profit, or for-profit. Students discussed their experience in terms of what they did, their opinion of the experience, what they learned about victims, and why the particular agency was important for victims.

The Victimology course that used these projects was an upper-level course of 36 students who were mostly Criminal Justice majors (75%). The other majors included Psychology (3%), Undeclared (3%), Chemistry (6%), Sociology (8%), and Management (6%). For the scope of this paper, I will focus on the students' experiences. The method used was content analysis as the write-ups included narratives from students. The research questions analyzed were (a) what was the extent of involvement of students, (b) what was the student's opinion of the experience, and (c) what did the student learn about victims?

### **Service Learning Project**

#### ***Method and Analysis***

In order to conduct content analysis, I grouped answers to certain questions from the student write-ups. This involved cutting the answers out from the printed write-up and pasting the answers to sheets of paper, keeping the answers to one particular question together. This process ensured that answers would not be associated with any particular student, thus maintaining anonymity for students. First, I used open coding to underline words and phrases that were associated with my research questions. Second, I created categories for the main themes which emerged during the open coding. Next, I color-coded the text using a highlighter to indicate the category to which it belonged. Finally, I looked at the

relationships between the categories and concepts in terms of the range to put together a summary of students' responses.

#### **Results**

To answer the first question, I looked at responses to the question "what did you do?" Through the process of open coding, I found four main categories of activities. Students were involved in actual participation and helping, observation, administrative work, and training. Thus, the extent of involvement varied from direct contact and assisting victims to performing administrative duties. A few students had more of a "hands-on" experience with their agency. These hands-on experience cited by students included the following: (a) speak with a client, (b) fill out a TPO, (c) taking on the role of a child and family advocate, (d) evaluate the child's situation, (d) playing with children while parents were in therapy session, (e) phone intakes, (f) pick up donations, (g) conducted interviews, (h) collected information pertaining to the case through interviews and examining files, and (j) helped kids with their homework

Many students were limited in their involvement with an agency because of training requirements. As one stated, "due to the training, I was limited to what I could do." These students were involved more with observation and administrative activities. Observations included watching videos, reviewing materials, observing staff interaction with clients, sitting in on groups, talking to employees, and shadowing a staff member. Administrative activities included taking inventory, organizing supplies, photocopying, filing, faxing, preparing materials to be sent out, inputting information into the computer, and answering the phones. As one student described, she played "a supporting role." Another stated that her administrative work

for the agency allowed “other employees to conduct more vital tasks.”

Although some students did not experience much interaction with victims, their experience met the goal of service learning in many respects. Students sought out volunteer opportunities themselves, thus discovering the needs of the community. Additionally, their sense of civic responsibility was enhanced as they were allowed to complete tasks and were appreciated by the agency. By not directly working with victims, some students were at a disadvantage because their work was not completely related to the course content and they did not have the opportunity to apply their knowledge at the volunteer site. However, I believe that they gained an understanding of how non-profit agencies work and what goes on behind the scenes for agencies serving victims. This is something that does not much coverage in the course, but is important for students and citizens to understand. There are a number of support personnel helping those that help victims and sometimes we forget to acknowledge the importance of their work in the victim movement.

In all capacities, students reported many benefits from their experience. They reported they learned a lot, enjoyed their experiences, and found the staff at these agencies to be very supportive and helpful. Many students reported some type of change during their service experience. One stated, “it did open my eyes to some very serious social concerns. I never really thought about the extent of the work that social work entails, but this experience gave me a new perspective.” Another said, “my interest in criminal justice was a little undecided prior to getting the opportunity to experience [service site]...I think this area may be what I have been looking for not only a need I have but to make a difference for others.” A

number of students said they plan to continue their work either as volunteers or as interns.

As far as what students learned about victims, common responses were “anyone can become a victim,” “there are far more victims...than one would ever imagine,” “a lot more should be done to help victims get justice,” “victims are affected in so many different ways,” “victims are just as human as everyone else,” and “domestic violence not only effects the guardians, but also the children.” As these were things that we discussed in class and students read in their texts, having first-hand experience really made them see the reality.

#### Discussion

This service-learning activity allowed students to gain a further understanding of victimology. Our class discussed domestic violence and the effects it has on victims, but as students worked in these agencies, the reality they experienced in their service learning project heightened their learning experience. As one student stated, “I took away from this a better understanding of what really goes on behind the scenes at a shelter.” As some students reported they planned to continue volunteering or serve as an intern for their agency, I believe this experience did enhance their sense of civic responsibility. These students were able to contribute to the community, realize the importance of volunteers in these agencies, and achieve the goals I set out for the experience. The first objective of the course requires students to understand the role of victims in the criminal justice system. We discussed the experiences of victims with the criminal justice system and other victim service agencies in class; however, this experience allowed many students to see victims going through the criminal justice process. By working with these agencies, students

enhanced their knowledge of social implications of victimization. Finally, this experience allowed students to engage in class discussions to offer policy ideas to improve treatment of victims and reduce victimization in our society.

### **Victim Awareness Fair**

In addition to the individual service-learning project, I had the students in the class work as a group to organize an informational fair on victim issues for students at the university. Because the course was taught in the spring when the April National Crime Victims' Rights Week occurs during the month of April, the class sponsored and organized a Victims' Awareness Fair during one day of that week between the hours of 12:00 and 5:00 p.m. The purpose of this fair was to participate in the national initiative by sponsoring an educational fair on campus on the topics of victims' rights and services.

Students participated in a variety of ways. I set up seven groups of students to handle different aspects of the event: advertising, coordinating with on-campus organizations, agency recruitment, setup, cleanup, administrative services, and attending booths. The advertising group put up flyers around campus and made a banner for the student center to advertise the event. The group who coordinated with on-campus organizations teamed up with the Criminal Justice Student Organization to help plan and attend the event. They also contacted a number of other on-campus organizations to help advertise the event. The agency recruitment group contacted victim organizations to find participants for the fair and compiled a list of attendees and times. Those for Setup and Cleanup were responsible for making the booth arrangements, setting up and cleaning up

after the event. The group for administrative services prepared name badges for students, signs for booths, handouts from the Office for Victims of Crime (OVC), and wrote thank-you letters to participants. Members of the attending booths group were responsible to offer help as needed, answer questions, and direct students and organizational volunteers.

Organizations participating in the event included: Prevention & Motivation Programs, Inc. - Good-Touch/Bad-Touch, Marietta Probation Office, CASA for Children, Inc. - Cherokee County, Georgia Department of Corrections - Victim Services, Cobb County Domestic Violence Project, Crime Victim Advocacy, and Appalachian Children's Center. We had a booth for each organization, booths for the materials from OVC, refreshments, and a raffle. A few students came up with the idea of a raffle and obtained donations to use in the raffle. The proceeds from this event benefited Good-Touch/Bad-Touch. We chose this organization because a number of students completed their service learning project with them, they participated in the Victims' Awareness Fair, and they are a small organization who could really use the money. The agency was able to use the money to buy teddy bears they use in the program to teach children about good touches.

Overall, the event was mildly successful. It would have been better with more agencies attending and if it had attracted more students. The event was attended by roughly 60 to 70 students outside of the class. As a first time, however, the class and I were pleased with the outcome. For the next year, advertising and recruiting agencies are the main concerns. Students discussed what they thought would improve the event and provided suggestions relating to advertising,

agency involvement, on-campus organizations, and overall changes needed. For advertising, students suggested e-mailing all students and faculty, posting more flyers around campus, having bigger signs all over the campus, offering incentives to come, having students in the class give out flyers to people around the student center, posting an announcement on the school public web site, and having instructors make announcements in their classes. In response to these suggestions, the number of people on the advertising committee will increase from 3 to 6. Additionally, all students will be responsible for helping with advertising. For agency involvement, students suggested that agencies come in at different time periods or make sure they stay the whole time, having more agencies, recruiting agencies earlier, focusing on potential victims of crime and how to prevent becoming a victim, and making each person responsible for one agency to either attend or send information. In the future, all students in the course will be responsible for recruiting off-campus agencies and on-campus organizations and obtaining confirmations of attendance at least 2 weeks before the event. The students in the on-campus recruitment group did not do a very good job on this. I will need to follow-up with all groups more regularly to ensure that things are getting done.

Some other suggestions included (a) having the fair outside to be more visible to students, (b) shorter length of time (change from 5 hours to 2 hours), (c) changing the day of the fair (from Monday to Tuesday during the time that no classes are held), and (d) having students dress professionally.

These items will be taken into account for the Second Annual Victims' Awareness Fair to achieve greater success.

### **Conclusions**

These two out-of-class service-learning opportunities provided students with additional learning experiences that they enjoyed, found rewarding, and learned a lot from. In the area of victimology, I felt these projects were essential to students' learning because students learned more about victims and the services that are out there for victims. Students were able to observe this first-hand in their volunteer work and, in some cases, provide services to victims themselves. They were also able to share this knowledge with the campus community through the fair. These two service-learning projects are ideal for anyone in the helping professions, and can be used individually for courses in a number of areas.

### **References**

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