



Journal for the Study of Postsecondary and Tertiary Education

An Official Publication
of the Informing Science Institute
InformingScience.org

JSPTE.org

Volume 3, 2018

UTILIZING SERVICE LEARNING IN MASTER OF HIGHER EDUCATION PROGRAMS

MaryBeth Walpole*	Rowan University, Glassboro, NJ, USA	walpole@rowan.edu
Felicia Crockett	Rowan University, Glassboro, NJ, USA	crockettf6@students.rowan.edu

* Corresponding author

ABSTRACT

Aim/Purpose	Service Learning is not used in graduate education to the extent it is in undergraduate education. This paper utilizes a developmental evaluation methodological approach and a strategic partnership conceptual framework in examining a service learning course in which higher education master students gain valuable experience they can use in their careers while assisting high school students as they apply to college.
Background	Little research has been done on service learning at the graduate level. Moreover, although service learning is growing on campuses, master of higher education students may not have experience with it. Additionally, gaps in college access by socioeconomic status and race continue to exist, yet little research has been done on how service recipients experience service learning. This paper evaluates a service learning course and addresses the service recipients who were high school students at the time and the experiences of graduate students who were enrolled in the course. The research questions are the following: To what extent do high school recipients report an increase in college application behaviors from the beginning to the end of the service learning experience? How do high school recipients describe their experiences with the graduate students? How do Master of Higher Education students describe their knowledge of the college admission process as a result of their experiences with service learning? How do they describe their experiences with service learning? What skills, if any, do they report improved as a result of the service learning experience?
Methodology	The paper uses developmental program evaluation methodological approach, and data collection strategies include survey responses and interviews with former high school students as well as document analysis of former graduate students' reflective essays and interviews with them.

Accepted as an empirical research article by Editor Terhi Nokkala. | Received: December 7, 2017 | Revised: February 27, March 7, 2018 | Accepted: March 8, 2018.

Cite as: Walpole, M., & Crockett, F. (2018). Utilizing service learning in master of higher education programs. *Journal for the Study of Postsecondary and Tertiary Education*, 3, 25-40. <https://doi.org/10.28945/3989>

(CC BY-NC 4.0) This article is licensed to you under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/). When you copy and redistribute this paper in full or in part, you need to provide proper attribution to it to ensure that others can later locate this work (and to ensure that others do not accuse you of plagiarism). You may (and we encourage you to) adapt, remix, transform, and build upon the material for any non-commercial purposes. This license does not permit you to use this material for commercial purposes.

Contribution	Little is documented regarding graduate student experiences with service learning, particularly Higher Education master programs. Additionally, little research exists on service recipients experiences.
Findings	The service learning course was helpful to the high school students' college application process, and students reported increases in college application behaviors as a result of the service learning project. The course also strengthened the higher education master students' communication skills, interpersonal skills, and awareness of diversity and equity issues.
Recommendations for Practitioners	Service learning experiences can be utilized to strengthen higher education master students' skills, and detailed information regarding the process of creating a service learning course are provided in the paper.
Recommendation for Researchers	The paper recommends additional research on service learning in graduate programs and additional research on the experiences of service recipients and community partners.
Impact on Society	This paper impacts master students who plan to work on college campuses and strengthen their skills in several areas that should positively affect the future students with whom they work. Additionally, the course resulted in high school students reporting increased college application behaviors, such as taking admission tests, seeking letters of recommendation, and writing essays, and may increase the number of students from underrepresented backgrounds who successfully enroll in college.
Future Research	Additional research on service learning in graduate programs and additional research on the experiences of service learning recipients should follow this study.
Keywords	service learning, college admission, graduate students

INTRODUCTION

This paper examines a service learning effort that has been incorporated into a Master of Higher Education program using a developmental evaluation approach (Patton, 2011). The effort is built around a course titled College Admission and Transition, and the service learning component pairs master students with nearby high school seniors who need assistance in applying for college. The master students apply the knowledge regarding admissions that they are learning in the course while providing a needed service to the community. The experience also provides many of the master students with a broader experience with diversity, both socioeconomic (SES) and racial/ethnic diversity, as the school district partner is a low income school with a diverse student body and significant achievement gaps among racial groups and between all students and low income students. The study foci include the extent to which the program improves high school students' outcomes pertaining to college application behaviors, including: taking standardized admission tests, writing essays, asking for letters of recommendation, and the extent to which the master students' knowledge pertaining to the college admission process and, more broadly, diversity and their professional skills pertaining to working with students increase.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Service learning is a growing pedagogical approach on many campuses and provides students with an opportunity to apply course concepts in settings chosen for their ability to provide students with, not only course relevant experience, but experience in settings or with populations that create an oppor-

tunity for the students to reflect on broader social issues. Thus, it can be a vehicle for social transformation as well as for student skill development (Ash & Clayton, 2009; Bushouse & Morrison, 2001; Einfeld & Collins, 2008; Kilgo, 2015). Rooted in Dewey's ideas of experiential learning (Giles & Eyler, 1994), service-learning can be a vehicle for social transformation as well as for student skill development (Bushouse & Morrison, 2001). Service learning is defined as an experience within a course that allows students to apply the course content and reflect on the experience (Eyler & Giles, 1999). This differs from volunteer efforts in that it is structured within an academic course, uses service learning as a pedagogical strategy, and the work within the community is related directly to the course content. Service-learning is considered a high impact educational activity and is utilized on a growing number of college campuses (Kuh, 2009). Yet, while many students volunteer during college, on many campuses service learning, while growing, still involves a minority of students. Therefore, many of our Master of Higher Education students have not experienced service learning as undergraduates and enrolling in this course provides them with an experience in service learning. Thus, in addition to the previously detailed benefits, it also gives graduate students who are seeking careers in higher education experience with service learning that they can draw upon in their job searches and careers.

Researchers and practitioners have defined the term service learning in different ways; it is also known by various names such as academic service-learning, strategic academically-based community, course based service-learning, school-based service-learning, community service-learning, community engaged learning, community scholarly service, and civic engagement (Chong, 2014). Service learning is perceived positively by college students (Bordelon & Phillips, 2006) and provides a host of benefits, including easing the transition to college, generating personal development, increasing engagement in the curriculum, increasing communication and leadership skills, as well as promoting cultural and racial understanding and a sense of social responsibility (Astin & Sax, 1998; Astin, Sax, & Avalos, 1999; Einfeld & Collins, 2008; Eyler, Giles, Stenson, & Gray, 2001; Ganss & Baker, 2014; Kilgo, 2015; Kuh, 2003; McDonald & Dominguez, 2015; Soria & Thomas-Card, 2014). Service learning may also increase retention for those students who participate (Keup, 2005-2006). Additionally, service learning has a positive effect on academic outcomes related to the course content and career development (Astin & Sax, 1998; Eyler, et al., 2001; Lambright & Lu, 2009; Pelco, Ball, & Lockeman, 2014), and may have uniquely positive effects for underrepresented students (Pelco et al., 2014). The benefits of service-learning are long-lasting as well (Strage, 2004). Studies have shown the impact that service learning has had on both the undergraduate and graduate students' academic performance (Lambright & Lu, 2009). However, more studies have been conducted and focused at the undergraduate level (Bushouse & Morrison, 2001).

Yet, service learning is also important at the graduate level and contributes to master students' career development because many students are looking to expand and advance their knowledge and expertise (Lambright & Lu, 2009). Yet, very few graduate programs have incorporated service learning into their curriculum, and less research has been done on service learning with graduate students. However, in the research that has been done, scholars report positive benefits in integrating course content and in career development through service learning for graduate students (Bushouse & Morrison, 2001; Lu & Lambright, 2010; Quinn, 2006), although Bushouse and Morrison (2001) report that students who already had some professional experience benefitted more than their less experienced peers. Service learning has become viewed as an effective relevant pedagogy that students reported to be more useful than the passive pedagogical approaches in a Master of Business Administration integrative project course (Coffey & Wang, 2006). The reflective component of service learning is very important (Coffey & Wang, 2006) and beneficial to the career and career development of graduate students as it builds on the concept of putting theory into practice and becoming active learners (Bushouse & Morrison, 2001).

International graduate programs that incorporate service learning into their programs have reported similar findings as service-learning efforts in the United States, including positive benefits related to

students' career growth and development (Burnett, Hamel, & Long, 2004; Coffey & Wang, 2006). Service learning projects that have an international component create transformative learning experiences that change the perceptions and lives of participants (Coffey & Wang, 2006). The graduate students who participate in service learning courses have growth in competencies as well as community responsibility (Burnett et al., 2004; Coffey & Wang, 2006).

Similar to the research on service learning and graduate students, little research has examined the experiences of and benefits for recipients of service. Bushouse and Morrison (2001) simply report that the clients their Master of Public Administration students worked with were satisfied with their services. Cress, Burack, Giles, Elkins, and Stevens (2010) report that high school students who participate in any service learning activity with college students are more likely to aspire to attend college. Gerstenblatt (2014) found that college students contributed many positive benefits for the community partners, including increased knowledge and personal growth. Several articles also report positive benefits for organizations hosting college students in service-learning activities, including increased social cohesion (Kimmel, Hull, Stephenson, Robertson, & Cowgill, 2012) and the ability to weather difficult economic circumstances more easily (Plaut, 2013). Thus, while these studies report some benefits, gaps in the literature regarding the experiences of graduate students and of service recipients exist and more research is needed (Cress et al., 2010). Thus, the current study focuses on a developmental evaluation (Patton, 2011) of a service learning course in a Master of Higher Education program and includes data from both graduate students and high school recipients of service. The research questions were:

To what extent do high school recipients report an increase in college application behaviors from the beginning to the end of the service learning experience?

How do high school recipients describe their experiences with the graduate students?

How do Master of Higher Education students describe their knowledge of the college admission process as a result of their experiences with service learning?

How do Master of Higher Education students describe their experiences with service learning?

What skills, if any, do Master of Higher Education students report improved as a result of the service learning experience?

DEVELOPING A SERVICE LEARNING COURSE

There are multiple aspects to developing a service learning course, as with any partnership (Eddy & Amey, 2014). The current study adopted the Eddy and Amey (2014) framework of a partnership aligned on values in which the partnership coalesced around common goals, which in this case included increasing the numbers of high school students attending college and increasing the knowledge and skills of graduate students pertaining to college admission. In curricular-based partnerships, such as service learning, four steps are commonly taken: forming partnership agreements, developing and teaching the course or courses, working through the delivery of the service and course content, and balancing the interests of all partners.

The first step was partnering with a local school district (Eddy & Amey, 2014). The university in this study was a public, selective, research university with approximately 15,000 students. The surrounding town is diverse, and the university has worked with town officials to bring businesses and economic activity to the community, which has been needed. For this study, a high school within walking distance was selected to minimize transportation issues. This high school's student body, according to state records, in the first year of the study (2011-2012), was 51% White, 36% Black, 8% Latinx, and 4.6% Asian. The school was also relatively low income, with 34% of students eligible for free or reduced lunch, referred to in state reports as economically disadvantaged students. Furthermore, in their 2011-2012 school report card, in English Language Arts proficiency exams 90% of White stu-

dents were considered proficient while 78% of Black students and 77% of economically disadvantaged students scored in the proficient range. No data for other groups was reported due to small sample sizes. On state math exams, 85% of White students scored proficient, while 71% of Black students and 73% of economically disadvantaged students did so. These data highlighted the disparities in student achievement, which translated into disparities in graduation and postsecondary enrollment. White students graduated at 91%, while 85% of Black students and 83% of economically disadvantaged students did so. Seventy-five percent of White students enrolled in college while the percentage was 60% for Black students. The rate was not reported for economically disadvantaged students.

In the third year of the study (2013-2014), the student demographics were similar, with 51% White students, 36% Black students, and 9% Latinx students. The percentage of economically disadvantaged students had grown to 44%. The percentage of Black students who were proficient on English Language Arts exams grew to 82%, the percentage for White students grew to 95%, while economically disadvantaged students grew less rapidly, with 79% considered proficient. Again, data were not reported for other groups due to sample size. Thus, while growth was reported, the gaps remained. The math scores were more mixed, with 92% of White students, 65% of Black students, and 57% of economically disadvantaged students considered proficient, a decrease for Black and economically disadvantaged students, and an increase for White students. Graduation rates increased across the board, however, with 94% of White students, 93% of Black students, and 97% of economically disadvantaged students graduating. Despite the increase in graduation rates, postsecondary enrollment was mixed, with a decrease to 73% for White students' enrollment, an increase to 69% for Black students' enrollment, and 51% of economically disadvantaged students enrolled in college. Thus it was clear from the high school demographics that there were some disparities based on race and socioeconomic status, and, given previous research on college enrollment (Freeman, 1997, 1999; Gonzalez, Stoner, & Jovel, 2003; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; McDonough, 1997, 2005; Perna, 2000; Smith, 2001; Walpole, et al., 2005), it was likely that low income students and students of color graduating from this school would be less likely to apply to or enroll in college, which also made the school attractive for the service learning project.

According to the Eddy and Amey (2014) partnership framework, the first step is working with the partner to create the partnership. The first author scheduled a meeting with high school officials and an administrator from the student affairs office charged with overseeing service learning. Initially there was some skepticism from the school counselors about such a course and its ability to assist students, but the principal was supportive and so the effort moved forward. The first author specifically requested to work with students who were less likely to have family members or other adults who could assist them in the college application process. While this request seems general, the first author based it on research documenting that low income students and students of color are less likely to have family members who have attended college and who are thus able to assist their high school students in the college application process (Freeman, 1997, 1999; Gonzalez et al., 2003; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; McDonough, 1997, 2005; Perna, 2000; Smith, 2001; Walpole, et al., 2005). Thus, the request was a way to ensure that the students chosen by the counselors were more likely to be low-income students and students of color, while also allowing the counselors to choose students in ways that did not involve substantial documenting or record keeping, which was critical to ensuring their cooperation. Yet, because the request was general in nature, there were no demographic data requested or provided. However, the first author worked with all of the high school students and their mentors, and, based on that interaction, we believe the students were often from low income families, and many were students of color or new immigrants to the U.S. The Board of Education required approval, and so the first author scheduled a presentation to the board, which was successful. Board members agreed to allow an evaluation survey to be distributed to the high school students and required all of the Master of Higher Education students go through a fingerprinting and background approval process. These agreements set the stage for a successful partnership (Eddy & Amey, 2014).

The second process of creating the course and teaching it also required multiple steps (Eddy & Amey, 2014). The university where this service learning effort took place had few service learning courses, and a student affairs office was tasked with working with faculty to create such courses. With logistical support from this office, and support from the program and department, the course was offered for the first time as an elective under a special heading, allowed at the university, without going through the official curriculum process. The next step in the process was creating the curriculum for the course, balancing the amount of reading with the expectation that students would spend time outside of class working with the high school student or students and assisting them with their college admission process (Chong, 2014). Typically, each graduate student was assigned to one high school student; however, there were occasions when two graduate students worked together with two or three high school students. The main goal of their work with high school students was to have the high school students complete at least one college application. Most of the course readings focused on the admission process, and students specifically read about the timing of students' decisions, access and equity issues, the outcomes of beginning at community college compared to beginning at a four-year college, undermatching and overmatching, financial aid, and college marketing and branding efforts. Students also explored current admissions related issues, reviewed information on the common application and essay prompts, and gained familiarity with college information websites such as the College Board, College Navigator, and the National Association of College Admission Counselors (NACAC).

However, at the beginning of the course, prior to being placed with a high school student, the master students were assigned reading pertaining to service learning, research on the outcomes and experiences of graduate students engaged in service learning and on building mentoring relationships, which are all part of the Eddy and Amey (2014) framework for creating the curriculum. During class, the first author utilized role playing activities to prepare the graduate students for working with their high school students. The first author also invited guest speakers from University Admissions; the Service Learning, Volunteerism, and Community Engagement office; and from the Equal Opportunity Fund (EOF) program to speak to the class and explain their services and processes. Building reflective assignments and activities into the course was also critical because reflection is one of the most crucial aspects of service learning (Ash & Clayton, 2009; Eyler & Giles, 1999), and activities provide preparation and opportunities that are foundational for any service-learning project (Chang & Yeh, 2014; Kilgo, 2015; Richards & Levesque-Bristol, 2016). During class time, the first author often organized an activity referred to as a reflective circle (Eyler & Giles, 1999) in which students reflected on and shared their responses to particular ideas or activities in which they were engaged with their high school mentees. Also, at the conclusion of the course, students were expected to complete an assignment of writing a reflective paper synthesizing their experiences with course readings and reflecting on and challenging what they learned (Ash & Clayton, 2009).

METHODOLOGY

The study utilizes program evaluation as its methodology (Greene & Caracelli, 1997; Posavac, 2011), specifically Patton's (2011) concept of developmental evaluation. While program evaluation has historically been considered either formative or summative, with formative evaluation eventually leading to summative evaluation, developmental evaluation is appropriate for programs that are ongoing and that want to maintain a focus on continuous improvement and an ability to innovate as needed. Developmental evaluation differs from traditional evaluation in its flexibility and pragmatic focus. Additionally, methods are chosen to support continued program development and evolve as the program unfolds and develops in a continuous way. Developmental evaluation is appropriate for the current study as the course and service learning is ongoing, and it is critical to consistently ensure it is meeting the desired outcomes for both the high school and the Master of Higher Education program; ensuring partner needs are met is also part of the Eddy and Amey (2014) framework. The research questions were the following: To what extent do high school recipients report an increase in college application behaviors from the beginning to the end of the service learning experience? How do high

school recipients describe their experiences with the graduate students? How do Master of Higher Education students describe their knowledge of the college admission process as a result of their experiences with service learning? How do they describe their experiences with service learning? What skills, if any, do they report improved as a result of the service learning experience?

Data collection strategies included surveys, document analysis, and interviews, all suitable for developmental evaluation (Patton, 2011). Data for the study were collected at two points in time: the first was at the conclusion of each semester's class when the high school students completed a survey about the program and when Masters students submitted a required reflective essay that synthesized the course readings and their experiences; the second was in the fourth and fifth year of the study, when the first author interviewed former Masters students and former high school students about the program, their experiences, and suggestions for improving the program. Data for this paper focus on the first three years of the program; during this time, a total of 31 high school students and 30 Master's students participated in the course.

PARTICIPANTS

Although all high school students were asked to complete a survey, not all did. Of the 31 students who participated over the three years, 14 high school students completed surveys, and those data are included in this paper. In an effort to evaluate the effectiveness of the course (Patton, 2011), the survey asked the high school students how many times they met with their graduate students, whether they met at the high school or on campus, and how long the meetings lasted. It also asked about behaviors associated with applying to college, including taking college entrance exams, visiting campuses, visiting websites, requesting letters of recommendation, writing essays, talking to parents about college and about financing for college, including completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). Students were also asked about whether they had chosen a major or decided on a career choice. They were also asked in open-ended questions how helpful the graduate student mentor was and the activities with which the graduate student mentor had assisted them. Four former high school students also agreed to interviews.

Additionally, five former graduate students agreed to participate by allowing the first author to analyze their reflective essays, and four agreed to an interview about their experiences. All of the interviews, with both former high school students and former graduate students, were completed during the fourth and fifth year of the program. The first author reached out to all high school students whose contact information could be located via social media, a total of 20 students, and all of the former graduate students who had taken the course.

Of the four former high school students, three were female and one was male; one former student identified as African American. One student had participated in the first year of the program, the other three participated in the third year. All four were interviewed face to face, taped and transcribed, and the interviews lasted from 10 to 30 minutes. Of the five former graduate students, three were male, one was African American, and three took the course the first year it was taught. Two students took the course the third year it was taught. Of the four former graduate student interviews, two were male and two female; two were from the first year the course was taught and two were from the third year. All interviews were conducted by phone and lasted between 15 minutes and a half an hour. Handwritten notes were taken during the interviews and later transcribed.

DATA ANALYSIS

Survey data were organized in an Excel spreadsheet, and frequencies were tallied. All of the qualitative data, including the graduate students' reflective essays, the former high school students' interviews, and former graduate students' interviews were analyzed using a thematic analysis (Creswell, 2013; Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Each set of data (essays, former high school student interviews, and former graduate student interviews) was read and coded separately for themes that emerged. The

first and second author each reviewed and coded the student transcripts and compared and agreed upon the themes. The first author is the creator and instructor of the service learning course entitled College Admissions and Transition. The second author is a former student in the service learning course; however, she was not a participant in the study.

LIMITATIONS

Limitations to this study include the small sample size and lack of demographic information for the students. Additionally, the data include only the first three years of the partnership, and just under half of the high school students completed the survey. Finally, the study focuses on only one service learning course and may not be representative of other service learning courses, of other high school students' experiences, or of other graduate student experiences.

FINDINGS

SURVEY DATA

According to the analysis, eleven of the high school students met three or more times with the master students, with three students meeting fewer than three times. Half of the high school students reported that they met at the high school location, five met at the university, and two reported meeting in both locations. Seven high school students reported their meetings lasted between one and two hours, two reported their meetings lasted more than two hours, three reported they lasted one hour, and two reported that the meetings lasted between a half hour and one hour. Students were also asked about whether they had engaged in particular behaviors related to the application process before working with their mentors and after working with their mentors. Prior to working with their college mentors, substantial numbers of students reported having registered for or taken the SAT or ACT (11 students), talking with their parents about college (13 students), deciding on a major (13 students), and deciding on a career (11 students).

Table 1. Number of students reporting completing college application tasks before and after mentoring

College application task	Number of students reporting before mentoring	Number of students reporting after mentoring
Visit college websites	10	14
Submit applications	3	12
Ask for letters of recommendation	5	9
Write application essay	5	12
Talk to parents about financial aid and FAFSA	6	11

Students reported increases from prior to working with their mentors to after in visiting college websites (from 10 to 14 students reporting), submitting applications (from 3 to 12 students reporting), asking for letters of recommendation (from 5 to 9 students reporting), writing their application essays (from 5 to 12 students reporting), and talking with their parents about financial aid and the Free application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) (from 6 to 11 students reporting) (See Table 1). Table 1 shows an increase in the students' behaviors regarding aspects of the college application process, which is a positive reflection of service learning (Bordelon & Phillips, 2006; Cress et al., 2010). All 14 students reported that the meetings were helpful and most often reported that assistance with their essays, with organization and time management, and with expanding their range of college choices was the most helpful. The high school students also said they learned about the social aspects of college, about extracurricular activities, and about the importance of getting involved once they enrolled in college. In the open-ended comments section, one student wrote, "She helped me through the

college application process and really helped me with my college essay. She helped me improve my writing.” A second wrote about what was learned, “I learned how to better my essay...[and] what to look for in colleges.” A third mentioned the essay, writing, “I learned how the college process works and how to actually write a college essay and what to put in it.”

A fourth wrote, “without [the program] I would not have fill[ed] out apps.” Another student mentioned, “I’d most likely be attending [the local community college] if it were not for my mentor.” “Organization was a key factor my mentor helped me with,” a sixth reported. Yet another learned “to not be afraid to astray[sic] from New Jersey, go to a school that will give me the best education.” Another reported, “I learned that college isn’t just about your education, there is other social aspects to college life too [sic].” An eighth student also commented that the program taught him or her “how to explore a college major wise and student life wise.”

FORMER HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT INTERVIEWS

In interviews with the former high school students, many of these ideas were echoed, particularly expanding options for college and for majors (Bordelon & Phillips, 2006). One said, “just applying to college is pretty simple, but it was kind of scary for me.” It was kind of scary because, according to this student, “my parents could not help in applying... [and] my guidance counselor didn’t really have the knowledge.” Another mentioned, when asked what had been helpful, “actually going in and applying to colleges... my mom was sick, so I was in the program so that someone could help me apply to college.” A third student was more focused on deciding on a major, saying the meetings, “kind of more focused on what my major wanted to be... they really helped a good deal.” Moreover, students learned or honed skills like time management, learned new skills, and were introduced to new, college specific, terms. One student mentioned, “throughout the process, they helped me remember, like, when things were due.” A second student mentioned, “I didn’t know what a prerequisite course was... like I didn’t know a lot of things. They really helped me.” A third said her mentor, “definitely helped me... to not be as nervous when I’m talking to someone in authority.” These quotes are a direct reflection of the many benefits that high school students are provided by participating in service learning, and echo previous research (Astin & Sax, 1998; Astin et al., 1999; Einfeld & Collins, 2008; Eyler et al., 2001; Ganss & Baker, 2014; Kilgo, 2015; Kuh, 2003; McDonald & Dominguez, 2015; Soria & Thomas-Card, 2014).

MASTER STUDENT ESSAYS

Analysis of the master students’ essays reveals that their knowledge and skills grew in several areas: content knowledge and applying that content knowledge in professional practice, understanding of broader equity and access issues and the effect they as mentors could have on their high school students, and relationship building and boundary setting in their relationships with students (Bushouse & Morrison, 2001; Lu & Lambright, 2010; Quinn, 2006). One student wrote, “[the course] pulled it all together for me and allowed me to draw [from] different pieces of... higher education [and] allowed me to practice what I have learned.” She later added, “this course... definitely opened my eyes to the students who one day will be coming out of my office, hopefully leaving with a bit more wisdom.” Another student wrote, “[the] aspect of service only added to our understanding of the admissions process and provided for deeper engagement with our readings.” He then explained, “with the backgrounds and knowledge of the college admissions process, our strategies when working with students could be more targeted and thereby effective.” A third student wrote, “having the opportunity to learn great things... through insightful readings and... apply the information to a real life situation is rarely found.”

Students also worked with students who were from low income backgrounds, who were first generation, and who were predominately students of color. For many of the graduate students, these circumstances were new and they felt a serious responsibility to their students and also were hopeful that they made a difference. One student wrote, “[the] book... educated me on the different experi-

ences students face as they go through the college process and the importance of having someone there to guide them... some find more or less support.” At the end of her essay, she concludes, “I really hope I made a difference.” Another student wrote, “working with a first generation college student would require one to have an understanding of what challenges these students typically face...our class readings became much more important as a result.” He also worked to get his student prepared for the SAT, and reflected, “these students [of color] also lack the resources to get the kind of test preparation that their more affluent peers tend to have.” Finally, he wrote,

this relationship could not just be an opportunity for me to feel good about myself and doing something for those less fortunate than me. This relationship had to be focused on ...the student’s best interest... this class has provided a really good experience of working with students who had very unique journeys.

Another student wrote, “the main theme of admissions is to provide everyone with an equal opportunity... underrepresented populations and first generation students are vulnerable when applying to college... we cannot afford to lose [these] students.” A fourth student reported, “we were told that the students... were from low-socioeconomic families. For some reason, this circumstance made me more nervous than usual... this interaction could possibly influence the future of the students I would be working with.” She added later, “I was also educated on initiative programs for low SES students...[but before the course] I never quite understood their purpose or what they had to offer.” Finally, at the end of her essay, she reported her student,

told me that if it were not for his opportunity to work with the... [college] students, he probably would have never applied to college. That statement alone made my experience... richer, knowing [I] made a difference in the life of another person.

Several graduate students also reflected on building relationships with their high school students and the importance of creating appropriate boundaries. One said “I hoped... our relationship would build into more of a mentorship where she trusted me with information about her goals and aspirations as well as her fears.” A second wrote, “it was not my job to fix the student... my job was to help find a passion for the student and not force any sort of agenda.” Yet, this student also reported, “I found myself developing more relational interactions and building a stronger connection with my students based off our goal of applying to college.” A third student, who worked with a high school student in foster care, struggled a bit with relationship boundaries, writing,

it was important... to maintain a particular set of boundaries. One of the most challenging situations... was denying [my student] a ride to and from our meeting sessions. Considering his lack of parental support, it took every ounce of my being to deny his request.

She added she had “learned through this process that [it] is important to clearly define your relationship status with your mentees.”

MASTER STUDENT INTERVIEWS

In their interviews, the four former graduate students all agreed that the course readings had provided important information for working with their students. One mentioned that “learning that going to a four year [college means the student] is more likely to finish” gave him information that he used in assisting his student, who had been considering a two year college. Another said “reading [the] research... [helped] in sorting through [the] process.” A third told me the “readings were helpful [in understanding] how to interact and the appropriateness of how to deal with students.” The fourth student also mentioned the readings saying they, “helped with dealing with students.”

All four also mentioned the relational skills they gained and still use in their professional practice. One specified that he learned “listening skills” and that he is “careful working as an advisor to take time when helping students” to listen and that it helps him “help students find direction and set goals.” Another student said she “is better at building relationships,” and in her current position she

uses “similar skills in helping people set goals and reach them.” A third student told me she uses the “people and personal skills” she gained in the course. The fourth mentioned that he “has a better understanding of how the students” he works with “got into college” and a better “understanding [of] that process.” The student who had that better understanding was specifically referring to “students with fewer resources.” Two students mentioned that the diversity knowledge they gained was still helpful to them. The student just quoted added that he was always “thinking of ways to build more access.” The second student is currently completing her thesis on first generation students and told me that the “skills from [the] course and working with that demographic was helpful” now with her thesis. This is consistent with previous studies of graduate programs incorporating service learning into their curriculum and students developing interpersonal and team skills (Coffey & Wang, 2006), as well as improvement of content and self-knowledge and examination of cultural bias (Burnett et al., 2004).

DISCUSSION

The data from the high school students indicated that the program was valuable to them and was, by and large, meeting its goal of having students apply to college. The first research question asked about the extent to which the high school students reported an increase in college application behaviors. Twelve out of the 14 students completing surveys reported that they had applied to at least one college after working with the graduate students. They additionally reported writing essays and securing letters of recommendation in increased numbers after working with the graduate students, which are critical supporting documents for students’ applications. Additionally, although almost all the students reported that they had talked to their parents about college in general before working with the graduate students, after working with them, the high school students also reported in high numbers that they had talked to their parents about financial aid and the FAFSA, which indicates that students are taking the appropriate steps to move forward after graduating from high school, echoing previous research on the positive effects of service learning on college students (Astin & Sax, 1998; Astin et al., 1999; Einfeld & Collins, 2008; Eyler et al., 2001; Ganss & Baker, 2014; Kilgo, 2015; Kuh, 2003; McDonald & Dominguez, 2015; Soria & Thomas-Card, 2014). Their open-ended responses indicated that the assistance they received on essays, on time management, on expanding their college set, and on understanding life on campus was helpful as well. In interviews, former high school students discussed the multiple options that working with the college students provided and the skills they honed or learned that were helpful when they enrolled in college (Bordelon & Phillips, 2006). Finally, every high school student, both on the survey and in interviews, reported the program was helpful as well, answering the second research question which asked how they described their experiences. This research helps fill the gap in research on service learning recipients (Cress et al., 2010).

The graduate students also responded positively to the course. Studies have shown that even though there is less research with graduate students, positive benefits and outcomes are reported (Burnett et al., 2004; Bushouse & Morrison, 2001; Coffey & Wang, 2006; Lu & Lambright, 2010; Quinn, 2006), similar to the current study. They wrote in their reflective essays at the end of the course and reported in their interviews that the course content knowledge was critical to their success in working with students by providing background information. The graduate students additionally wrote that the service aspect of the course assisted them with understanding and synthesizing the course material. In their essays, they also discussed the equity and diversity issues they read about and saw while working with students. Moreover, the experience allowed them to build relationships with their high school students and left them hopeful about having made a difference. The findings show that connecting service learning to the academic course is directly related to the reflections that occurred in discussions among students, with professors, and in written assignments (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000).

In the interviews, the former graduate students also mentioned the course readings as critical to their understanding of the admission process and that those readings informed their work with the high

school students (Bushouse & Morrison, 2001; Lu & Lambright, 2010; Quinn, 2006). The readings further assisted them in building relationships with students that were goal oriented and increased their personal skills in working with people that they still find helpful in their professional practice. Only two of the four interviewees specifically mentioned the diversity and equity issues as still helpful to them in their current professional practice. While this may be an area of additional work in structuring the course, the fact that the diversity and equity issues continue to inform the professional practice of two of the four former students illustrates that service learning can be an important avenue for students to grapple with diversity issues, as found in previous research (Ash & Clayton, 2009; Bushouse & Morrison, 2001; Einfeld & Collins, 2008; Kilgo, 2015). Thus, these data address the third research question, which asked how the former graduate students described their content knowledge as a result of service learning. The former graduate students clearly believed that the project assisted with understanding and applying the course content. Moreover, in both the essays and the interviews, the former graduate students clearly described valuable experiences they had with the high school students, although those experiences were sometimes challenging, answering the fourth research question. Finally, the former graduate students clearly explained the skills they had learned and still used as a result of the service learning experience, which included relational skills and skills in working with diverse students, answering the fifth research question and echoing previous research on service learning and professional skill growth in graduate students (Bushouse & Morrison, 2001; Lu & Lambright, 2010; Quinn, 2006).

CONCLUSION

Service learning as a pedagogical tool can be beneficial for Master of Higher Education program students, as this course and developmental evaluation analysis (Patton, 2011) indicate. These findings pertaining to increased course content knowledge, development and application of professional skills, and increased awareness of diversity and equity issues align with those of previous scholars (Astin & Sax, 1998; Astin, et al., 1999; Bushouse & Morrison, 2001; Einfeld & Collins, 2008; Eyler, et al., 2001; Lu & Lambright, 2010; Pelco et al., 2014; Quinn, 2006). While the research on undergraduate students is more robust than on graduate students, these findings agree with that research and assist in filling the gap in research on graduate students (Bushouse & Morrison, 2001; Lu & Lambright, 2010; Quinn, 2006). Moreover, these skills are critical for our higher education master graduates as they begin careers on campuses.

The high school recipients reported positive outcomes as well. They applied to colleges with the assistance of their graduate student mentors, secured supporting material, and were communicating with their parents about moving forward with financial aid applications. Given that many of these students were first generation students and students of color, the course had a positive impact on a group of high school students who are underrepresented in colleges, and especially in four year universities, echoing previous research (Bushouse & Morrison, 2001; Cress et al., 2010; Freeman, 1997, 1999; Gonzalez et al., 2003; McDonough, 1997, 2005; Perna, 2000; Smith, 2001; Walpole et al., 2005). Further, one insight of this study may be that service recipients experience positive outcomes as a result of service learning efforts that are similar to those of service providers, at least when both groups are students. Thus, the course had positive outcomes on several measures. It provided graduate students with experience they can utilize in their professional lives on campuses, assisted a group of high school students in transitioning from high school to college, and may have increased underrepresented students' presence on college campuses.

Furthermore, this study highlighted the benefits of developmental evaluation (Patton, 2011) and of Eddy and Amey's (2014) partnership framework. Including these approaches strengthened the study in several ways. It provided a framework for understanding the process in building partnerships based on values alignment (Eddy & Amey), which is often the motivating force in higher education service learning courses. Eddy and Amey's (2014) framework provides an invaluable tool for understanding the process and motivation for partnerships such as service learning, and additional work incorporat-

ing it as a framework would be helpful. At the same time, developmental evaluation allows for ongoing, innovative improvements to projects such as service learning courses (Patton, 2011). Both of these approaches will be beneficial for practitioners seeking to create similar courses in their own high education programs.

Future research should focus on expanding the knowledge base regarding both graduate student experiences with and outcomes from service learning and service recipients' experiences with and outcomes from participating in service learning. These are two gaps that have been identified in the research (Cress et al., 2010; Lambright & Lu, 2009), and additional research, particularly with larger samples and across multiple contexts, will be important contributions to the literature. Additionally, service learning has been critiqued as atheoretical (Giles & Eyler, 1994), although Giles and Eyler have linked it to Dewy's ideas of experiential learning. Incorporating and testing additional theory may also be helpful in future research.

REFERENCES

- Ash, S. L., & Clayton, P. H. (2009). Generating, deepening, and documenting learning: The power of critical reflection in applied learning. *Journal of Applied Learning in Higher Education*, 1, 25-48. <http://hdl.handle.net/1805/4579>
- Astin, A. W., & Sax, L. J. (1998). How undergraduates are affected by service participation. *Journal of College Student Development*, 39(3), 251-263.
- Astin, A. W., Sax, L. J., & Avalos, J. (1999). Long term effects of volunteerism during the undergraduate years. *Review of Higher Education*, 22(2), 187-202.
- Astin, A. W., Vogelgesang, L. J., Ikeda, E. K., & Yee, J. A. (2000). Executive summary: How service learning affects students. *Higher Education*. 144. <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/slcehighered/144>
- Bordelon, T. D. & Phillips, I. (2006). Service-learning: What students have to say. *Active Learning in Higher Education*, 7(2), 143-153. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1469787406064750>
- Burnett, J. A., Hamel, D., & Long, L. L. (2004). Service learning in graduate counselor education: Developing multicultural counseling competency. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development*, 32(3), 180-191. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2161-1912.2004.tb00370.x>
- Bushouse, B., & Morrison S. (2001). Applying service learning in master of public affairs programs. *Journal of Public Affairs Education*, 7(1), 9-17.
- Chang, W. J., & Yeh, Z. M. (2014). A case study of service learning effectiveness based on ubiquitous learning system for college students. *Procedia-Social & Behavioral Sciences*, 136, 554-558. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2014.05.375>
- Chong, C. S. (2014). Service-learning research: Definitional challenges and complexities. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education*, 15(4), 347-358.
- Coffey, B. S., & Wang, J. (2006). Service learning in a master of business administration (MBA) integrative project course: An experience in China. *Journal of Education for Business*, 82(2), 119-124. <https://doi.org/10.3200/JOEB.82.2.119-124>
- Cress, C. M., Burack, C., Giles, D. E., Jr., Elkins, J., & Stevens, M. C. (2010). *A promising connection: Increasing college access and success through civic engagement*. Campus Compact.
- Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. Sage Publications.
- Eddy, P. L., & Amey, M. J. (2014). *Creating strategic partnerships: A guide for educational institutions and their partners*. Stylus Publishing.
- Einfeld, A., & Collins, D. (2008). The relationships between service-learning, social justice, multicultural competence, and civic engagement. *Journal of College Student Development*, 49(2), 95-109. <https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2008.0017>
- Eyler, J. & Giles, D. E. (1999). *Where's the learning in service-learning?* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

- Eyler, J. S., Giles, D. E., Stenson, C. M., & Gray, C. J. (2001). *At a glance: What we know about the effects of service-learning on college students, faculty, institutions and communities, 1993-2000: Third Edition*.
<https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/slcehighered/139>
- Freeman, K. (1997). Increasing African Americans' participation in higher education: African American high-school students' perspectives. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 68, 523-50.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.1997.11778996>
- Freeman, K. (1999). The race factor in African Americans' college choice. *Urban Education*, 34(1), 4-25.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085999341002>
- Ganss, K. M., & Baker, L. (2014). Utilizing critical service-learning to ease college transitions. *Currents in Teaching & Learning*, 7(1), 131-142.
- Gerstenblatt, P. (2014). Community as agency: Community partner experiences with service learning. *Journal of Community Engagement and Scholarship*, 7(2), 60-71.
<http://ezproxy.rowan.edu/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/1726693399?accountid=13605>
- Giles, D. E., & Eyler, J. (1994). *The theoretical roots of service-learning in John Dewey: Toward a theory of service-learning*. Service Learning, General, Paper 150.
- Gonzalez, K. P., Stoner, C., & Jovel, J. E. (2003). Examining the role of social capital in access to college for Latinas: Toward a college opportunity framework. *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education*, 2, 146-170.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1538192702250620>
- Greene, J. C., & Caracelli, V. J. (1997). Defining and describing the paradigm issue in mixed-method evaluation. *New Directions for Evaluation*, 1997(74), 5-17. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ev.1068>
- Hossler, D., & Gallagher, K. S. (1987). Studying student college choice: A three-phase model and the implications for policymakers. *College & University*, 62(3), 207-222.
- Keup, J. R. (2005–2006). The impact of curricular interventions on intended second-year enrollment. *Journal of College Student Retention*, 7(1–2), 61–89. <https://doi.org/10.2190/2DCU-KABY-WVQH-2F8J>
- Kilgo, C. A. (2015). The estimated effects of service learning on students' intercultural effectiveness. *Journal of College Student Development*, 56(8), 867-871. <https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2015.0086>
- Kimmel, C. E., Hull, R. B., Stephenson, M. O., Robertson, D. P., & Cowgill, K. H. (2012). Building community capacity and social infrastructure through landcare: A case study of land grant engagement. *Higher Education*, 64(2), 223-235. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-011-9489-9>
- Kuh, G. (2003). What we're learning about student engagement from NSSE: Benchmarks for effective educational practices. *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*, 35(2), 24-32.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00091380309604090>
- Kuh, G. D. (2009) What student affairs professionals need to know about student engagement, *Journal of College Student Development*, 50(6), 683-706. <https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.0.0099>
- Lambricht, K., & Lu, Y. (2009). What impacts the learning in service learning? An examination of project structure and student characteristics. *Journal of Public Affairs Education*, 15(4), 425-444.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/25703146>
- Lu, Y. & Lambricht, K.T. (2010). Looking beyond the undergraduate classroom: Factors influencing service learning's effectiveness at improving graduate students' professional skills. *College Teaching*, 58, 118–126.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/87567550903583777>
- McDonald, J., & Dominguez, L. A. (2015). Developing university and community partnerships: A critical piece of successful service learning. *Journal of College Science Teaching*, 44(3), 52-56.
https://doi.org/10.2505/4/jcst15_044_03_52
- McDonough, P. M. (1997). *Choosing colleges: How social class and schools structure opportunity*. New York: SUNY Press.

- McDonough, P. M. (2005). Counseling matters: Knowledge, assistance, and organizational commitment in college preparation. In W. G. Tierney, Z. B. Corwin, & J. E. Colyar (Eds.). *Preparing for college: Nine elements of effective outreach* (pp. 69-87). New York, SUNY Press.
- Patton, M. Q. (2011). *Developmental evaluation: Applying complexity concepts to enhance innovation and use*. Guilford Press.
- Pelco, L. E., Ball, C. T., & Lockeman, K. (2014). Student growth from service-learning: A comparison of first-generation and non-first-generation college students. *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*, 18(2), 49-66. <http://openjournals.libs.uga.edu/index.php/jheoe/article/view/1234>
- Perna, L. (2000). Differences in the decision to attend college among African Americans, Hispanics, and Whites. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 71(2), 117-141. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2000.11778831>
- Plaut, J. (2013). *Partnering in tough times: Service-learning for economic vitality*. California Campus Compact. https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/elp_fac/7
- Posavac, E. J. (2011). *Program evaluation methods and case studies*. New York, Routledge.
- Quinn, S. M. F. (2006). Facilitating service-learning for the first time with advanced graduate students: A mentoring perspective. *Mentoring & Tutoring*, 14(1), 97-110. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13611260500432848>
- Richards, K. A. R., & Levesque-Bristol, C. (2016). The influence of self-efficacy and self-regulated motivation on civic learning in service learning courses. *Journal of College Student Development*, 57(7), 827-843. <https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2016.0081>
- Rubin, H. J., & Rubin, I. S. (1995). *Qualitative interviewing: The art of bearing data*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Smith, M. (2001). Low SES African American parents: Playing the college choice game on an unlevel field. *The Journal of College Admission*, 171, 16-21.
- Soria, K. M., & Thomas-Card, T. (2014). Relationships between motivations for community service participation and desire to continue service following college. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, 20(2), 53-64. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1116574.pdf>
- Strage, A. (2004). Long-term academic benefits of service-learning: When and where do they manifest themselves? *College Student Journal*, 38(2), 257-261.
- Walpole, M., McDonough, P. M., Bauer, C. J., Gibson, C., Kanyi, K., & Toliver, R. (2005). This test is unfair: Urban African American and Latino high school students' perceptions of standardized college admission tests. *Urban Education*, 40(3), 321-349. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085905274536>

BIOGRAPHIES



Dr. MaryBeth Walpole received her Ph.D. from UCLA in Higher Education and Organizational Change and her M.A. in Higher Education Administration from Stanford University. She is a professor of Higher Education and Chair of the Educational Services and Leadership department at Rowan University. Her research interests focus on access and equity issues in higher education, particularly focused on students from low socioeconomic backgrounds and students of color. She is currently teaching The College Student: Issues and Support Programs and College Admission and Transition. Her work has been published in several journals including *Research in Higher Education*, *the Review of Higher Education*, and *Urban Review*. Her books include: *From diplomas to doctorates: The success of black women in higher education and its implications for equal educational opportunities for all*, which she coedited and *Economically and educationally challenged students in higher education: Access to outcomes*.



Felicia Crockett received her M.A. in Higher Education from Rowan University and B.S. in Biology from Ramapo College of New Jersey. Felicia is a first-year Ph.D. student studying Education with a specialization in Higher and Postsecondary Education at Rowan University in the Center for Access, Success, and Equity (CASE). She's a research fellow for CASE and her research interests include access and equity issues in higher education, particularly focused on underrepresented student population and educational opportunity programs.