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Recommended Citation

Kaugars, Astrida S., "Evaluating the Impact of Service Learning on Student Outcomes in a Health Psychology Course" (2011). *Psychology Faculty Research and Publications*. 88.

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Evaluating the impact of service learning on student outcomes in a health psychology course

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Keywords: Biopsychosocial model, transactional model, service-learning, undergraduate

Track: Student development and learning

Format: Research paper

Summary:

Although positive effects of service learning have been demonstrated for personal, citizenship, and social outcomes there is a need to target specific outcomes in psychology course design and to incorporate appropriate service learning experiences (Conway, Amel, & Gerwien, 2009). The purpose of the present study was to examine how aspects of an undergraduate Health Psychology course, which included a project-based model of service learning, may contribute to changing students' perspectives on public service, community engagement, and social justice.

Participating undergraduate students (70% female) were predominately Caucasian (85%), and the majority (64%) had never participated in service learning prior to the present course. In preliminary data analysis comparing data from the two time points, there were no significant changes in students' public service motivation, however, there was a statistically significant increase in students' community service self-efficacy scores ($t(29) = -2.230, p < .05$). Moreover, more than half of the respondents reported that as a result of their service learning experience they became more aware of racism, educational issues, environmental issues, discrimination, health care issues, inequality, alcohol/drug abuse, and poverty. Ongoing analyses will include coding the perspective-taking task transcripts for stereotypical representations, affect, and attributions. Further analyses will also examine the influence of social desirability on students' responses.

Preliminary results suggest that the inclusion of a project-based service learning activity was influential in changing students' community service self-efficacy. Analyses of student responses to a perspective-taking task hold promise for demonstrating the value of reducing students' stereotypes about children's health.

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