DESIGNING INTERGENERATIONAL SERVICE-LEARNING COURSES BASED ON STUDENT CHARACTERISTICS

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DESIGNING INTERGENERATIONAL SERVICE-LEARNING COURSES BASED ON STUDENT CHARACTERISTICS

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Generations Together and the Association for Gerontology in Higher Education have jointly supported the establishment of service-learning in American college and university gerontology programs through minimigrants to faculty members who design and implement intergenerational service-learning gerontology courses. Thirty such courses have been offered over the past 3 years. We examined survey data collected from students enrolled in 10 intergenerational service-learning courses in spring semester 1999. The analysis suggested that characteristics such as age, gender, and class standing as well as students’ previous experiences in gerontology and service activities may explain how they expect to benefit from an intergenerational service-learning course. This article also discusses relationship-based and curriculum-based benefits of intergenerational service-learning courses and makes recommendations for designing intergenerational service-learning gerontology courses based on the characteristics of students enrolled in the course.

Many of the benefits of intergenerational service-learning can be categorized as either relationship-based benefits or curriculum-based benefits (Loewen, 1996). Relationship-based benefits have to do with
relationships between younger and older people or changes in students’ perceptions of older adults. Educators who have incorporated intergenerational service-learning into their courses have indicated that contact between generations has increased understanding among generations and encouraged constructive exchanges and the sharing of experiences among younger and older individuals (Hannon & Koch, 1993). At course conclusion, students in intergenerational service-learning courses have expressed appreciation for the life experiences and personal insights shared by older individuals (Hannon & Koch, 1993) and demonstrated more positive attitudes toward older individuals (Bringle & Kremer 1993; Newman, Lyons, & Onawola, 1985).

Curriculum-based benefits of intergenerational service-learning include the ability to translate gerontology content into real-life experience, acquire skills that can be used in careers with older adults, and change personal perceptions of one’s own aging. Students in intergenerational service-learning courses have reported that service experiences made real many of the gerontology topics discussed in class (Hannon & Koch, 1993) and challenged them to examine the lack of fit between their assumptions regarding aging and the facts about aging (McGowan & Blankenship, 1994). In addition, students who participated in service-learning experiences indicated a more positive view of their own later lives than either those who took a traditional didactic course or those who experienced intergenerational interactions without the benefit of gerontology course content (Bringle & Kremer, 1993).

The growth of intergenerational service-learning in career preparation has been demonstrated by the number of professional schools now interested in including an experiential component in their curricula. Studies of student outcomes from service-learning projects in occupational therapy (Greene & Diehm, 1995), accounting (Lenk, 1997), and pharmaceutical education (Lamsam, 1999; Nickman, 1998; Osborne, Hammerich, & Hensley, 1998) have been published. Of the 30 courses in the intergenerational service-learning in the gerontology program offered by Generations Together at the University of Pittsburgh (GT) and the Association for Gerontology in Higher Education (AGHE) over the past 3 years (1998–2000), several have been in professional programs such as occupational therapy, business, and social work (McCrea, Nichols, & Newman, 1998, 1999, 2000).

Understanding the relationships among student characteristics and the relationship-based or curriculum-based benefits of service-learning courses may help faculty members design intergenerational service-learning courses that meet the specific educational needs of different groups of students. Unfortunately, the question of whether student characteristics play a part in a student’s likelihood of experiencing
relationship-based or curriculum-based benefits from an intergenerational service-learning course has not been examined. In fact, there is very little discussion of the influence of demographics on service-learning in the literature. However, one study of 140 adolescent students from a New York City middle school who participated in a service-learning program found that girls consistently reported higher expectations for service-learning and expected more positive personal growth, such as learning to care for others, better understanding of people, and improving their community, than did boys. Boys were more motivated by grades and course credit than were girls (Hecht & Fusco, 1995). Another study of students in a service-learning philosophy course at a small parochial college found that older and younger students may benefit from service-learning in different ways (Fenzel & Leary, 1997).

Previous participation in volunteer service activities may indicate a strong interest in service and a predisposition for selecting service-learning courses. One study found that high school students who were involved in community service work were twice as likely to continue community service after graduation (National Center for Education Statistics, 1998).

We explored the relationships among student characteristics, such as age, gender, and class standing, as well as experience in gerontology and service activities, and the relationship-based and curriculum-based benefits students expected to gain from intergenerational service-learning courses.

**METHOD**

This study used survey data collected from 230 students who, in spring semester 1999, took an intergenerational service-learning course at 1 of 10 colleges and universities that were recipients of minigrants from the Corporation for National Service. Joint coordination of the fiscal and programmatic aspects of the projects was provided by GT and AGHE. At each institution, an intergenerational service-learning component was incorporated into existing gerontology courses, including Introduction to Gerontology, Management of Aging Services, and Intergenerational Early Childhood Classroom Management. The institutions that received funding in 1999 were Carlow College (Pittsburgh, PA); Illinois State University, (IL); Nova Southeastern University (Fort Lauderdale, FL); Ohio State University (Columbus, OH); Saint Louis University (St. Louis, MO); San Jose State University (SanJose, CA); Southeastern Oklahoma State University (Durant); Towson State
University (Baltimore, MD); University of Findlay (Findlay, OH); and University of North Carolina at Charlotte (Charlotte, NC).

Of the 230 students, 38.7% were age 18–22 years of age, and another 31.7% were 23 to 30 years of age. Of the remaining students, 25.5% were 31 to 60 years of age, and 4.1% were over 60 years of age. The majority of the students were women (87%); only 13% were men. Seventy-one and eight tenths percent of the students were Caucasian, 9.1% were African American, 10% were Hispanic, 5.9% were Asian, and 2.7% were Native American.

The students represented a wide range of academic experience, but the majority were upper division or graduate students: 4.8% freshmen, 13.9% sophomores, 20.4% juniors, 26.5% seniors, 26.1% graduate students, and 8.3% other. Most students never had a service-learning course (76.8%). However, most had no previous volunteer experience (84.8%). The majority had taken a gerontology course (68.1%) Academic majors were primarily social science (65%) and allied health disciplines (19%).

The pre- and postcourse questionnaires were designed to collect data in a number of areas, including (a) motivations for taking an intergenerational service-learning course, (b) perceived benefits of intergenerational service-learning, (c) problems and barriers to intergenerational service-learning and (d) attitudes toward aging and older people. One question asked students to respond to a list of possible relationship- or curriculum-based gains from taking an intergenerational service-learning course. The relationship-based gains included “a firsthand understanding of older people,” “more respect for older people,” “an older friend,” “a mentor,” “preparation for my own aging,” and “the good feelings that come from giving service.” The curriculum-based gains included “career skills,” “information about the aging process,” “communication skills with older adults,” “college credit,” “knowledge of the theories of aging,” “understanding of the diversity of older people,” “understanding of the social issues related to aging,” “problem-solving skills,” “link between academia and the real world,” and “leadership skills.”

Data from the precourse questionnaires were analyzed using multiple regression to determine the relationship of three variable models to student benefits. These models included (a) student demographics (i.e., age, gender, and class standing); (b) measures of experience in and commitment to gerontology (i.e., first course in gerontology, required course in major); and (c) measures of experience in and commitment to community service (i.e., first service-learning course, previous volunteer community service, rating of community involvement). The analysis controlled for the institution attended by the student. The
direction of the standardized coefficients was used to determine the interpretation of the variable (i.e., whether was male or female, older or younger, satisfied or unsatisfied). The coding scheme used is indicated at the bottom of each table included in this article.

FINDINGS

Student Demographics

There was a significant relationship between age, gender, and class standing and students’ perceptions of the benefits they would receive from taking an intergenerational service-learning course (see Table 1). First, younger, female, and lower level class standing were significantly related to a variety of relationship-based benefits (e.g., gaining, an older

**TABLE 1** Benefits of Intergenerational Service-Learning Courses According to Age, Gender, and Class Standing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Benefit</th>
<th>$R^2$</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Class</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gain older friend</td>
<td>.073***</td>
<td>-1.24</td>
<td>-1.09</td>
<td>-1.53*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gain respect for older people</td>
<td>.081***</td>
<td>-1.09</td>
<td>-2.17***</td>
<td>-0.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gain leadership skills</td>
<td>.063**</td>
<td>-0.30</td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.084</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunity to give service</td>
<td>.053*</td>
<td>-0.19</td>
<td>-1.47*</td>
<td>-1.59*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunity to become friend to older adult</td>
<td>.101***</td>
<td>-1.29</td>
<td>-0.97</td>
<td>-1.91**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunity to get to know older adult</td>
<td>.096***</td>
<td>-1.49*</td>
<td>-0.069</td>
<td>-1.97**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gain good feelings from giving service</td>
<td>.053*</td>
<td>0.59</td>
<td>-1.18</td>
<td>-2.10**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gain knowledge of social issues of aging</td>
<td>.054**</td>
<td>0.103</td>
<td>-2.01**</td>
<td>0.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gain problem-solving skills</td>
<td>.048*</td>
<td>0.138</td>
<td>-1.61*</td>
<td>-1.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prefer to work with dementia or AD patients</td>
<td>.075*</td>
<td>0.192**</td>
<td>0.132*</td>
<td>-0.093</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prefer to work with the mentally impaired patients</td>
<td>.049*</td>
<td>0.002</td>
<td>2.16***</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prefer to work in adult day care</td>
<td>.079***</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>0.132*</td>
<td>-0.036</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prefer to work in clinic</td>
<td>.040</td>
<td>0.004</td>
<td>1.33*</td>
<td>-1.58*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: AD = Alzheimer’s disease; Age: 1 = under 18, 2 = 18–22, 3 = 23–30, 4 = 31–40, 5 = 41–50, 6 = 51–60, 7 = 61+; gender: 1 = female, 2 = male; class standing: 1 = freshman, 2 = sophomore, 3 = junior, 4 = senior, 5 = graduate student, 6 = other.

* $p < .05$.
** $p < .01$.
*** $p < .001$. 
friend, gaining respect for older people, and gaining leadership skills and preference for service activities. Those variables also demonstrated a significant relationship with having the opportunity to give service, having the opportunity to become a friend to an older adult, and having the opportunity to get to know an older person.

Second, older, female, and lower class standing were significantly related to one relationship-based benefit, gaining the good feelings that come from giving service, but they also were significantly related to several curriculum-based benefits, such as gaining knowledge of the social issues of aging and gaining problem-solving skills.

Third, older, male, and lower class standing were significantly related to a curriculum-based benefit, gaining credit toward graduation. They also were related to the preference to work with specialized populations of older adults such as individuals with dementia Alzheimer’s disease or other mental impairments and to work in clinical settings such as adult day care facilities and clinics. These preferences may indicate that older male students anticipate more focused, career-oriented curriculum-based benefits from service-learning courses.

Measures of Experience in and Commitment to Gerontology

There were significant relationships among (a) whether or not the course was required and (b) whether or not it was the students’ first gerontology course and (c) the benefits students perceived they would receive from taking an intergenerational service-learning course (see Table 2). First course in gerontology and required course were significantly related to one relationship-based benefit, becoming a friend to an older adult, as well as to problems and concerns such as agencies would not be welcoming and students were not prepared to work with older adults. Also, having taken another gerontology course and having taken this one as a required course were significantly related to several curriculum-related benefits, such as gaining credit in major, gaining credit toward graduation, gaining career skills, and gaining knowledge of the social issues of aging.

Measures of Experience in and Commitment to Community Service

Finally, there were significant relationships among first service-learning course, previous volunteer experience, and students’ ratings of community involvement experience and the benefits students expected to receive from the intergenerational service-learning course
TABLE 2 Benefits of Intergenerational Service-Learning for First Gerontology Course Versus Required Course

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Benefit</th>
<th>$R^2$</th>
<th>$\beta$ First gerontology course</th>
<th>$\beta$ Required course</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Become friend to older adult</td>
<td>.040*</td>
<td>-.105</td>
<td>.096</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concerned that agencies would not be welcoming</td>
<td>.068**</td>
<td>-.257***</td>
<td>.008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concerned that not prepared to work with older adults</td>
<td>.083***</td>
<td>-.216**</td>
<td>.134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Credit in major</td>
<td>.169**</td>
<td>.108</td>
<td>-.346***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Credit toward graduation</td>
<td>.121**</td>
<td>.064</td>
<td>-.283***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career skills</td>
<td>.043*</td>
<td>.134*</td>
<td>-.057</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge of social issues of aging</td>
<td>.035*</td>
<td>.161*</td>
<td>-.011</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* $p < .05$.  
** $p < .01$.  
*** $p < .001$.  

Note: Required course: 1 = yes, 2 = no; first gerontology course: 1 = yes, 2 = no.

TABLE 3 With Benefits of Intergenerational Service-Learning Course (SC) for Having Taken an S-L Course, Having Volunteered for Community Service, and Rating of Community Involvement Experiences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Benefit</th>
<th>$R^2$</th>
<th>$\beta$ S-L course</th>
<th>$\beta$ Volunteer</th>
<th>$\beta$ Rating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Challenge of course</td>
<td>.079**</td>
<td>.165*</td>
<td>-.173*</td>
<td>.180*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extra work</td>
<td>.053*</td>
<td>.102</td>
<td>-.104</td>
<td>.194**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparation to work with older adults</td>
<td>.123***</td>
<td>.140</td>
<td>-.098</td>
<td>.348***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Link academia to real world</td>
<td>.056*</td>
<td>.052</td>
<td>.080</td>
<td>-.102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career skills</td>
<td>.060*</td>
<td>.165*</td>
<td>-.105</td>
<td>-.024</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* $p < .05$.  
** $p < .01$.  
*** $p < .001$.  

Note: First S-L course: 1 = yes, 2 = no; volunteered for community service: 1 = yes, 2 = no; ratings of community involvement experiences: 1 = very satisfying, 2 = satisfying, 3 = somewhat satisfying, 4 = unsatisfying, 5 = very unsatisfying.

(see Table 3). However, in this model, the most important variable was students’ ratings of their community involvement experience. Having taken another service-learning course and having done volunteer service before, but having had a less than satisfactory community involvement experience, were significantly related to expected problems with the intergenerational service-learning course.
(e.g., not challenging enough, a lot of extra work, and not prepared to work with older adults). On the other hand, having taken another service-learning course and having done volunteer service before, but having had a more than satisfactory community involvement experience, were related to curriculum-based benefits such as gaining career skills and connecting academic experience with the real world.

**DISCUSSION**

By examining student motivations for taking an intergenerational service-learning course, it was possible to get a picture of the type of student who might select and benefit from this type of course. The results of our analysis suggest that student characteristics and prior experience in gerontology and service activities may predict what students hope to gain from the intergenerational service-learning course and may have implications for planning and implementation.

The results suggest that younger female undergraduate students are more interested in relationship-based benefits than older female, male, and graduate-level students. These benefits may include getting to know older adults on a personal level, having an older adult as a mentor, gaining a new older adult friend, learning to respect older adults, and gaining the good feelings that come from giving service.

Older female students are interested in gaining the good feelings from giving service, a relationship-based benefit, but they also are interested in increasing their knowledge of the aging field. They want to know more about the theories of aging, but most especially about the social issues of aging. Because many of these students are seeking careers in gerontology, they also are interested in learning to solve problems related to the field.

Older female students and men tend to be interested in pragmatic, curriculum-based benefits. They are interested in exploring career options, specifically ones that involve special populations of older adults, such as those with Alzheimer's disease or those who are mentally impaired. If given a choice, they want to work in clinical settings such as adult day care facilities and clinics.

The data also suggest that previous experience with gerontology has an effect on student expectations. Students who are new to the field of gerontology and who have not committed themselves to gerontology as a major or minor field expect relationship-based benefits such as becoming a friend to an older adult. They also are concerned about some of the problems they may face in the course that may inhibit their success, such as the possibility that some agencies may not be welcoming, that they may not be prepared to work with older adults,
and that the course may not be challenging enough. On the other hand, students who have had previous experience in gerontology and who are taking the course as a required course because they are committed to gerontology as a major or a minor tend to be seeking curriculum-based benefits such as getting credit in their major, getting credit toward graduation, enhancing career skills, and gaining knowledge of the social issues of aging.

Finally, we did not find that lack of service experience had an effect on a student’s perception of the benefits he or she would receive from taking an intergenerational service-learning course, but we did find that if a student had service experience, his or her rating of that experience affected his or her perception of the benefits of service-learning. Those who had a less than satisfactory experience were more likely to worry about the problems they might face in the course, such as it might not be challenging enough, there might be too much extra work, and they might not be prepared to work with older adults. In contrast those students who had a more satisfactory community involvement experience seemed interested in gaining new career skills and making the connection between their studies and the real world.

An example of how some faculty member coordinators designed their courses to accommodate the special needs and expertise of different groups of students is the intergenerational service-learning project at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte (McCrea, Nichols, & Newman 2000). This project involved two core courses in the gerontology program: Introduction to Gerontology and Senior Seminar. It also included graduate students who served as liaisons among faculty members, site directors, supervisors, and students. Using a three-level process, the seminar students formed service-learning mentoring teams to work with the community service providers to design projects for introductory students. The introductory students then completed 10 hours of service at one of the sites that had been prepared by the more advanced students.

Different learning goals that addressed the needs of different types of students were accomplished by this three-level approach. Undergraduates in the Introduction to Gerontology course developed an understanding of the realities of aging, dispelled the age-associated myths they held, and experienced examples of successful aging. Senior Seminar students developed an understanding of the realities of working with professionals in the aging field and learned mentoring techniques. Graduate students developed coordination and mentoring skills for use in future professional work.

In a second example, the service-learning faculty coordinator at the Ohio State University taught a graduate class in allied health that she
designed to meet the specific needs of older professional students. As she explained:

Most students are working full time and are taking one or two courses a quarter in the late afternoon and evening. In addition, most of these students are already working in the field with older adults; they do not need to be introduced to the field of aging or to gain experience with older adults. So activities such as friendly visiting did not seem appropriate or useful for them. (McCrea, Nichols, & Newman, 1999, p. 39).

Her solution was to seek service-learning activities that would bring these nontraditional students into contact with groups of older adults that they did not normally encounter in the course of their employment. She described this as follows: “For example, two nurses who work in acute care in the hospital setting went to an adult day care program and helped out with field trips, gardening, and craft activities.” (McCrea, Nichols, & Newman, 1999, p. 39).

Finally, the intergenerational distance-learning service-learning course at Nova Southeastern University is another example of course adaptation based on student demographics. All students enrolled in this course were graduate students, and most held high administrative positions at their agency or business. Because of their busy schedules, they were unable to do their service activity at a location other than their own. Instead, these students did their service-learning assignments at their place of employment, but they assumed duties that were different from their own. They were responsible for their own supervision. This approach worked with highly motivated professionals in a distance-learning course, but it probably would not be recommended for lower level courses. This course was so successful that it has become a regular part of the Nova Southeastern program.

IMPLICATIONS

On the basis of analysis of the experiences of over 200 students from 10 different academic settings, the following suggestions for designing intergenerational service-learning courses are offered.

- Faculty members should consider structuring intergenerational service-learning classes according to the types of students registered. This may mean providing a broader spectrum of service opportunities in classes with a variety of types of students. For example, service opportunities for older, upper level, and male students should be career oriented and located at sites with special populations of older
adults. For younger, lower level, and female students, service opportunities should be more socially oriented and designed to provide one-on-one interactions. Particular effort should be given to providing an orientation session for students who have not had previous gerontology or service experience. These sessions should help dispel fears related to working in social service organizations and with older adult populations.

- Older and male students may benefit most from service activities that are directly related to their career interests. Subject matter should also be specific to the career needs of these students.

- Younger and female students may benefit most from activities that involve one-on-one relationships with elders, such as mentoring, tutoring, discussions, and social activities. Activities that involve students doing service with older adults may be especially valuable for younger students who seem to benefit from the relationship-building aspects of service-learning.

- Students who have not had experience in gerontology may benefit from orientation sessions that are designed to reassure them about what they will experience as they participate in service-learning activities with or for the elderly. They should have adequate time to meet with agency staff members and to become comfortable with the skills they will have to perform.

- Students who have a major or minor in gerontology or a related discipline should be helped to see the relationship of their service assignment to their chosen career. Their curriculum-based expectations should be respected and addressed.

- It may be helpful to discuss with students their past service activities and community involvement experiences. Negative experiences may hinder students from benefiting from the service-learning experience and may cause them to focus on the problems rather than on the benefits of the experience.

REFERENCES


