

Leadership and Service through Intergenerational Learning: The Older Adult and Student Partnership

Intergenerational service-learning (IGSL) experiences are beneficial to students studying gerontology, because hands on experience with aging populations educates beyond the pages of a textbook. Service-learning satisfies community needs by supporting service providers (e.g. students) and recipients (e.g. agencies, organizations, or individuals) (Zuccherro, 2010). Students and older adults are engaged in a mutual effort to address community needs while forming lasting relationships outside of the academic environment.

Nazareth College of Rochester (Nazareth) and Saint John's Meadows Senior Living Community (SJM) came together to create intergenerational service-learning in a semester long course, *Issues in Aging*, offered to college students and SJM residents. The amalgamation of traditional primary-source learning, contextual immersion, and community involvement were the fundamental components of the course (Steitz, 2011). Cultivating relationships between community, academia, and SJM benefits each participating organization and enriches the lives of all participants (Steitz, 2011).

Nazareth is a four-year, coeducational, independent college on a suburban campus just outside Rochester, New York. Nazareth was named one of the nation's best institutions for undergraduate education, according to The Princeton Review. Featured in *The Best 376 Colleges: 2012 Edition*, Nazareth was ranked one of the best northeastern colleges that "inspires students to reflect on the role of independence and interdependence" (Nazareth College of Rochester, 2012). SJM is located on 35 acres in Brighton, New York. Independent living and enhanced assisted living is offered to 400 active seniors aged 55 years and older (St. John's Meadows, 2012). These two communities joined together to create IGSL projects which impacted the Rochester area.

Nazareth's Center for Service-Learning has a longstanding tradition of integrating service with academic study to complement student learning while satisfying community needs, and promoting civic responsibility (Boyle, 2011). The *Issues in Aging* course supports the mission set forth by Nazareth's Center for Service-Learning by supporting collaborative efforts between

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students and elder groups. These collaborations encourage students and elders to design their own community projects addressing an issue pertinent to aging in today's society. The *Issues in Aging* course content is based on the design of Fromm Faria, Dauenhauer and Steitz, who state, IGSL enables students to connect theory with practice, and increase student's empathy towards older adults (2010). *Issues in Aging*, encourages meaningful interactions between students and elders to address misconceptions about aging and elder populations.

The student/elder partnerships discussed in the current paper yielded two successful community projects: "*Connecting Through Hope*" and "*You're Outnumbered.*" Each project is exemplary of service-learning through the creation of intergenerational bonds. The IGSL projects cultivate relationships beyond the typical classroom setting and create lasting connections between SJM residents, Nazareth students, and community partners. The integration of service-learning with academic study throughout the community projects discussed here provides participants, young and old, with satisfaction and a sense of purpose. Gains in esteem and purpose are evident in the case studies described in the current paper. Service-learning engages students in civic responsibility through the application of intellectual processes and community affairs. The purpose of the current paper is to illustrate IGSL through two case studies: *Connecting Through Hope* and *You're Outnumbered.*

"Connecting Through Hope"

Connecting Through Hope (CTH) is an IGSL experience developed by five Nazareth students and six SJM residents. The CTH project was created to link the elderly, college students, and elementary school students to form an intergenerational bond, and to provide a service experience. Four elders in the CTH group are retired teachers, and for them, the school environment provided a safe and familiar starting point for the project. The initial goal of the elders and college students was to find an elementary school student body that would benefit from a unique connection with the elderly. The five college students and six elders discovered the unique quality they were seeking in Hope Hall. Hope Hall is a school for students with learning disabilities in Rochester, NY. The school offers a safe, enriching learning environment for students who have failed in regular school settings. According to Sister Diana Dolce, S.S.J., Executive Director/Principle, 90% of Hope Hall's children are from the inner-city, 83% are at or below poverty level, and 100% are learning challenged (Hope Hall, 2011). Hope Hall provided an ideal IGSL environment for the elders and college students.

The ultimate goal of CTH was to establish commonality and develop understanding between elders and children facing similar life challenges. CTH highlighted four similarities: frustration, stereotypes, lack of voice, and being talked down to. Through activities and conversation, these mutual issues were explored, therefore breaking down the barriers that exist between the two generations.

Careful planning was put into place to create the desired connection between the three generations. To establish a partnership between Hope Hall and the *Issues in Aging* class, the four college students submitted a project proposal to Sister Diana Dolce. Sister Diana invited the Nazareth students and elders to Hope Hall, allowing them to see the school, and meet the third and fourth graders participating in the project. During this first interaction, small groups, made up of an elder, Nazareth students, and Hope Hall students, were created to facilitate discussion. In these small groups, the elders read a story about children and older adults interacting. After the reading, the Hope Hall students drew pictures illustrating what they had learned from spending time with the elders, and listening to the stories. Although the four mutual issues were introduced, it is unclear whether the students made conceptual connections. However, it was clear that the students were receptive to spending time with the older adults, and a second interaction was scheduled. The second interaction occurred at St. John's Meadows. After a brief tour, the children had a snack and played games with the Meadows residents. They again drew pictures to celebrate their exciting experience with the older adults. One student showed his appreciation for the experience by drawing a picture that said "I love you," and thanking the elders for the experience. The classroom teachers recognized the benefit of the interaction between the students and elders, and asked to come back in the spring.

In between the first and second interactions, the entire class at the Meadows had the pleasure of meeting Sister Diana Dolce. She was able to break down the aspects of the learning disabilities the students had, in order for everyone to have a better glimpse into the daily challenges the Hope Hall students face. She also shared personal stories about the economic background that these students were from, which allowed the entire class to realize how difficult the home environments may be for these students. This lecture from Sister Diana was truly remarkable, and one that no one in the room could ever forget. Each elder, Nazareth student, and instructor realized the value of interacting with these students. After such an informative and moving presentation, the group members realized how much of a difference they could make, not only in the lives of Hope Hall students, but their own lives as well.

For the final presentation in the class, the Nazareth students created a digital book to commemorate the unique experience that all the group members shared. The digital book contained all of the pictures the students had drawn, photographs from each of the interactions,

and reflection letters written by the elders. This video served to visually depict the unforgettable interactions between all participating members. The Hope Hall students' positive reactions to working with the elderly, and the intergenerational bonds created between all the participants, solidified why this project was more than an assignment simply completed for a grade; it was an opportunity to explore personal values of different generations.

CTH was a valuable learning experience that created lasting bonds. Through the development of the IGSL project, lifelong relationships were created. The CTH bond is the first step in breaking down barriers and addressing the CTH goals. The elders and Nazareth students plan on returning to Hope Hall to continue breaking down barriers, and strengthening the relationships that were created.

The Nazareth students gained a sense of fulfillment from their work with the community. For the elders, this class gave them an "energizing, learning experience" and "a joy that will always remain in their memory" (personal communication, November 29, 2011). The community involvement allowed the elders to have a sense of purpose, learn about a community outside their realm of usual contact, and develop bonds with younger generations.

The equal partnership between the elders and the students in this endeavor led to a sense of pride and respect between the groups. The elders were able to see that the college students are dependable, outgoing and diligent. The Nazareth students were given the opportunity to learn from the elders and experience their willingness to delve into new experiences. All the aspects of the CTH project created a unique learning experience that changed the mindsets and lives of the participants. The *You're Outnumbered* IGSL group utilized the same foundational basis to influence the mindsets of a broader audience.

"You're Outnumbered"

As baby-boomers (persons born between 1946 and 1964) age, the number of older adults, aged 65 and up, will double from 35 million in 2000 to 71.3 million in 2030 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (USDHHS), 2011). Due to this dramatic increase, the elderly population will demand a large proportion of the United States' medical resources and services, which in turn will tax the need for health professionals with specialized knowledge in geriatrics (Clearly, Lesky, Shultz, & Smith, 2001). With medical and technological advances, Americans are living longer with more chronic illnesses (American Geriatrics Society, 2012). The escalation of the older adult population in the U.S. is inversely related to the number of health professionals with geriatric specialization. It is projected that the number of health professionals that are

trained and certified in geriatric medicine will decrease over the next three decades (Fitzgerald, Wray, Halter, Williams, & Supiano, 2003).

You're Outnumbered (YON) is an IGSL project created by a group of four Nazareth students and four SJM residents. The purpose of this venture was to raise awareness about the lack of health professionals specializing in geriatrics. While many people are afraid or hesitant to work with older adults due to stereotypes associated with aging, along with the fear of death, the goal of this project was to unveil the geriatric population in a positive manner unfamiliar to many people. The project is titled "You're Outnumbered" because students are the minority compared to the size of the ever-growing 65 and up population, and they are numerically outnumbered in age.

The lectures were focused on students studying speech and language pathology, physical therapy, pre-med, nursing and social work. Why target these students? At the undergraduate level there is a lack of academic coverage on the geriatric population; most programs emphasize working with children and adolescents (Horowitz, Howe & Maiden, 2010). How can students be expected to desire working with older adults if they are rarely exposed to them? First proposal: Increase contact between students and the geriatric population. Exposure to elders is one factor, but what about geriatric specialization in the particular fields of Nazareth students? Second proposal: Introduce students to professionals in their fields of study who are currently working with the geriatric population. How can student/elder interaction increase while learning about geriatric specialization? Third proposal: Bring together Nazareth students, health professionals from the Rochester community, and SJM residents- all in one room to learn from each other.

The student/elder collaboration of YON resulted in a lecture series on the Nazareth College campus. The goal was to educate young health professionals about the benefits and rewards of working with older adults by breaking stereotypes through facts, guest speakers, and shared experiences from population aged 65 and older. The first lecture hosted speech and language pathology and physical therapy students and faculty, and SJM residents. A speech and language pathologist and a physical therapist from the Rochester community, specializing in geriatrics, educated our audience about their passion and experience of working with the 65 and up population. There was a question and answer session between the audience and the speakers, followed by an open forum of discussion between students and elders. Residents from SJM shared stories about working with health professionals and provided a unique perspective to the lecture.

Students learned about geriatric specialization within their fields as well as communicated with elders. The health professionals from the community shared why they love working with this population and offered their point of view about working with older adults. The elders' accounts enabled students to reflect upon their own stereotypes about working with the 65 and up population, and the health professionals provided positive and negative accounts of working in geriatrics.

The audience was surveyed pre- and post-lecture as a tool to measure attitudes and feelings toward working with the geriatric population. Pre-lecture survey results indicated that many students had minimal contact with the geriatric population outside that of their grandparents. When asked about completed observation hours of the geriatric population, 43% of the student audience answered yes they have observed the 65 and up population, and 57% of the audience answered no, they have not observed older adults, aged 65 and up. When asked, "Would you consider volunteering to spend time with an older adult?" 100% of the student audience responded yes; when asked to explain why, students wrote, "to drop stereotypes," it would be a "rewarding" and "educational experience," and "you can only learn about them if you work with them" (survey, October 24, 2011). Post-lecture surveys were distributed to gauge the effectiveness of the lecture and determine whether it impacted students' thinking about a career specializing in geriatrics. For several students, providing care for someone nearing death is "scary," "depressing" and "intimidating," however one student stated, "This presentation has opened my eyes" and geriatric specialization could be a future "career option" (survey, October 24, 2011).

The second lecture targeted pre-med, nursing and social work students. SJM elders also attended. Guest speakers included a geriatric physician, a geriatric nurse and a social worker that specialized in working with older adults. Each touched upon their experiences with this population and why they chose their specialization, after which they joined a panel for students and elders to ask questions. The panel was comprised of all three speakers and a SJM resident who was once a practicing physician. She spoke about her endeavors as a doctor as well as a geriatric patient and provided an interesting point of view to the discussion. Subsequent to the panel of professionals, an open forum of communication between students and elders provided greater opportunity for students to learn from the older adults of St. John's Meadows. Who better to teach students about the importance of specialization in geriatrics than the elders themselves?

The YON lecture series educated Nazareth students and faculty, as well as SJM elders on the need for professionals to work with the 65 and older population. The experience was meaningful and rewarding for all those involved. Members of the Nazareth and Rochester

community, belonging to different age groups, were able to share their opinions and learn from one another. The elders shared their encounters with health professionals, positive and negative, to give the students insight into what it is like to be treated by a health care provider. Meadows' residents were able to show students that you can be in your 90's and still live an active lifestyle. They were able to demonstrate that not all older adults are "cranky" and "boring." Elders and students were able to communicate and interact with one another in a way not typically experienced in the curriculum of an undergraduate student in the health professional field.

Discussion

The fundamental concept of hands-on learning through community involvement, addressed in the *Issues in Aging* course, allowed students and elders to advocate for the 65 and up population and address perceptions about aging. Over three years, the *Issues in Aging* course has established a relationship between Nazareth and SJM that has resulted in several IGSL projects. However, the aforementioned IGSL experiences (i.e., CTH and You're Outnumbered) engaged audiences of a greater magnitude and had a much larger impact on students, elders and the public.

The communities impacted by *Connecting Through Hope* and *You're Outnumbered* include: Nazareth College, SJM Senior Living Community and the greater Rochester area. CTH raised awareness about the commonalities that inner city youth and SJM residents share. The elders were empowered by their experience and able to see they are capable of impacting the lives of children. Hope Hall was very grateful for the time the elders took to interact with the students. The teachers and students personally thanked the elders and expressed their sincere gratitude for the effort the elders put into creating this connection. Interest was expressed in continuing to develop the IGSL experience with the elders. The Nazareth students were able to learn how to best interact with children by witnessing the development of a relationship between the elders and Hope Hall. The teachers and administrators of the school saw the benefit in exposing the students to the elderly early on, which encourages positive relationships between the two generations. As a result of the efforts put forth in the CTH project, all participants realized the benefit of offering support to populations that are often identified by negative labels.

The YON lecture series resulted in a greater interest of students in the health professional fields at Nazareth to work with the aging population (survey, October 24, 2011). At the conclusion of this particular semester of *Issues in Aging*, Nazareth experienced a dramatic increase in the number of students pursuing gerontology minors (Steitz, 2011). The YON lectures hosted not only elders from the *Issues in Aging* course, but others residing in the SJM

community. The group of elders that attended gained knowledge about the lack of geriatric specialists and realized the importance of advocacy in aging. The experiences of all participants in CTH and YON offer a basis of evidence as to why IGSL is an effective method of instruction, especially for those exploring the gerontological field.

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