Chapter 11

Service Learning in Elder Care: Ten Years of Growth and Assessment

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SUMMARY. This article includes an overview of the history and rationale of service learning in elder care, a description of the varied service learning in elder care programs initiated by the Foundation for Long Term Care and other entities, the empirical and qualitative impacts of service learning in elder care projects on students, elders and the host agency staff. It concludes with recommendations and resource materials for implementation, expansion and incorporation into effec-
The Foundation for Long Term Care (FLTC) has nurtured the concept of service learning in elder care for over 10 years. In service learning in elder care programs, colleges, students, and community agencies join forces to enhance care for the elderly and student learning about aging. Although there are certain similarities, service-learning programs are not necessarily the same as the practica, preceptorships and internships that are so well established in social work and nursing education. While the program described here has been overwhelmingly used in undergraduate education, there is nothing which precludes graduate programs focused in this area.

A service learning in elder care project is specifically designed to (a) include a seminar requiring a high amount of both student-to-student and student-to-faculty interactions so that all the different service experiences of students are placed in appropriate and wide-ranging academic, political and psychosocial contexts, and (b) assure that the service is developed and requested by the agency to meet real needs of the elderly. What is most unique about service learning in elder care is its ability to blossom in almost any discipline within a college as long as there is articulation with disciplines such as social work, nursing, gerontology, psychology or sociology. This ability adds to the scope of services that can be provided and the number of students able to participate.

There is a particular relevance to social work education. While the majority of students come from gerontologically-oriented and/or health-oriented disciplines, service learning in elder care now includes other majors such as architecture and business management. The inclusion of the social work perspective (from both faculty and students) in such a mixed academic setting can help to assure that a holistic view of the individual aged and the social milieu surrounding them is understood.
Conversely, the social work educational experience itself is enriched by service learning. While formal internships are well established, the great variety of informal placements social work students can experience in a service learning setting can be enriching for students. Lastly, pedagogy is enriched: Almost all faculty feel that student participation in seminars which explore and put into context the wide array of experiences students have in service learning is exceptional. Social work principles and concepts can be explored from a greatly wider perspective.

**PROJECT GOALS**

The short-term goals of the FLTC’s varied service learning in elder care programs are:

1. to enhance the quality of academic learning about elder care issues and policy in various disciplines by integrating meaningful community service into coursework; and,
2. through these service-learning courses, to address immediate societal needs in the community surrounding the participating college.

The long-term project goal is to create a citizenry prepared for the challenges an aging society will bring. Since the attitude of today’s college students will shape elder care policy in the future, programs that educate as many college students as possible about the aging experience have a great societal value. A service-learning experience in which students debate the costs of care, equity, the “no care” zone and other health care and social issues is the best way—perhaps the only way—to prepare students for the elder-care challenges of today and tomorrow.

**PROGRAM RATIONALE**

Service learning in the health professions is an emerging concept. The Surgeon General’s deputy recommends that some form of service learning be a required component of health professional education (Lurie, 2000). Similarly, the Pew Health Professions Commission concludes “the nation and its health professionals will be best served when public service is a significant part of the typical path to professional practice (UCSF Center for the Health Professions, cited in Seifer, 2001).

FLTC’s service learning in elder care programs are an important component of this service learning movement. They were developed as a reaction to
demographic challenges: an increasing number of aging Americans and a decreasing number of the pool of professional and volunteer caregivers. In 1900, one in 25 Americans was over 65, but by 1990, one in eight Americans was elderly (Goldstein, A. and Damon, B., 1993). Of these, nearly 40 percent of the elderly not living in institutions were limited by chronic care conditions (Freudenheim, 1996). The future needs are even more significant: The elderly population will double between 1995 and 2050, with most of this growth occurring in the years from 2010-2030 (the years the “baby boom” becomes elderly and today’s college students will be decision makers). The “oldest-old” (those 85+) are the most rapidly growing group of the elderly. This group is most likely to need help with the activities of daily living, with a 50 percent chance of needing such help (U.S. Census Statistical Brief, *Sixty Five Plus in the United States*, 1995).

By contrast, there is a decreasing number of people able or willing to care for the aging population. The number of aides needed is expected to grow by 76 percent from 1996 to 2006, yet ombudsmen in 41 states report that nursing homes already cannot recruit or retain the aides they need (Editorial, *New York Times*, February 4, 2000). In 2000, 92 percent of nursing homes, 82 percent of home health agencies and 70 percent of adult care facilities in New York state were experiencing shortages (Heim and Tucker, 2000).

In response to these challenges, the Foundation for Long Term Care, in concert with 27 diverse colleges and elder-care providers, has systematically developed and studied service learning in elder care programs for over ten years as a way of both adding informal supports to the elder care system and to educating students about aging.

**PROJECT DEFINITION**

According to the Federal Corporation for National Service, “service-learning combines service to the community with student learning in a way that improves both the student and the community” (www.cns.gov). In the FLTC programs, of course, we focused on the service learning that is associated with service to the aged and/or the chronically ill.

**Distinction from Other Forms of Experiential Education**

Service learning is distinguished from other approaches to experiential education by its “intention to equally benefit the provider and the recipient of service as well as to ensure equal focus on both the service being provided and the learning that is occurring (Furco, 1996). Figure 1 provides a useful framework
Traditionally, experiential learning in the health professions is primarily concerned with its impact on student development and learning. Service learning can impact and benefit at least five important stakeholders: students, faculty, educational programs, community organizations and community members.

When a service-learning class is operating at its potential, what students are learning in their classrooms makes them more effective in their service and conversely, what students are experiencing in their service are making them better, more engaged students. One might imagine the hyphen in service-learning to be an equal sign (Hegeman, C. in Seperson and Hegeman, 2001).

All of the FLTC service learning in elder care projects, which involved over 1200 students from 28 colleges, share these commonalities:

- the colleges develop, and students participate in, one or more credit-bearing courses in service learning in elder care, either in a discipline in which elder care studies naturally fits (such as social work, nursing, human services, psychology, sociology or any of the allied health fields) or one which is interdisciplinary in nature and includes one of these disciplines;
- as part of the course work, students provide meaningful service in elder care as defined by elders themselves, by elder-care providers or by advocates (usually from 30-50 hours per semester, but there are variations by colleges based on credit-hours and other college requirements); and,
- the seminar has rigorous academic components that place the service in meaningful political, social and academic context and uses techniques...
appropriate for eliciting reflection and debate about how their experiences reflect policy and practice challenges inherent in elder care. Typically, a case study and a policy paper are required. In other words, the service and the class work must intertwine and enrich each other.

Within this structure, there is an almost infinite variety in services and course content and emphasis. For example, courses run from BSW programs might look like either of these hypothetical models (with many more possible):

- students visit the isolated elderly in their homes while their academic seminar focuses on the policies and politics of home care entitlements and how the experiences of the students show strength and weaknesses in the policies;
- students conduct a variety of small group activities in senior centers, adult day programs and nursing homes while their seminar focuses on innovations in elder care service delivery and how students perceive the nature of care in these agencies.

Courses from schools of nursing in previous FLTC models included a program in which students run wellness clinics for elders living independently while learning the policy issues of health care for the aging and discussing how their service has made them view the health care system for the aged (Saladino, S. in Westacott and Hegeman, 1996).

A service learning in elder care program sponsored by a non-traditional program included an architecture technology program in which students developed designs for senior adult day care programs (Sprayregan and Sperling in Seperson and Hegeman, 2001).

An example of an interdisciplinary service learning in elder care program included a program run which offered an interdisciplinary program entitled “Communicating with the Linguistically Impaired Elderly Clients.” This course is being team taught by faculty from the department of nursing, psychology and communication sciences and disorders. Students are taught how to communicate with people with dementia and then in turn put what they have learned in practice in educating staff in area nursing homes (Van Derveer, C., Riquelme, L. and Gomberg, D. 2000). Clearly, no two models will be alike and the potential variety is vast.

**History of Service Learning in Elder Care**

While service learning itself has a long history, the needs of the elderly had not been a primary focus of service learning programs until the FLTC pio-
neered it. The FLTC service learning programs were developed over time in different waves and with different external funders including the US Department of Education’s Fund for the Improvement of Post Secondary Education (FIPSE), the Federal Corporation on National and Community Service and a private foundation which wishes to remain anonymous. From 1980-2000, over 1200 students from 27 participating colleges worked with over 6000 elders.

However, after the FLTC initiation, the Association for Gerontology in Higher Education (AGHE) and the University of Pittsburgh jointly developed an intergenerational service-learning program. (McCrea, 1998) and the Stephen F. Austin State University, Texas developed a program similar to that developed by the FLTC (Watson et al., 1997).

**Findings from Related Studies**

A faculty member in one of the FLTC’s early service learning in elder care projects reports that her service learning experience in a service learning in elder care program based in a sociology department resulted in positive impacts in “three focused themes: inspiration and respect, education and learning, and interest and enjoyment” (Pine 1996.) McCrea (1998) noted that, in the AGHE/University of Pittsburgh’s Intergenerational Service Learning Program, 64 percent of faculty who participated believed that service learning components increased student interest in course content, and all faculty reported that volunteer experiences complemented course work; 78 percent of 230 participating students reported that their service-learning experience contributed a great deal to what would have been learned in a traditional course; 92 percent of participating agencies reported these programs contributed to their organization; and, 88 percent said it was beneficial to individual clients. A structured intergenerational visitation program for nursing home residents within a school of nursing found substantial improvement in resident’s psychosocial and physical condition while positively impacting nursing students views on aging (Newman, Lyons, & Onawola, 1985).

In an unpublished study, Watson (2001) found no measurable short-term (one semester, four months) improvement in attitudes/commitment to community service or improved perceptions of the elderly. Watson hypothesized that the lack of change resulted from the short time period and a selection effect: Participating students were juniors and seniors with prior experience with the elderly who were already predisposed to view the elderly positively. As will be seen, the FLTC’s larger study was more positive, although the same selection effect is suspected.

Faculty members running programs in service learning in health and allied health care disciplines report that it enhances professionalism, provides oppor-
tunities to develop inter-personal skills, critical thinking, and social responsibility while also responding to diverse unmet community health needs. Agencies participating in these kinds of service learning programs report the students enabled them to provide services to increased numbers of undeserved clients to better serve their communities (Bayne, Barker, Higgs, Jenkin, Murphy & Symnoground, 1994; Callister & Hobbins-Garbett, 2000; Seifer, 1998; Simoni & McKinney, 1998).

Interdisciplinary service-learning projects with students from medical technology, medical dietetics, respiratory therapy, nursing, speech and language pathology, pharmacy, social work, and optometry and medicine have been implemented to provide health screenings, and counseling to address unmet health needs in community settings, including rural areas (Rudmann, Ward & Varekojis, 1999.) Other models have sought to augment clinical services in rural undeserved areas utilizing senior-level students in medicine, nursing and pharmacy (Wiese, Howard & Stephens, 1979).

Allied health, occupational and physical therapy programs service-learning projects also show positive impacts. Such programs focused on fall prevention, health screenings, home assessments for “at risk” community living elders, recreation and fitness, and friendly visitation. In all programs students gained knowledge and skills and agencies reported benefits for clients (Greene, 1997; Horowitz, 2000; Thomas, Reigart, & Trickey, 1998). One project spearheaded by physical therapy developed a multidisciplinary fall prevention program for undeserved elders, including educational brochures in multiple languages, a video and web site, for older adults and health professionals (Newton, 2000).

Service learning out of the health care arena is more common than any of the models discussed so far. Research on service learning from all disciplines and activities (most commonly education and community building) shows that it too is an effective way to expand classroom education to provide hands on learning and build leadership while reconnecting students with communities to promote volunteerism (Cleary, Kaiser-Drobney, Ubbes, Stuhldreher & Birch, 1998; Stanton, 1990). Learn and Service America, a component of the Corporation for National Service (CNS) one of the FLTC’s funders, found: (1) strong relationships between service experiences and course content when students performed 20 + hours per semester and had opportunities for class discussion and (2) a strong correlation between participation in a service-learning course and increased civic responsibility (Gray, Ondaatje & Zakaras, 1999).

Evaluation of the FLTC’s Service Learning in Elder Care Programs

The five main objectives of the evaluation of the FLTC’s service learning programs were: (1) to detail the characteristics of participating students; (2) to
assess student views regarding the success of the program; (3) to explore changes in student attitudes on several dimensions over their involvement in the project; (4) obtain assessments from selected participating elder service agencies of the success of the program; and, (5) obtain assessments from individuals who received services from the program.

**Methods**

In the initial seminar for each semester, students completed a pretest questionnaire. A posttest questionnaire was completed in the last seminar session of each semester. Although well over 1,000 students from twenty-five educational institutions at twenty-eight diverse campuses completed these forms, the following results are based only on the 912 students who completed both pre- and post-tests.

**Characteristics of Participating Students**

Students who participated:

- ranged in age from 18 to 67 years. Sixty-four percent of the students fell within the traditional college ages of 18-23, leaving 36 percent of students older than 23, signifying a large number of older returning students in the group. This is also reflected by the mean age for the group: 27 years of age.
- tended to be upper classmen. Fifty-eight percent were in their senior year, 22 percent were in their junior year, and 11 percent were in their sophomore year. Only five percent were freshman and only three percent were graduate students.
- were predominantly female. Seventy-eight of students were female and 22 percent were male.
- were divided almost equally into students who were part of a formal gerontology minor or concentration within their major (48 percent) and those whose major had no formal gerontological concentration. (52 percent)
- had a variety of majors: 44 percent in social sciences, including social work and human services; 27 percent in nursing; 17 percent in allied health; and, in keeping with the FLTC efforts to diversify service learning, six percent were majoring in architectural technology, and five percent in management/communication.
- had a variety of career plans: 30 percent social work/counseling; 28 percent allied health; 26 percent nursing; 13 percent architecture and design; 3.3 percent management and communications.
The students’ services were friendly visiting (40 percent), recreation/activities work (25 percent), health promotion (10 percent), and social services (9 percent). The remaining services were varied.

Assessment of Students’ Views Regarding the Success of the Program

Students’ assessments of the service learning experiences were overwhelmingly positive. Specifically:

- almost all (97 percent) of the students reported that they would recommend the program to other students;
- almost all (96 percent) felt that they learned a lot in this program;
- most students (86 percent) felt this program was one of the best experiences they had in college.

Open-ended statements from the students give a context for these numbers:

“It was enjoyable to learn about a group of people that my age group forgot existed.”

“This experience will help me to be more politically conscious to the needs of the elderly.”

“You can make a difference in an elder’s life by just being there with them.”

“I learned not to treat the elderly as children . . . they are capable of doing for themselves.”

“Being old does not mean that you are any less than a younger person . . . the elderly are just like us . . . they have good days and bad days.”

“I learned that with the frustrations of working with the elderly also comes a lot of fulfillment.”

“I learned a lot about history . . . peoples’ personal stories made it come alive.”

“I got some good advice and I made some new friends.”

“Many of the folks I worked with were open to new ideas and enjoyed talking about their lives . . . this surprised me a little.”

Students were asked to respond to open-ended questions about their work experience and the coursework. Seventy-eight percent of the students offered
at least one suggestion for improving the work experience. Seventeen percent of the students indicated a desire for more hours at their placements, reflecting a desire to make the experience more intense. Other suggestions for improvement included a desire for more variety in the work; less role ambiguity; identification of more activities that are stimulating for the older people and more orientation to the placement. Student responses also indicated that more attention should be paid to expediting student interactions with workers in their service setting.

One interesting question is whether students who had prior experience with aging-related issues would have a different response to the program from students without such experience. To address this issue, we examined whether satisfaction was lower or higher for students (1) who were part of an organized gerontology program; (2) who had previously worked with the aged for pay; and (3) who had done volunteer work with the elderly in the past. Although satisfaction was slightly less for those students who had previously worked with the aged for pay, there were, however, no significant differences between the experienced and inexperienced students on any of the relevant satisfaction variables.

Assessment of Student Attitudes

A number of Likert-like scales were included in the pre-test and the post-test to measure such changes in attitudes toward the aged, attitudes toward community service work, and attitudes toward working with the elderly and chronically ill or disabled. These items were repeated on the posttest to allow for an assessment of changes over the semester. In sum, there were statistically significant changes in attitudes towards the elderly, but no statistically significant changes in attitudes toward community service or towards careers in aging services.

Attitudes Toward the Elderly

Participants were asked to rate nine statements about the elderly on a 1-4 scale, with 4 representing the most positive answer. Therefore, the highest possible score was 36. Scores ranged from 16 to 35 at the pretest, indicating that student’s attitudes to the elderly were generally very positive to begin with. The mean of this scale increased from 24.7 to 25.69, a change that is significant at the level of p < .000 (t-test), representing a positive change in attitudes toward the elderly over the course.

Particularly significant changes (p < .01) were observed on several of the individual items. While 61 percent of the students at the pretest agreed with the
statement “Most people are set in their ways and unable to change,” only 44 percent did so at the posttest. In the pretest, 84 percent agreed with the statement “Older people become wiser with old age” compared to 90 percent at the posttest.

**Attitudes Toward Community Service**

Participants were asked to rate a series of statements about attitudes toward community service (strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree), with a higher score indicating a more positive attitude. The scale ranged from 16 to 28 at the pretest. These scores show, as with the attitudes toward the elderly scales, that the students’ attitudes toward community service prior to entering the course were generally very positive to begin with. None of the changes observed on individual items were found to be significant. Although 97.5 percent of the students agreed that “It is important to help people in general, whether you know them or not” on the pretest and on the posttest, all the scores for all of the other items in this scale decreased very slightly. For example, in response to the statement “It is the community’s responsibility to take care of people who can’t take care of themselves,” 89 percent of the students agreed at the pretest while 88 percent agreed at the posttest. While 99 percent of the students agreed with the statement “I am good at helping people” at the pretest, 96 percent agreed at the posttest. Ninety-five percent of the students agreed at the pretest that “Careers in service to others can be more rewarding than other careers,” 93 percent agreed at the posttest. It is possible that as Watson (2001) hypothesized, a selection effect was present as these responses were very positive to begin with. It is also possible findings reflect a more realistic view of community service as well as their own abilities regarding elder care.

**Attitudes Toward Work with the Elderly**

Students were asked the extent to which they agreed with a series of statements regarding their attitudes toward working with elderly persons. Statements included, for example, “People who work with older people have interesting jobs.” The scale ranged from 10 to 28 at the pre-test. The mean of this scale decreased slightly from 21.6 at the pretest to 21.49 at the posttest. Although this change was not statistically significant for the total scale, several individual items demonstrated significant changes in student attitudes toward work with the elderly. For example, while 35 percent of the students at the pretest agreed with the statement “It would be very stressful to work with older people or people with chronic conditions,” 44 percent of the students at the posttest agree to this statement. Ninety two percent of the students at the pre-
test agreed with the statement “I don’t have the ability to work with older people” decreasing to 85 percent agreement at the posttest. As before, we suggest that this change is a reflection of a more realistic view on the part of some students regarding this type of work rather than an increased negative attitude.

In contrast to the previous examples, 91 percent of the students agreed with the statement “Working with older people is an interesting job” in the pre-test, while 95 percent agreed in the posttest. The student’s experience in the service learning program seems to have supported a more realistic understanding of work with the elderly while simultaneously reinforcing the students’ generally positive feelings regarding how interesting it is to work with the elderly.

While these findings indicate that, in the aggregate, we have not changed the desire of students to work with the aged, it is evident that they may view support for the aging and aging services in general more positively.

**AGENCY PERSPECTIVES**

There was a modest one-semester evaluation of the impact of service learning on 21 different elder care providers. On the average, each of these agencies hosted two students, with a range from one to eight students. Based on findings from a self-administered mail survey, almost all agency staff (96 percent) felt that the students were very responsible; and 74 percent felt students were well-prepared for the work experience.

In terms of perceived impact on clients, 96 percent said their client’s lives had been enhanced and 91 percent said that the quality of their client’s lives had improved as a result of the student activities. Overall, all facility respondents thought it was successful with 87 percent saying the program was “very successful,” and the remainder that it was “somewhat successful.” Lastly, all agency respondents said they would recommend the program to another agency/facility.

When asked about the benefits to the recipients, the most frequent response to this question could be summarized in the term “companionship.” The positive results of this interaction fell into two categories—personal one-on-one time and greater community/social interaction. Respondents often noted that their agency was unable to give enough personal attention to their clients, and that the students gave clients much needed individual attention.

**IMPACT ON THE RECIPIENTS OF THE SERVICE**

There was also a one-semester study of the impact of the students’ service on recipients. Thirty-three recipients were surveyed from rural and urban areas
of New York state. Seventy-five percent of the recipients completed the survey themselves with the remainder having someone assisting or acting as a proxy. Fifty-five percent received service from students at an adult-day care program, 30 percent at a senior center, nine percent in their own home, with the remainder at a group home, independent housing or some other location. In terms of specific activities, recipients reported receiving help in two major areas: (1) exercise and massage (reflecting that one of the communities surveyed has service learning emanating from a physical therapy department) and (2) friendly visitation and conversation. Several respondents stated that the student assisted the client in learning basic computing skills, showing the individual nature of the service learning experiences.

Recipients were overwhelmingly positive about the experience. Of the 50 percent that reported having a regular caregiver, 85 percent felt that having a student working with them reduced the strain on their caregiver, with 41 percent saying that it was reduced significantly. When asked “How enjoyable were these activities?” 98 percent said they found them enjoyable, with 60 percent answering “very enjoyable.” Eighty-three percent reported that the student made it easier for them to remain living at home. An overwhelming majority (98 percent) reported that working with the student made their life better or more pleasant with 51 percent reporting that it “improved a lot.” Finally, all of the respondents said they would recommend the service-learning program to someone else.

When asked what they liked most about their involvement with the student, nearly all respondents commented on the benefits of companionship and social interaction and responses such as “she was able to relate to me,” “gave me incentive to try something new,” and “a friend” typified the results.

Most recipients did not have any suggestions for improving the program. Several respondents, however, suggested that the program was too short or that they wanted more visits or longer visits.

A common debate among the project director and faculty has been the issue of attachment: What happens to the elder when the student leaves? What happens to the student when a resident dies? Students receive a service-learning handbook (Westcott and Hegeman, 1996) which discusses this issue and FLTC faculty orientation discusses them in detail. From these evaluations, it seems as if the issues are managed well although they remain an ongoing challenge.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR FACULTY**

While a consistent faculty concern is the extra time such a program takes in terms of additional student placements, student queries and relationships with
elder care agencies, faculty has been extremely supportive of the project, both because it is professionally rewarding and energizing (Roodin, 2000) and because faculty enjoys “the degree of dedication” shown by students (Harter, Ladrigan and Machemer in Westacott and Hegeman, 1996). Further options and innovations in service learning in elder care are virtually unlimited, making available and creative efforts in developing them an exciting option.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION**

As for the impact of social work education, it certainly seems the further development of service learning in elder care by social work faculty will have several compelling benefits: increased community-college interactions; more services for the aged members in the communities surrounding the colleges; an effective and invigorating pedagogy; the potential for a practical way to assure interdisciplinary collaboration; and an effective way to prepare society for the changes an aging society will bring to all.

In addition, the emerging emphasis on service learning in generic health care seems to demand that social work also participate. In particular, the development of multi-disciplinary service learning in elder care programs will allow students from other disciplines to have an enriched view of the psycho-social needs of the aging.

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