Service-learning in a community nutrition course: Influence of site on student perceptions

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Abstract

Service-learning has been used successfully in college courses at the undergraduate level to increase feelings of community connectedness, broaden student perspectives and provide opportunities for soft skill development. The goal of this evaluation was to determine perceived development of soft skills and perceived benefits of a service learning experience in a Community Nutrition course at a southern university. Students were assigned to community sites based on ranked preferences to complete a 15 hour service learning requirement. Site types included food provisions (food pantries and pre-packed food assistance programs), education (school-based, community level efforts, campus education, and health events) and local food (farmer’s markets, farms and sustainability efforts). Student perceptions were evaluated based on a 16-item survey with Likert scale responses given both before and after the completion of the required 15 hours. Responses were tested for significant differences using paired Student’s t-tests and differences based on site type were determined by ANOVA (alpha <0.05). Students working with sites related to food provisions had stronger views that nutrition education was needed in Mississippi relative to other sites and felt that they gained more professional skills. In contrast local food did not feel they had gained as many valuable professional skills. Overall, students felt more connected to the local community, gained a greater understanding of the complexity of community nutrition, and were inspired to do more community service in the future. Future research is needed to determine how to create clear learning objectives and activities to facilitate the development of soft skills through a service learning experience for undergraduate students.

Methods

- Students completed a pre/post online 16-item survey with 4-point Likert scales
- Perceptions before and after compared using Student’s t-tests
  - α <0.05
- Perceptions based on site type (food provisions, education, local food) tested using ANOVA on difference before and after
  - α <0.05

Conclusions

- Students felt more connected to community following the service learning experience
- Students understood the complexity of community nutrition in all site types
- Students were encouraged to do more service learning in the future
- Students realized the importance of nutrition education, especially those working in food provisions
- Students working in food provisions felt that they learned more skills for their future career relative to students in education or local foods
  - Differences could be attributed to frustrations with local food service-learning partners
  - Further differences could be attributed to autonomy of food provision sites

Impacts of Service-Learning by Site Type

- "Service learning will provide me with valuable skills to help me with my future career" x "I feel that nutrition education is a serious concern in Mississippi"
- "Service learning will provide me with valuable skills to help me with my future career" x "I feel connected to the surrounding community (outside of the university)"
- "I will benefit, professionally, from my service learning experiences" x "I will benefit, personally, from my service learning experiences"

Significant differences by site type found using ANOVA are noted

References


