



Service Learning to Benefit Graduate Students and Meet Community Needs

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Abstract

This poster session will share with faculty members, graduate students, and practicing school psychologists what service learning partnerships are, highlight potential benefits that could come from service learning, and indicate how service learning partnerships can be developed.

Introduction

Service learning combines academic learning with community service and involvement. By joining school and service, graduate students gain real-world experience in the field and apply their knowledge from the course content. Service learning benefits all stakeholders (i.e., community partners, faculty, and students) by strengthening academic and public engagement and creating positive connections in the community (Salam et al., 2019). Students gain critical reflection through learning about community structures and systems (Rondini, 2015). Part of this acquired knowledge and thinking includes greater personal insight and awareness of social justice issues (Yorio & Ye, 2012). While school psychology graduate programs across the country utilize practicums and internships, our program includes several service learning courses to connect classroom learning with experiences that benefit the community. Therefore, graduates of our program begin their careers with more applied experiences than the typical Ed.S. student might.

Online Modules for Children on Therapy Waiting Lists

Graduate students, in partnership with a local Child Advocacy Center, created online learning modules for children on waiting lists for therapy. The children who participated in the online modules were able to learn valuable skills prior to their therapy sessions beginning. The children learned skills such as:

- Coping with anxiety
- Peer conflict
- Confidentiality
- Talking to a trusted adult

Graduate students became more familiar with these topics and how to discuss them in a developmentally appropriate manner when working with children.

FBA Partnership

While working alongside a practicing school psychologist, graduate students conducted a Functional Behavioral Assessment (FBA) in a local school district. Graduate students each had the opportunity to practice consulting with classroom teachers, gathering ABC data through direct observation, administering rating scales, and setting up some experimental methods (e.g., structural analysis).

This culminated with graduate students proposing a variety of strategies and interventions for school staff to consider. Finally, graduate students followed-up with their respective school building to determine how the recommendations went.

Small Group Mental Health Services

In partnership with local school districts, graduate students provided small group intervention services to middle school and high school students. The focus of the small groups directly served a district-identified need such as students' executive functioning or self-esteem. Graduate students prepared curriculum resources and visited their respective school sites weekly to implement small group discussion and activities.

Graduate students also worked closely with the building's school psychologist to ensure pre- and post-data was collected and ask clarifying questions about leading small group interventions.

Head Start Interventions

As they learned about early childhood assessment, graduate students worked closely with local Head Start teachers to identify a student who could benefit from an intervention (e.g., play, social, behavioral, etc.). After operationally defining the problem behavior and determining a method of data collection, students developed one-on-one interventions and visited their Head Start sites frequently to lead the intervention with the student.

Students also interviewed the teacher and determined which prosocial skills could be improved within the classroom. They then created videos on topics such as how to cope when feeling left out or how to accept no.

Special Education Program Needs Assessment

In recent years, our program has partnered with a suburban school district. This service learning course's focus has shifted from year to year depending on the district's needs. This past year, graduate students took a deep dive into best practices for Alternative Curriculum Program (ACP) classrooms. After reviewing published literature, students observed in ACP classrooms and conducted focus groups with ACP staff. This service learning course culminated in graduate students, along with their professor, presenting for district staff and discussing strengths, weaknesses, and specific recommendations.

McKevitt et al. (2023) includes comments graduate students offered about their experiences with this partnership. Students said, while time consuming, their service learning experiences were valuable and improved their knowledge and understanding.

References

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