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SNAPSHOT ARTICLE (NON-REFEREED)

Service-learning in the Philippines: The University of Santo Tomas' National Service Training Program

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Abstract

Service-learning in the educational sector has shown increased impact on student lifelong learning and institutional commitment to the community over the past decade. Universities in the Philippines provide various service-learning programs for their partner communities, to address students' understanding of real-life community needs. However, there has been little study on students' service-learning in geriatric institutions. This article first discusses higher education in the Philippines, noting the impact of the National Service Training Program on institutions' programs. It then describes how one university, the University of Santo Tomas, has responded to this policy framework with the development of community programs that also meet its goals for social transformation. One particular program is examined – a service-learning program involving college students and a geriatric institution in Manila. Early qualitative feedback provides an understanding of college students' perceptions of the elderly and the service-learning implemented by the university. It also offers a strong foundation for continuing to improve the current service-learning program. From this study an 8-loop model has been developed for future evaluations of the service-learning program in this geriatric institution.

Keywords

service-learning, elderly, geriatric institution, Philippines higher education

Introduction

Service-learning was coined in the 1970s and has been promoted in the curricula by various educational scholars. A range of definitions of service-learning have emerged since the 1980s. Service-learning, according to John Dewey, is the interaction of knowledge and skills with experience (Giles Jnr & Eyley 1994). It is the combination of academic learning and community service that promotes critical and reflective thinking in order to develop civic responsibility and commitment and skills in identifying community problems and needs.

In the Philippines, university-based service-learning programs are emerging and generally focus on education, general health, and indigent socioeconomic wellbeing and livelihood (for example, see Guardino et al. 2015; Pottier 2013; and Tũaño & Pacardo 2013). Informing the development of service-learning and other community-engaged programs at Filipino universities is the National Service Training Program (NSTP) Act of 2001, which was established by virtue of Republic Act 9163. Its statement of declaration asserts that the state will promote civic consciousness among youth in recognition of youth's vital role in nation building. The NSTP has three program components, or courses. The Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) provides military training to organise and mobilise students for national defence preparedness. The Civic Welfare Training Service (CWTS) focuses on activities that contribute to the general welfare and betterment of life of members of the community or enhancement of their facilities. The Literacy Training Service (LTS) trains students to teach literacy and numeracy skills to schoolchildren, out-of-school youth and other segments of society in need of their services. The NSTP program is a compulsory one-year course for all Filipino university and college students (Republic Act No. 9163, 23 January 2002). Students undergo only one component. They may choose to take ROTC, CWTS or LTS in their first year or second year of university. Students enrolled in these courses, particularly CWTS and LTS, participate in off-campus projects to provide them with opportunities to become familiar with the community structure and to immerse themselves in the partner communities of the university.

The University of Santo Tomas (UST) is a private Roman Catholic university in Manila, Philippines. It was established in 1611 by Bishop Miguel de Benavides O.P. Its original campus was located inside Intramuros, a walled area of Manila. The university has withstood the Philippine Revolution and the Filipino–American War and has become the alma mater of great Filipino men and women. The UST's community development program is geared towards fulfilment of the university's mission to generate, advance and transmit knowledge to form competent professionals committed to serving the church and the global community. For the university's quadricentennial celebration project (2010–2012), the Community Development Department used the term *Simbahayan*, which is a combination of the words *simbahan*, *bayan* and *tahanan* (church, nation and home), the three foci of the project. The university commits to the continuous improvement of Christian formation and university partner communities becoming agents of social transformation. Development and implementation of community programs is based on its social transformation strategy, TOMAS. T stands for training and education for capacity-building; O for organising for empowerment; M for management of program development; A for advocacy, research and documentation; and S for spirituality of transformation. The National Service Training Program of the university has helped support continuity of the various programs for the university's partner communities for more than 10 years. It has provided assistance and

training to community partners and its members to become interdependent, empowered and self-reliant today and into the future.

Most of the university's partner communities are from the provinces of Central and Southern Luzon. Students from different colleges implement various programs which may include education, health, livelihood, environmental sustainability, disaster risk reduction, socio-pastoral ministry and evangelisation programs. Generally, the university receives letters of request for partnership from different schools, institutions and communities. These requests usually seek assistance and support for their members due to issues of funding resources. Projects must be aligned to the program areas namely health and wellness; equitable and inclusive education; socio-pastoral ministry and evangelisation; heritage, culture and sports development; and environmental sustainability and action. A project proposal is submitted and, when approved, participating faculty members and students from different colleges are identified. Funding for the project will come from the university and sponsorship from university partners. The faculty's role is to coordinate with the partner institution seeking assistance, the community development office, students, and sponsors from university partners for utilisation of materials to avoid conflict in schedules. Projects vary from classroom construction, library rehabilitation, feeding programs and tree planting to tutorial services for basic education students.

However, the university also receives requests for assistance and partnership from different institutions. These requests are assessed through background checks of the requesting institutions and a series of meetings relating to long-term partnership. This leads to the establishment of new institution or community partnerships with the university.

A recent service-learning program at the university was established between the university and a home for the elderly as it was felt that there was not sufficient study related to students' service-learning in geriatric institutions within the Philippines. Limited service-learning opportunities with elderly members of the community hinder students' understanding of the need to support the concluding stages of the human life cycle – mature and late adulthood.

The University of Santo Tomas sought to address this gap in Filipino students' understanding of real-life elderly needs through the establishment of a service-learning program between the university and the Little Sisters of the Elderly St Teresa Jornet home in San Juan, Metro Manila. This article gives an overview of the program and presents some qualitative feedback from the participating students. It is hoped that this and future research can be used to improve service-learning programs to meet the needs of the elderly, students and educational institutions in the Philippines.

Service-learning with the Little Sisters of the Abandoned Elderly

The population of the Philippines is projected to reach 107.3 million at the beginning of 2019. An estimated 4.3 per cent of the total population is 65 years old and above. In actual figures, there are around 4.3 million persons above 65 years of age. The average life expectancy for the Philippines is 71.7 years (68.7 years for males; 74.7 years for females). These people belong to the dependent population (Population of Philippines 2015, n.d.).

In the Philippines, these numbers cause increased concern for the welfare of the elderly. Generally, elders in the Philippines are disadvantaged. Although Filipinos continue to have a high regard for their elders, socioeconomic challenges force many working adults to look for jobs abroad, leaving the elders of these families to other people's care. Furthermore, families

with limited financial capabilities may choose to address other financial concerns over the elderly's needs (Lucentales n.d.). These are two reasons why some families abandon their elders and why some elders choose to leave their families and live in a geriatric institution.

This service-learning program started in January 2014, and the participating students were all enrolled in the National Service Training Program under the CWTS component. The goals were to assist, educate and train the CWTS students in proper interaction with and care for the elders, and to provide activities for the elderly that would help their wellbeing and life in a geriatric institution. The institution for elderly women was established in 2010 and is managed by the Spanish sisters. They envisioned a home that was simple and comfortable where the elderly could spend the autumn of their lives and be taken care of. The elderly women admitted to the facility were either abandoned by their family, voluntarily chose to live with the sisters or were recommended by priests from different parishes as they were homeless. Support for the projects of the institution is dependent on the generosity of persons, organisations and other institutions. This geriatric institution requested the assistance of the university for their elderly women members due to insufficient funding. Upon recommendation following a needs assessment, the university agreed to a partnership with this institution.

Students involved are from the Colleges of Education, Fine Arts and Design, Science, and Engineering, and the Conservatory of Music. These colleges were randomly chosen for exploratory purposes for this engagement. All students are given an equal amount of time of four hours per week for engagement with the elderly. They have time for one-on-one and group interaction during each visit. Students prepare various activities based on their respective disciplines and curricula. For example, Education students prepare activities using theories and concepts in instructional planning. Fine Arts and Design students provide activities focused on the arts and painting, using the principles of creation and design from their academic subjects. Students from the College of Science prepare activities that encourage mental fitness in the elderly, which usually take the form of games. Students from the Conservatory of Music perform various musical pieces, classical and pop, for the elderly, and since some of the elders were also music teachers in their younger years, they pair up and discuss topics related to music. Engineering students mostly provide talk sessions with the elderly. These may not be directly aligned with their discipline; however, their exposure to the elderly and their needs provides information that can feed into their project proposals for construction of facilities or design of communication. The Spanish sisters from the institution offer instruction and assistance to both students and elders during these sessions.

Course grading requires students to prepare a community development plan, a reflective journal, and a magazine that presents their overall experience of service-learning and other activities completed during the term. Prior to engaging with the elderly, student participants attend an orientation where they are asked to prepare the community development plan, showing the varied activities that they will incorporate in their interactions with the elderly. The reflective journal encourages students to discuss their thoughts, feelings and challenges during the interactions. An optional reflective journal format includes guide questions about the challenges encountered during interaction, realisation of values, suggestions for improvement, advocacy, and future commitment to service-related activities. The final output is a magazine that showcases the students' overall experience. The magazine includes articles, features and an editorial written by the students, as well as a photo gallery.

Early student feedback on impacts and challenges

The service-learning program with this institution has yet to be systematically evaluated. As a first step, a researcher produced survey questionnaire was employed to evaluate the service learning program in 2016 and was given to 305 tertiary students from the different faculties and colleges. This will be reported on separately. For the purposes of this article, just the two open-ended questions that accompanied the questionnaire will be discussed. They were:

- *How did your visit to the elderly institution impact your views about the elderly?*
- *What are your suggestions to make the activities more responsive and effective in catering to the needs of the elderly?*

The following themes emerged.

Respect for and valuing the elderly. Service-learning activities provide a venue for college students to learn respect for the elderly. This respect is shown in the way they interact with the elderly members of an institution. Respect is also shown in valuing elders as part of the family and a contributor to the community. Several participants said that the elderly deserve respect because of what they have done and what they have contributed to the society. They may seem weak due to deteriorating physical abilities; however, they still have much to offer. A number of respondents said:

They may look fragile but when you hear their stories, you will know how strong they really are. The reason why I think elderly people deserve so much respect is because they have been through so much. (College of Science, 18)

Compassion for the elderly. Exposure to an environment where many elderly people spend the sunset of their lives offers an opportunity for students to show compassion for the elderly and the life they live in a geriatric institution. Feelings of concern, kindness and care were realised through the service-learning program. On the other hand, some students felt pity for the elders who were living in the institution and being cared for by people other than their family. One respondent said:

Honestly, I initially felt sad for the elderly for the reason that their relatives and family chose to bring them to institutions like this instead of them being attended by their own family. (Faculty of Engineering, 17)

Selfless joy. Interaction of the students with the elderly created a positive feeling of being selfless. Students realised the significance of caring more for others and putting the needs of others first. The impact of being selfless led to feelings of joy. This positive feeling around meeting the elderly brought joy to several participants. The joy that they felt seemed to amaze some of them. One respondent's reaction:

It was very memorable & a fun filled experience. It was beyond ordinary for I got a chance to meet & visit these lolas which does not happen in an ordinary day. (College of Education, 18)

Volunteerism. Another impact of service-learning on students was a desire to volunteer. Upon learning of the life of elders in the institution, students were moved to voluntarily support and help programs for the benefit of the elders. This was not limited to supporting those who live in a geriatric institution. In response to the situation of the elders whom they had witnessed, most students were motivated to take action. One student said:

I have realized that there were indeed hardships and life stories that I only thought were seen on movies. It inspired me to do volunteer works in order to help and at least make the elderly happy in my own little way. (College of Science, 18)

Continuation of the program. Many of the respondents suggested continuing the service-learning program in the geriatric institution. Students expressed desire to address and support the needs of the elders. This could be done through an increase in exposure, regular visits to the institution and interaction with the elders. They said:

The time spent there should be extended because I feel that it wasn't enough to really address to their problems and needs. (College of Fine Arts & Design, 19)

Moreover, there were students who suggested that service-learning with the elders should be offered even to those who are not enrolled in the course. Encouraging and giving other students the opportunity to participate would facilitate the continuation of the program.

Preparation and orientation. A number of students emphasised the significance of student preparation before participation in implementing service-learning for the elders. Improved preparation of student activities for the elders could be achieved through orientation in the mission and administration of the geriatric institution and information about the elderly participants, such as a brief biography of each elderly participant, their likes and dislikes, their physical capability and their daily routines. This would also help students broaden their awareness of geriatric care and appropriate interaction with the elders and to prepare activities that would cater to their needs. Some of them said:

I think that the visit to the elderly will be responsive and effective if we know the background of the elderly we will be handling so that we can prepare ahead of time what must be done to cater [to] their needs. (Faculty of Engineering, 18)

Student attitude. Students also recommended addressing certain mindsets about elderly people such as apprehension and fear of interacting with the elders. Emotional and mental preparation of students is essential since this will be the first instance of student interaction with the elders. Students should be made aware of the need to be extra-sensitive, tolerant and accommodating of the elders' different moods and needs. Some students said:

Give respect and give more time to them because they are moody. Give more patience. (Faculty of Engineering, 18)

Concluding thoughts

From the above, the following observations were identified: students generally enjoyed the activities with the elderly; stereotypical thinking about elderly people was minimised; students understood that learning the needs of the elders is important; students learned of the importance of family relationships for elders; and they learnt to value the contributions of the elderly to the family and society. This initial feedback offers a strong foundation for continuing and improving the current implementation of the CWTS program. These results guided development by the author of a conceptual model for evaluation of the service-learning program (Figure 1) that could be used for future evaluations.

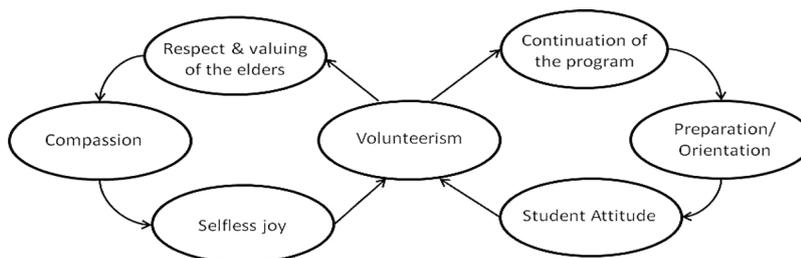


Figure 1 The 8-loop model for CWTS program evaluation of service-learning in a geriatric institution

Student feedback suggests that interaction with the elderly through the service-learning program helped in their holistic formation as a student, reduced the differences of views between people of different generations and contributed to the University's vision and mission, and that this engagement with the elders should be sustained and enhanced. Suggestions on how to improve the current program include an increased focus on preparation and orientation and addressing student attitudes. Future research should consider the perspectives of the administration of the institution and the elderly participants in the university's service-learning program. The success of service-learning for students also depends on the cooperation and participation of service-learning program beneficiaries. It would thus be useful to examine the impact of student service-learning on the elderly participants in the program. The voice of community partners could bring vital information to identifying steps on how to plan for a sustainable program for this and other geriatric institutions. Additionally, a closer look at the service-learning program could provide clear guidelines to the university on how to improve and carry out the TOMAS social transformation strategies.

Higher education in the Philippines focuses on its vital role in social and human development, with emphasis on creating linkages to universities and other institutions to serve its mission through three programs: research, instruction, and community service. Research and instruction focus on the application of generated knowledge to serve the community. Community service builds strong partnerships between community-based organisations and the academe (Cook & Meredith 2004). The University of Santo Tomas is committed to generating and transmitting knowledge to form competent and compassionate professionals in the service of the global community. On the other hand, the National Service Training Program promotes civic consciousness and recognises youth's vital role in nation building. The service-learning activities provided by the university, in partnership with various institutions and partner communities, are just one example of how universities can respond to this drive for higher education in the Philippines.

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