

**Project Title:** One Year Later: Assessing Student Outcomes from the Illinois State University/ Alzheimer's Association Service-Learning Partnership

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With few exceptions, little scholarship has been written on the impact of service-learning on students long after the course is over (Sax and Astin 1997; Rhoads 1998). The goal of the present research project was to examine the outcomes of college student participation in service-learning on their career path choices, identity, civic participation and involvement in gerontology.

This SoTL project represented a follow-up study with students who had been enrolled in the *Issues in Gerontology Seminar* (SOC 311/469.08) in the fall of 2001. The students in the class participated in service-learning by working with the Greater Illinois Chapter of the Alzheimer's Association to conduct a community needs assessment for Alzheimer's caregivers who reside in 4 central Illinois counties (McLean, Woodford, Livingston, and Dewitt). As part of the students' service-learning experience they interviewed caregivers, conducted focus groups, designed and administered a mailed-survey, and conducted home-visits with Alzheimer's caregivers.

What the present project attempted to do was locate the 16 students who had taken the *Issues in Gerontology* seminar 15 months earlier and interview them. The research team created list of 22 interview questions that addressed the impact of intergenerational service-learning in three major domains:

1. Civic responsibility
2. academic attainment
3. life skills (Sax and Astin 1997)

Five of the sixteen students from the course participated in the interviews. Locating the students was more challenging for the research team than originally anticipated, and for those who were located the research team experienced some difficulty in having the student follow through for the actual interview. Data from the recorded interviews are being analyzed with QSR NVIVO (NUD\*IST) software in order to establish patterns and themes in the responses of the five participants. The interviews lasted between 45 minutes and 2 hours and covered 22 questions. Preliminary examination shows that service-learning had a strong impact on several students' professional career plans after graduation. It seems that working with caregivers and those with Alzheimer's Disease struck a chord with the students that were interviewed that has made them want to either work professionally on behalf of those with Alzheimer's Disease or volunteer for local Alzheimer's Associations. These five students also showed more concern with the elderly in general than they had previous to taking the *Issues in Gerontology* course.

As these five students reflected back, it appears that life skills was the domain least impacted by the service-learning experience. This might be related to the fact that all 5 of the students who participated in the interviews were either graduate students or seniors and therefore, believed that based on their age and life experiences, that their life skills were not enhanced or altered very much based on their service-learning participation. It would be worthwhile in future service-learning studies to examine the domain of "life skills" in order to see if the self-reported impact by students differs between freshmen and seniors and/or based on age.

The long range goal of this study was that it would serve as a foundation for an on-going longitudinal study of the group of 16 students from the *Issues in Gerontology Seminar*. The original hope was to return to these 16 students five years after they had taken the course to track

the long-term, qualitative impact of their service-learning experiences. However, it seems doubtful that this will be possible since the present study took place only 15 months after the students had taken the course and only five students participated. Nevertheless, longitudinal, qualitative research on service-learning is still lacking in the field of gerontology and needs more focus in the literature in the coming years to help reinforce the importance of community-based learning in the lives and careers of university students.

### **References**

- Rhoads, Robert. 1998. In the Service of Citizenship. *Journal of Higher Education*, Vol. 69, no. 3 (277-297).
- Sax, Linda J. and Alexander Astin. 1997. The Benefits of Service: Evidence from Undergraduates. *Educational Record*, vol. 78, no. 3 (25-32).