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BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

Service learning brings compassion into healthcare education **By Danielle Bullen**

“Service learning involves a partnership that is formed between a community agency and a university training program. For service learning to be effective, equal ‘buy in’ is needed from all parties involved.”¹

This concept is woven into the fabric of Butler University in Indianapolis. All undergrads must complete service learning courses and the students in the communication sciences & disorders (CSD) department are no exception. Mary Gospel, chair of that department, is proud of her employer for its

commitment to serving the community. “The university is completely on board,” she said.

In January 2013, she began teaching the Butler Aphasia Community course, offered to seniors who had taken a prerequisite class where they learned about aphasia. Gospel has taught the course every subsequent term. The semester consists of four weeks of intense academic work, featuring a focus on what the students expected to learn, and 11 weeks of the experiential portion, featuring a lot of reflection on what they actually learned. Reflection and tying the theoretical to the practical are

hallmarks of any service learning experience.

For the “community” part of the course, 20 people with aphasia come to campus for weekly sessions with the students. Some might not have had the opportunity to get therapy services otherwise. Members range in age from their early 30s to late 70s and enjoy being in the collegiate setting. The majority of them started that first semester and stayed with the program, so it always fills the available slots.

The purpose of the group is to give them the opportunity to communicate in a safe environment. As a result of the program, caregivers would tell Gospel how their relatives were more likely to initiate conversations in public. Some of the activities include painting, yoga and trivia night. Two students were partnered with three or four clients and they switched halfway through the semester. Gospel said, “The students interacted with the people with aphasia more than in a typical therapy role.”

“The most rewarding part was making a connection with the clients,” added Mikinzie O’Neal, a communication sciences and disorders student, who is graduating in May 2015. She took the Butler Aphasia Community course in the fall of 2014.

FIRST-PERSON KNOWLEDGE

The aphasia program increased students’ empathy and made them less intimidated to interact with the adult population. “In our field, a lot of preparation is through the clients,” noted O’Neal.



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JEFFREY LEESER

Gospel explained, “It’s one thing to learn about aphasia in class and another to interact with people with aphasia.” The students had the facts and the anatomy from the classroom, but learned more about aphasia once they were hands-on. As O’Neal said, “It affects each person completely differently.”

Almost all of these CSD students will go on to further study speech-language pathology or audiology. O’Neal plans to become an SLP and would like to work with adults with brain injury. “The growth in the students is fabulous to watch. They certainly hit graduate school with more confidence,” noted Gospel.

Graduate professors have commented on how well-prepared the Butler students are, a compliment Gospel believes is in part due to their service learning background. About her service learning experience, O’Neal remarked, “Anytime you can get in the field and experience what you will do one day, it will help you a thousand times over.”

Gospel sees service learning and speech-language pathology as a good fit for each other. “We are already committed to service,” she said. She clarified the difference between service learning and volunteering. “It’s not just sign up and work at the food bank once per year.” There is more focus on mutual benefits. “The people with aphasia gain from the experience of interacting with others, and the students learn about aphasia as it affects all aspects of someone’s life,” Gospel concluded.

Communication sciences and disorders students are not the only healthcare trainees who stand to gain from the service learning experience. The RN-to-BSN students at Fayetteville State University in North Carolina have access to a unique class that combines traditional volunteering and service learning.

“The university has service learning as a global mission,” explained Sharon Gallagher, MSN, RN, PCCN, nurse faculty, Fayetteville State University. “We have completely embraced giving to our community.” All students must take ethics and civic engagement as a graduate requirement.

REWARDING EXPERIENCES

In Gallagher’s Contemporary Supportive Community Nursing course, students complete a 96-hour clinical component, 32 hours of which are service. The class component

looks at public health and community service. In the first part of the course, students are expected to volunteer at a community setting of their choice.

Parrish Dickens, RN, CNOR, team leader/manager for heart and vascular surgery, Rex UNC Healthcare in Raleigh-Durham, N.C., and a current student at Fayetteville State University, took the course in the fall of 2014 and completed her volunteer hours at a Virginia nursing home. She chose it because her grandmother had lived there. “It was a wonderful experience,” she said.

Dickens assisted nurses with getting patients up and dressed and served them breakfast, basically helping to start their day. She also organized activities for the residents, like creating handprint art and having musical guests visit so they could dance. “Even if they were in wheelchairs, they loved it. The most rewarding thing was their smiles and enthusiasm.”

Alenna LeCompte, RN, Levine Cancer Institute, Charlotte, N.C., another student in the fall 2014 Contemporary Supportive Community Nursing course, volunteered at HealthQuest, a non-profit pharmacy in North Carolina. “Working at that pharmacy was a fantastic opportunity to learn about the community,” she said. LeCompte organized and checked stock and talked to patients. The mission of the pharmacy is to provide medicine for people who couldn’t otherwise afford it, for a flat monthly fee. “It was a very rewarding experience,” she recalled.

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For her community project, Dickens created a fitness program at an assisted living community in Cary, N.C. She led an exercise program using water bottles as weights and played 1950s and 60s music, the soundtrack of the participants’ youth. She also measured and tracked the residents’ blood pressure. Before she left, Dickens created a sheet of exercises so they could continue working out.

LeCompte created a healthy eating for kids class at Charlotte County Day School for her service learning portion. “Kids aren’t taught how to make healthy food choices,”

she explained. The one-day class emphasized proper nutrition and portion control.

During the semester, the nursing students shared their experiences with each other. They reflected on how their involvement connected to them personally, and revealed any struggles and epiphanies, charting how they’d grown.

Dickens noted, “I was very intimidated going in, but it made me really use my time-management skills.” She learned to better balance family, work and school.

CHANGE OF HEART

Gallagher has seen firsthand how some students began the course overwhelmed, asking why they needed to do this, and then grew to understand the merits. Some continued volunteering after the semester. Some community agencies later hired the students as full-time nurses.

No matter the project, service learning prepares students to be better clinicians. “It is an amazing feeling to watch them grow,” noted Gallagher. Service learning allows them the opportunity to see areas of the community they had not experienced. For some nursing students, it solidifies the desire to work in a particular setting; for others it opens them up to new possibilities. While she currently works in the OR, Dickens said, “I eventually would like to do something with elderly people.”

LeCompte noted how her experiences broadened her perspectives, “After I started volunteering, I paid more attention to my patients. Is this medicine something my patients can afford? Will they be compliant? The affordability factor is a big deal for patients.”

As nurses, it’s easy to get wrapped up in shifts, but Gallagher sees a professional duty to give back. She emphasizes it’s not about the quantity of time, but the quality. Nurses need to be focused on wellness in the community, explained Dickens. LeCompte summed up the general attitude: “I think it’s always beneficial to have a service learning experience.” ■

Reference

1. Schoenbrodt L. “Service Learning 201: Beyond the Basics.” SIG 10 Perspectives on Issues in Higher Education, June 2008, Vol. 11, 36-40.

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