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Learning Outcomes of Intergenerational Service Learning: A Case Study of Event Tourism Students in a Midwest College

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Abstract: Student learning outcomes have been investigated across disciplines and the topics range from openness to diversity (Pascarella, Edison, Hagedorn, Nora, & Terenzini, 1996) to responsibility for improving society (Nelson Laird, Engberg, & Hurtado, 2005). Relatively little research has been done on student learning outcomes in the management of sporting events such as the Senior Games. The purpose of the study was to investigate the specific learning outcomes of intergenerational learning of undergraduate event tourism majors. 116 reflection papers were analyzed via qualitative content analysis. The two major themes identified were developing intergenerational relationships, and role modeling and personal development.
The United States Department of Labor (2009) reported that 63.4 million people volunteered for an organization at least once a week in 2009. This admirable spirit of civic engagement is also prevalent in higher education. Campus Compact, a national coalition of more than 1200 member institutions representing some 6 million students, helps faculty members integrate community work into higher education. In a Campus Compact 2009 report, approximately 6% of higher education faculty, across a broad spectrum of disciplines, offered service learning courses and an estimated 366 million hours of service were committed to local communities during the 2008-2009 academic year. Kuh (2008) reported that service learning, a form of experiential education, has gained prominence in higher education as a type of high impact educational practice. The first service learning conference convened in Atlanta, Georgia in 1969. To date, service learning research agendas include student learning, community impact, historical research, effect on practice, etc. Student learning outcomes have been investigated across disciplines and the topics range from openness to diversity (Pascarella, Edison, Hagedorn, Nora, & Terenzini, 1996) to responsibility for improving society (Nelson Laird, Engberg, & Hurtado, 2005). Relatively little research has been done on student learning outcomes in the management of sporting events for special populations. For example, Overton and Malinauskas (2007) investigated student perceptions regarding Special Olympics and reported that students had positive perceptions, and concluded that service learning could be successfully implemented into a sport management curriculum. They did not identify specific student learning outcomes. Studies about Senior Games have not addressed the student learning outcomes of inter-generational experiential learning. Hence the purpose of the present study was to investigate the learning outcomes of sport event tourism management students who volunteered at the Indiana
Senior Games. The research questions were: (a) What did students learn by volunteering, in a class designated service learning project, at a community sporting event that involved elderly participants? (b) What made the service learning experience unique, given that the students were exposed to a uniquely intergenerational setting?

**Literature Review**

*Service Learning*

Service learning is a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities. Service learning has positive influences local and municipal stakeholders, but also can be applied in a wide variety of settings from community-based organizations to universities. Service learning includes various areas such as student learning, regional impact, historical research, effect on practice and retention rates, etc. Student learning outcomes have been investigated in many disciplines and the topics that have been often used include openness to diversity (Pascarella et.al., 1996) to responsibility for improving society (Nelson Laird, et. al., 2005).

Service learning has been also utilized as an effective educational tool for students. Kuh (2008) reported that service learning, as a form of experiential education, has gained prominence in higher education as a type of high impact educational practice. Through the service learning experience, students can enhance their personal growth, self-esteem and social responsibility (Shumer & Belbas, 1996). In addition, students acquire critical thinking skills, the ability to distinguish between various political analyses and the policies they foster, the ability to analyze individual-level to structural problems, knowledge of various social science methodologies to employ in their work, and participatory research and program evaluation techniques (Roschelle,
Participating in service learning activity enables students to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996).

On the other hand, instructors who recognized the merits of service learning can bring new life to the classroom, enhance performance on traditional measures of learning, increase student interest in the subject, teaches new problem solving skills, and make teaching more enjoyable (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996). Service learning has powerful impact on students’ social and emotional development, and often utilized as a powerful pedagogical tool for preparing students to be contributing citizens in their broader communities (Strage, 2004). The benefits of service learning is tied to the present study because students who engaged in intergenerational service learning may develop more positive attitudes toward the older adults (Bringle & Kremer, 1993).

**Intergenerational Learning**

Intergenerational learning has been in existence since the beginning of humankind. Hunters and gathers had information about food sources and medicine that was valuable knowledge orally passed down from generation to generation. According to McIntosh (2002), intergenerational education has only become part of established usage in pedagogical discourse in the last decade, and “as recently as 1994, it did not even appear in the index of a standard encyclopedia of education” (p.301). Ames and Youatt (1994) noted that intergenerational learning has been gaining wider attention since 1960s due to the increase in the senior citizen population. In 2009, the population of people 65 years or older was at 39.6 million. This figure represented 12.9% of the U.S. population, which is about one in every eight Americans. It is projected that the number will increase to about 72.1 million by 2030, which is more than twice
number in 2000 (U.S. Administration on Aging, 2010). In many developed countries, impending inverted population pyramids are projected and the importance of learning via interaction with people from different generations has been identified by researchers in the U.S. and around the world. People believe that the older and younger generations can provide beneficial resources for each other (McIntosh, 2002).

Dellmann-Jenkins (1997) reported the goal of intergenerational programming is to build meaningful intergenerational relationships among generations. When two generations collaborate in sharing their experiences, it is believed that there is a synergy effect on human development which occurs naturally (Broomall, 1992). The program is not only beneficial and valuable for both generations, it has also been shown to “demonstrate an improvement in the quality of life for both, and from that, an improvement in the quality of life for all” (Granville, & Ellis, 1999, p. 236). Kaplan (2002) noted that intergenerational engagement “is the full range of ways in which young people and older adults interact, support, and provide care for one another.” (p.306).

Benefits of Intergenerational Learning

Interaction across generations can result in mutual benefit for all participants and the benefits can be broadly divided into two areas. The first is greater understanding among generations. Intergenerational educational programs can improve the attitudes that various groups have toward each other as a result of heightened contact, which can eventually lead to discoveries of common interests and similarities among each other (Chapman & Neal, 1990). Numerous research studies support this idea. For example, Zucchero (2010) found that active older adults can benefit from an intergenerational service-learning experience with college students. Pillemer and Schultz (2002) found that 83% of older participants in intergenerational education expressed that the experience allowed them to think about their lives in more
enjoyable ways. Greene (1998) reported that 94% of nursing home residents indicated they received benefits from participating in intergenerational education with young adults. Underwood and Dorfman (2006) identified “benefits of personal interaction, companionship, increased intergenerational understanding, and being able to share life experiences” (p.44). A majority of elders believe that an intergenerational service learning project is very beneficial and should be continued to develop their relationship with the younger generation.

The benefits of intergenerational interaction are not limited to older adults. Students who participated in intergenerational service learning projects also benefitted. Blieszner and Artale (2001) found 49% of the students indicated they overcame misconceptions about aging and 21% of them expressed an increased appreciation of elders. Students additionally reported that they were not only afraid of growing old, and the experience made them feel more comfortable around older people. Doll (2006) used focus groups and surveys and reported that both generations admitted changes in their attitudes toward each other as well as toward those they do not routinely engage with. According to Pettigrew (1998), intergenerational education participants who were originally not comfortable with each other, developed increased levels of familiarity and companionship with other generations as the number of regular contact increased. Participants also developed friendships as they gained better understanding of each other’s interests and shared stories about their lives.

The second broad area in terms of benefits of intergeneration learning is role modeling and personal development. Intergenerational learning can also provide a chance for young adults to improve self-efficacy and encourage them to seek careers in the aging industry. According to Blieszner and Artale (2001), “Potential outcomes may include respective development of attitudes and values, increased feelings of self-efficacy and self-esteem, and exploration of
potential careers through exposure to a variety of work environments.” (p.72) Blieszner and Artale also found that 16% of students indicated they were willing to work in the aging business. Students were also willing to develop long term goals for themselves after their interaction with older adults. This indicates that intergenerational learning can provide students with realistic and concrete guidelines for future career goals and development. Intergenerational learning can also serve as an opportunity for people to develop civic responsibilities and values (Blieszner & Artale, 2001). The authors noted that participating in intergenerational service-learning in aging industries can affect personal and social values, as well as civic attitudes about volunteerism.

**Methodology**

The annual Indiana Senior Games is facilitated by the Hamilton County Sports Authority (HCSA) which is tasked by the Hamilton County Convention and Visitors Bureau to tap the estimated $1.85 million local sport tourism industry. Partnering with the HCSA for service learning courses allows for the expansion of sport tourism efforts in Indianapolis and provides event administrators access to trained volunteers interested in event management. The Senior Games are known as the largest multi-sport event in the world for men and women athletes age 50 and older. Every state in the United States has annual Senior Games and those who qualify in the state games are eligible to compete in the national level. The Indiana Senior Games takes place in Indianapolis and several hundred older adults participate every year.

Qualitative data was collected over the summers of 2008, 2009, and 2010 from students enrolled in the Management of Sport Event course. The courses are offered by a midwest state university, and the majority of the students in the courses were event tourism majors. The students participated in structured service learning opportunities at the Indiana Senior Games. At the end of the semester, students were expected to look back and perform some level of self-
analysis, in the form of a reflection paper. Students were not specifically exposed to service learning outcomes literature in the classroom; they were exposed to events management course material. Upon completion of volunteering at the event, students were asked to submit a reflection paper and the following instructions were provided – “Your paper should include information such as (but not limited to) what you learned (especially if this is the first sporting event you have volunteered for), what you thought about the event itself, would you would consider when planning events such as this in the future, and what you thought about the marketing of an event such as this.” The systematic investigation used in this study was qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Content analysis is a generic name for various textual analyses that involve comparison, contrast, and categorization of a set of data. It is a technique used for making replicable and valid inferences. The investigators analyzed the student reports independently and manually. Each investigator identified coding categories independently, to improve inter-coder reliability, and subsequently developed a final categorization scheme.

Results

A total of 116 service learning reflection papers investigated. Two major recurring themes that identified the outcomes participating in intergenerational service learning were developing intergenerational relationships, and role modeling and personal development.

Development of Intergenerational Relationships

Development of intergenerational relationships through greater understanding was one of the most distinctive themes that emerged from the qualitative data. Through service learning and volunteerism at the Indiana Senior Games, students interacted with older adults which fostered
friendships across generations. The communication and attitude changes were evident in the comments:

“It was very enjoyable to talk with the different athletes, get their backgrounds, and also get them excited about the games. We met a lot of interesting people with great attitude about life and they also all had great personalities; each one seeming unique.

The interactions between the students and older adults were often developed during the event because many older adults noted how much they appreciated students’ help with the event administration. This issue was expressed by a student who claimed:

“The participants in the events were so thankful that we were volunteering. At the track meet, I had the opportunity to talk to many participants at the high jump (between jumps). Their stories were inspiring and they loved that we were students. They were all appreciative for the little things and I was told multiple times, “we appreciate you all helping out.” It’s kind of funny, because it wasn’t hard work. I guess it really is the little things that people learn to appreciate.”

For some students, it appears that they did not have much interaction with older adults prior to participating in this event. The interactions they had seemed to be mostly positive as the following quotes illustrate:

“The participants were not extremely elderly and they actually were lively and talked a lot! They were very friendly and talked to me a lot. They were interested in things such as my school, volleyball, and career plans. They were really very nice.”

“I really enjoyed my experience volunteering. My favorite part of the experience was interacting with the athletes. I must confess, this was a pleasant surprise. I met some
really nice people, and I am glad I did the event and enjoyed meeting and interacting with
the participants."

**Role Modeling and Personal Development**

Many students were accustomed to seeing inactive and sedentary older adults, and observing the
athleticism was eye opening. Some students indicated that they had stereotypes of older adults
prior to participating in this event, but their image of older adults changed positively. For
example, one student noted:

“I was very surprised as to how much they practice and compete. One lady who was
playing pickleball told me that she plays five days a week and the other two days she
swims. That definitely changed my thinking in that senior citizens are not competitive.”

Further support was obtained from another student:

“Many times I think that just because a particular person can’t do something, I think that
no one their age can do that. However I was definitely proved wrong. For example, there
was an 86 year-old woman who was a participant in the tennis tournament. I was so
shocked that she could jog as fast as she did; she did very well, and appeared as if she
truly was having a great time. Also, at the track and field event, there was one gentleman
who had trouble walking. He was moving rather slow, and stopped to take many breaks.
However, when it came time for the sprinting events, he was first in line and ready to run!
It was truly eye opening. I have come to learn that it doesn’t matter what age you are, if
you take care of your body, there is no limit to what you can do!”

After volunteering experiences, many students’ stereotypes toward older adults changed because
it seems like some students did not realize how much hard work and dedication the older adults
put towards competition. The changes of perspective towards older adults may inspire students to
follow in active older adults’ footsteps when they reach to later stages of life, as the following comment illustrates:

“I thought the competitors would be relaxed and didn’t care much about the outcome of their event. I was completely wrong. Each older adult took the competition very seriously and did a significant amount of training to get where they were at today. I also thought the competitors would not be very knowledgeable of the sport and I would have to help them with the rules, regulations, and scoring. The competitors were all very knowledgeable and often corrected me and taught me new things about the sports. I also did not believe they would be so athletically talented. They were all in great shape and took pride in their abilities. It gave me a goal of how in shape I want to be when I get older as well as an understanding of the great things in life.”

A student seemed to have negative images towards older adults in general, but participating in the intergenerational service learning completely changed her view”

“Most of the older adults that I have come across were a little bit more negative and always had a negative attitude. I do not know if something happened in the past that gave them that feeling, but all I know is that the people that I met and got to know at the Senior Games were all positive and very easy to get along with. With me volunteering, I found it to be more of a positive experience to know what older adults go through and what they do when our generation thinks of what they don’t do. I do believe volunteering would definitely help a person’s perceptual visions.”

In addition, students were inspired to maintain a healthy lifestyle, and they learned the importance of staying fit. The following passages illustrate this finding:
“It was great to meet the senior athletes and see people in an older generation staying active and taking care of their health. It made me think how I need to work out and be in shape like the runners I saw on this day. This can lead to a longer, healthier life. I wish there were more events like this around so more seniors could get active. The involvement of the older generation that stays active is beyond impressive”.

The following comment also demonstrates that volunteering activity was able to broaden his horizons by recognizing how competitive and enthusiastic older adults could be in sporting events:

I can honestly say that I am amazed with the physical conditions that the seniors went through. I don’t even think that I would have been able to last that long, especially in the pickleball tournament, where the temperature outside was in the high nineties. I know there is a saying that once you get older you stop moving you then die. But I definitely think that these seniors that participated are proving that saying wrong, because they not only proved that they can be extremely active, but they can be very competitive about what they are doing. Also with this activity, I never would have thought the older people would be so into sports.

Some students realized that active living of older adults have immense value because, they are still capable of giving back to society even when they are retired. In other words, they understood that older adults have ability to contribute to the society after their retirement, and active lifestyle should be prerequisite to giving back, as this quote illustrates:

“Seniors are a lot more capable and valuable than society can sometimes portray them to be. By seeing how mentally and physically fit they are, I realized they can be a great asset to society. In partaking in the Indiana Senior Games, these people showed me that they
are capable of being an important part of the makeup of our society. It took a good mental attitude and physical strength for these people to partake in these events. These characteristics can be used to hold jobs, teach, mentor and volunteer themselves. This is good to remember because we can use their wisdom and expertise to help the younger generations also survive and live in society.”

Discussion

This study highlighted that service learning opportunities with older adults is a promising practice for students in event tourism field. Students were able to collaborate with a local professional agency, and played an important role in facilitating the Senior Games. Students had a deeper understanding of subject matter, enhanced problem analysis abilities, and applied class materials to real problems, as identified by Eyler and Giles’s (1999) national study. Although it is not included in the analysis, some students were able to critique on the event management and administration aspects which enhanced their critical thinking and problem solving skills. For example, a student noted that the event needs to be publicized and marketed better. Another student was aware of extent to which the event organizers were striving to recruit participants to the event, and indicated that they should reach out to the senior communities around the city more aggressively. This study also revealed that students were able to enhance self-esteem and social responsibility through service learning opportunity, which coincides with Shumer and Belbas’ (1996) remarks. Through communicating with older adults, students were able to find role models of successful aging, and at the same time, some older adults appreciated and enjoyed interacting with younger generation at the event. This supports Zuchero’s (2010) contention that the intergenerational interaction environment would foster mutual benefits to students and older adults.
The Administration on Aging (2010) reported that the proportion of the older population in the United States, 65 and older, is projected to increase from 12.4% in 2000 to 20% in 2030. Considering the significant increase in the number of older adults as well as their increasing needs, understanding the psychological and social consequences of aging becomes a central issue for many people. The older adults have been noted to possess larger amounts of discretionary income than in past generations. As the present study illustrates, maintaining a healthy life style and quality of life is often considered to be important, which exposed the students to the concept of successful aging. The intergenerational learning approach encouraged event tourism students to better understand their individual learning processes, and future studies should investigate long term impact of intergenerational service learning, as a component of the undergraduate curriculum. Finally, as suggested in the following statement by a student, the intergenerational service learning was an important way for delivering an insightful personal learning experience:

“At the Senior Games, everyone’s attitude towards each other has been polite and enthusiastic. This weekend opened my eyes to how many diverse groups can be brought together towards a universal goal. There were different genders, races, ethnicities, and even different age groups. The great thing about sports is how it brings people together as a common denominator.”

References


