

Educating Optometry Students to Engage the Community: Learning Professional Identity

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Introduction:

For each of the past six years, approximately one-hundred first-year professional students in the Community Health Optometry course at the University of Houston College of Optometry have participated in a service-learning project in which they engage members of the community with eye health education presentations. Through reflection on their experience and that of the audience they serve, the students gain insights that will guide their future community behavior as doctors of optometry; giving them a professional identity that extends beyond the practice into the community.

I point out that this is not a research project, though its service-learning component is supported by community-based research conducted by others.

Prior to giving a description of this community service-learning activity, I want to describe the events that led to this effort intended to teach optometry students that being an eye care professional is more than caring for the eyes and vision of the patients in the examination room. Doctors of optometry have a professional responsibility for the vision health of their communities demanding a variety of services outside of the practice.

My understanding and appreciation of service-learning as an educational modality is from an awareness of a number of service-learning programs in the country, but primarily from the Health Professions Schools in Service to the Nation Program. This program, supported by The Pew Charitable Trusts and the Corporation for National Service, was initiated in 1995 with 20 demonstration sites and extended for a period of three years. I understand that Community-Campus Partnerships for Health or CCPH, one of the sponsors for today's workshop, was organized around the time of this program to help expand service-learning for health professional students through community-campus partnerships. CCPH encourages other community-campus activities as well.

In June of 1999, I attended a Community-Campus Partnerships for Health Faculty Service-Learning Institute at Leavenworth, Washington, where I was first introduced to the concept of service-learning. It took me a few years, but in 2004 I introduced a service-learning activity to our Community Health course at the U.H. College of Optometry.

Service learning has been described as “structured learning experiences with a balance of service and learning, combining community service with explicit learning objectives, and emphasizing opportunities for critical reflection about the service work and its relationship to the participants’ professional education.”

Project Description:

The class of approximately one-hundred optometry students is divided into twelve project groups of eight or nine students each. Each group adopts the American Optometric Association's concept theme, Healthy Eyes Healthy People. This service-learning project contributes to the **reduction of blindness and visual impairment in children and adolescents** through delivering eye health education to school-aged children. This goal comes from the vision objectives related to eye diseases and impairments listed in Chapter 28 of Healthy People 2010. "Healthy People 2010" is the health goals document for this decade developed under the guidance of the U. S. Department of Health and Human Services.

While general guidelines for the project are provided by the course master, the students conduct all planning, development, and delivery of this eye health education.

Each group appoints a leader and formulates an Action Plan that addresses the identification of a target audience, the creation and delivery of the presentation, and the assessment of target audience outcomes. At the conclusion of the project, each group's leader coordinates the preparation of a final report in hard-copy format that describes the group's activities. The group report includes the Action Plan, role of each of the group's members, outline of the presentation with visual aids, photos, a journal of all group meetings and activities, demographics of the target audience children, and an assessment of the outcomes of the education delivered to the target audience through an analysis of pre and post testing of the children.

Each group member keeps a personal journal from which an individual reflection essay is written on personal insights gained. Each one-thousand word essay is to describe the group of children served and gives the optometry student's personal reflection on what the provided service meant to all parties, those served and those serving. It is hoped the professional students will see that their service to the community gave them an opportunity to learn from the community. In addition, the student is encouraged to reflect on how this service-learning experience is likely to impact their behavior as future Doctors of Optometry.

The emotional as well as cognitive realizations revealed by the reflection essays have indicated a positive impact on developing professional identities. It is too early to know the long-term impact of this service-learning experience on the graduates of the University Of Houston College Of Optometry. It is hoped that members of the public will gain important education on eye and vision health practices through the efforts of the college's graduates as they move into their practice communities.

A most important observation has been the development of very positive dynamics within each of the project groups. Though the Community Health Optometry students have had no say in who will be in their respective service-learning groups, it has been remarkable, almost without exception, how well the individuals within each group formed cohesive functioning units.

A sampling of student comments from their reflection papers:

- “When driving through the neighborhoods around the area as we approached the school, a wave of sadness came over me. Looking out the window at broken down homes, torn up streets, and other pitiful living arrangements made me feel a little gloomy, yet it also made me want to encourage these children I was about to go speak to and try to improve their lives even if only a small bit.” – Jed Martin
- “Our position as ...future doctors should start with our efforts of service...I believe our knowledge should not always come with a price tag.” – Kassandra Barlow
- “...On the way out, one of the students [a seventh grader] put his hand out and shook my hand. That moment was the best part of the entire project. That hand shake meant to me that I had reached out to that student and made a difference in his life for that moment.” – Ozhan Jafri
- “...This was one of the RARE times in which everyone in a group has positively influenced the common good...I am sincerely thankful for the insight I have gained.” – Idia Oriakhi
- “...The community health project helped me to appreciate the importance of outreach cooperation between health care providers and community, and the significance of health education in community service.” – Jenny Huang
- “...Overall, the highlight of the day was when a girl in our second group responded to our presentation by saying, “First of all your presentation was awesome, second of all your presentation was awesome, and third of all your presentation was awesome!” – Madison Luce
- “I know that when those kids go home, they’ll talk to their parents about what we taught them and hopefully, like me, they’ll remember that presentation for the rest of their lives...” – Phison Le
- “...I am very excited to continue my journey of education in optometry so that I can further pursue my ultimate dream of becoming an optometrist that makes a difference in my community.” – Mandy Williamson
- “...if I want to make a large societal impact as an optometrist, it will not be because of the number of eye exams that I will have performed, but from the number of people I reach through activities such as this that educate the public...” – Steven Barraza

- “...The community health project helped me to appreciate the importance of outreach cooperation between health care providers and community, and the significance of health education in community service.” – Jenny Huang
- “...I must learn how to communicate to people of all ages, ethnicity, and social class.” – Calvin Nguyen
- “...Placing myself in a teacher situation offered challenges that I wasn’t used to...This project helped reemphasize that we can learn something from everyone we meet and that teaching is learning.” – Francisco Martinez
- “There have been efforts among the health community to try to promote public health through advertisements on radio, television, newspaper, and other means of media. However, in my opinion the most effective way is to go out and educate one-on-one with the community.” – David Chau
- “...The project was great as a team building exercise. It required a lot of organization, delegation and research.” – Joe Krockner
- “This was my first experience in which social service was related to my future career. I appreciate the opportunity that was given to me to transfer some of the knowledge that I have gained while attending optometry school to the surrounding community.” – Dajana Komadiana