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Service-Learning: Implications for the Academic, Personal, and Professional Development of Criminal Justice Majors

Helen Ahn Lim

An exploratory senior and alumni survey was administered to better assess the experiential learning opportunities, including service-learning, offered to students in a criminal justice department. This article highlights the academic, personal and professional development of students, based on the perception of criminal justice majors in the department who completed a service-learning course. Educators continue to assess the academic outcomes for students and the benefits to the community. What may be less appreciated is how service-learning can also benefit students in their professional skills development. This article illustrates these potential benefits, and also discusses why service-learning courses are a critical part of development for criminal justice majors.

Service-learning courses are taught in many disciplines across college campuses and universities. The National Service-Learning Clearinghouse, one of the most widely cited sources, refers to service-learning as 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” (Learn and Serve America National Service-Learning Clearinghouse, 2016). For decades, educators have embraced service-learning as an effective pedagogical tool for improving student learning, including personal and social development, and for improving cognitive and academic outcomes (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000; Bringle & Hatcher, 1996; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Markus, Howard, & King, 1993; Yorio & Ye, 2012). When students engage in service-learning courses, the community also benefits through their service (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996).

Educators for some time have understood these reciprocal benefits (the mutual benefit to the student and to the community). What may be still less known about service-learning, is how these courses can have a direct benefit in the professional development of students. Service-learning courses can enhance academic learning and professional preparation for students (Ehrlich, 2005). Reynolds has also written about the benefits of service-learning and the

professional skills development among physical therapy students (2005). Others have also written about service-learning and how service-learning can benefit students in deepening curricular content, but also in skills important for professional success (Prentice & Robinson, 2010). Yet, service-learning as a pedagogical tool for advancing students in their professional skills may still be underutilized.

This article contributes to the existing literature on service-learning, but also emphasizes the potential value of service-learning in advancing students in their professional skills development. Studies often cite the service-learning benefits for increasing civic engagement, intellectual, personal, and interpersonal skills (Burke & Bush, 2013; Einfeld & Collins, 2008; Hirschinger-Blank, Simons, & Kenyon, 2009), but researchers may overlook the potential benefits of service-learning for professional skills development. This article highlights the findings on service-learning from criminal justice majors who participated in a senior and alumni survey. The study revealed positive findings for students who completed service-learning courses in the department in the areas of academic, personal, and professional development. The senior and alumni survey was conducted to assess the learning benefits of experiential learning opportunities offered in a criminal justice department (see George, Lim, Lucas, & Meadows, 2015). The findings discussed in this article are part of this broader study. Further studies are, however, warranted in order to better assess the efficacy of service-learning in developing criminal justice majors in various skills.

This article begins with a discussion on the traditional benefits of service-learning, and the important components of a high-quality service-learning course. In the next section, I present the findings of the survey, and discuss its potential implications. In closing, I discuss why service-learning courses can be a critical part of development for criminal justice majors, including in their professional preparation for their future careers.

Literature Review

Service-learning courses are taught in a variety of disciplines (Zlotkowski, 2001). Service-learning courses engage students in learning by applying course concepts to their service experiences (Jacoby, 1996). Although there is no universal definition or standard of service-learning, high-quality service-learning courses are rigorous, and benefit both the students and the community through meaningful service (Galvan & Parker, 2011).

Several factors have been identified for producing high-quality service-learning courses, including the following seven components: integrated learning, quality service, collaboration, student voice, critical reflection, civic responsibility, and assessment. The Seven Elements of High-Quality Service-Learning were developed by the Service-Learning 2000 Center at Stanford

University (2016). These elements provide clear criteria and guidelines for instructors in developing service-learning courses.

The first trademark of a high-quality service-learning courses is integrated learning (Markus et al., 1993). Integrated learning connects service to the learning, and vice versa (Billig, 2000). The service is not an episodic event, instead is structured to inform the academic learning content. The service intentionally supports learning objectives and the broader goals of the course. The academic learning content should also bring deeper meaning to the service. Integrated learning occurs in a well-planned service-learning course (Fink, 2013).

Service to the community or community partner must also be meaningful, and meet an actual need (Furco, 1996). Given that service-learning courses are reciprocal in nature, both the student and community partner must benefit (Jacoby, 2003). The service should be designed to benefit students in learning and skills development, and also achieve a benefit for the community (Furco, 1996). The service should be thoughtful, helpful, student-appropriate and well-organized.

Collaboration is also an important component of service-learning (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996). Collaboration is essential among students and the service recipient (King, 2004). Collaboration and communication throughout the service-learning process is important in order to enhance the quality of the service and experience. Student perspective and the student voice are also essential for increasing engagement and student commitment to the service project. Ultimately all collaborators should benefit from the service-learning process and planning.

Students should also be critically reflecting throughout the service-learning process as they are connecting the learning to the service (Bringle & Hatcher, 1999). Critical reflection can occur through various processes and modes, including through guided classroom discussions and through critical reflection journals and papers. Students should be critically thinking throughout the process and how they are linking their service experience to their academic learning, and bringing deeper meaning to the service experience (Eyler, 2002).

Finally, the evaluation of the service-learning project is also essential to the learning process (Waterman, 2014). Evaluation should occur for the duration of the service-learning process. The evaluation process can help move progress forward in achieving the learning goals and outcomes of the course. Evaluation helps improve future service-learning courses. The evaluation process should include an assessment of the service and community partner. All partners should also be engaged in the evaluation process.

Ultimately, in a well and intentionally structured service-learning course, engagement in the service should promote students' care for others and the community. Service-learning should, therefore, promote social responsibility (Einfeld & Collins, 2008; Jacoby, 2009). Service-learning can strengthen the appreciation for service and in fulfilling community needs (Simons & Cleary, 2006).

These seven components have also been integrated in the service-learning courses offered in the criminal justice department presented in this study. These seven components help maintain rigor and continuity across the service-learning courses taught in the department. The instructors also believe that incorporating these key components will help optimize the service-learning experience for the students who take the course, and also for the community partners who engage in this collaborative learning process.

Method

The narratives and exploratory findings in this article are part of a broader experiential learning survey conducted in 2015, by George et al. (2015). One of the most cited definitions of experiential learning describes it as “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience” (Kolb, 1984, p. 41). The authors received IRB approval to use an exploratory, cross-sectional survey for their criminal justice seniors and alumni. The study was conducted at a small private liberal arts university located in Southern California, and was administered in order to better assess students’ learning experiences related to the program. The authors created and distributed the questionnaire with Qualtrics, an online survey tool that allows the user to create surveys and reports. The sampling frame for the questionnaire included 393 respondents (357 alumni and 36 seniors). Questionnaires were sent to alumni dating back to 1988. Among the respondents, 86 individuals completed most of the questionnaire and 67 individuals fully completed the questionnaire. Our low response rate (17%) is partially attributed to outdated contact information. For example, outdated email addresses and contact information for many of the alumni. Low alumni response, however, may not be an uncommon problem for these kinds of surveys (Lambert & Miller, 2014).

The 18-item questionnaire consisted of demographic questions that included gender, race, ethnicity, year of graduation, employment status, and completion of last degree. In regarding to gender, the composition of females to males is slightly higher for females ($n = 35$) to male respondents ($n = 32$). This is similar to the current gender makeup of the department. In regards to race and ethnicity, 69% identified as White, followed by Hispanic/Latino (18%) as the next highest category. Nearly half of the respondents (49.9%) graduated between 1988 and 2005, 27.7% of the respondents in 2006–2014, and 22.4% of our respondents were seniors, anticipating to graduate in 2015.

The survey included a series of questions regarding respondents’ learning experiences within our criminal justice department, including questions about service-learning. The key variables included questions about respondents’ beliefs about whether the learning experiences contributed to their personal, academic and professional development. The majority of the questions were

closed-ended. A few opened-ended questions allowed respondents to also provide feedback. Due to the small sample size, and given that the questions were exploratory in nature, univariate descriptive statistics were used to illustrate the respondents perspective on the learning experiences within the department.

Although the survey included alumni spanning the past 27 years, service-learning courses have only more recently been introduced to the criminal justice curriculum (in 2012). At the time of the survey, two upper division courses, Criminology and Family Violence, were offered as service-learning courses. The decision to implement service-learning courses was part of the department's broader effort to expand and deepen experiential learning opportunities for students due to its benefits (Lersch, 1997; Parilla & Hesser, 1998). Completing a service-learning course, however, is not a requirement for the criminal justice degree. Therefore, not all respondents who matriculated in 2012 or after completed a service-learning course. On the other hand, it was also possible for respondents to have completed up to two service-learning courses before completing their degrees.

For both these courses, service-learning was utilized to deepen course content and for understanding the relationship and tensions between theory and practice. Community partners were, therefore, identified based on their levels of engagement in practice. In the Criminology service-learning course, students also learned about delinquency theories and the various practices in responding to delinquency. Given this, one of the community partners selected for the service-learning course was the county's probation department, and the probation officers assigned to the juvenile facility. During the service-learning experience, not only did students deepen their knowledge about juvenile delinquency theories, but also about rehabilitation and custodial practices in our local juvenile facility. Students also learned about our county's probation system and about the role of the probation officers, and how they care for juveniles in the facility. For the Family Violence service-learning course, community partners have varied and included organizations that are active in educating or preventing family violence, or that are involved in the rehabilitation or reintegration process of offenders. Community partners for our service-learning courses through the years have included non-profit agencies, non- government agencies, faith-based organizations, and criminal justice agencies.

The type of service also performed varied depending on the community partner's identified need(s) and included fulfilling service hours by educating the community at outreach events, providing tutoring for juveniles, and research-based service projects including on topics like drug abuse, trends in delinquency, and mental illness—all topics identified by the community partner based on need. The number of service hours also varied depending on the nature of the service project, and the service requested.

As part of the service-learning process, students engaged with their community partners on site tours, through face-to-face small group meetings, email, and throughout the duration of their service activity. Students were also

critically reflecting on the service-learning through classroom discussions, journal writing, and term papers. Several of these students have also presented their service-learning projects in professional forums. For example, select students in the Criminology courses presented their service-learning projects to the county's probation supervisors at the local juvenile facility. The students presented their work through a PowerPoint presentation, and answered questions from the staff supervisors. Other service-learning students have also presented their service experience and findings at our university's annual Festival of Scholars event in conference rooms for faculty, staff, peers, and community members.

Results

In the alumni and senior survey, the respondents were asked various closed-ended questions. Responses were based on a Likert scale of 1–5. The Likert scale was keyed according to the following minimum and maximum values: Large Extent (1), Moderate Extent (2), Small Extent (3), No Extent (4), and Did Not Experience (5). Out of the 65 respondents who completed the entire survey, 46 of the respondents had taken a service-learning course (70% of the survey respondents). As previously stated, since service-learning was introduced in 2012, the percentage (70%) reflects the lower number of students who completed a service-learning course at the time the survey was conducted.

Among those who answered the first question on service-learning, on the question of whether or not service-learning promoted academic development, Table 1 reflects respondents' answers.

As reflected in Table 1, 93% of the respondents agreed that service-learning contributed to their academic development to some degree, and 71% agreed that service-learning contributed to their academic growth to a large or moderate degree. The findings are consistent with other data on service-learning and academic development (Astin & Sax, 1998; Bringle & Hatcher, 2005; Scales, Roehlkepartain, Neal, Kielsmeier, & Benson, 2006; Vogelgesang & Astin, 2000). Service-learning courses benefit students by enhancing the learning process for course content knowledge and for applying knowledge (Eyler & Giles, 1999). Service-learning courses can also help develop academic skills, including critical thinking and writing skills (Astin et al., 2000; Eyler & Giles, 1999). Not

Table 1 Respondents' answers on the impact of service-learning on academic development

Large extent	Moderate extent	Small extent	No extent	Did not experience	Total responses	Mean (SD)
9	23	10	3	21	66	3.06 (1.5)

Table 2 Respondents' answers on the impact of service-learning on personal development

Large extent	Moderate extent	Small extent	No extent	Did not experience	Total responses	Mean (SD)
17	13	11	5	19	65	2.94 (1.58)

Table 3 Respondents' answers on the impact of service-learning on professional development

Large extent	Moderate extent	Small extent	No extent	Did not experience	Total responses	Mean (S.D.)
11	13	16	5	20	65	3.15 (1.48)

only was service-learning incorporated to deepen course content knowledge for both courses, but critical thinking and writing were also integrated as part of the critical reflection process and required assignments. These self-reported responses support growth in the areas of academic skills development.

On the question of whether or not service-learning promoted personal development, Table 2 reflects the respondents' answers.

Table 2 indicates that 89% of the respondents agreed that service-learning contributed to their personal development to some degree, and 65% indicated that service-learning contributed to their personal growth, to a large or moderate extent. Service-learning courses are valued for advancing personal development, including attributes, such as growth in knowledge of oneself and rewards of helping others (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Hirschinger-Blank et al., 2009; Simons & Cleary, 2006). These studies indicate that service-learning impacts students' personal development. The two narratives from the survey also capture sentiments on personal growth.

... [I] Volunteer[ed] at the Ventura County Rescue Mission ... Made me appreciate everything I have in life ...

... I was an after school tutor for Many Mansions, a nonprofit organization that deals with giving low income families housing opportunities and other assistance. The opportunity really enhanced my sense of duty to our community ...

The self-responses in the study appear to support existing literature on service-learning for improving personal development.

On the question of whether service-learning promoted professional development, Table 3 reflects the respondents' answers.

Among those who responded to the question in Table 3, 89% indicated that service-learning contributed to their professional development. Fifty-three percent agreed that service-learning contributed to their professional development to a large and moderate extent. One in four respondents (24.4%) indicated that service-learning contributed to their professional development to a large extent. Although at first glance, the responses in Table 3 may not be compelling, the open-ended responses further illustrate the value or potential for service-learning on professional development.

For the open-ended question related to service-learning, respondents were asked the following: "If you had the opportunity to participate in service-learning as a criminal justice major at CLU, please describe the project and identify specific skills that you developed from the experience." The select narratives below reflect respondents' answers.

I [completed] research for the juvenile justice complex and ... it helped me develop my research skills as well as presentation skills ...

Collect[ed] research to give to professionals in the juvenile justice field ... and learned that there is a lot of research that is included in the job ...

I participated in service learning in Criminology with the juvenile detention center and also in my Family Violence course with the Coalition for Family Harmony. I learned how to research and the pertinent skills needed ...

I was able to participate in a site visit for a domestic violence clinic in Oxnard. Our contact at the clinic discussed many difficulties when handling a domestic violence case. She gave me insight on how to handle them as a [future] police officer ... I am glad I was able to speak with her and hear these tips/advice because officers often times do not have the skills or knowledge to know how delicate these situations are ...

We conducted research for the Ventura County Probation juvenile facility ... We provided information and recommendations regarding issues that they wished to explore but lacked the resources to do so. I developed stronger team-working and communication skills and had a chance to give back to the community ...

The service learning project I did was on juveniles and why juvenile crime is on the decline. The skills I developed were knowledge that I can use for when I become a juvenile probation officer ...

Table 3 and the narratives above capture respondents' perceptions on the benefits of service-learning, including development for their future careers. The narratives are also similar to reflections my students submit as part of their classroom assignments. Students who complete the service-learning course regularly reference how service-learning deepened their substantive course knowledge, but also how service-learning improved their critical

thinking, communication, team-work, collaborative learning, problem-solving, and presentation skills. These skills are critical for employment and future success, and have real-world applications (DuFour & DuFour, 2010; Nealy, 2011; Robles, 2012). Service-learning can be beneficial for deepening content knowledge and personal growth, but also for developing soft skills important for success in the twenty-first century workforce (Nealy, 2011). Based on the perceptions of seniors and alumni who completed the survey and a service-learning course, many of the respondents indicated a positive influence on their academic, personal, and professional development.

Discussion

The study reveals the perception of seniors and alumni who completed a service-learning course in a criminal justice department. The findings suggest positive indicators for service-learning for improving academic, personal and professional skills development. The study, however, is not without its weaknesses. The study was exploratory in nature, had a small sample size and low response. Due to the exploratory nature of the study, the survey also did not assess specific attributes for academic, personal, or professional development. Instead, the respondents' answers reflected their own general perceptions about these values. It is possible that respondents were assessing different attributes of these values, while answering these survey questions. Further studies are warranted in order to better assess the efficacy of service-learning on these values and skills. Future studies should also consider how the benefits of service-learning may be differentiated or similar to other experiential learning experiences like internships (George et al., 2015). Internships are commonly valued for building skills with real-world applications in order to prepare students for their future careers (Gordon & McBride, 2011; Parilla & Smith-Cunnien, 1997; Stone & McLaren, 1999); however, service-learning may be undervalued in its potential to do the same (Rehling, 2000). Service-learning courses have great potential for professional skills development, especially when soft-skills are integrated as part of the course requirement (Deepa & Seth, 2013; Mishra, 2014). Furthermore, since internship generally occur during a student's senior year, service-learning courses can offer a distinct benefit by beginning the process of professional development in the earlier years of education, than later (Penn, 2003). Community partnerships established through service-learning courses, may also then lead to future internship opportunities for students. Service-learning courses in this regard, can serve as a platform for a continuum of professional development and opportunities for growth. A continuum of professional development may especially be important for preparing students for success in the twenty-first century workforce.

Just as traditional courses can vary in the ways that they are taught and improve with instructor experience and evaluation, service-learning courses are no different (Ash & Clayton, 2004). Service-learning courses can vary in to

the degree and extent they integrate specific learning outcomes, and how they ultimately benefit students in their academic, personal, and professional skills development.

Finally, service-learning courses may have special value for criminal justice students (Cipolle, 2010; Penn, 2003). Many criminal justice majors will graduate and pursue service-oriented professions, including in policing, social work, corrections, law, and non-profits that require direct engagement with the community. Service-learning courses provide an early pathway for community involvement for students, and also exposure to potential job-related challenges and complexities. Learning about these challenges from service-learning community partners can help educate students about the realities of the job, but also about the importance of partnerships in problem-solving (Jacoby, 2009). Early engagement may also help deepen appreciation for service-oriented professions, and help prepare students for their future careers (Cipolle, 2010; Lersch, 1997). Service-learning courses not only have the potential to provide multiple learning benefits (Astin et al., 2000), including professional skills development, but may be a critical part of development for criminal justice students who pursue service-oriented professions.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on Contributor

Helen A. Lim is a professor of Criminology and Criminal Justice at California Lutheran University in Thousand Oaks. Her teaching and research interests include criminology, service-learning, and hate crimes. She has also served as Director for the Center for Academic Service-Learning at California Lutheran University.

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