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Partners for Success

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PARTNERS FOR SUCCESS

On the way to my second service-learning session, I fell and scraped my hand. The fourth graders I tutored then surrounded me and asked if I was sad. A girl even remarked on how I would not be the same after epithelialization. Her words struck me a long time afterwards as I reflected on my service-learning experience. In a way, many students undergo epithelialization when doing service. Both negative and positive experiences redefine their self-perception and awareness of local issues. However, few people have paid attention to the sustainability of this epithelialization process. How can we nurture the impacts of service – learning after students stop doing service?

To unfold the components of meaningful service, I studied Partners For Success (PFS), a service-learning program founded at Duke University since 1996. This paper first evaluates the program’s success through examining its five elements: Relationship, Rigor, Reciprocity, Reflection, and Real life. It then analyzes existing difficulties of PFS and suggests possible practices adapted from the Alternative Breaks at UNC-Chapel Hill. Last but not least, the paper uses survey results collected from 43 past participants of PFS to assess the program’s potentials for political and civic engagement to sustain the impact of the service-learning experience.

Development of Partners For Success
Founded in 1998, Partners For Success (PFS) has always been closely affiliated with Duke Service Learning and the Program in Education. Up to date, it has worked with five service-learning education courses at Duke University to serve education minors, teaching certification candidates, and any student interested in child development and service–learning. Only in 2013, 290 undergraduates participated in the program, providing more than 4700 hours of service at 13 sites, including seven schools and six community organizations. (“A Year in Review 2013-2014.pdf,” n.d.)

The program has four main goals that benefit both the community partners and Duke undergraduates. First, it facilitates Duke undergraduates to take part in and observe community – based learning environment. Second, it encourages participants to build long – term, positive relationship with preK – 12th grade students through academic as well as social engagement. Third, it coordinates reflection that integrates field experience

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and education philosophy to enhance participants’ takeaway. Lastly, PFS guarantees to constantly provide community partners with trained volunteer tutors. Over the year, PFS has increased its flexibility to cater to the partners’ varying need. While originally a one-on-one tutoring model, the program now allows volunteers to do either individual or group-work teaching depending on the learning environments at different sites.

Any PFS volunteer has to go through four stages, namely placement advising, service accountability, training and reflection (“A Year in Review 2013-2014.pdf,” n.d.). Before starting their service – learning, with the assistance of PFS staff, Duke undergraduates complete the online training for working with minor and pick a volunteering site that fits their interest and schedule. During the four months of service, participants are involved in ongoing training, support, and reflection. At the beginning of the semester, it is compulsory for all PFS volunteers to enroll in a four-hour training. Each volunteer will attend different sessions according to his or her future tutoring site’s characteristics. For example, since I was going to tutor in fourth grade, I went to three sessions: identity exploration, how to deal with different types of students, and 3rd – 5th grade literacy education.

Throughout the semester, volunteers can seek resources on how to work effectively with certain age group on the PFS’s website as well as from the volunteer support sessions. Topics include supporting English language learners, teaching Mathematics, working with middle school children, 3rd – 5th graders or preK-2nd graders, small group interaction, and identity exploration. Volunteers can also have part of the service – learning session observed and debriefed by PFS. As PFS helps faculties go through students’ weekly reflections, the program’s facilitator can resolve any problem in time to improve future practice. To be specific, if the volunteer reports unpleasant incidents at the tutoring site, the facilitator will contact the partner to solve the issue and reassess the potential for cooperation. Notably, after service learning, volunteers are welcome to contact PFS if they want to stay at their volunteering sites and continue the service.

**What Makes Partners For Success Work?**

David Malone, Director of Service – Learning Program at Duke University, once affirmed that the five Rs in serving the community were **Relationship, Rigor, Reciprocity, Reflection,** and **Real life** (Duke University, n.d.). For its sixteen years of service, PFS has satisfied these five Rs to solve many critiques often associated with service – learning.
The first aspect of service–learning is **Rigor**. Any PFS volunteer only fulfills their semester requirement after serving at least eighteen hours and having written critical reflections of the experience. This helps to resolve the doubt that service declines in quality when the number of participants rises. The term “rigor” should not be understood as competitiveness, because the large number of service-learning courses allows every undergraduate to attend the course they want.

In order for the program to run efficiently, the **Relationship** between the university and community partners should be emphasized. Oftentimes, service learning receives criticism because mixed motives can “prostitute” service and “contribute to the students and the universities rather than the community” (Eby, 1998). Madeleine Ramsey, PFS coordinator, is well aware of this critique. To guarantee that the program is not detached from the sites’ learning environment, she keeps close contact with the partners and attends to comments from all the involved sides: faculty members, partners’ administrative boards, host teachers, and Duke students.

**Reciprocity** is directly connected to Relationship as central to the service–learning experience. In addition to gratitude from both sides - PFS and the partners, faculty members and volunteers are to adopt a certain mindset before joining the class. Professors are responsible for equipping students with enough knowledge to work at the site and to reflect on the experience. At the same time, participants should come to the service sites expecting to learn and to help genuinely, coming to work with, not work for the community. While they are assisting the community partners, they also gain far-reaching factual and experiential knowledge. Through its training and resources, PFS encourages Duke undergraduates to establish strong relationship at the learning sites as the foundation for the program’s expansion. Moreover, reciprocity increases as the faculties and community partners jointly design service–learning courses where each party makes the most use of the available resources.

At the end of the semester, PFS distributes surveys to evaluate the experience of community partners and students. Because the surveys are self-reported, respondents may be subjected to self-fulfilling prophecy. However, PFS’s timely address of any incident that arises substantially reduces this possibility. Interestingly, according to PFS’s 2013 survey results, the partners reported more satisfaction with service learning than Duke undergraduates. While 96% of the partners thought that tutors had a positive impact on students’ academic skills, only 82% of Duke Tutors agreed with the statement. When it comes to students’ confidence and academic engagement, 100% of the partners and 90%
of the tutors had positive feedback. 100% of the partners would recommend PFS to other colleagues (“A Year in Review 2013-2014.pdf,” n.d.). These statistics indicate the value of tutors’ ongoing service.

**Real life** distinguishes service learning from other learning practices. Through observing and serving at different sites, undergraduates testify class materials and gain a comparative approach to contemporary issues. More essentially, knowledge of existing problems in the society such as the inequity of public education, immigration crisis, unemployment, invites for more actions beyond the classroom. Regarding the necessity of civic engagement in universities, Stanley Fish argued that within the context of the classroom, knowledge should be “academicized”, value – free and relativistic, and therefore civic engagement should be considered “extracurricular” (Fish, 2012). In other words, lecturers should only pay attention to the structure and history of ideas. Contrary to Fish’s argument, the continued popularity of service-learning courses at Duke in particular and nationwide in general demonstrates the potential of civic engagement in higher education. A relevant concern, however, is how to evaluate students’ growth from the experience?

This question leads us to the last, and to me the biggest element of service learning: **Reflection**. Under any circumstances, students should serve of their own accord. Within the service-learning education classes that PFS facilitates, reflections make students think more critically of their experience as they advance in the course. Importantly, for the teaching certificate candidates, reflections manifest their teaching philosophy and suitability to work in the classroom.

**Existing Issues with Partners For Success**

During my interviews with students who have taken more than three service-learning courses, lack of diversity is identified as the main issue with the program. In the two foundational Education classes that every Education Minor and teaching certificate candidate is required to take, the students tutor. Up to the 300 and 400-level education classes, students still tutor. In spite of the argument that students can build their knowledge upon working with different partners over time, due to logistics concern, tutoring sites are located close to campus and within a five – minute ride from one another. Consequently, tutors have limited options to fit both their schedule and interest. For example, Shaun Thompson’ 2015, a Biology and Physics double major and Education minor who aspired to become a high school teacher after graduation, did not have the chance to practice high school teaching throughout his four years of service-learning.
Another issue is insufficient time allocated for reflection. While PFS aids faculty members in evaluating the written reflections, many faculties find it difficult to sacrifice class time for reflections. Meanwhile, peer reflection is not as effective as it should be. At Duke, the student organization LEAPS (Learning through Experience, Action, Partnership and Service) was founded since 1995 to advocate for service – learning courses and to facilitate meaningful peer reflections. Due to time conflict, however, peer reflection is no longer a priority for many professors. When turning to reflection series outside of class, LEAPS received poor attendance. To many students, service–learning is not so much an opportunity to serve the community and reflect as simply a course’s component. In other words, service learning is not utilizing its full potential as a catalyst for social change.

This realization leads me to consider another service-learning model - the Alternative Breaks at UNC – Chapel Hill, for suggestions for PFS’s improvements. Organized by the student-led, service–learning organization APPLES, the program was funded by UNC students’ fee and North Carolina’s Fund for Public Service. It started off as a student–led house course for an hour a week, which is similar to Duke LEAPS’s house course in 1998. However, while LEAPS’s course was unsustainable, APPLES brought faculty member into the course and changed it into a two-hour per week class, an hour with the professor to discuss readings and analyze issues surrounding service, and the other for student–led reflection and community service. Participants also perform service across North Carolina, the Southeast and mid – Atlantic regions of the country. The program’s selectiveness ensures participants’ commitment to service learning. In 2013, 12 students were admitted out of 130 applicants for the Alternative Spring Break. This practice is noteworthy because it allows for more active interaction with course content as well as more commitment to reflection.

**Through the Lens of Civic and Political Engagement**

Over the past decade, there have been controversies surrounding the position on the social justice ladder of civic engagement in general and service learning in particular. At one end of the scale is “charity” act, which solely aims to offer help, not to redefine social order. At the other end of the scale, “social justice” activities empower groups with less power to reorder the social hierarchy (Einfeld & Collins, 2008).

While it is undeniable that PFS’s work majorly leans towards “charity”, potential for political activities and social justice is confirmed by the program coordinator as well as past volunteers. Responses from the survey I sent out to 298 past year PFS volunteers confirmed this notion. The questions were:

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• How many service – learning courses have you taken at Duke?
• Do you plan to take another service – learning course?
• Besides service – learning, what kind of on – campus activities are you involved in?

Survey Question 1 & 2:

<table>
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<th>Yes</th>
<th>31</th>
<th>74%</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

How many service - learning courses have you taken at Duke?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>0</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>0%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Out of 43 respondents, 31 reported intentions to take part in another service-learning courses. This trend and the predominant number of participants of more than one course (57%) can be explained by PFS’s relationship with the Program in Education. Therefore, skepticism may arise that the volunteers’ continued participation stems from the education program’s requirement, not from their own interest. Regardless of the motive, however, uninterrupted service would benefit both the community partners and the volunteers.

The survey result also reflects the popularity of different types of activities on campus. Volunteer/ Community Service comes first with 64% of the respondents reporting preoccupation with this activity throughout their Duke career. Sports and social activism are also prominent choices with 31% and 24% of participation relatively. In contrast, only 3 respondents appeared to take part in political activism. When asked if
they wanted to continue on–campus activities, only 7 respondents said no because of other priorities. Out of 36 respondents who said yes, 4 wanted to be politically active.

Survey Question 3:

There are many justifications for this division in interest among Duke undergraduates. A recurrent answer I received from interview with people currently involved with PFS and other volunteering organizations is the notion of a greater need for community service and more tangible impact. Many reported distrust in politics and an education system that might take decades to change. Many answers also resonated with the idea that civic engagement is less controversial than political involvement.

Conclusion
Over its sixteen years of operation, Partners For Success has constantly acknowledged the challenges and advantages of service learning to improve Duke’s learning environment alongside with Durham’s community. As long as the program retains the five core values of service learning: rigor, reflection, relationship, reciprocity, and real life, its sustainability can be guaranteed.

Nevertheless, Partners For Success has yet explored its full potential in civic and political engagement facets. To turn awareness into action, in terms of service, more meaningful and effective reflections can be organized both in and outside of class to ensure long-term involvement with the community. During their service learning, volunteers also need to learn about the possibility of political participation to bring about social change. In my opinion, reflection is the key to both types of engagement.

should be exposed to diverse trains of thoughts from their professors, their peers, and the community members they work with to better identify existing issues in their community as well as possible directions to solve them. Further study with larger survey scope is needed to determine the best practices to impact the dichotomy of civic and political engagement on the university campus.

Works Cited


