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Service Learning and Student Organization Initiatives: Facilitating Leadership Among Graduate Students

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ABSTRACT

The coordination of service learning experiences can play an important role in the leadership development of allied health professionals. Potential allied health professionals can benefit from participation in service learning and co-curricular activities that relate to their curriculum. Peer mentorship can be utilized to facilitate student engagement in co-curricular activities that can assist in the development of leadership skills, technical skills, and other skills required for their profession. The purpose of this article is to identify a leadership model that can be utilized through student organizations in allied health profession education. One model that can be used to facilitate leadership among graduate students is the Social Change Model of Leadership Development. The model encompasses seven domains which include consciousness of self, congruence, commitment, collaboration, common purpose, controversy, and citizenship. This model was used as a framework to facilitate student teamwork and participation within the community.

INTRODUCTION

Serving as Academic Coordinator of Clinical Education (ACCE) and event coordinator of physical therapy month activities, I have had the privilege of advising three cohorts of student physical therapists in a graduate doctor of physical therapy program. This position coordinates activities for national physical therapy month including a university health fair service learning project, off campus community service activities, and other volunteer opportunities.

National physical therapy month is an exciting time for physical therapy departments all over the country. National initiatives of any profession can be an opportunity to engage students and faculty in community service and student involvement. It is an opportunity for members, non-members, educators, and students to educate their communities about their profession. The activities surrounding student planned events is supported by "a social change model of leadership development," which allows students to engage in a service-learning project within the student organization. The model suggests that a "leadership development group" must exist that intends to engage in some form of change-action project as the primary vehicle for developing leadership skills.¹ Students engage in university health fairs, off campus health fairs in under-represented and underserved communities, and other community service opportunities. The event coordinators suggest that the student physical therapy organization president holds meetings with each of the three cohorts explaining the details of community initiatives to junior members. Each year a new class enters the program and utilizes upper classmen and peers as mentors. Smith suggests that peer advisers involve "students helping students."² Any health discipline can set up meaningful planned activities for students to participate in that would be supported by the social change model of leadership development.

Faculty teach students the skills needed to participate in health fair screenings. When teaching in the clinical sciences, educators are not only interested in facilitating the development of the students' psychomotor skills, but also in developing the thinking skills (e.g., planning, analyzing, problem solving, evaluating, and decision-making processes).³ The event coordinator advises and

mentors students and the class president about event expectations. Each cohort of students has an elected class president that communicates with the event coordinator about the coordination of activities for the health fair and other planned community activities. The class president communicates the designation of tasks to the class. Communication with student leaders is a vital component of the planning process for successful events. Communication between regular meetings or on last-minute issues, email, and phone communications are appropriate. Formal meetings with one-on-one communication tend to enhance this process. Meetings are held between the class president, old class officers, and newly selected officers. Senior members mentor incoming students. Peer mentoring is known to be beneficial for those that share commonalities. First year students need peers who will guide, support, and instruct them. Peer mentoring may help new students adapt to a new academic environment faster.² The relationship between the mentor and mentee gives the mentee a sense of being connected to the larger community where they may otherwise feel lost.

The Higher Education Research Institute suggests that the “Social Change Model of Leadership Development” demonstrates three components or levels: the individual, the group, and the community/society.¹ Students are challenged to learn foundational skills that are required to effectively participate in health fairs in the community. Participation includes but is not limited to blood pressure, posture, balance, manual muscle testing, range of motion, and flexibility screening. Physical therapy students conduct the screenings, while faculty, other students on campus, and individuals from the community are recipients. These are also skills students will use for the rest of their careers. Other disciplines may choose appropriate activities pertinent to their area of study. Students are assigned tasks and grouped together in order to cover booths, which cultivates a collaborative effort of cooperation. This event also gives students an opportunity to practice interpersonal skills and allows for the development of more self-confidence when dealing with the public. Students are also engaged in educating the public about health prevention in hopes of bringing about change.

SERVICE LEARNING

The Presidents’ declaration on civic responsibility of higher education emphasizes cultivating citizenship and social responsibility, which is a thread presently found in many foundational philosophical statements for higher education reform documents.⁴ Service learning is a method of teaching and learning. Students are able to reflect on experiences that combine classroom curriculum with meaningful service initiatives in the community. It integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, encourage life-long civic engagement, and strengthen communities for the common good.⁵ Service learning activities allow students to be in contact with individuals of various backgrounds that may be different from their own. Service learning promotes self-reflection and awareness of community needs. Community service-learning activities have the potential for creating opportunities for students to develop some of the skills needed for their professional careers. Service learning has been reported as an appropriate method for developing professional behaviors with health professions.⁶

WHY FOCUS ON ADVISING WITHIN THE 7 C’S OF LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT FOR SOCIAL CHANGE?

The seven areas of the social change model of leadership development are essential to students in health professions because these skills are needed for students and graduates to effectively function as strong leaders in the community. These characteristics of behaviors are also meaningful when practicing in a professional environment and within interdisciplinary teams. Therefore, development of these skills and qualities are necessary for meaningful and effective leadership among graduates that will be promoted to directors and managers as practitioners in the field.

“Consciousness of self” means being aware of the beliefs, values, attitudes, and emotions that motivates one to take action.”¹ Student physical therapists are made aware of attitudes and values that surround the physical therapy profession. The Guide to Professional Conduct states “that a physical therapist shall endeavor to address the health needs of society” is used with the intent of being a guide in the professional development of physical therapy students.⁷ Providing a co-curricular activity such as a health fair or volunteer project is a way to reinforce the importance of addressing needs of the society. A group of researchers who studied 100 individuals engaged in doing “common good” found some evidence of the relationship between citizenship and identity development.⁸ For example, it was found among those leading lives of commitment to do “common good” that they described the challenges of civic participation as “being thrust into a larger sphere of responsibility, one calling for keener recognition of diversity, complexity, and ambiguity” that we all share.

“Congruence” refers to thinking, feeling, and behaving with consistency, genuineness, authenticity, and honesty toward others.”¹ Student physical therapists are advised to treat peers, faculty, and participants’ with dignity and respect. The code of ethics of the American Physical Therapy Association states that “A physical therapist shall respect the rights and dignity of all individuals and shall provide compassionate care.”⁷ Co-curricular activities provide a way for students to explore their creativity in planning and organizing activities under proper supervision. In “Crossing High Street,” Jones and Hill found that service learning

contributes to a growing sense of efficacy among students in their development of understanding life circumstances of the people they serve and issues that are involved.⁹

“*Commitment* is the psychic energy that motivates the individual to serve and that drives the collective effort.”⁹ Students will find that working with groups and others can be rewarding and at times challenging. Commitment is needed for any endeavor to be successful, and a plan of action needs to be established along with a strategy for executing the plan. A commitment needs to be made by the individual and group involved to see the plan through to conclusion in order for it to be successful. Making a personal commitment is the foundation upon which a successful project is completed.

“*Collaboration* is to work with others in a common effort.”¹ Student physical therapists normally exist within an interdisciplinary team which stimulates and sometimes depends on collaboration of colleagues. Throughout internships, students are encouraged to work cooperatively with others for the benefit of client satisfaction. During the coordination of co-curricular activities, students are encouraged to participate in strategic planning for organizing booths at health fairs, set-up, clean up, details of activities, and advertisement related to the event. Collaboration benefits not only student outcomes but faculty as well. Lehna and Byrne reason that faculty educators benefit by developing an awareness of clinical requirements between agencies and academia and providing service to the community.¹⁰ Mintz and Liu emphasized that “service learning programs should foster collaboration both within the institution and between the institution and the community.”¹¹ Collaboration within service learning facilitates success in meeting the needs of students, faculty, staff, institutions, and the community.

“*Common Purpose* means to work with shared aims and values.”¹ In most cases, student physical therapists are working toward individual and/or collective positive outcomes on group projects, class assignments, or co-curricular activities. Engaging student physical therapists in activities such as university health fairs, community health fairs, muscular dystrophy association walk-a-thons, and breast cancer runs provides a sense of purpose and contribution to the community and profession by the students.

“*Controversy with civility* recognizes two fundamental realities of any creative group effort: differences in viewpoint are inevitable, and such differences must be aired openly but with civility.”¹ Student meetings provide a way for the expression of ideas to be considered for activities. Communication both produces and resolves conflict and controversy. Students need to effectively learn how to resolve conflict and manage organizational controversy. Meaningful dialogue can be challenging, but the exchange of thoughts and ideas to be considered should be respected.

“*Citizenship* is the process whereby the individual and the collaborative group become responsibly connected to the community and the society through leadership development activity.”¹ Engaging students in community projects heightens their awareness about the needs of the community and gives a sense of ownership. General awareness strengthens leaders to be able to address the needs of society. It allows a person to view situations from a more integrated, holistic position. Jones and Hill conclude that by interacting in communities that are different, students become more aware of their privileges, causing them to understand themselves better. With these behaviors at the center of their profession, students who practice these behaviors will be equipped with the basic tools to succeed in a leadership position noted in Table 1.

Table 1. 7 C's Of Leadership Development for Social Change

Behaviors	Sample Behaviors
Consciousness of self	• Taking action to make positive change when a problem arises
Congruence	• Acting in ways that show respect for others in everyday conversations
Commitment	• Loyalty to participate in activities that bring about change
Collaboration	• Operating within a team approach
Common Purpose	• Working on projects to fulfill a general need
Controversy	• Respecting the opinions of others without confrontation
Citizenship	• Display of concern and responsible for actions of the community

CONCLUSION

Service learning and student organization initiatives can provide a way to facilitate “leadership for social change” in the community, thus permitting faculty, peer advising, and mentorship. Advising students through co-curricular activities is rewarding and satisfying for the coordinator, upper classmen, and junior students. For some students, graduate school can be a challenge, and outside experiences can give students and faculty a chance to see each other outside of the classroom but still functioning in

a professional manner. Allied health professionals and faculty should provide opportunities for students to engage in community service events and interaction with other health care professionals in order to gain the much needed leadership skills needed to operate in a health care setting.

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