

Graduation Rates of Students Participating on Hurricane Relief Team

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Abstract: After Hurricane Katrina devastated parts of the Gulf Coast, Susquehanna University (SU) responded by launching the Hurricane Relief Team (HRT) program. In the past six years, SU has sent 16 teams of 15-20 students each and the program has evolved from a basic volunteer service opportunity into a service-learning experience and later into a two-week, cross-cultural service-learning program. While this study is not designed to determine whether participation in HRT, as a specific program, impacted graduation rates, it is intended to provide support for the correlation between civically engaged students and persistence to graduation. Through this example of a cross-cultural, service-learning program, the examination of graduation rates of HRT participants provides evidence of the potentially transformative nature of the experience as derived from historical data.

Keywords: service-learning; experiential learning; transformative learning; graduation rates; Hurricane Katrina; Susquehanna University

Introduction

After Hurricane Katrina devastated parts of the Gulf Coast, Susquehanna University (SU) responded in a myriad of ways to address various needs of New Orleans. At the heart of SU's response was the formation of a planning team in order to consider how the campus could best contribute to the relief efforts in the region and to create an action plan. Members of this group agreed that one of the most important things that SU could contribute was a long-term commitment so the Hurricane Relief Team (HRT) program was formed.

Having been involved in the leadership of 7 of the 16 HRT service-learning trips to New Orleans during my time at Susquehanna University, I have accumulated a significant amount of anecdotal evidence illustrating the positive effect the experience has on students. Participants report the positive impact of the experience (on them) to me through stories (post trip and post graduation), journal entries, as part of reflection discussions and many other ways. In addition to the collection of anecdotal information, limited assessment has been conducted across all 16 trips including the processing of survey and trip evaluation results.

Experiential learning in the form of service-learning and/or cross-cultural experiences is likely to be transformative for students based on their likely stage of development, availability of meaningful interaction with people different from themselves, and increased engagement with societal problems. For these and other reasons, it is important to demonstrate ways in which experiential learning might positively impact student outcomes.

For the purposes of this study, I reviewed the graduation rates of all participants and compared this with the overall graduation rate of students from SU. As I began to review data, other questions emerged regarding female to male ratio of participants, graduation rates of students who participated on multiple trips, and average grade point average of participants compared with overall average GPA at SU. It will be interesting to follow up on these questions in the future. Much value could also be derived by surveying or interviewing participants several years after graduation to discover perceived impact the HRT experience may have had on their life path.

I believe that this study will be useful as it provides support for existing research which finds that students with increased engagement and involvement in campus activities, civic learning, and/or cross-cultural experience tend to experience more positive outcomes than their peers who do not participate in such activities. Persistence to graduation has been used as a measure to support these conclusions.

Objective

The research question is not whether participation in HRT, as a specific program, impacted graduation rates. But as just one example of a cross-cultural, service-learning program, can the examination of graduation rates of HRT participants provide support for the correlation between civically engaged students and persistence to graduation? Can any evidence of the potentially transformative nature of the experience be derived from this historical data?

Literature

This study will be useful as it could provide support for existing research which finds that college students who experience increased engagement and involvement in campus activities with a learning component, internships, civic learning, and/or cross-cultural experience tend to demonstrate increased positive outcomes over their peers who do not participate in such activities. Experiential education, having the capacity to be transformative, is a powerful means of educating students. “Despite the varied definitions and tensions surrounding the terms, pioneers of integrative and interdisciplinary education have long embedded experiential learning into the curriculum, often using service-learning approaches, as a way to deepen students’ awareness and knowledge of societal issues and challenges” (Ehrlich & Jacoby, 2009).

The combination of cross-cultural experience and service-learning can have a more powerful effect on learning and identity development than when these approaches are used independently. Studying away helps highlight cultural differences while service-learning provides a framework for action, reflection and understanding of cultural differences and similarities (Chisholm, 2003). The way in which integrative, educational experiences are designed to develop civic awareness may be transformational for learners. According to Mezirow, transformational learning is, “the process of using prior interpretation to make a new or revised meaning of ones experience to guide future action” (Mezirow, 2000, p. 5).

Place-based, multi-disciplined, and focused on engagement, transformative education is often concerned with the identification and resolution of problems as both vehicle for and outcome of involved learning. A goal of transformative learning is to create positive change in students and thereby effect positive change in society. Colby (2007) specifies that in one form of transformative education, civic learning or civic engagement, learning goals are achieved through active involvement or direct interaction with unfamiliar populations. Transformational learning encourages individuals to “seek out ... engagement with those different from ourselves, to foster critical reflection on the meaning of our differences...” (Mezirow, 2000, p.121). From this perspective, both service-learning and cross-cultural experience help to create socially responsible communities thus engaging students in meaningful ways that provide enhanced perspective on their own college experience.

To further the connection between transformative education and civically transformative partnerships, Jacoby describes transformative partnerships as those in which campus-community partnerships are appreciating the idea that their “joint work is likely to transform them both” (Jacoby, 2003). Mather, Karbley, & Yamamoto (2012) highlight that cross-cultural, service-learning experiences are likely to trigger resistance to issues and reactions that arise during reflection. But rather than close students off from the experience, such resistance serves to integrate the experience into students’ lives going forward.

Methods

This project examined existing data that includes names of participants, class year, number of trips attended and whether the participants persisted to graduation at Susquehanna University. This data was compared to the overall graduation rate at SU and data analysis was conducted using Microsoft Excel.

Sample and Setting

In the past six years, SU has sent 16 teams of 15-20 students to participate in the following service projects: tutoring in Elementary Schools; sorting donated clothing; mucking out, gutting, and de-molding houses; collecting and donating musical instruments for a Middle School; working as a tree and brush removal crew; painting murals and schools; constructing playgrounds and baseball fields; supporting local animal shelters; and working with Habitat for Humanity to construct new, affordable housing.

The HRT program first evolved from a basic volunteer service program into a service-learning experience and later into a two-week, cross-cultural service-learning program. During the 2006-2007 academic year, group reflection was enhanced, a trip handbook was developed and a related interdisciplinary, service-learning course was offered for the first time. In 2011, the trip was extended to two weeks, as the program became part of SU's Global Opportunities (GO) program. Under the current model, participants have the option to take the original course, must complete the service-learning, cross-cultural experience and are then required to participate in a two-credit reflection course. Originally offered three times a year, frequency has been reduced over time and the program now runs one or two times per year.

Students have participated in this program through its various phases and across all four class-years. While there has not been a minimum grade point average requirement, participants have been selected to participate based on the strength of an application and in consideration of student conduct records.

Results

Total Student Participants = 177	
Student Participants Who Graduated = 167	
Student Participants Who Did Not Graduate = 10 (2 were exchange students, 1 is a returning student)	
Susquehanna University Graduation Rate = 81.3%	
Graduation Rate of HRT Student Participants = 94.4% (not counting exchange students = 95.5%)	
Total Male Participants = 55	Male Participants Who Did Not Graduate = 2
Total Female Participants = 122	Female Participants Who Did Not Graduate = 8

While this study shows that students who participated on at least one Susquehanna University Hurricane Relief Team trip had a higher graduation rate ($n = 167 / 94.4\%$) than the overall institutional graduation rate (81.3%), there is not enough information to directly correlate HRT participation with persistence. However, this information does seem to support other research regarding the role of service, participation in campus activities/college life, and civic engagement in successful student matriculation on college campuses.

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Hurricane Relief Team 16