Chapter 13
From “Oh My Gosh I’m Going to Get Mugged” to “See[ing] Them as People Who Are Just Like Me”

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ABSTRACT
Since the “service” component exposes college students to individuals in the community who often differ from them in their ethnoracial, socioeconomic, linguistic background, and age, etc. these classes present an ideal opportunity to test Allport’s (1954) intergroup contact hypothesis. This theory stipulates that prejudice can be reduced if certain criteria are met. This case study about freshmen students’ service learning experiences with a local West African community tested this theory and found that over the semester students’ stereotypes changed. In addition, this research project showed that the experiences of ethnoracial minority and/or immigrant students differed from their White peers; due to race, ethnicity, language, and/or immigration status, they were cultural insiders which enabled them to build more meaningful relationships with the community members.

I grew up hearing a lot of negative stereotypes about African Americans and people who lived in Africa. I had a preconceived notion of what people from Africa and black people were like, and I would secretly judge others based off of that. I never really thought my mind could be changed until I went to Napela. Going there really opened my eyes to the world, and pushed me out of the bubble I was living in for the last 18 years of my life which I am now super thankful for. – Katelyn, White freshman student from suburban New York City

INTRODUCTION
A good number of colleges and universities throughout the United States either encourage or require their students to participate in community engagement activities. Administrations and civic engagement centers on the different campuses promote this form of education as an opportunity for students to learn about “real-world” issues and to get to know the community outside their campus; latter being especially important for predominantly residential colleges (Campus Compact, 2014).
But there is much more to this. In this chapter the author argues that college students’ community engagement tests Allport’s (1954) contact hypothesis which states that if groups/individuals of different backgrounds encounter each other on an equal level, prejudice and racism can be reduced. Additionally, it is not only the college students who change their views and perceptions but also the community members with whom they are working. Perhaps most significantly—if done right—this approach can rectify a common problem of civic engagement programs on colleges, mostly middle and upper-class White American students “helping” the poor communities around the college. If not addressed, this approach intensifies and strengthens already existing inequalities and power-dynamics. Finally, the opportunity to work with an outside community—most often it is one that is economically disfranchised and/or ethnoracially different from the mostly White students at liberal arts colleges—offers immigrant students and/or students of color an opportunity to not stand out but rather to fit in. While middle/ upper class (White) students can be reluctant to go to these communities, most students of color and/or immigrant students tend to look forward to an opportunity like this, knowing that they will feel comfortable in this environment and bring the necessary skills to create meaningful connections with the community members (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996).

BACKGROUND

Why We Do Service Learning

Service learning is defined as a method a) under which students learn and develop through active participation in thoughtfully organized service experiences that meet actual community needs; b) that is integrated into the students’ academic curriculum or provides structured time for a student to think, talk, or write about what the student did and saw during the service activity; c) that provides students with opportunities to use newly acquired skills and knowledge in real-life situations in their own communities; and d) that enhances what is taught in school by extending student learning beyond the classroom and into the community and helps to foster the development of a sense of caring for others (Willitis-Cairn & Kielsmeier, 1991, p. 17).

Colleges and universities that use service learning methods in their curricula do this, according to Rockquemore and Schaffer (2000), with two pedagogical goals in mind, “increasing civic responsibility […] and facilitating academic objectives” (p. 14) (see also, Bringle & Hatcher, 1996). Institutions of higher learning also promote service learning projects because it is “a good way to diversify the educators and role models with whom […] students work […] [and] it is also an effective mechanism for improving university-community relations” (Marullo, 1998, p. 264).

According to Kahne and Westheimer (1996), service learning goals can be distinguished in the “goal of charity” and “goal of change.” Whereas the “goal of charity” focuses on the development of altruism as a good citizen’s duty, the “goal of change” emphasizes what the different parties involved in a service learning project can do together to bring about societal (and structural) changes (p. 5).

Research shows that service learning positively affects students’ personal development, including their personal identity and moral growth (Rockquemore & Schaffer, 2000; Vogelgesang, 2000; Wang & Rodgers, 2006). In addition, scholars have found that service learning and community service help students become better leaders, enhance their communication skills (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Vogelgesang, 2000), and learn how to develop and sustain positive and collaborative relationships (Burnett, Long, & Horne, 2005, p. 158). Perhaps most relevant for this chapter, studies (for example, Marullo, 1998; Myers-Lipton, 1996) indicate that
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