Chapter 16

Engaging Vital Older Adults in Intergenerational Service-Learning

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ABSTRACT

The population of older adults within the United States is growing rapidly, which calls for increased understanding of that population. However, ageism is pervasive and one of the most engrained forms of prejudice. Intergenerational service-learning may be one way to reduce negative stereotypes and ageism. The Co-Mentoring Project is an intergenerational service-learning project that matches undergraduate students and vital older adult volunteers. Students meet with their partners at least four times over the course of the semester to conduct a life review and gather information to begin the older adults’ memoirs. This chapter provides a rationale for intergenerational service-learning and information about its theoretical underpinnings. The chapter also offers information about service-learning best practices, including structured reflection, and how the Project’s methodology is consistent with them. The multimodal assessment conducted for the Project and its outcomes are discussed. Finally, directions for future research are described.

INTRODUCTION

The older adult population within the United States is growing exponentially. In 2012, the older adult population was believed to number 43.1 million (Ortman, Velkoff, & Hogan, 2014). That total will rise to an estimated 83.7 million in 2050 (Ortman et al., 2014). To provide additional context for these numbers, in 1970, 9.8% of the U.S. population was 65 years of age or older, and in 2010, 13% of the population was. In 2030, more than 20% of the U.S. population will be an older adult (Ortman et al., 2014). Hence, there is a demographic imperative for greater understanding of the older adult population.

Ageism is stereotyping of and discrimination against people due to their age (Butler, 1969). Despite substantial growth of the older adult population, ageism is pervasive (Achenbaum, 2015) and profoundly
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rooted in society (Butler, 2005). Ageism is manifested in stereotypes, avoidance of contact, and discriminatory practices (Butler, 1989). It continues to be one of the most entrenched forms of prejudice, as most people do not consider stereotypes about older adults in the same way as the harmful stereotypes about racism or sexism (Nelson, 2016b). People may not recognize ageism as a prejudice or form of discrimination when it occurs (Nelson, 2016a). A primary solution to the negative effects of ageism may be more education about the myths and stereotypes about aging directed toward younger generations (Nelson, 2016b). Growth of the older adult population and focus on youth, indicates a need to address ageist attitudes and intergenerational relations (Levy & Macdonald, 2016). Intergenerational service-learning can provide such an educational experience and the opportunity for intergenerational dialogue.

This chapter presents the Co-Mentoring Project, an intergenerational service-learning experience, hereafter referred to as “the Project.” It engages undergraduate lifespan developmental psychology students with vital, older adult volunteers. A primary course goal is for students to more effectively understand lifespan development. The Project, through intergenerational interaction and service-learning requirements, helps students work toward this goal. Through review of this chapter, the reader will become more familiar with a rationale for the use of intergenerational service-learning between undergraduate psychology students and older adults; foundational theories for intergenerational service-learning; detailed information about the Project and how it brings distant age groups together; best-practices for service-learning and how the Project’s methodology manifests them; and, multi-modal assessment for service-learning (Jacoby, 2015) and how this type of assessment has been utilized for this Project. The chapter includes information about effective service-learning reflective practices and how the Project’s methodology demonstrates them.

INTERGENERATIONAL SERVICE-LEARNING IN LIFESPAN DEVELOPMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY

High impact practices are techniques and designs for learning that are beneficial for student engagement and successful learning among students from varied backgrounds (Association of American Colleges and Universities, n.d.). Service-learning has been identified as a high impact educational practice (Kuh, 2008). According to Bringle and Hatcher (1995), service learning is,

A credit-bearing, educational, experience in which students participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and reflect on the service activity … to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility (p. 112).

Academic service-learning focuses on the synergy of service and learning (Howard, 1998). Similarly, Jacoby (1996) described the hyphen in service-learning as symbolizing the “symbiotic relationship” between service and learning which bear equal weight in the experience (p. 5). Service and learning are reciprocal- service experiences enlighten and transform academic learning, and academic learning enlightens and transforms service experiences (Howard, 1998).