

The Impact of Participating in Cross-Cultural Dialogues through a Service-Learning Project

The proposed project will examine the impact of a service-learning activity that involved interactions between Stockton University undergraduates and international students from ELS English Language Centers -Atlantic City. This proposal outlines my request for a summer stipend from the Scholarship of Engagement Fund to support data analysis, conference proposal writing, and manuscript writing for this research project. This project seeks to understand how participating in an international community engagement activity impacted Stockton students' attitudes towards diversity, cross-cultural contact, and service.

Background and Aims

The service-learning project described in this proposal involved a community partnership between ELS English Language Center -Atlantic City and students in PSYC 2201 Adolescence. ELS Atlantic City is an intensive English language education program wherein adults from around the world study English in southern New Jersey. Stockton students enrolled in PSYC 2201 provided informal "conversation clubs" to help ELS international students practice spoken English. Stockton students led informal meet-and-greet sessions for their ELS partners, conducted reciprocal interviews of their partners (ELS students and Stockton students asked each other about growing up in their respective countries), and participated in a social activity, together (e.g. see a movie, go out to dinner).

This engagement project not only provided a service to international students: Stockton students may also have benefitted from greater exposure to individuals of diverse cultures and nationalities. Substantial research from the field of social psychology supports the notion that increasing interactions between individuals that identify with different national, racial, and ethnic groups can reduce prejudice towards members that identify with a nationality, race, or ethnicity different from one's own (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006, Pettigrew et al., 2011). For example, European Americans reported more favorable attitudes towards African Americans after experiencing collaborative interactions with African Americans; Germans who got to know Turkish immigrants living in Germany experienced lower prejudice towards Turkish people as a whole (Pettigrew, 1997). Researchers proposed that the positive impacts of contact can be explained by increased knowledge about a previously unfamiliar group, reduced anxiety related to having interactions with diverse individuals, and increased empathy for experiences and perspectives as a result of getting to know someone with different life experiences (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008).

Based on psychological research on the benefits of contact with diverse individuals, I wish to understand how engagement with members of the international community impacted Stockton students. I wish to study this beyond the pedagogical scope of the service-learning course (PSYC 2201 Adolescence). This is important to understand because of recent concerns about the value of cultural competence, global engagement, and diversity for cultivating tolerance and counteracting the effects of ideological isolation and political polarization in the United States. How does engaging with community members who are different from oneself in terms of race, culture/ethnicity, and nationality impact one's own attitudes towards diversity and desire to interact with diverse individuals? Previously, I have spoken about service-learning and global engagement at national conferences and I have written descriptions of these activities for a scholarly volume (Tome, Yang, & Zhou, 2017; Zhou, Yang, & Tome, 2017; Yang, in press). However, what is missing from previous research endeavors is the analysis of student reactions to participating in the service activity. Therefore, my aims for this research program are the following:

Objective 1. The first goal of this project is to conduct data analyses of students' self-reflection essays, journals, and responses to a questionnaire on perceptions of service-learning.

Objective 2. The second goal of this project is to disseminate the findings of this research through a conference and a publication. Upon completion of Objective 1, I will submit a presentation proposal to national or regional conferences focused on community engagement, service-learning, global engagement, or pedagogical innovation. I will also write a manuscript reporting the findings from this research project for publication in a peer-reviewed scholarly journal of service-learning, community engagement, or psychology.

Beginning in Fall, 2017, I collected 35 Stockton student essays and reflections with approval from the IRB. Data collection is proceeding during Spring 2018 and will result in an additional 35 essays and reflections (total of 70 participants from Fall and Spring semesters). Specifically, I am interested in examining the following questions:

- How do Stockton students participating in this service feel about their international student partners? Do they report positive or negative feelings towards their partners?
- Are Stockton students' knowledge of different groups, anxiety in intercultural communication, and empathy for diverse individuals impacted by the service-learning experience?
- How do Stockton students' views towards service-learning and global engagement change after engaging in the service-learning experience?

Given the findings from previous research on the impacts of cross-cultural interactions, I predict that Stockton students will hold predominately positive attitudes towards their international partners. In addition, Stockton students will express generally positive views towards service-learning and global engagement. Students will have more positive views towards service as a whole at the end of the semester compared to at the beginning of the semester, prior to their service. Lastly, I predict that student responses will address the three impacts identified in previous research: knowledge, anxiety reduction, and empathy.

The proposed project will use the following procedures and methods over Summer, 2018:

Data Analyses. In total, 70 students' responses to essays and journals will be examined using thematic analysis for content that addresses the research questions of this project. The reflection essays and journals, combined, were 1000 words long for each student. In the thematic analysis, responses will be examined for words and descriptions pertaining to knowledge acquisition, anxiety reduction, and empathy. Students' reactions to service-learning, global learning, and their international partner will be coded as positive, negative, ambivalent, or did not address. Lastly, perceptions of service-learning on a 23-item questionnaire collected prior to the service project will be compared to perceptions of service-learning on a 21-item questionnaire at the end of the semester. I will conduct quantitative analyses of questionnaire items using SPSS statistical software, which is available through Stockton University. Data will be tabulated and presented in graphical form using Microsoft Excel for presentation and publication.

Scholarly Writing. Following data analyses, I will compile the methods and primary findings from this project into a conference poster, workshop, or presentation proposal. Following feedback from the conference, I will draft a manuscript for publication in a peer-reviewed scholarly journal.

Timeline. The proposed project will be conducted over the course of 14 weeks in Summer, 2018. June, 2018: Primary data analyses (e.g. thematic analysis of students' qualitative reflection responses). July, 2018: Secondary data analyses (e.g. analysis of questionnaire responses). Tabulation of quantitative data. Conference proposal writing.

August, 2018: Conference submission. Manuscript preparation and revision.

Importance or Value

Conversations about globalization, immigration, and human movement have become especially prominent in social and political discourse in the United States. Social science research has demonstrated that exposure to different viewpoints and authentic interactions with individuals of different national, cultural, and racial backgrounds can foster tolerance, willingness to cooperate, and greater understanding between individuals (Galupo, Cartwright, & Savage, 2010; Gurin, Nagda, & Lopez, 2004; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008; Spanierman et al., 2008). Findings from the proposed research project may provide further evidence that young adults benefit from face-to-face interactions with diverse individuals, and that institutions of higher education can support this contact through prioritizing diversity initiatives, community engagement, and experiential learning. Findings may illuminate the psychological processes involved in becoming more comfortable with cross-cultural interactions, generate ideas for future research on how to promote tolerance and cultural competence (e.g. best practices), and propose recommendations for how to organize authentic cultural exchanges with international communities.

Further Research or Study

Future research in this scholarship program will proceed based on data gathered from the proposed project. Two follow-up projects may result. One project is the identification and use of quantitative assessment instruments measuring student empathy, attitudes towards globalization, and cultural sensitivity. Such measures can be assessed before and after the service activity in order to observe changes in attitudes, tolerance, and empathic concern as a result of the service-learning project. A second area of future research will examine the impact of the service-learning project on the community partner, ELS Atlantic City. Opportunities for external funding will also be explored in collaboration with the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs and other faculty members working on global engagement and community engagement. For example, findings from the proposed project may be included in a grant application for the Campus Compact Fund for Positive Engagement in support of continued research on the impact of service-learning on Stockton students and international partners.

Outcomes

The research outlined in this application will ultimately lead to a manuscript submission to a scholarly journal and a poster submission to an academic conference. The findings will be reported in a manuscript submitted for publication in a journal such as *Journal of Community Engagement and Scholarship*, *American Journal of Community Psychology*, or *Teaching of Psychology*. The findings from this project will be submitted as a poster, workshop, or talk presentation to a conference highlighting community engagement, service-learning, global learning, or applications of psychology. For example, potential outlets include the Association of American Colleges & University's Global Engagement Meeting, Campus Compact 2019 National Conference, Cultures & Languages Across the Curriculum Conference, or the Society for the Teaching of Psychology's 18th Annual Conference.