



Developing Community Partnerships for Service-Learning

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The purpose of this study was to investigate the needs of current and potential community partners related to developing a more sustainable service-learning partnership.

Methods: This quality improvement study collected qualitative data using grounded theory and semi-structured interviews regarding the needs and roles of community partners in the UMMC's Occupational Therapy doctoral level service-learning program.

Results: The researchers identified the characteristics of a compatible partner (adequate communication, mutual benefit, etc.), as well as the barriers to compatibility (conflicting hours, unrealistic expectation, etc.) Based on these findings, five out of the eight community partners interviewed were deemed compatible for an ongoing partnership with the UMMC OTD Service-Learning Program.

Conclusion: Based on the results, the student investigators were able to provide suggestions to improve the UMMC OTD service-learning program/community partner relationships. Further research could contribute additional information on scheduling methods, approaches to obtaining continuous feedback on student performance, and developing an effective matching process between students and facilities.

INTRODUCTION

Service-learning is an essential tool used to enhance learning in higher-education settings. The mission of the service-learning program within the Occupational Therapy department at the University of Mississippi Medical Center is to "develop healthier communities and committed health care professionals through leadership in service and community engagement." There are many factors that are necessary to establish a long-standing, structured relationship with community partners, such as an open loop of communication, benefits for both students and partner, and meeting the needs of both parties (Karasik and Wallingford, 2007; Schneerid et al., 2018; Davis & Dempsey, 2018). There is little evidence in the literature about effective ways to establish and maintain a durable community partnership and this knowledge is necessary for the betterment of the UMMC OTD service-learning program.

PURPOSE

Primary Aims:

1. Identify potential community organizations compatible for long term academic/community partnerships.
2. Investigate the level of knowledge and understanding that community organizations have regarding the process and purpose of service-learning.
3. Discover preferred means of communication and approaches for obtaining continuous feedback between the academic program and the community partners.

RESULTS

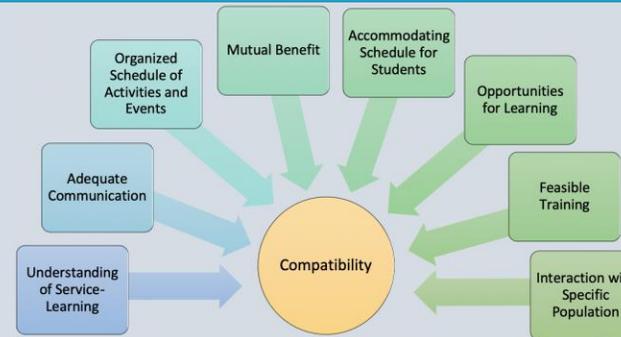


Figure 1: Characteristics of Compatible Community Service-Learning Partnerships with the UMMC OTD Program

Regarding **primary aim one**, five of the eight community partners that were interviewed were considered compatible for a more stable partnership with the UMMC OTD Service-Learning Program based on the characteristics in this figure. These include Mustard Seed, Eudora Welty Autism Resource Center, Home Place, Riggs Manor, and Hope Hollow .

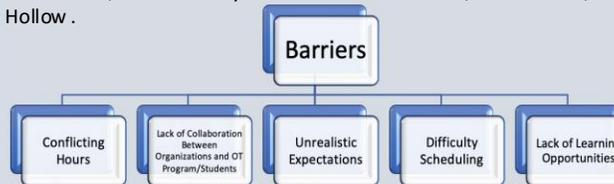


Figure 2: Barriers to Compatible Community Service-Learning Partnerships with UMMC OTD Program

As shown above, several barriers were identified throughout this study, making some facilities less compatible with the UMMC OTD service-learning program at this time. From this list of variables, the researchers determined Special Olympics, Wounded Warriors and Magnolia Speech School to be less compatible. **For primary aim two**, interviewees responses concerning service-learning knowledge was categorized as little to no understanding, limited understanding, or excellent understanding. Three participants showed little to no understanding, two had limited understanding, and three had excellent understanding. **For primary aim three**, preferred communication methods for each potential partner were as follows: email (7); email, text & call (3); text only (1)

LIMITATIONS

- Small sample size
- Time constraints
- Use of purposive sampling
- Interviewer reliability
- Minimal interviewer expertise
- Multiple researchers transcribing recordings
- Intercoder reliability

METHODOLOGY

Research Design Statement : This quality improvement study collected qualitative data using grounded theory and semi-structured interviews regarding the needs and roles of community partners in the UMMC's Occupational Therapy doctoral level service-learning program.

Participants: The student researchers used purposive sampling to select eight potential community partners in the Jackson area that offer services to a variety of populations. The participants were chosen based on students' previous experience and personal preferences with those sites.

Data collection instrument: Semi-structured interview consisting of open-ended questions designed to collect qualitative data. The interview comprised four sections designed to elicit responses to address primary aims.

Data collection process: All eight interviews were recorded and conducted by 1-2 student researchers and one UMMC faculty member. The research team then met to code the interviews and identify categories and overarching themes using Tesch's Eight Steps in the Coding Process. The student researchers used a grounded theory method in conjunction with Tesch's methods to identify and label the themes that emerged.

IMPLICATIONS

The results suggest that the UMMC OTD program could further develop the service-learning education provided to students by implementing some of the following ideas.

- Students could create a service-learning committee to help organize service-learning hours, provide information about service opportunities to other students, and to assist the faculty service-learning coordinator.
- In order to communicate opportunities to students, a calendar could be created to easily illustrate service-learning opportunities in the geographic area.
- The UMMC OTD program could organize the service-learning partnerships to match specific academic courses throughout the curriculum. It would be beneficial to organize partnerships with specific populations to match the students' current classwork, such as: pediatrics, older adult, and physical dysfunction. This would allow students to practice what they're learning in the classroom and see the benefit of service-learning in a variety of settings.

CONCLUSION

Based on the OT students' findings, the primary aims were met and characteristics of and barriers to compatibility with specific partners were discovered. Considering the results, the students were able to provide suggestions to improve the UMMC OTD service-learning program into a community partnership. Further research could contribute additional information on forming a consistent schedule, approaches to obtaining continuous feedback on student performance, and developing an effective matching process between students and facilities.