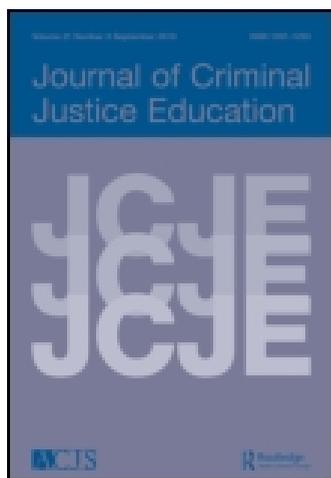


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# Outside the Comfort Zone of the Classroom

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*Brian Chad Starks, Lana Harrison and Kathy Denhardt*

What comes to mind when the word *learning* is mentioned? Is it a classroom full of students and a teacher dictating notes as the students struggle emphatically to write down every word that is said? Is it a picture of a student in the library with a stack of books piled on a desk, trying to read them all? These examples of learning may fit the traditional definition but this paper expands learning to include service. This paper describes a non-traditional style of learning that takes the student "out of the comfort zone of the classroom" into the community and explains how this experience has an impact on the students' education as well as their lives. The authors of this paper hope to influence its readers to re-think the definition of learning by understanding the importance of service.

## Introduction

This paper explores the impact of service-learning on undergraduate sociology and criminal justice students at a major university. The service-learning course combined traditional class lectures and readings with a service component geared to serving community residents, especially youth, while simultaneously enriching the lives of the students. This non-traditional style of learning takes the student "out of the comfort zone of the classroom" into communities that are characterized by traditional criminal justice literature as being "high risk" or marginalized. This paper aims to increase the understanding of service-learning and its importance to students' education and their lives as well.

## Youth Street Outreach

An innovative service-learning course was piloted in Spring 2007 at the University of Delaware (UD) by professors with expertise in the drug-crime nexus and community coalition building. The professors implemented an outreach program to youth in a low-income, urbanized community in Wilmington, Delaware known

as the Eastside. The Eastside, like several other Wilmington communities, is characterized by high rates of poverty and social disorder. Poor neighborhoods have been shown to have an adverse effect on adolescent mental health (e.g., depression, anxiety, oppositional disorder, and conduct disorder) operating through the youths' perception of living in a threatening, hostile environment. The most commonly reported dangers were drug use and dealing (Aneshensel and Sucoff 1996).

The class was based on the European model of street outreach to "at-risk" populations, primarily aimed at preventing and reducing drug use. European nations have been conducting street outreach for over 40 years, and street outreach to drug users is a primary prevention method for reducing drug use written into the charter of most European Union states. The Youth Street Outreach class was piloted to determine if college students could successfully outreach to neighborhood youth and adolescents. The project's goals were to increase social capital in the Eastside by encouraging and facilitating participation in community educational, recreational, and social support services/activities. It was hypothesized that increased social capital would translate into lower rates of youth involvement with drugs and crime. Another goal of the project was to provide a transformative experience for college students, one that allowed them to see both themselves and the youth to whom they reached out in a new light. The expectation that this would be a transformative experience is based upon the notion that middle-to-upper class (both white and black) college students may have only textbook knowledge about the "lived experiences" of the residents in neighborhoods characterized as dangerous, marginalized, and/or high risk. This limited information creates a notion of fear in those who have no experiences or relationship with residents from these types of communities and continues to support separate but equal doctrines on a social, educational, and lifestyle platform. We also observed that the college students feel a sense of separation from these communities and do not realize that they can learn a great deal from those who live in inner city, poor communities of color. We hope that this class will dispel some of these myths about impoverished communities as such, highlight the assets as well as give the students experiences to allow them to challenge the mindsets on how these communities are often viewed. It is the notion of the leadership team that these service-learning experiences will bring about personal transformations in the lives of the college students.

The class was developed in response to a call from the dean of the College of Arts and Sciences for classes providing a transformational experience for students. UD is committed to Discovery Learning Experience (service-learning) for all students, and small incentive grants helped to fund projects, requiring that each include an evaluation component. The evaluation was based on examining the transformational potential of the course for UD students. There appeared to be great potential as most UD students are from middle-class backgrounds with relatively little experience with youth in low-income urbanized communities of color. The service-learning component gave students the

opportunity to build relationships with people in the community where they conducted street outreach, getting to know them as individuals in their own neighborhood environment. It also helped students understand the structure and nature of the “social safety net” in the USA and the challenges of communication (across social strata, between government and social services and the people they intend to serve). Students also had the opportunity to have a positive and transformational effect on others, and participate in and witness social change. Recognizing the need for, and helping to create, social change is an incredibly powerful experience. This paper explores the impact of the Youth Street Outreach class on the student outreach workers.

### Service-Learning

According to Eyler and Giles (1999) and the National Service-Learning Clearinghouse (2007), service-learning “is a form of experiential education where learning occurs through a cycle of action and reflection as students work with others through a process of applying what they are learning to community problems and, at the same time, reflecting upon their experience as they seek to achieve real objectives for the community and deeper understanding and skills for themselves” (pp. 2, 7). Service-learning promotes teamwork, community involvement, and positive civic virtues. It offers opportunities to create strategies that address complex problems for citizens in complex situations. With the combination of *service* and *learning*, the students gain direct knowledge through service-learning activities about community challenges, as opposed to traditional, general knowledge learned from theories in textbooks and lectures (Eyler and Giles 1999; National Service-Learning Clearinghouse 2007). Service-learning enhances critical thinking, promotes learning through active participation, and fosters a sense of caring for others. This non-traditional style of learning has begun to spread to many different disciplines in colleges and universities. It has become a valuable tool in the field of criminal justice in addition to sociology, political science, education, and the applied sciences. A report titled *Learning in deed* by the National Center for Education Statistics (as referenced in Fiske 2001) estimated that 13 million plus students during the 2000-2001 academic year participated in service or service-learning projects.

Robert A. Rhoads (1997) in *Community Service and Higher Learning* stated that service-learning is about relationships. “A relationship that is based on equality and collaboration. From such a perspective, service is seen more as an act of *working with people in need rather than working to serve them*” (p. 8, emphasis added, Pompa 2002, p. 4). Everyone involved learned from each other. The students, community members, and the instructor were impacted by the shared experience (Pompa 2002). Thus it is a particularly valuable strategy for courses in which students are preparing to work with people who are unlike themselves. Following are examples of several diversity-based

service-learning courses: (1) Ohio University offered a course titled "Communication and Aging" through the School of Biology. This service-learning course included the study of biological, physiological, and sociological aspects of communication in the aging of adults with an emphasis on language, cognition, disorders of speech, and hearing issues. The course also focused on political, economic, cultural, and national health care issues that deal with the services of communication that affect the elderly. In addition to coursework, students were required to spend a minimum of four hours with an aging adult experiencing some type of difficulty with communication and/or caretakers (Hallowell 2007, p. 7); (2) a course on community and environmental compatibility at the University of New England, students focused on projects designed to help save the environment. In collaboration among the departments of Life Sciences and Social and Behavioral Sciences at the university, and the community of York, students evaluated the human impact on the York River Watershed. With the combination of interest groups, environmentalists, professors, and community officials, the students developed and implemented an assessment of social, microbial, and invertebrate populations of the watershed. The goal was to give the students hands-on experience with helping the community understand and address a problem that impacted them, while also integrating service-learning across disciplines and academic boundaries (Brown, McReynolds, and Johnson 2007); and (3) Wesleyan College offered a course entitled "The Nature and Manifestation of Prejudice" in the Ethnic Studies and Sociology department. In an attempt to uncover the root causes of prejudice, students were required to become involved in community service projects that would increase their consciousness of personal prejudices and the impact that these mindsets have in supporting institutionalized prejudice in society. In addition to traditional course requirements, some of the "community service" in which students were required to participate included preparing food at the local soup kitchen, preparing care packages for the homeless, and/or organizing the clothes closet at homeless shelters (Meeks 2007).

Service-learning courses have also been implemented in the criminal justice discipline to provide students with hands-on opportunities. Penn (2003) collaborated with four service organizations to provide criminal justice students with hands-on experience in developing rape prevention workshops, conducting community crime surveys and organizing criminal justice conferences. Penn's class was geared toward criminal justice majors being more prepared for their careers by experiencing a "hands-on" service-learning course early in their academic careers. In addition to traditional class requirements (readings, lectures, papers, quizzes, and tests) students were required to complete 10 hours of service at one of the four service organizations (p. 378). A quantitative evaluation conducted by Penn revealed 85% of students "agree a lot", "agree a little" or "agree" that they learned a great deal about issues surrounding criminal justice, while 90% of students "agree a lot", "agree a little", or "agree" that their service-learning experience taught them important life and job skills (p. 380).

Pompa (2002) discussed the impact that a service-learning course taught inside a prison had on her students. Her "Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program" placed university students and incarcerated men (or women) in prison in Pennsylvania together as peers in classes studying issues related to crime and justice. The course provided a non-traditional style of learning that cannot be captured by traditional classroom practices. Students met for weekly class sessions inside a prison.

Pompa stated that the goal of this class is to "know the issues thoroughly, especially as they impact on their own lives and that of others" (2004, p. 26). The author pointed out that there is perhaps no better way to examine the most central questions of crime and justice than to come face to face with the issues as experienced by the men and women caught up in the system. One of the "outside" (from the university) students exclaimed,

Most college courses are lectures and readings which, later on we are supposed to apply to real-life situations. This class was a real-life situation itself. The readings gave all of us facts, statistics, and the opinions of the "experts," but the class itself was what gave the course additional meaning and another dimension. The students in the class gave it life—we taught each other more than can be read in a book. (Pompa 2004, p. 26)

This type of learning allowed the students the opportunity to apply the theories read in journal articles and books and to really understand these theories as they pertain to peoples' lives. In such a classroom, both "outside" students (university students) and "inside" students (from the prison) come to know one another as peers and individuals with lives, families, goals, and values. No longer are the incarcerated (or the college students) those nebulous "others," but real people whom they frankly liked and found they had surprisingly much in common.

Both inside and outside students developed unique insights into the complex nature of crime and justice, and the US criminal justice system. The inside students were able to situate their own life experiences in the larger societal framework. They developed relationships with people who planned careers in law, policing, and other criminal justice and related fields, and were able to see them as "regular" people too. Inside students also benefitted from the academic rigor of the course, reading articles and books about the criminal justice system, incarceration, and books written by people who are incarcerated. Although many had been critics of the criminal justice system, they got fresh insights into its goals, structure, and outcomes for prisoners, and for society as a whole. One student said:

Being part of this experience has taught me more than I could ever put into words. This has changed my mindset and my life. In the future, I hope to use every dialogue, experience, and teaching as a reference in hopes of changing someone else's life, as mine has been changed. I'm definitely not leaving this class the way I came in. I will be leaving with the necessary tools to make a positive impact on the criminal justice system. ([www.insideoutcenter.org](http://www.insideoutcenter.org))

The exchange of ideas in the class greatly broadened the perspectives of all students, providing a unique opportunity to critically evaluate the theories and findings of traditional criminal justice course content.

The Inside-Out program has been so successful and enjoyed by so many students (both inside and out!) that Pompa has launched a national training program and is training professors from all over the country in the model. According to the website ([www.insideoutcenter.org](http://www.insideoutcenter.org)), Inside-Out courses have been offered in over 100 colleges and universities to date, across 33 states. The University of Delaware has been offering Inside-Out classes continuously since 2005, with two trained instructors teaching two Inside-out classes at two correctional institutions.

### The Youth Street Outreach Service-Learning Class and Project Description

The three-credit hour Youth Street Outreach course was designed to prepare the students for their role as youth outreach workers first, and then to place them in the Eastside community in teams of 2-3 for two 4-hour outreach shifts per week. University of Delaware undergraduate students and several community volunteers (who will be referred to as student outreach workers) were trained and monitored as outreach workers by their professors along with a group of several men who grew up in the community. This group of men is known as the Knoble Players, and they have worked in the Eastside with a goal of providing mentorship to neighborhood youth for over a decade. Together the Knoble Players and professors (collectively known as the leadership team) designed and presented the curriculum for the course, as well as monitored the student outreach workers, as they went out into the community. A graduate research assistant participated actively in all aspects of the development and implementation of the course, with a particular focus on process evaluation and providing continuous feedback to the leadership team. Students, including the five volunteers (two from the community and three from the university) met in a three-hour class on Wednesday evenings during the first month of the semester for classroom instruction at a community center located in the Eastside. The community center also served as the base for the project. With this foundation of training, participants began outreach in the community while also continuing to meet on Wednesday evenings for 1.5 hours for structured debriefing sessions in which the student outreach workers were encouraged to share their field experiences and problem-solve to increase youth engagement. The classes focused on communication strategies, and programs and resources available to the youth. A great deal of the curriculum centered on building communication strategies that would enable the student outreach workers to engage local youth. Outreach was conducted on Monday through Friday from 2:30 to 6:30, and the weekend shifts were 11:00-3:00 and 2:30-6:30. Student outreach workers were assigned to two outreach shifts per week—one on a weekday and one on a weekend. The Eastside neighborhood was divided into three sections

and the teams were assigned to one section per shift. All shifts were covered except one weekday, although usually only two teams were available to cover two of the three sections per shift.

Student outreach workers also reflected on their weekly field experiences through short writing assignments in which they were asked to observe, describe, and reflect upon their experiences. Classroom readings covered outreach strategies and models in Europe and the USA, community building, challenges facing inner-city youth, child development, race, crime, and education. The student outreach workers were instructed not to assume that we understood the neighborhood problems and how to solve them, but rather, we were to ask youth (and adults) their perceptions of problems and solutions. The leadership team and the outreach effort focused on the many positive assets of the community and ensuring that local youth knew about the range of activities and services available to them (and sometimes, to their families).

It is important to note that collaboration between the university and the community around this effort was based on relationships that had been built over several years prior to the piloting of the Youth Street Outreach course. One professor had collaborated with the Knoble Players on two previous projects in the Eastside, including the development of the Eastside Renaissance Neighborhood Association, an organization that also partnered with the Youth Street Outreach class. There had also been significant time put into learning about the resources available to the Eastside youth, resources to which outreach workers were to direct the youth once they learned of specific interests or needs. Several months prior to the Spring implementation, the leadership team began publicizing the project to the city planning district, other community agencies, the local school district, and to the community at large.

As the course curriculum was being developed, the leadership team brought in consultant Dirk Korf from the University of Amsterdam, a professor and drug researcher who has also evaluated street outreach in Europe and worked as a youth street outreach worker early in his career (Korf et al. 1999). Over three days, he provided 16 hours of training to the professors, the graduate student research assistant, and several members of the Knoble Players. It was during this time that a shared vision emerged on how best to implement and target the youth street outreach in the specific context of the Eastside neighborhood.

The Knoble Players, graduate student research assistant, and several community volunteers walked the neighborhood, passed out flyers, and spoke to community residents to announce the youth street outreach project during the training phase of the project. The students first outreach session consisted of a canvassing of the neighborhood where they knocked on every door and introduced themselves and the project, leaving a flyer for the residents (particularly when no one was home). The Knoble Players and the professors accompanied the student outreach workers for the neighborhood canvassing. Although the professors continued to meet the outreach groups for a week or so, the teams immediately started going out on their own. Their methods essentially entailed walking the city blocks in their assigned segment of the Eastside with

recreational equipment and talking to children and young people hanging out. They canvassed the neighborhood, and often found groups of children playing at local parks.

Student outreach workers used recreation as a way to engage youth. This was a modification to European style outreach that the leadership team agreed during our training to provide the best access to our targeted age group of 8-17 years of age. Recreation provided a mechanism to engage youth in order to talk to them. The role of the student outreach workers was to build relationships with the youth. Their goal was to learn about their interests, concerns and needs, to encourage their educational and recreational pursuits, and to provide information about local events and services. Student outreach workers distributed bulletins providing information about community services, recreational activities, and other subjects pertinent to youth. The variety of resources available in the community were definitely an asset, and the student outreach workers attempted to connect local youth to services that were available to them in their community. Basically, the student outreach workers "played" with youth and encouraged their involvement in local community events and activities. They engaged the youth in conversations about school, and thinking about their futures, and encouraged their dreams.

The college students reached out to the youth attempting to get to know them, help them to address their needs through utilization of local services, and encourage their dreams. The intent was to prevent further marginalization of youth (involvement in drugs, crime, etc.) and encourage social integration—to build individual and community social capital. Outreach workers also had responsibility for developing either an informational strategy or some type of event in response to the "unmet" needs of the youth that they identified through outreach.

European research has suggested little in the way of safety concerns for street youth outreach workers, as they serve helping roles and are recognized as assets to the community. To address the concerns of safety, the student outreach workers wore bright yellow hats and identification badges. This helped to ensure the residents that the non-native student outreach workers were: (1) visitors in their community, (2) not there to buy or sell drugs, or (3) not there to serve as undercover law enforcement agents. The yellow hats were easily identifiable and bore the logo of the university's mascot, the Knoble Players symbol and the acronym Y.O.U. This acronym stood for Youth Outreach United. The logo signifies the collaboration between the university and the Knoble Players and the acronym was an invitation to "You" to become an active participant in the project. The hats were great conversation starters to build trust and rapport that opened lines of communication between the Eastside youth and the student outreach workers. As the student outreach workers continued to show up on a daily basis, the residents began to ask: "Who are these people in our community with these yellow hats?" This is the type of response that we were hoping to get, with the mindset that the students would get a chance to talk with the residents about who they were and why they "kept showing up" in

their community. One of the students commented “Having the yellow hats as a way for people to identify us, ... kind of turned into this joke way of engaging with the kids [as] they were teasing us [about the yellow hats]. I enjoyed that.”

The outreach effort took an assets-based approach, and this meant the student outreach workers had to identify not only the assets of the community, but also the assets they themselves brought to the Youth Street Outreach class that would help them engage the youth. The remainder of this paper focuses on the impact of the service-learning experience on our student outreach workers in terms of the goals we set for them. Table 1 defines the six competencies that were designed for the course. Methods section will provide insight on how these competencies were met during the semester in weekly class debriefing sessions, weekly journal submissions, focus groups, and class projects.

## Methods

The primary evaluation tool was a process evaluation conducted by the graduate student research assistant. Process evaluations attempt to assess the quality and purpose of program activities relative to the desired outcomes or results of these programs (Krisberg 1980). A process evaluation was conducted of the course to assure that the goals were being met for the student outreach workers. Table 1 outlines the goals of developing six competencies among the student outreach workers through participation in the class.

Several strategies were built into the course design in order to gather information for the evaluation. First, the professors asked the student outreach workers to “debrief,” sharing their outreach efforts in class weekly and discussing their experiences in the community. These debriefing sessions would provide the leadership team (in particular the graduate research assistant) with information to determine if the competencies were being accomplished. Second, the student outreach workers were asked to write weekly journal submissions about their outreach efforts and submit these to the leadership team to aid in the assessment of whether the program was meeting the competencies originally outlined for the course. Third, the student outreach workers were asked to complete projects. These projects were called communication projects and

**Table 1** Evaluation of course objectives: data sources for evaluation

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- |     |   |
|-----|---|
| (1) | Communication skills—active listening; written communication; and ability to share information effectively                                      |
| (2) | Interpersonal skills—relationship building; and cultural competence   |
| (3) | Knowledge base—knowledge of various models of outreach; and knowledge of available services and programs  |
| (4) | Service coordination skills—ability to identify and access resources; ability to network and build coalitions; and ability to provide follow-up |
| (5) | Capacity building skills—ability to identify problems and resources; and leadership   |
| (6) | Organizational skills   |
-

were designed to address unmet needs identified by the local youth of the community. The leadership team hoped the communication projects would encompass all competencies for the course, while at the same time become sustainable for the residents of the community.

Qualitative data gathered through student journals, observation of the classes and teams in the field, formal and informal discussions with outreach workers and community members, was supplemented through two focus group interviews with the student outreach workers. "Focus groups are defined as an interviewing style designed for small groups of unrelated individuals, formed by an investigator and led in a group discussion on some particular topic or topics" (Bachman and Schutt 2003; Berg 2007, p. 144). It is a method used to interview a group of people simultaneously, allowing ideas to emerge from the group. Focus groups can provide insight into complicated topics where opinions or attitudes are conditional or where the area of concern relates to multifaceted behavior or motivation. Focus groups possess the capacity to become more than the sum of their participants, to exhibit a synergy that individuals alone cannot achieve. Focus groups have provided researchers with valuable insights into conducting complicated investigations and learning how respondents talk about the phenomenon of interest. According to Berg (2007, p. 144), focus groups are best used when: insights are needed for exploratory outreach projects, to gain reactions to areas needing improvement or how an intervention might operate, diagnosing the potential for problems with a new program, service or product, and to uncover factors relating to complex behavior or motivation.

An additional benefit of utilizing focus groups (led outside the classroom by the graduate student research assistant) was to create a confidential environment for the respondents to feel free to discuss whatever issues they may have had with the youth street outreach project, share insights about their outreach efforts, their interactions with other outreach workers, and their feelings about the target populations and how the project impacted their lives.

According to the literature (Berg 2007), focus groups are better maintained if the number of research participants ranges from 6 to 12. Two focus groups were conducted, and each was designed to include five students from the University of Delaware and one community volunteer, bringing the total participants in each focus group to six.

Participants in the two focus groups were selected using a purposive sample. "In some instances purposive samples are selected after field investigations on some group in order to ensure that certain types of individuals or persons displaying certain attributes are included in the study" (Berg 2007, p. 43). Because of the importance of getting the perspectives of persons living in the community and also participating in the student outreach work teams, the two community volunteers were selected as default participants, one in each focus group. There were only four African American students in the class (two males and two females), and they were also selected as default participants and divided between the two focus groups. The population of the Eastside community is about 95% African American, while the University of Delaware has

a predominantly white student body with African Americans making up about 6% of the student body. This distinctiveness suggested it would be especially important to explore the experiences and perspectives of African American students.

The selection of these six community volunteers and African American students comprised one-half of the focus group participants. The remaining six student participants were selected based on content analysis of weekly journal entries discussing their outreach experiences, as well as gender and the location of the outreach work provided in the Eastside. The journal entries were used to select students who did not have the same experiences in the community. For example, the graduate assistant looked for student outreach workers who had both negative and positive experiences in the community with hopes to provide a holistic analysis of outreach. Among the six selected for the focus groups, males and females were equally represented, there were no duplicate representatives from the same outreach teams or from the same Eastside geographic area where they conducted their outreach. Table 2 outlines the data.

The graduate student research assistant conducted the focus groups and transcribed the tapes. The transcripts were reviewed to determine if and how the six competencies (Table 1) were or were not developed from the focus group interviews.

### Findings

Overall, the student outreach workers’ experiences exemplify the impact of a non-traditional style of learning (by providing service to others) on the lives of college students. The student journals, class debriefing sessions, the process

**Table 2** Evaluation of course objectives: data sources for evaluation

Course objectives	In-class debriefing	Journal entries	Projects	Focus groups
Communication skills—active listening; written communication; and ability to share information effectively	x	x	x	x
Interpersonal skills—relationship building; and cultural competence	x	x		x
Knowledge base—knowledge of various models of outreach; and knowledge of available services and programs				x
Service coordination skills—ability to identify and access resources; ability to network and build coalitions; and ability to provide follow-up	x		x	x
Capacity building skills—ability to identify problems and resources; and leadership	x		x	x
Organizational skills	x		x	

evaluation, and focus groups all contributed to the understanding of the importance of getting college students more involved in “hands-on experiences.” The six competencies outlined in the course objectives speak to the skill set that one acquires during this type of service-learning experience. The student outreach workers describe in detail how they gained assets that not only made it easier to conduct outreach but how it changed their lives, thus addressing the transformational dimension of the experience. They discovered communication skills, interpersonal skills, as well as leadership skills while conducting outreach in a neighborhood characterized as “high risk” by traditional standards. The outreach workers learned that a quality education is not limited to traditional styles of learning. The combination of service and learning provided an experience that gave them insights and experiences that are truly at the core of a quality education.

### Six Competencies

#### Communication

With the hope of building trust and rapport, the student outreach workers were challenged to create a dialogue that would allow them to gain entry into the lives of the youth. In order to engage youth, student outreach workers found it important to build their own communication skills. The class portrayed communication in this situation as centered more around listening first, and talking afterwards. Listening to the youth about what they deemed important helped to establish trust and rapport that allowed the student outreach workers to provide information that would address some of the needs and interests of the youth. This tactic of listening to what youth deemed important rather than focusing on what student outreach workers deemed important allowed them to gain entry and become better communicators.

The learning objectives of the course included improving communication defined as “active listening; written communication; and the ability to share information effectively.” The student outreach workers became very comfortable in communicating with and engaging youth. For example:

- J: I have had a very easy time engaging with kids, very easy time talking with kids. A very easy time discussing with kids, especially like in a park sort of setting;
- W: I know on one or a couple weekends, we had like 25 kids ... playing football ... talking to them. It starts off with one and the next thing I know, I feel like the pied piper ... We just interacted with them, answered what questions they had, discussed different things.

The student outreach workers generally felt they did a good job of engaging with the younger children, although they were little less successful with teenagers. For example:

- M: I feel like kids under the age of 14 feel like "Oh where's the football, what are you guys gonna do today?" You know I've had even older people come up to me and say "What do you guys got for me today?"
- C: The younger ones will stick around and play with you, and you can talk to them forever ... I think when you approach them [teenagers] they're still very polite, but they'll only talk to you for like a minute or two and that's really it and then they're done with you.

The student outreach workers also saw the importance of engaging youth through listening. This was especially true for the community volunteers.

- D: I guess it's a little easier for me. I know the area, but I don't know every body ... What I found is if you go and if you are not telling them but if you are trying to engage them ... I don't wanna say it's an art but it's like you are putting yourself at their level and kinda sharing something that matters ... [W]hen you share it, they are more likely to give it back to you.

Student outreach workers also recognized that their approach needed to be unobtrusive, and to empower rather than disempower youth.

- W: It's one thing if I ask you for your help, "Can you help me out?" and you give it to me. It's another thing ... when you just come up and start giving me the answers ... It alludes to the mindset that I don't think you can do it yourself, so here I come to save your day ... The bottom line is that ... people ... have to earn trust, you have to earn respect, and you have to earn that relationship. People [are] not just gonna automatically think that you here to save my day. ... It doesn't work like that. It doesn't.

If helping someone is the true goal, W is outlining an approach of "respect" in order to accomplish it. As a guest who has come to their community, he must prove to the youth that he is capable of offering helpful services, and wait for them to ask for his help; this is in distinct contrast to an egoistic approach that makes those whom he is trying to serve feel less equipped to help themselves.

The students also found that the communications skills they learned made it easier for the youth to talk to them about their perceived problems and needs. This was contingent upon developing a trusting relationship with youth.

- J: [There is] a lot of opening the door, paving the way. I think a lot of this standoffishness is an initial kind of thing ... [But] once you are able to talk to people and develop a rapport and develop a relationship, then I think people will tell you about their problems ... and then they will be coming to you for your help, not you going to them.
- D: A lot of folks, once you get them engaged, they start talking about the problems ... [what] we need, what's wrong with this, and then those folks really want your help.
- W: Children are not ... stupid. They know what's going on. They have a full scope of the reality of the world, larger than we think. They may not know everything, but they know more than we give them credit for and to me, my mission ... was to go out here and be myself, talk to them, engage with them, but not an approach like, "Hey I got something I wanna tell you

about ... hey you need to go to school. You know what I mean?" Just talk to them and get to know who they are as human beings and treat them like human beings. A lot of times, kids are overlooked, overshadowed and they don't feel they exist. So when you let them know they exist, then you have the ability to leave an impression on them. It may be a small impression that's gonna grow to something ... I just never really bought into the concept of "hey let me tell you about school" ... It wouldn't have worked with me, ... [Y]ou could tell me all the things in the world, [but if] I don't know who you are, [there is] no connection, there is no value ... So to me, that connection needs to be established.

The service-learning approach allowed the students to discover their own existing assets, develop new assets, and utilize assets that existed in the Eastside community. Having the ability to communicate was instrumental to the project, but working to become a better communicator will not only benefit the project, but also impact the students' lives. Some of the students expressed their lack of communication skills prior to this course, yet after participation in the course, speak to how the outreach class has provided them with more confidence that helped improve their communication skill set. For example:

- A: I think I improved on my communication skills and my ability to adapt to different situations because as we are walking throughout the neighborhood, the situations are constantly changing at each step that we take.
- K: I found that it used to [take] me a minute to warm up to people ... But doing this outreach service, now it's like everywhere I go I speak to every body. ... Now that I am walking the streets doing this, I find myself at work speaking to people that I have never spoken to and I have been there for two years. I find myself walking on campus and people walking by and I'm like "Hi, how are you?"

### Interpersonal Skills

While engaging the youth in conversation, the student outreach workers were building their interpersonal skills. The course objectives defined development of interpersonal skills in terms of relationship building and coalition building. The trust and rapport established from the communication opened the door to establish and build upon the relationships with the youth and adults in the Eastside community. For example:

- W: I remember one weekend ... we met these four girls and one girl was real psyched about science which you know is kind of an unusual thing. You know most girls don't really care, and we were trying to build off of that. We sat there probably about a half an hour talking about their writing and different things like that. That was probably one of my better opportunities to sit down and talk to somebody ... trying to get them to think ahead, to think about the future.
- K: I don't know if ... everybody in this neighborhood is just friendly like that but, I have never walked down the street ... and had people just say "Hey

how are you?” you know, just spoken to so much on a city street. The kids are very receptive, they yell at us, they yell for us, run to us every time they see us and even an older gentlemen on a bike today, said “I keep seeing these yellow hats, what’s up with the yellow hats stuff?” If there had to be a program and we had to pick a neighborhood to do it we picked the right one to do it in.

After showing the documentary, *A Day on the Eastside: A Look Into Violence* produced by Jonathan Robinson, director of Youth Services at the local community center, the leadership team challenged participants to look inside themselves to discover what assets they possessed that would be beneficial to the residents of the Eastside community. A majority of the students, overwhelmed by the documentary, retreated from their confident comfortable college lifestyles and simply replied “I don’t know what assets I have.” During the focus groups, one student spoke to overcoming this hesitation and developing his interpersonal skills:

J: I think coming in here I very much had the “What do I have to say to these kids” sort of complex. You know I’m a rich white college kid coming into this neighborhood. I was worried about my ability to relate to people in that sense but I probably now feel ... [that] as long as you are gonna talk to somebody and be real, ... people are gonna see that you are a real person and even if you got differences like that, people are gonna be willing to talk and relate. I think on the line of improving communication skills, I very much received those sorts of benefits, specifically in that area that I feel more I won’t say comfortable—it wasn’t a comfortable issue—but I feel ... like I have more to offer to people who I thought that I might not have had anything to offer before.

## Knowledge Base

The student outreach workers were challenged to connect the Eastside residents to resources with the hope of increasing social capital. Having a *knowledge base* of various types of outreach and more importantly, having knowledge of local services and programs were necessary to accomplish this task. Yet, the knowledge is useless if you do not share it. For example:

J: I had a great [experience] with the Louis Redding Day. ... I was walking back ... by myself and ... I was telling people on the way back to go to the high school for Louis Redding Day, and there is a couple with piles of papers everywhere ... working right at that moment, trying to figure out how to pay for their child to go to college ... [I told them there] was all that scholarship information there [at Redding Day at the High School]. I mean they were putting their papers away and began to walk to the High School! So that was cool to see an immediate effect there. You know like, they were right there sitting there looking at the papers trying to do this and you know, they didn’t know about ... this event with all this scholarship information. It was like perfect lining up of stars and planets or something.

Each student outreach worker possessed different assets (such as cultural competence) that helped them to gain trust from the Eastside youth, so that they could facilitate their participation in activities. There were occasions when student outreach workers accompanied youth to after-school recreational events or to home with applications for Parks and Recreation or YMCA events/camps.

- D: For some things, I kind of concentrated on the parents, the mothers ... One thing I took was the Horticulture Society leadership program. I know for a fact there were three parents, mothers whose kids fell into that age range ... when I saw parents who had some kids and would probably look into this, then I contacted them and had a lot of success with the horticulture leadership program because it provided a job. A lot of these parents with older kids are looking for something to give their kids to keep them off of the street, to give them something where they can leave the neighborhood ... and realize a little bit of money at the end of it.

The leadership team not only stressed the building of assets in the student outreach workers, but also informed them that many assets existed in the Eastside community. The students were challenged with bringing the assets of the community and the people there to the forefront and utilizing them. One student outreach worker spoke about his experiences with talking to the youth about college education.

- J: Most of the kids we talk to are like 12 years old and you'll ask them whether they plan to go to college and sometimes they say what everybody else says and their just like "yeah, you know I think about it." But you know, they just don't know what it takes ... [t]he kid I was talking to you before about, who told me that he wanted to go here [my university] ... his brother went here and so ... I tried a lot to tell him about school like what kinda grades do you get? "Bs and Cs" and just kinda like how to go about his business.
- J: [t]here's one kid that you know was talking to me about school. He was 13 and he was interested and said what he wanted to go to college. Then he was telling me he got expelled from school for fighting. That's when I was like "You know what? You don't want to go to duke it out in school, and he took me seriously."

### Service Coordination Skills

Service coordination skills were outlined as the ability to identify and access resources; the ability to network and build coalitions; and the ability to follow up. The level of competency equipped the student outreach workers to better meet the needs of the community. The student outreach workers were tasked with identifying and accessing resources (service coordination skills). Much of this was accomplished through the bi-weekly bulletins developed by the leadership team that the outreach workers distributed. Toward the end of the class, one of the student outreach workers assumed responsibility for developing the

bulletins as their “project.” The student outreach workers found the bulletins useful in helping the youth to identify local resources. They also utilized existing resources, especially the local parks, to meet local children.

- M: You ... tell them about what’s in the bulletin or give them other papers you have.
- K: [t]he art thing that was down here on a Sunday ... A wall mural at Bethel Villa, so we brought kids from Bethel Villa over there with us. If I had it, they knew about it.
- M: This week was very successful ... For the first time, the older kids wanted to talk to us! Eventually we got on the subject of school ... We talked for a long time and exchanged e-mail addresses and phone numbers. The kids wanted more information on options after high school.

### Capacity Building Skills

The next competency learning objective that was addressed was capacity building skills. This includes the “ability to identify problems and resources and build leadership skills.” The outreach method focused on listening to what the youth and adult residents deemed as issues in their community; listening and then taking action. For example, the following quotes speak to this method of outreach:

- M: I think one of the better conversations that I had about education ... I didn’t even initiate it ... [another outreach worker] was talking to some kids across the street ... There were a bunch of teenagers out there [talking with me] ..., [and one said] “I got a question, I think it’s a stupid question” and his friends started laughing at him and he said “Can you go to college with a felony?” And we were like “Yeah” and they all started laughing, because they thought it was a stupid question, but there was this awkwardness. Maybe they were uncomfortable with the question or something ... [A]s soon as we said “yes” they were all shocked like REALLY? It was like they were all like 18 or 19, and they were all surprised to hear that you can go to college with a felony. I was kind of thinking like how many of you guys have felonies? It was group of about five or six of them. So that was probably like the most productive conversation that I had that had ... a real critical point.
- A: I think all of this has to go back to what [another outreach worker] said about the basketball nets. ... Let’s try and fix it and get those up there they are gonna be like “Wow, they actually care, they did something for our community” .... and it can be seen, right now.

As mentioned earlier, the student outreach workers were asked to name the assets they possessed that would be beneficial to the project in the first class. The few that named assets spoke of traits like, “I like working with kids” or “I have a younger sibling that I have to take care of.” They were unaware that they possessed skills much more valuable, like being a leader. Some of the situations that our student outreach workers were faced with brought out assets

like leadership. For example, one of our student outreach workers was able to identify a problem and exhibit leadership skills:

- K: My first outreach, my first day out I think was the best day I had out ... I had four brothers on my [football] team and the other team was being super aggressive like about to fight every time we threw the ball and I was telling my team that look we not gonna fight. We not gonna yell tandem, we gonna let them talk all the trash they want to but when y'all get down that field if they start talking trash, run back up here to me. We gonna be passive on it. And I feel that was my best outreach day. Because I was able to show them you don't always gotta fight over ... a football game. What do you mean? Fight for what? We are playing football, so if you guys can be passive during this when other situations arise, they may be able to be passive and see that there are other options than throwing down. What threw a monkey wrench in it was when the mom came out and wanted to fight all the kids and I was like "Maam, can we finish our football game?" You know, and at the end I went up to talk to her and she was like listening to me for five seconds and turned her attention directly to a kid that was coming over to her house and said, "You can't come over my house no more." And I was thinking like I just showed your kids that there were other options not to be violent with these other kids and here you are 40 some odd years old and you ready to come out here and ... so I hope that I was able to at least, that set of brothers, to show them a different option.

### Organizational Skills

Organization, the last of the competency skills, was addressed with the end of the year communication projects. Communication projects were projects that the student outreach workers were charged with implementing during this last phase of the course in response to some unmet needs identified among local youth. The student outreach workers were given the responsibility of organizing their teams, getting approval of their ideas from the leadership team, and then planning and implementing the project or event. Meeting times occurred both in and outside of the classroom settings. The role of the leadership team was to advise the project teams on thinking through the many details for the projects and to provide budget approval. The projects are reviewed below.

#### *Community project 1*

The first project was the double-dutch jump rope event, which was all about fun and recreation. This event took place in the gym of a local school, which meant involving the local school district. Due to the success of outreach efforts engaging youth in recreational activities, the youth showed a strong interest in competing in a double-dutch jump rope contest. The contest not only appealed to the youth, but also brought out some adults (mostly parents) as well. Everyone got involved and some of the leadership team even participated in the

jump rope competitions. The events included double-dutch jump rope competitions, single jump rope competitions, speed competitions, and team jump rope competitions. The Knoble Players served as disc jockeys playing music for the event. Toward the end of the event as some familiar dance music was played, nearly everyone in attendance participated in an impromptu line dance. The overall feel for this event was definitely a success, especially for the first community project to be implemented. Approximately 65 youth and residents showed up for the community event. Pizza, chicken, soda, and water were provided to all by the team. The team also provided certificates of appreciation to all participants and the winners, who placed first, second and third, were awarded prizes. The event was advertised ahead of time with flyers.

### *Community project 2*

The second project was College Night, also held at a local school (an alternative high school). The goal of the project was to provide information pertinent to attending college, and was advertised in flyers the week prior to the event. College Night provided an opportunity for youth to learn about admission requirements, athletic and academic scholarships, and financial aid. Representatives from the University of Delaware, Delaware State University, Delaware Technical and Community College, and Wilmington College gave presentations. A student representative attending the University of Delaware on a track scholarship also spoke to youth during the refreshment period, which included soda, pizza, and large Philly style pretzels. The attendance started off rather slow, but the commitment of the leadership team who walked and drove through the neighborhood recruiting youth and parents to attend, resulted in 31 youth participants at the College Night event.

### *Community project 3*

The purpose of the Nike Shoe Design project was to give the youth an opportunity to display their creative talents by developing a theme and designing a Nike tennis shoe, with the possibility of having it displayed at a local art gallery in Wilmington. The shoes were on display during the month of June. Regular meetings were held at the local alternative school with a graduate student in the art department at the University of Delaware who oversaw the design work and display. He was more than willing to provide his services to the college students, but even more excited to work with the youth of the Eastside. These events were advertised in catchy flyers that resembled a Nike tennis shoe, and in the bi-weekly bulletins distributed during outreach. The event was attractive to male teenagers, who were a more difficult audience to engage in the Youth Street Outreach.

### *Community project 4*

The last project was the finale and end of the semester function dubbed "Eastside Pride Day" by the student outreach workers. This event took place at the playground of a local school and entailed a great deal of planning, including getting petitions signed and hiring a police officer for the function. The event combined both recreational and educational activities. There was a large skating area for the youth, reserved basketball courts that featured two games between the Eastside team and representatives of the University of Delaware basketball team, flag football games, double-dutch and jump rope events, and a Nike shoe design table for children to color the Nike shoe flyer. There was a fire truck on display by Wilmington Fire and Safety department, and smoke detectors were distributed for free. There were also tables arranged around one side of the event with representatives from a number of local organizations. There were sign-up sheets for youth who were interested in participating in a rowing program sponsored by Breaking Barriers Incorporated, information on local General Educational Development (GED) programs, summer camp sign-up sheets, and scholarship information. The event also included free food and drinks, and, of course, the Knoble Players disc jockeys kept the crowd motivated for the duration of the event. Entertainment was also provided by the Diamond Elite Dancers, a local female youth dance group. The student outreach workers organized and purchased all the necessary supplies, and food was also donated by the Knoble Players, the university, and others. Other volunteers who helped to make Eastside Pride day a success were parents and friends of the outreach workers. A sign-in sheet showed that 166 people participated in the event.

The Eastside Pride day event was a marquee day. The event had a great turnout of youth and Eastside residents that was fun for all, but it also served as an appreciation day for the student outreach workers. During the semester, a number of the student outreach workers wondered if they were being successful in their outreach efforts. The impressive number of youth and parents that showed up for the event provided them with a feeling of accomplishment. They were able to witness the result of their hard work.

The approach to building trust and rapport by listening to the youth and residents about their concerns or what they felt was lacking in their community, led to the student outreach workers consistently being told that they would like to see the basketball backboards and nets replaced at the park adjoining the school playground. The park had only one basketball rim on a court that had the space for three more. The residents felt that the youth had nothing to do and the hoops would give them just that, something to do. When the Parks and Recreation department agreed to replace them if they had evidence that the community wanted them replaced, the outreach workers, who had only been in the community for approximately two and half months, collected over 200 names from the residents (in a 24-hour period) for a petition to support their endeavor. With the support of the Christina School District, the community, and the student outreach workers, the Department of Parks and Recreation quickly

granted the wish of the Eastside youth and residents. After convening a meeting with all parties involved, the basketball goals were restored within 48 hours after the meeting adjourned. The student outreach workers and leadership team were especially pleased with this because it showed the outreach team had been listening to community residents, and were able to organize a response to their requests that lasted longer than the class. The collaboration of college students, Eastside residents, the school district, and Parks and Recreation is a great example of how service-learning impacts all parties involved. Following this experience in the Spring, Parks and Recreation added summer program activities in an additional park in the Eastside, and hired one of the student outreach workers and one of the teens they had worked with to staff the park for the summer program.

Some of the student outreach workers discussed their overall experiences about the field of outreach. They expressed how they grew because of the service-learning class. The assets gained from the design of the non-traditional style of learning had an impact on the outreach experience.

K—I was encouraged by some of the things we found out this weekend and by some of the people we talked to. They seem to be increasingly receptive to the information we have which is a good feeling. I think I'm starting to learn more about what I might want to do when I graduate. I'm also learning to be more open to new experiences and I'm feeling more and more comfortable in the community.

K—I knew it was going to be interesting ... we had UD students, a majority of them Caucasian, venturing into an inner-city neighborhood, where they basically know no one. I can also imagine the initial fear that many experienced ... what we didn't know is that the Eastside of Wilmington would change and impact our lives the way it did.

The two community volunteers also gained from the experience.

D—I wanna say that I always thought that I was a natural, but I didn't know what outreach was truly about until I got here; to the different aspects of outreach, the ways to do it. I always thought that "Hey, I'm a good outreach person I know how to do this." I came in this and just found out "No. This is a field; what I learned is that I don't know as much as I thought I did."

W—As far as gains—I gained a new appreciation for the outreach concept. And the fact that you don't know as much as you think you know. I wasn't always comfortable ... I think I probably portrayed that I was, but a lot of times I really wasn't.

## Conclusions

The non-traditional style of educating college students through service-learning has served to build relationships and collaborations between and among diverse

groups of people who may have only come in contact with each other in passing. The Youth Street Outreach class gave predominantly white middle-to-upper class college students an opportunity to experience what it may be like growing up in an inner-city environment, and the opportunity to be impacted by the experience and to impact the community as well. It was also an opportunity for the students to learn on the deep levels that come through experience. Such learning can rarely be experienced through traditional styles of classroom lectures and readings from a text. Participation in the Youth Street Outreach class provided them with a rich life experience that hopefully will impact the lives of these students, changing their perspective about impoverished inner-city neighborhoods and residents as well as their own capacity to build relationships outside their natural comfort zones. As exemplified in the paper, most students had never had an experience with someone from a predominantly minority inner-city community or spent time in such a community. This opportunity allowed them to recognize and embrace some of the assets in communities like these. It also allowed them to recognize the assets they possessed that are useful in overcoming some of the wedges built by discrimination in the world today.

The Youth Street Outreach class was designed to increase students' knowledge about different models of outreach, with the goal of connecting the Eastside youth to different services and programs as a way of building social capital. Although there was little follow-up to determine if youth and others accessed programs, there is anecdotal information that attendance and applications increased for a number of events that the Youth Street Outreach workers advertised.

After taking the class, the student outreach workers spoke of their abilities to approach anyone and engage them in conversation. The class helped them to work on these skills in an attempt to build relationships based on trust and rapport. It is the belief of the authors that skills as important as the communication style imbued in the course could possibly serve as a bridge builder for people of different races and classes. The ability to communicate with others provided the students opportunities not only to learn about others, but also to realize personal bias and ignorance within themselves. Communication allowed them to face some of these issues (self-reflection), work on them (action), and use them to build positive relationships with someone they previously thought would not want to hear a word from their lips. The purpose of this class was to highlight the importance of service to learning and how it impacts the field of criminal justice education. It is the intent of the authors to stress how this non-traditional style of learning enhances the student outreach workers' ability to understand the people who live in poor black communities. Enhancing their ability to communicate, engage community residents, and develop interpersonal skills, will help them to be more effective in learning and thinking critically about issues related to crime and justice. Such a transformative and competency building experience can help them become citizens who work more effectively toward social justice. For those who choose a career in the field of

criminology/criminal justice, it can be expected that this experience will lead them to a better understanding of how poor black inner-city communities are much more complex than the typical depiction of bad communities with bad people found in the traditional criminal justice literature. This service-oriented class challenged the students and the professors to get “out of the comfort zone of the classroom” and through this experience they found much more in themselves and in the community than would ever have been possible if they had stayed in that old comfort zone.

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