

CAPITALIZING ON THE POPULARITY OF SPORT AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AMONG UNDERSERVED YOUTH: BREAKING NEW GROUND IN UNIVERSITY/COMMUNITY CULTURES

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Introduction

This article describes the work of six university professors who are doing important collaborative work with social agencies and educational institutions in their surrounding communities to impact the social, emotional, and educational growth of underserved children and youth. In these universities, professors and students are working together to provide a rich array of physical activity programs for underserved youth¹.

This work takes place at different times (school days, evenings, and weekends during the school year, as well as summer vacations), in different venues (including elementary, middle, and high schools, alternative schools, detention centers, universities, and boys and girls clubs), and involves different ages (from third graders all the way through to high school seniors). Much of this work has been going on for several years at the same site, while other program sites are new and may not be there forever. However, these programs have several things in common: they capitalize on the popularity of physical activity among most underserved kids; they are taught or directed by people who are concerned about the plight of underserved youth and who are committed to developing programs that work; and last but certainly not least, Don Hellison's (1995) responsibility model is at the heart of each program's framework and focus.

The responsibility model occupies a central place in this work because it provides a common set of values, goals, and instructional strategies for all youth programs conducted in these university communities. Furthermore, the model extends far beyond physical activity instruction by focusing on the teaching of life skills and values and their subsequent transfer from the physical activity setting to the classroom, community, and home. Four life skills/values—respect for others' rights and feelings, effort, goal-setting, and helping and leadership—are learned and practiced as part of the physical activity lesson. Eventually, the fifth goal, outside the gym, is introduced and increasingly emphasized, along with activities such as cross-age teaching and one-on-one sessions to show kids how to apply these skills in the classroom. Empowerment, which simply refers to gradually shifting power from program leaders to kids, is interwoven throughout the program, so that students take more responsibility for their attitudes and behaviors, for solving their conflicts, for evaluating the program and themselves, and for teaching and coaching each other.

One of the reasons that this work is significant is because most faculty and students in departments of physical education (or kinesiology) in the United States have not been players in the university-community collaboration movement (Siedentop, 1998). At a recent HUD-sponsored COPC conference, one

of these professors was told, "I certainly didn't expect anyone from your field to be involved in this stuff."

Although the community programs run by the university students and professors began in Chicago, one of America's largest cities, it is no longer a secret that many of our youth—perhaps the majority—need more help than our institutions give them (Benson & Harkavy, 1997). Underserved neighborhoods and communities are everywhere. That's why the six professors' work takes place in a variety of locations, including Greeley, Colorado; Grand Forks, North Dakota; Greensboro, North Carolina; Los Angeles; Chicago; and Denver. Thus, the ideas being shared in this article have relevance for professors and students in all colleges and universities, not just those in major urban areas.

In the following sections, we detail the variety of experiences, courses, and programs physical educators in higher education can use to develop a community focus within the college, school, department, or division. We draw on our experiences as professors as well as the experiences of our students who have integrated serving underserved youth into their professional lives. We present several options that professors might consider as they consider how best to integrate experience in community programs into university course work and degree programs. We conclude with some thoughts that may guide professors and students as they strive to develop a community focus within larger physical education/kinesiology contexts.

Establishing a University Commitment towards Underserved Communities

In spite of periodic calls for reform and change, kinesiology and physical education programs have remained largely isolated from their surrounding communities (Lawson, 1997). Granted, teacher education programs place pre-service teachers in local schools to fulfill student teaching requirements, but in most cases, the attention of student teachers, university supervisors, and cooperating teachers is focused on children and youth who fit within the normal range of ability and attitude. This is hardly surprising when one considers that university course work is usually geared to this population as well as coaching elite performers or else students with clearly defined "special needs." With few exceptions, little regard is given to understanding the lives of young children and youth who live in underserved

communities, and even less attention is devoted to considering how their needs can be met through physical activity programs.

A Brief History: How a "Lone Ranger" Community-Oriented Professor was Joined by Kindred Souls

Until the late 1980s, Don Hellison was perhaps the only university professor in the United States who regularly taught physical activity programs to kids in underserved communities. After having been a "lone ranger" at Portland State University for almost 20 years, in 1987 he joined the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) attracted by the then Kinesiology Dean, Chuck Kristufek's promise to support his efforts in teaching urban kids. It wasn't long before a small group of faculty members and graduate students joined him and taught their own programs. Under Don's direction, this group was instrumental in creating a School of Kinesiology commitment to providing physical activity programs for underserved youth in the urban communities that surround the UIC campus. While students have graduated and faculty have moved on in their professional lives, the group is still in place, and in 1999 there are nine programs being run in Chicago schools and social agencies.

Today, Don's efforts have branched out into other locations around the US. Two of Don's former students—James Kallusky at Los Angeles State University and Nick Cutforth at the University of Denver—have used the knowledge and experience gained from a close working relationship with him to develop a community focus in their universities and implement their own physical activity programs. Two others—Tom Martinek at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro and Missy Parker (formerly at the University of North Dakota) now at the University of Northern Colorado—used their sabbatical leave to come to Chicago to observe and assist in the UIC programs run by Don and his students and on returning to their universities applied this new knowledge to develop community programs of their own. The other professor—Jim Stiehl from the University of Northern Colorado—has known Don for many years and has always maintained close contact with him by sharing ideas and writing. At the same time Jim has taught underserved kids in outdoor programs, taking along university students with him.

Thus each professor's journey toward a focus on university-community collaboration differs in

several ways. In addition, their present commitment to youth programming takes many forms. For example, their kids' programs differ in content focus and populations served (although all are underserved); the way they connect these programs to their universities varies; and their organizational styles reflect their different personalities and values. However, they are all connecting community programs in underserved communities to university structures, course work, and degree opportunities.

Options for Integrating Experience in Community Programs into University Course Work and Degree Programs

The university-community programs in the professors' university settings take several different forms. They are distinguishable by the kinds of experiences available to students and the accompanying degree of intellectual depth. They also reflect professors' and students' motives for participating in such programs and their desired levels of involvement.

The professors range from tenured full professors to untenured assistant professors. Their motivations vary from always having done this kind of work (Don and Jim), to an expanding interest in applying many years of success in their disciplinary field to the needs of underserved kids (Tom and Missy), to a desire to pursue the challenges of university-community collaboration for the rest of their careers (James and Nick).

The students range from freshmen undergraduates trying to find something worthwhile to do to doctoral students writing their dissertations. Their motivations range from the simple desire to have such an experience to an interest in pursuing a career in youth development work (including public school teaching). Their reasons for participation illustrate the variety of commitments one can make, ranging from a one semester experience to an entire career change.

In this section we will look at several options including:

- Visitations to existing programs
- Independent study
- Optional (or mandatory) service learning experiences in current courses
- Graduate concentrations
- Special programs
- Faculty and student collaboration on research and scholarship

Visitations to Existing Programs

These are opportunities to visit and observe an existing program taught by a professor, university student, community youth worker, or public school teacher. They could be voluntary or provide credit for students who show interest and promise. The student's role could be as an observer or, if sufficiently motivated or confident, he or she could assist the teacher by working with individual kids or small groups. While these visits need not be connected with course work, they could be one option for a course assignment (for example, Curriculum Issues in Physical Education or Psycho-Social Aspects of Physical Education and Sport) in which case they could be followed up by a written paper or class presentation.

Independent Study

An independent study involves a student and a professor having regular one-to-one exchanges on a project tailor-made to the students' needs and interests—for example, Effective Programming for Underserved Youth (Cutforth). The pair meets on a weekly, biweekly, or monthly basis to discuss readings or an issue or idea about underserved youth and effective programming. Often, the resulting more personal relationship enables the professor to be in a better position to make course readings, discussions, and perhaps visits to existing youth development programs meaningful. Sometimes, as a result of the course, the student may be motivated to become further involved with the professor's work by visiting existing programs or developing and teaching a program in the community. The drawback is that the professor has to budget time to meet with the student, read and respond to the student's journals or papers, and prepare for the next meeting, and often this work is "off-load" and therefore in addition to usual professorial duties. While new assistant professors, in particular, may be concerned about this drawback, independent study arrangements do provide them with a valuable opportunity to discuss readings and issues related to their academic interests.

Optional (or Mandatory) Service Learning Experiences in Current Courses

Service learning experiences involve students in community placements in which they assume helping roles with youth. Such experiences can be mandatory or optional. When mandatory, "service learning" may even be included in the course title or course description to reflect the focus of

the class. However, a service learning assignment can also be one of several options within a course. As a pedagogical process, service learning involves four elements: 1) planning, 2) implementation and project monitoring, 3) reflection and celebration, and 4) evaluation and reporting (Witmer & Anderson, 1994). University students are placed in community settings to "serve and learn" through various roles. These might include mentoring a child or a small group of children through physical activities, assisting teachers with a physical education class, athletic team, or after school program, or directing their own physical activity program.

The first step of the service learning experience involves planning. Here, the students work cooperatively with the professor and the community partner to describe and agree upon the major components of the service experience including tasks, schedule, outcomes, supervision, and assessment. This step also involves the preparation of the university students and the host site including knowing how to act, what to expect, identifying the needs of the placement population, and planning a series of activities to meet these needs.

The next major component to be considered in effective service learning experiences is project implementation and monitoring. During implementation, a good monitoring process is needed to ensure that the project is meeting the expectations of the professor, the student, and the community partner. It also allows modifications too be made during the implementation process as needed.

Reflection and celebration distinguish service learning from other community service activities. Through reflection, students analyze, synthesize, and make judgments about their service experiences while also learning youth development concepts. Reflection is an ongoing process and can include writing diaries, logs, or journals and oral reflections such as presentations and discussions with peers, site supervisors, or the professor. The written materials enable students to compile a record of what their experiences were about, thus creating a system for reflection and growth; they also enable students to reflect on the meaning of these experiences, thus increasing the power of their application of theory and research to their work with children. The oral medium offers contexts for sharing experiences, questioning particular activities or events they observed, probing new possibilities, discussing successful activities,

and exploring new solutions to problems. Students should be encouraged to develop their own culminating experiences which might integrate reflection with the celebration component of service learning. The final stage, evaluation and reporting, should be based on the objectives of the service learning activity and should be designed during the planning process. The students should learn how to use both qualitative and quantitative techniques to collect, analyze, and report the data. The evaluation should show the extent to which objectives were met, the degree to which the activities were carried out as planned, and the impact of the experience on the children's academic, social, and personal development. The reporting could be done through traditional class papers or oral presentations, or through more nontraditional approaches such as poster presentations, video-documentaries, or Web Pages.

Thus service learning is a complex process that involves careful planning, implementation, reflection, and evaluation to be successful. (Erickson & Anderson, 1997). The time spent on these elements will be reflected in the quality and impact of the experience on the community partners, the professor, and the students. The community partners benefit when the service experience is tailored to young people's needs (Cutforth, in press), and from the enhanced relationship with the university. Potential benefits accruing to the professor include increased student motivation, an increased knowledge of the community and the extent of services available, the better relations between the university and the community, and the experience of using a nontraditional pedagogical approach.

The students benefit from learning by doing and reflecting on their learning with the professor and fellow students. Service learning experiences offer opportunities for students and professors to link theory and practice in ways that stimulate discussion, refinements of pedagogical strategies, and development of new teaching approaches. For example, challenges such as diversity and youth alienation can take on real faces and specific locations for students. Such shared, collaborative learning experiences result in the students being active rather than passive in the learning process, and their discourse is wide-ranging and interdisciplinary. Students in these small learning communities often say that these are some of the most beneficial learning experiences of their degree program. Furthermore, the stu-

dents' involvement in planning, practicing different skills, and reflecting on these experiences reinforces basic pedagogical behaviors common to teaching. Many students continue to work with kids long after the completion of the class.

Special Programs

Several of the professors have built an administrative home for their work by establishing special programs. These programs differ in regard to the academic experiences offered and their form of university-community collaboration. At the University of Illinois at Chicago, Don offers undergraduate elective courses in At-risk Youth Leadership and Youth Mentoring, a master's program in Urban Youth Development, and a doctoral program in curriculum design with the College of Education with a concentration in Urban Youth Development. As staff members in Don's Urban Youth Leadership Project, students work in youth programs in Chicago's inner-city communities. At the University of Northern Colorado, Jim's students can pursue Master's and doctoral degrees in Outdoor Education while teaching outdoor and experiential education in alternative schools in the Greeley area. At the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, Tom directs a master's degree in Community Youth Leadership and teaches courses in underserved youth and program evaluation which are also attended by doctoral students. Students work in Project Effort—a mentoring and cross-aged teaching program held at the local Boys and Girls Club. At the University of Denver, Nick offers a two-course specialization in Urban Education at the master's level. In addition, graduate students in the College of Education and undergraduate students in the Department of Service Learning provide numerous educational, curriculum, and mental health services to three Denver public schools as part of his University of Denver/Northwestside Schools Partnership.

While different in structure, these programs share several similarities. The students enroll in master's or doctoral programs, take several classroom courses and one or more service learning or field-based courses, develop, teach in, and evaluate programs for underserved kids, and write theses and dissertations to expand their knowledge and their connections to real world problems. The purpose of these programs is to prepare students to take leadership roles in a variety of institutions and levels. Several graduates are teachers in pri-

vate or public schools and community recreation programs, while others are pursuing careers in higher education as faculty members in physical education teacher education, kinesiology, recreation, or urban education.

Also, these special programs adopt modes of organization in curriculum, pedagogy, academic work, and assessment that promote educational community among students and faculty. Student learning spans the disciplines and is shared and collaborative both in the university and in the community so that students learn together rather than apart. These classes often follow an inquiry approach into the dilemmas and challenges of teaching and learning in underserved communities. The professors build on the interaction of fieldwork experiences and theory to ask questions of students, direct them to a variety of resources, share perceptions, suggest some possible alternatives to try, and encourage them to persist in their own learning until they resolve the dilemmas of their teaching practices to their own satisfaction.

When students study the same topic, they will naturally form their own self-supporting associations to give each other academic and social support. The professors have found that students spend more time together out of class than do students in traditional, unrelated stand-alone classes. The common study of a subject within the context of kids' programs brings them together quickly as small communities of learners.

These learning communities have several benefits. First, students become more actively involved in classroom learning, even after class, and by spending more time learning, obviously they learn more. Second, the students spend more time learning together, and by learning together everyone's understanding and knowledge is enriched. Third, these students form social bonds outside the classroom. They tend to learn and make close friends at the same time. This last outcome is one that is especially important in an era which Robert Bellah (1985) says is defined by rampant "expressive individualism," and of growing racial, gender, sexual, and ideological divisions on university campuses. Collaborative experiences teach students that their learning and that of their peers is inexorably intertwined, and that, regardless of race, class, gender, or background, their academic interests, namely working with underserved youth, are the same.

These special programs require faculty to work and think in a different way. Often the traditional professor-student relationship is replaced by a team approach in which team members spend many hours in discussions deciding what specific topics should receive focus and how best to study them. Each person should feel able to express his or her opinion, and decisions are often made by consensus, rather than directives from the professor.

Faculty and Student Collaboration on Research and Scholarship

Each of the above options may include professors and students engaging in varying amounts of teaching in community programs, consulting with community agencies, presenting papers and conducting workshops at local, national, and international conferences, and undertaking research. Numerous applied research opportunities are available for students and faculty interested in making a contribution to the academic community and to the advancement of the youth development model. Such opportunities illustrate how the university tripartite mission of research, teaching, and service can be combined rather than being seen as separate entities (Cutforth, 1997).

Some Closing Thoughts About Developing a University-Community Focus

Collaborating with social agencies and educational institutions in local communities takes a considerable amount of time, support, and intellectual energy, and is often more messy than working on research projects and teaching. Problems and challenges occur regularly and all the professors have experienced struggles and victories in gaining support at the departmental, college, university, and community levels.

Underserved communities are everywhere and most are desperate for additional help and services. While such neediness can be an asset (there is no shortage of settings in which to focus our energies!) there is also the danger that we will be asked to take on more of a challenge than we can handle. For example, on several occasions we have been asked to take 30 kids in our after school programs. In response we make it clear that large numbers will take our focus away from the responsibility goals of the program to classroom management and behavioral strategies (for additional thoughts on this issue, see Hellison & Cutforth, 1997).

The adage, "Start Small" is appropriate because the options for university-community collaboration discussed earlier take time to develop and require professors and students to be receptive, ready, and willing to teach and learn in new ways. All the professors started by teaching in their own community program. Sometimes interested students visit these programs, several get their feet wet as assistant teachers, and a few go on to direct their own programs. Others may approach their professor about doing an independent study.

Over many months, the professors and students begin to foster university-community collaboration, often without much experience in doing so. As the years progress, they gain access to and the trust of additional public schools and community social agencies. Often the practical questions that arise from such efforts merit thoughtful consideration back at the university, and generate a demand for service learning experiences and the infusion of youth development concepts into university course work. Several years later a graduate concentration or a special program may develop, with faculty and student collaborating on research and scholarship.

However, while this scenario may sound like a blueprint, it certainly is not. Rather it is nonlinear and loaded with uncertainty. Because of individual, group, and institutional values, priorities, and needs, the extent to which these developments occur may vary. The important point is that one has to start somewhere, and without the professor's initial efforts to venture beyond the university setting, there would be no opportunities for the seeds of university-collaboration to take root. Vision, while necessary for success, emerges from, more than it precedes, action. Furthermore, productive educational change is really a journey that doesn't end until we do!

In the professors' university-community programs, students are more like colleagues than subordinates, colleagues to be supported in any possible way. Social functions play a large part in all the professors' programs, and they reflect the view that most of us possess minds capable of cultivation beyond classes. Also, they reduce the isolation that innovators typically experience. These professors are almost always available to students in their offices and at homes and they have a solicitous concern for their well-being—a concern

which is usually reciprocated. Such practices embody the view of looking beyond labels such as "inexperienced," "beginning teacher," "graduate student," or "member of a research team" and replacing them with appropriate recognition for contributions to various projects, whether they be teaching in community programs, writing research reports, making presentations, or submitting manuscripts for publications.

It has been our experience that neither centralization nor decentralization works in efforts to reach out to the community. What is required is a different two-way relationship of pressure, support, and continuous negotiation, amounting to simultaneous top-down and bottom-up influence. Each of us—whether as individuals or as in groups—have learned to manage this paradox.

The most important ingredients for successful university-community collaboration are the commitment, preparation, and persistence of the faculty and students involved. Every person can be a change agent but must forego the hope of discovering a set of easy-to-follow steps. Likewise, a commitment to university-community collaboration by itself is not good enough. A commitment needs an engine, and that engine comprises individual, skilled people pushing for changes around them, intersecting with other like-minded individuals and groups necessary to form the critical mass necessary to bring about continuous improvements. Indeed, this is the spirit in which the partnership involving the professors was formed.

Physical education/kinesiology programs in higher education are well-positioned to direct more of their energies to their local communities, and to develop leaders in the youth development field—people willing to accept challenges and take risks. This article has provided several examples and guidelines for doing this kind of work and for developing and implementing programs. We hope that our efforts will inspire others to get involved.

Endnotes

1. The work of the professors mentioned in this article is featured in an edited book by Don Hellison and Nick Cutforth titled *Serving underserved youth through physical activity: Toward a model of university-community collaboration* which will be published by Human Kinetics, Champaign, IL, in 2000.

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