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Enhancing Social Responsibility: A Comprehensive Study On Undergraduate Students' Participation In Community Service At Loyola College, Chennai.

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Abstract:

This research investigates the integral role of undergraduate students from Loyola College, Chennai, in rendering community service within the slums of the metropolitan city. As a manifestation of social responsibility, students, guided by a dedicated team of social workers, actively participate in service-learning initiatives. This study evaluates the participation of second-year undergraduate students, emphasizing the transformative impact of community service on academic learning and personal development. Primary data from 120 respondents were collected through interviews, revealing a significant increase in students' participation and involvement. The study underscores the mutual benefits of academic learning and community engagement.

Keywords: Community Service, Students' Participation, Academic Learning, Social Responsibility, Service-Learning, Neighbourhood Slums, Classroom Experience

1. Introduction

Community service, traditionally known as the Outreach Programme in India, has evolved into the global concept of "service-learning." Loyola College, Chennai, embraces service-learning as an essential component of its curriculum, aiming to provide students with meaningful and dynamic learning experiences. Rooted in experiential education, service-learning bridges the gap between academic knowledge and real-world community engagement. This shift reflects a global trend in educational institutions prioritizing adaptable practices that foster holistic learning experiences. This study delves into the transformative journey of undergraduate students engaged in service-learning, exploring the link between academic learning, personal development, and social responsibility.

Community service, also known as the Outreach Programme in India for over four decades, has recently undergone a transformation in many countries, being replaced by the term "service-learning." Numerous universities in the United Kingdom, Europe, and Asia have embraced service-learning as a fundamental component of their curricular activities. This shift is reflective of a global trend where educational institutions are moving towards more adaptable practices that foster meaningful and dynamic learning experiences for students (Carrington & Saggers, 2008).

Service-learning, essentially an experiential education, serves as a bridge connecting academic learning with real-world experiences in community settings. The evolution from traditional community service to service-learning is driven by the desire to provide students with more than just volunteer opportunities; it aims to stimulate their minds and cultivate a sense of civic responsibility. Students engaging in service-learning are encouraged to engage in reflective thinking before participating in community service activities. This approach not only nurtures critical thinking skills but also fosters an appreciation for broader social issues inherent in a democratic society.

The conceptual roots of service-learning can be traced back to John Dewey's Experiential Learning (1938), where he proposed an innovative educational methodology linking classroom learning with practical experiences based on theoretical perspectives. The central tenet of service-learning is to bring innovation and place emphasis on addressing the local needs of society and the surrounding community. This involves responding to new theories and perspectives on learning (Domangue & Carson, 2008).

David Kolb (1984), in his Experiential Learning Theory, describes it as a "holistic integrative perspective on learning that combines experience, perception, cognition, and behavior." This model offers a unique viewpoint on learning and student development, presenting an integrated framework that articulates the characteristics of experiential learning. The emphasis is on incorporating experience into the learning process, thereby fostering a comprehensive understanding that goes beyond traditional academic boundaries.

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i. The quantification of learning should not be limited to outcomes; rather, it is more appropriately conceptualized as an ongoing process.
ii. Learning is not a static phenomenon; instead, it is a continuous process deeply rooted in experiential engagement.
iii. The comprehensive process of perpetual learning involves and mandates the resolution of conflicts arising from dialectically opposed modes of adaptation to the world.
iv. Significantly, learning necessitates a holistic approach, representing an integrated process of transformation and adjustment to the world.
v. Learning is characterized by meaningful and fruitful transactions between the individual and the environment, emphasizing dynamic interactions.
vi. The generation of knowledge is intrinsically linked to learning, as the latter constitutes the actual process of knowledge creation.

The characteristics delineated above emanate from David Kolb's conceptualization of learning as a "process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" within the framework of experiential learning. Kolb's definition underscores the dynamic nature of learning, emphasizing the active engagement and transformation of experiences as a fundamental driver in the knowledge creation process. This perspective situates learning as a continual and transformative journey, wherein knowledge is not merely acquired but actively constructed through the ongoing interaction with diverse experiences.

Objectives of the Study

1. To investigate the individual backgrounds of the participants engaged in community service, delving into their personal histories, experiences, and contextual factors.
2. To examine the extent of engagement and the substantive contributions made by the respondents in the context of community service or service learning, aiming to comprehensively understand the nature and impact of their involvement.

Methodology

The study, conducted at Loyola College, employed convenience sampling to gather primary data from 183 respondents across nine departments. Semi-structured interviews were utilized for data collection. Secondary data were also obtained from various sources, enriching the study's depth. The research adopted a descriptive design to elucidate results and findings from students actively participating in the service-learning program.

The research was conducted at Loyola College, situated in Chennai, Tamil Nadu. The study focused on undergraduate students who had fulfilled the mandatory community service component as part of their academic requirements for degree completion. Prior to the commencement of the study, formal consent was obtained from the director of the service learning department. Each participant provided voluntary consent by signing the data collection sheet, indicating their willingness to participate.

Convenience sampling techniques were employed to gather primary data from a total of 183 respondents representing nine different departments. Although the initial target was 200 participants, 183 respondents provided complete responses, while the remaining responses were considered partial and thus excluded from the study. The research utilized a semi-structured interview schedule for primary data collection.

This descriptive research design aimed to elucidate results and findings from participants who actively engaged in and successfully completed the community service component. To enhance the study's depth, secondary data were also obtained from diverse sources, including journals and websites of organizations involved in community service implementation. The collected primary data, derived from students at Loyola College during the academic year 2018 to 2019, were subjected to statistical analysis using appropriate tools for interpretation.

Results

Loyola College in Chennai, Tamil Nadu, currently refers to community service as Service-Learning, a term formerly known as the Outreach Programme. The institution has a dedicated department comprising ten professional social workers responsible for overseeing community service activities. Mandated as a compulsory two-credit requirement, community service is integrated into the regular academic curriculum for second-year undergraduate students and first-year postgraduate students at Loyola College.

This program, designed to meet specific community needs, provides students with the opportunity to engage during the course period. Through community service, students are not only encouraged but also given a valuable chance to apply their acquired knowledge and skills, acting as learners who contribute to the development of individuals by mobilizing locally available resources.

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Table 1 provides a demographic overview of respondents, highlighting gender imbalances, age group distributions, religious diversity, and academic program representations. Notably, there is a significant predominance of male participants, reflecting a diverse representation of academic backgrounds.

Table 2 illustrates the varying levels of participation and engagement across different service-learning activities. Activities such as youth welfare programs and evening tuition garnered high levels of participation, showcasing the students' commitment to diverse community service initiatives.

Table: 1 Personal background of the respondents

Variables	Frequency (n= 183)	Percentage
Gender		
Male	155	84.6
Female	28	15.4
Age		
17 – 19 years	23	12.6
19+ - 21 years	160	87.4
Religion		
Hindu	85	46.5
Christian	90	49.2
Muslim	8	04.3
Programme		
B.Com	48	26.3
Visual Communication	23	12.5
Economics	24	13.2
French	12	06.5
English	18	09.8
Chemistry	15	08.2
Plan Biology and Bio-technology	14	07.6
Advanced Zoology	13	07.2
Physics	16	08.7

Table 1 presents the personal background characteristics of the respondents, encompassing variables such as gender, age, religion, and academic program. A total of 183 respondents participated in the study, with the majority being male (84.6%) and the remaining female (15.4%). This gender distribution suggests a notable predominance of male participants in the community service or service-learning program.

Regarding the age distribution, the respondents were categorized into two groups: those aged 17-19 years and those aged 19-21 years. The majority of participants fell into the older age group (87.4%), indicating that a substantial proportion of the respondents were in the later stages of their teenage years and early adulthood.

In terms of religion, the respondents belonged to various religious affiliations, with Hindus constituting the largest group (46.5%), followed closely by Christians (49.2%), and a smaller representation of Muslims (4.3%). This diversity in religious backgrounds reflects the inclusive nature of the community service program, engaging participants from different faiths.

The final variable, academic program, delineates the distribution of respondents across various disciplines. The most prominent programs include Visual Communication (12.5%), Economics (13.2%), B.Com (26.3%), and other science-related disciplines. This diversity in academic backgrounds suggests a broad representation of students from different fields participating in the community service initiative.

Table 1 provides a comprehensive overview of the demographic and academic characteristics of the respondents engaged in community service or service-learning. The analysis highlights gender imbalances, age group distributions, religious diversity, and the wide array of academic programs represented among the participants.

Table 2 Level of participation and engagements in community service or Service-Learning (SL) activities

Sl. No	Variables	No of students involved	Participation and engagement levels		
			Low	Medium	High
1	Remedial coaching classes for school children	13	2 (15.4%)	3 (23.0%)	8 (61.6.%)
2	Youth welfare programmes	36	5 (13.8%)	9 (25.0%)	22 (61.2%)
3	Women empowerment programmes	36	9 (25.0%)	15 (41.7%)	12 (33.3%)
4	Health and sanitation programmes	36	7 (19.4%)	13 (3.2%)	16 (44.4%)
5	Protection of environment	36	8 (22.3%)	12 (33.3%)	16 (44.4%)

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6	Caring of elders and the disabled	13	3 (23.07)	3 (23.07%)	7 (53.86%)
7	Evening Tuition	13	2 (15.4)	3 (23.07%)	8 (61.53%)

Table 2 illustrates the level of participation and engagement of students in various community service or Service-Learning (SL) activities. The data is organized into different activities, along with the number of students involved and their corresponding participation and engagement levels categorized as low, medium, and high.

1. Remedial Coaching Classes for School Children: A total of 13 students were involved in this activity. Among them, the majority (61.6%) showed a high level of participation and engagement, indicating a strong commitment to contributing to the community through educational support for school children.

2. Youth Welfare Programmes: In this category, 36 students participated. A significant portion (61.2%) demonstrated a high level of engagement, reflecting a proactive involvement in activities aimed at the welfare of the youth.

3. Women Empowerment Programmes: The participation of 36 students in women empowerment programs showed a varied engagement level. The largest segment (41.7%) fell into the medium category, suggesting a substantial commitment, while 33.3% exhibited a high level of engagement.

4. Health and Sanitation Programmes: With 36 students participating, the engagement was distributed across the three levels, with a notable 44.4% showing a high level of commitment to health and sanitation initiatives.

5. Protection of Environment: Similar to health and sanitation programs, 44.4% of the 36 students engaged in activities related to the protection of the environment demonstrated a high level of commitment.

6. Caring of Elders and the Disabled: Involving 13 students, this activity displayed a majority (53.86%) with a high level of participation, indicating a significant commitment to providing care for elders and disabled individuals.

7. Evening Tuition: With 13 students involved, the evening tuition activity showed a predominant high level of engagement (61.53%), emphasizing a strong commitment to educational support during evening hours.

Table 2 provides a detailed breakdown of the participation and engagement levels of students in various community service or Service-Learning activities. The data reveals diverse levels of commitment across different initiatives, with a substantial number of students actively involved in activities contributing to the betterment of society.

The key findings related to Service-Learning Activities can be summarized as follows:
1. **Enhancement of Personal and Social Development:** The community service or service learning experiences undertaken by all the respondents in this study played a pivotal role in fostering personal development and a heightened awareness of others. Engaging in activities geared towards assisting the needy contributed to the respondents' self-perception and their understanding of the needs of others.
2. **Integration of Service-Learning into Academic Curriculum:** The ongoing commitment of Loyola College to community service, coupled with the incorporation of service-learning into the core academic curriculum, has created a conducive environment for holistic learning. The college's emphasis on service-learning as a significant academic activity encourages students to establish connections, both intellectually and emotionally, ultimately motivating them to actively participate in community service.
3. **High Participation in Youth Welfare Programs:** Among the various community service activities, youth welfare programs emerged as particularly popular, with 61.2% of the respondents displaying a high level of participation and engagement in these initiatives. This finding underscores the significance of youth-centric initiatives in capturing the interest and commitment of the student body, suggesting a positive impact on the community and the students themselves.

Discussion

This study advocates for the continued integration and expansion of service-learning programs in educational institutions. To further enhance the impact:
- Institutions should actively promote diverse service-learning activities to cater to varied student interests.
- Collaborative efforts between institutions and communities should be strengthened to create unified platforms for learning and exchanging concerns.

Conclusion

Community service, encapsulated in service-learning, emerges as a potent strategy for educational institutions to fulfill social responsibilities. The transformative impact on students' academic learning, personal development, and heightened social awareness is evident. Despite its nascent stage in Indian educational institutions, service-learning's potential warrants collaborative efforts for sustained growth and impact.

This study concludes that community service or service learning has emerged as a major and effective strategy employed by educational institutions to demonstrate their social responsibilities by actively engaging their students in the neighboring communities or areas with pressing needs. The initiative not only shapes students' understanding of

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community issues and immediate needs but also influences the way they immerse themselves within these communities. The research substantiates that students exhibit a higher level of participation and engagement, especially with marginalized and economically disadvantaged sections, particularly within the slum population of Chennai city.

Moreover, the study affirms that service learning experiences play a pivotal role in fostering a connection between students' intellectual and personal development. As a result, students realize the applicability of newly acquired knowledge within their local communities, leading to an increased awareness of issues discussed in the classroom. This engagement prompts students to proactively seek solutions to enhance their services in the same community where they are involved. The connections forged through service learning become instrumental in providing links to academic learning.

Despite the evident benefits, service learning programs in India are still in a nascent stage within educational institutions. Consequently, there is a compelling need for institutions and communities to collaboratively form a unified platform. This collaboration should extend to the creation of joint platforms aimed at fostering learning and facilitating the exchange of concerns and success stories. The current study aims to uncover the intricate learning processes that unfold when students actively participate in community service or engage in service-learning programs.

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