Qualitative Student Responses to Service Learning with Veterans who are Homeless
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**Abstract**
This article presents a description of a service learning activity in which students assisted veterans who are homeless. The article outlines how the event was organized, provides resources for implementation, discusses student response using evaluations from 15 students, and discusses considerations made in organizing such an event.

The National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty (2007) estimates that 3.5 million people are likely to experience homelessness per year. Homelessness is typically described as being without permanent residence. Of the homeless population, it is estimated that each night, there are about 75,609 veterans who are homeless (Kuhn & Nakashima, 2011). Due to difficulty finding, identifying, and counting this population, we are unable to know exactly how many veterans are homeless at any given time (National Coalition for Homeless Veterans, 2011).

Stand Down outreach events occur across the nation each year (Stand Down, 2011) and provide an opportunity for community members and agencies to assist veterans who are homeless. These events occur throughout the country and are advertised to veterans. Event coordinators typically transport veterans who are homeless from shelters and other locations to an identified location to spend about 3 days at this event, in which they have a place to sleep, showers, food, haircuts, and connections to resources. The main goal of Stand Down events are to link veterans who are homeless to resources that will assist them. These events are modeled after and named after events that started during the Vietnam War which gave veterans respite from combat zones by setting up a safe place for troops to stay and get needed services.

The purpose of this article is to inform teachers of psychology (and related disciplines, such as sociology) how to organize a service learning project in which students can volunteer at a
Implementing a Service Learning Project to Assist Veterans who are Homeless

The purpose of this service learning activity was two-fold. First, like other service learning opportunities, the experience aimed to enhance students’ sense of responsibility (Chupp & Joseph, 2010). Secondly, students who volunteered at this event were educated about veterans, homelessness, and veterans who are homeless prior to and during the event.

The goal of this article is to describe the steps to organize and implement a service learning experience at a Stand Down event. This article specifically describes two experiences that occurred at a Stand Down event located within an hour and a half of a small, private liberal arts college in Pennsylvania. These steps serve as recommendations for other instructors. Although incorporating a Stand Down volunteer experience into a course would be possible, in the examples described in this article, traditional college students, as well as students in an accelerated adult evening program, were invited to participate if they were interested in a non-credit experience which would involve them learning more about veterans who are homeless and assisting this population.

To begin, interested instructors need to identify a Stand Down event closest to their college or university. Individuals who are interested in organizing such an event can simply begin by visiting the website: http://www.nchv.org/standdown.cfm. On this website, interested individuals can download a spreadsheet that lists Stand Down events across the nation, including location, date of event, person or group organizing the event, and contact information for the organizer. Event organizers can arrange for student volunteers to attend and assist instructors in organizing the event.

Regarding the event described in this article, interested students were provided information about the specific event (with information from the event organizer) and about Stand Down in general, along with relevant weblinks to more information. Students also had ample opportunity to call or email with questions.

Next, students were provided with all relevant college paperwork (including waiver of liability forms required by the college) and completed any college paperwork required for such trips. They read through a thorough document including all details of the event, including date, location, exact meeting time and place (since there would be an hour and a half car trip), estimated time of return to campus, important contact information, maps of the location and site, tips on what to wear and bring (which included not bringing valuables), risk prevention information (including dress, staying hydrated, and protecting valuables), and information on
what to expect at the event. This event followed all ethical considerations of organizing a service learning experience outlined by Chapdelaine, Ruiz, Warchal, and Wells (2005).

Students who agreed to volunteer were then provided with education, resources, and weblinks on veterans, homelessness, and veterans who are homeless, both in person and via email. On the day of the events, students reviewed goals and precautions of the event, and were then assigned to assist the event in a variety of ways, including food preparation, serving food, administering surveys to veterans, and assisting veterans to find their way throughout the event space. Interested students were also given the opportunity to interact with and observe mental health professionals. At the end of the day, students processed their experience were informed that they would be emailed an optional, anonymous evaluation of the event.

**Methods for Evaluation of Student Response**

**Participants**
The students who volunteered for the Stand Down event included traditional and working adult undergraduate students. After the events, a total of 15 of the students who had participated consented to complete an evaluation of this service learning activity, which involved responding to scaled questions and qualitative evaluations on the educational value of the event. To protect anonymity, demographic information was not requested from the students who responded to the evaluation.

**Materials**
Materials used for the evaluation included an email requesting students to participate in an online evaluation. This email contained a weblink which directed students to an online informed consent statement and survey about their experience.

**Procedure**
First, students received an email invitation to complete the evaluation. Interested students clicked on the weblink and were directed to an online survey. They read and indicated their consent on the informed consent page. Then, participants completed the survey, which involved rating their satisfaction on several items and open-ended questions that allowed them to describe experience. Finally, they read a debriefing statement. This entire process occurred online.

**Results**
Regarding questions that allowed students to rate their satisfaction with the service learning experience, there were no negative responses:
• 60% strongly agreed and 40% agreed that they learned more about veterans.
• 60% strongly agreed and 40% agreed that they learned more about homelessness.
• 66.7% strongly agreed and 33.3% agreed that they learned more about veterans who are homeless.
• All participants indicated that they would volunteer for the event again.
• 66.7% strongly agreed and 33.3% agreed that more volunteer opportunities like this should be offered to college students.

Regarding open-ended responses, through phenomenological analysis, prominent themes in student responses were identified utilizing the process outlined by Creswell (2007). This method involves compiling a list of statements that participants used to describe their experience and organizing the important statements into commonly experienced themes.

Fourteen out of fifteen participants described the experience as being very beneficial because they were able to assist veterans who are homeless. A majority of students believed that they learned far more about homelessness and veterans than they would have learned in a classroom (nine out of fifteen explicitly stated this), including statistics, factors contributing to homelessness, and services available. One student stated, “I learned that although many homeless veterans have drug or alcohol related problems, they’re still heros... they’re still fellow humans that need our love and help... guidance to help them get back on the right track. They were there for us unconditionally and it's always nice to try and return a favor.”

Another theme that emerged was that students described the experience as “rewarding” and stated that they felt good about themselves afterwards, in addition to learning more. One participant stated, “As the day went on and I got to talk to so many people I realized how fulfilling and satisfying it is to even just keep company to these wonderful men who served our country.” Another stated, “I feel like I didn’t do enough, but I know that the veterans were just so thankful and appreciative for everyone who was there helping out. To know that they love the weekend where they could have some place to stay, so food to eat, healthcare, and the company of others made me feel so great that I could be a part of that. I loved volunteering, and I want to do these events and similar ones more often.” In fact, fourteen out of fifteen students stated that they felt better about themselves after volunteering. Additionally, responses often mentioned that students would like more events like this, for example, one stated, “You could not get an experience like this from any classroom, any textbook, or any lecture. This experience was so rewarding and events like this should be available for students to attend all year round.”

Students were explicitly asked what they did not like and only five out of fifteen students provided feedback about what to change. Two students spent a small portion of their day picking up trash, and voiced that they did not like this. When asked what to improve, four out of fifteen students stated that they believed that the actual event needed better organization (hence, their response was related less to how the educational opportunity was organized and more related to coordination of the Stand Down event).
Discussion

Responses to this experience indicate that students greatly enjoyed this service learning project, felt that they learned more about veterans and homelessness, and found the experience to be very rewarding. A limitation of this evaluation, however, is that this is a group of student volunteers who may be different from students in general since this event was optional and did not offer any credits or incentives. Additionally, only 15 students responded to the evaluation. Future research can use an objective measure, such as a test of knowledge about homelessness, to evaluate improvement in this manner.

Regarding ways to improve this and other service learning experiences, students voiced that they want information on exactly what they will be doing on the day of the event. Although students were explicitly told that the event organizer could not predict in advance where volunteers would be needed, students may have responded better if given exact tasks that they may be asked to do. Instructors who replicate this volunteer activity are encouraged to ask event organizers to be as specific as possible prior to the event, and in cases where event coordinators cannot provide such information (such as the experiences described in this article), students should be explicitly informed of this. Such information in advance is also an ethical step to take when organizing such an experience (Chapdelaine et al., 2005).

In closing, students had a very positive response to this service learning project, and other instructors are strongly encouraged to consider taking students to volunteer at Stand Down events. Students even explicitly requested that more opportunities for volunteering and service learning are made available to them, so teachers of psychology and related fields of study are encouraged to consider more ways to organize applied learning and volunteer experiences that enhance learning about groups of individuals.

References


