

Multifaceted Growth Through Community-Based Learning

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A myriad of experiences call us to learn, collaborate, and grow. Through these events, individuals are ultimately able to seek meaning in their lives and work toward becoming better versions of themselves. One way in which an individual can achieve this is through service and interaction with his or her community. In the past year, I have participated in three community-based learning classes. CBL classes aim to enrich student learning through community service and provide opportunities for students to apply knowledge gained in the classroom to specific community experiences. By participating in such curriculum, students are not only able to meet their needs academically, but are also able to meet the needs of their community. These classes have afforded me the opportunity to work with various populations and increase my awareness of the diverse groups that make up my community.

I have had the privilege to work with children, the elderly, individuals with physical and mental impairments, and those afflicted with AIDS/HIV. Doing so has deepened my appreciation of the world around me and allowed me to give back to the community while applying knowledge I gained in the classroom. Depending on their dedication and willingness to step out of their comfort zones, students can gain several benefits through involvement with community-based learning opportunities, including: personal, social, and academic. I have achieved, to some degree, all of these through my experience in various CBL courses. These personal gains did not come easily, but by fully immersing myself in service, I was able to accomplish and experience truly rewarding outcomes. This semester in particular afforded me a unique opportunity to engage in service that genuinely tested my ability to step outside my box and leave my inhibitions behind.

This past semester I registered for the class *Exercise for Special Populations*. The main focus of this course was to explore chronic disorders and disabilities in regard to their etiology, epidemiology, pathophysiology, and pharmacology and investigate the ways in which exercise can benefit such conditions. More simply, this class aimed to provide a more coherent understanding of the patterns, causes, effects, treatments, and maintenance of chronic disorders and disabilities and exercise's role to circumvent these conditions. We reviewed two main populations over the course of the semester — older adults and special needs populations, particularly those who have impaired cognitive, psychological, and sensory skills. In working with the older adults of our community, we strived to emphasize the importance of exercise and its role in reduction and modification of fall risk factors. To do so, we hosted fitness, mobility, and balance assessments to provide participants with baseline measurements and to identify areas in need of improvement. We then presented guidelines on how to address the areas of weakness through a counseling and group exercise demonstration session.

In addition to older adults, we worked with special needs populations through Loyola Marymount University's 36th Annual Special Games. This service, the main focus of this reflection, called students of the LMU community to facilitate a day of celebration for individuals in the Los Angeles community with varied ranges of intellectual and physical abilities. Through non-competitive games and a friendly, enjoyable atmosphere, participants from all walks of life were able to come together and celebrate their individuality and foster life-

long friendships. Through my participation in Special Games, I experienced an invaluable lesson in growth.

Prior to my involvement with this course, I had never been fully comfortable in engaging in community service or volunteer work that focused on serving individuals with intellectual or physical disabilities. It was something I had avoided for many years. It was by no means a matter of discrimination or lack of concern, but rather a fear of not being able to positively impact this particular group due to my naïveté and inexperience. I was not only afraid of being unable to make a significant impact, but I was also so unfamiliar with the mannerisms and behaviors of this particular community, making me feel anxious about my capacity to engage. The last thing I wanted was for my qualms to disrupt my efforts to make a difference in someone's life. But I now realize these were ignorant fears and it was only through full immersion in unfamiliar experiences that I underwent true personal growth. By simply stepping out of my comfort zone and applying the knowledge I developed through my coursework to my service with Special Games, I was able to experience a great array of constructive personal outcomes.

Special Games enhanced my personal development by promoting a sense of self-efficacy, personal identity, and moral development. Self-efficacy is the belief in one's abilities to achieve a goal or outcome. My goals for Special Games were to broaden my perspective, become more comfortable with the unfamiliar, and apply concepts from class to a contextualized community experience. Letting my guard down and putting forth an honest effort to provide an unforgettable experience for the participant I was paired with enabled me to fully achieve what I set out to do. Based on the behaviors and mannerisms I observed during the time I spent with my participant, Michael, my professor and I deduced that he had Asperger's Syndrome. Common symptoms of Asperger's that Michael seemed to display included the hindered ability to pick up on social cues, an apparent lack of empathy, avoiding eye contact, and having a preoccupation with only a few, specific interests. Learning about the Autism Spectrum in class made identifying what possible condition Michael had easier and gave me deeper insight on how to interact and communicate with him. This allowed me to be more comfortable in reaching out and connecting with him. Michael was a very bubbly, energetic person who not only wanted to enjoy his time at the games, but also make sure that those around him were having a good time as well. His positive attitude made it easier for me to completely invest myself during Special Games and shed my apprehensions. I was patient, attentive, and completely devoted to Michael to ensure that he had a genuinely good time. Being able to see the smile on his face throughout the day was the greatest reward.

This experience also helped me amplify my personal identity. I have always prided myself on being a caring, compassionate, and empathetic individual, and by devoting my time and effort to this event, I was able to enhance and build upon these characteristics. Establishing personal connections and interacting with the participants of Special Games allowed me to clearly see that each individual is just like me. We are all human; we all have distinct personalities yet are one in the same. Categorizing or differentiating people based on physical or cognitive limitations is unnecessary. Realizing and experiencing this concept increased my sense of compassion and empathy in a way that I never thought imaginable.

Lastly, my involvement with this event helped build my moral development. Morality encompasses a wide range of life experiences and circumstances, but primarily focuses on the way in which we treat one another. We are called to treat one another with respect, kindness, and love, and to promote these virtues on an everyday basis. Initially, I did not think my moral development would improve through my involvement in this event, but surprisingly I was

wrong. This experience has ameliorated my prior beliefs, contributed to my ability to approach new situations with an open mind, and generated an eagerness to experience the unknown. Thinking that I needed to treat those of this population differently or approach them with extreme caution was an incorrect worldview brought on by socially constructed stigmas. I have realized the importance of forming my own opinions based on personal experiences, not by what society dictates me to believe or think. Special Games taught me that one should never be defined by a limitation or disability and that it takes maturity in one's moral development to understand and apply this to everyday life. Participating in Special Games expanded the domains of my social knowledge and contributed to my ability to think for myself and discover the diversity of the world. Special Games, and CBL courses in general, truly contributed to my growth and development. Had I not discovered courses such as these, I would not have achieved such extensive personal growth over the past year.

Not only did this service learning experience foster personal outcomes, but it also produced some important social outcomes as well. Special Games allowed me to understand different populations, reduce stereotyped ways of thinking, and increase my sense of social responsibility. As mentioned previously, I used to have a fear of participating in service with mentally and physically challenged populations. In looking back on my prior sentiments, I notice that socially constructed ways of thinking attributed to this viewpoint. These preconceived notions and beliefs were informed by society's stereotypes, some of which portray these individuals as unpredictable or lacking the ability to control their behavior. These stereotypes influence the way society thinks and emit an unrealistic depiction of this population and who they truly are. As a result of learning in detail about a broad spectrum of disabilities, such as developmental, emotional, sensory, physical, and neurological disabilities, and honing in on specific conditions including, but not limited to, Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), autism, blindness, deafness, spinal chord injuries, and orthopedic impairments, I was able to challenge my own inhibitions and assumptions about behavioral difficulties. As a result, I have come to value human diversity on a more intimate level and have learned to better appreciate the uniqueness in everyone. By increasing my understanding of the special needs population, I have developed a heightened sense of social responsibility. I now understand it is my duty to devote more of myself to service and community interaction. I aspire to become a physician, and through my work with Special Games I now have a more enduring commitment to service and look forward to the future when I can professionally utilize my skills and knowledge to help others.

The purpose of CBL courses is not only to contribute to personal and social growth, but to also enhance academic learning by working and interacting with the community. Learning outcomes I accomplished in my service commitment to Special Games included increased academic knowledge through application of learned material to the real world and improved critical thinking skills. This course called my fellow students and I to recognize, properly approach, and assimilate people's individual differences as a means to gain a deeper understanding of the quality of life of those with disabilities. By actively learning in class through group collaborations and hypothetical situations, we were able to better appreciate the methodology of approaching and solving difficult, real-life situations. The ability to apply knowledge from the classroom into everyday life has truly been one of the most significant benefits of my community-based learning experiences. Mastering material on an academic level is one thing, but it is another to utilize this information and apply it to real-life experiences. This skill takes versatility and evolves through practice. However, if a student is fully dedicated to

gaining a greater sense of self, then he or she can overcome all obstacles to achieve such growth. I am very fortunate to have been a part of Special Games and get hands-on experience where I could apply knowledge from the classroom to my service. It enhanced my understanding, analytical skills, and critical thinking abilities and contributed to my learning in an invaluable way. Knowing how to handle and take care of the assigned participant was essential to ensure that everything ran smoothly. Difficulties presented themselves at times and it was up to the volunteers to figure out ways to solve these situations in a calm and collective manner.

Thankfully, the most pressing matter with Michael involved him gluing his hands together during Arts and Crafts. Although an easy fix, figuring out how to approach him in a gentle way so as not to upset him or scrutinize him was necessary. Acknowledging and recognizing how to handle conflicts such as this is imperative in order to properly resolve unexpected situations. My class prepared me for these circumstances through class discussions and activities that allowed us to brainstorm effective methods of resolution when interacting with special populations. As a result, I was ultimately able to help him recognize the appropriate use for glue and he was very receptive to my efforts.

With every opportunity comes room for growth, whether it is personal, social, or cognitive. Through dedication and an honest interest or passion in one's field of work, the possibilities for such growth are endless. Willingness to shed preconceptions and step out of one's comfort zone is imperative to fully immersing oneself in service and achieving quality outcomes. Learning through service has the capacity to foster leadership skills, empathy, compassion, and selflessness — all of which are qualities necessary in building a strong, intimate community. My experience through Special Games helped me become more comfortable with taking risks and exploring the unknown. I realized there is such a diverse world around me and it takes initiative and desire to grow to truly expand one's worldview. It's impractical and extremely limiting to spend life avoiding things that are unfamiliar or may cause discomfort. Learning to embrace and face uncertainty with the appropriate attitude can lead to a new appreciation of things and situations that were once foreign. If, in the future, I am given the opportunity to participate in an event like Special Games again, I will no longer approach the occasion in such a hesitant, precautionary manner, but embrace the opportunity for all the wonderful life lessons it has to offer. Service learning has made such a lasting impression on me and has truly reinforced my desire to help others throughout my life.

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