

The Metamorphosis: Positive Effects of a Service Learning Internship

Seth Gustafson
Grinnell College

As my junior year of college approached, I was already worrying about next summer's internship opportunities. In today's competitive job market, internships are the best resource for obtaining a job right after college. While my preliminary goal was finding an internship that would pay the most or position me in an exotic area, I realized I was searching with the wrong intentions. The goal in life is not to have the most money or live in the biggest house; instead, the goal is to simply be happy. So I shut my laptop and grabbed the nearest pencil and paper to begin writing down what on this earth makes me joyful. As I began to write, it became apparent that I did not need some six-figure job, a big house, or a fancy car. All I needed for happiness was a job that would allow me to assist in improving people's lives. I believe Mahatma Gandhi expressed the importance of community service best when he said, "You must be the change you wish to see in the world."

In the midst of this awe-inspiring moment of clarity, my cell phone rang. My mother was on the other end of the line, and we began our normal tête-à-tête regarding work, life, school, and my future plans. As I discussed with her my recent enlightenment, what she said next changed my entire life. My mother told me how much of a coincidence it was that I revealed my epiphany to her that day, because she learned from one of her landscaping clients that an in-town counseling institution was beginning to accept internship applications and her client was on the board of this particular institution. As my mom told me this, I pulled up on Google the company, Rosecrance, which is located in Rockford, Illinois. I found out that this institution is a non-profit company that provides mental health and substance abuse services to children, adolescents, adults, and families. Due to my recent epiphany and current endeavor of majoring in Psychology, learning of this opportunity ignited a fire of excitement inside me. After my conversation with my mother, I ventured to the campus science building to print off the application. Within twenty minutes, that application was in the mail en route to Rockford.

Although I was entering my junior year with an idea and opportunity, I still felt burdened by feelings of uncertainty. Luckily, I had a health psychology seminar professor who conducted her course in a way that sparked my interest while challenging me intellectually through readings, discussions, and papers. This professor took the time to get to know her students, while teaching life-changing skills. As this professor furthered my personal and professional development, my eyes were open for the first time to see, with extreme clarity, the path in front of me. As I finished up my health psychology seminar and heard I was accepted as an intern at Rosecrance, the reality of how much I had grown in the last year set in.

Coming into my internship at Rosecrance, I wanted to accomplish many goals, but the main one was to figure out which professional field within social services, whether social work or counseling, working with adolescents or adults, and focusing on mental health or substance abuse, I wanted to pursue with my B.A. in Psychology. Rosecrance offers inpatient and outpatient programs for prevention, intervention, detoxification, therapy, education, and treatment of drug addictions as well as mental health issues.

While interning at Rosecrance, I spent time in the Human Resources department and in mental health centers for children, adolescents, and adults. The most important feature of this internship was the ability to work with every aspect of Rosecrance, which guided me to possible

career paths. Along with aiding in my search for the perfect profession, I got to experience, firsthand, what it takes to formally help a population in dire need of assistance. Despite my lack of training or experience in counseling, I brought a strong work ethic and an excitement to learn. The experiences and knowledge I gained at Rosecrance have reinforced my ambitions, as well as made me a better person overall.

My first week at Rosecrance was spent in the Human Resources department. Because my internship had me going from campus to campus, Rosecrance wanted me to figure out broad “behind the scenes” processes that allow a non-profit health organization to succeed. While at this department, I learned what it takes to run a successful non-profit organization, but I was extremely excited to transition to working directly with the clients who needed counseling.

My second and third weeks at Rosecrance were spent at the adult mental health facility, The Ware Center. The Ware Center provides individuals who are 18 years of age or older with counseling and a number of other resources for all ranges of mental illness. The majority of clients have no insurance, no benefits, and, for the most part, no place to call home. Throughout my time there I encountered many low functioning clients who rarely made any progress but still needed to be seen two to five times per week.

During this time, I visited a troubled nineteen-year-old with severe schizophrenia who had recently been admitted into the psychiatric ward at the local hospital. He had been diagnosed with a mental illness around twelve years old and suffered from an extreme lack of social skills. As I entered the psychiatric ward, my excitement for a significant interaction with a client was at an all-time high. Up to this point I had only shadowed and observed counselors, but this counselor allowed me to interject whenever I deemed necessary. As we entered the client’s room, the counselor took the lead addressing the vital information of medication, mood, affect, and thoughts on his discharge. After that, the client instantaneously started conversing with me and before I knew what happened, we had a 45-minute counseling session. It was an incredible experience, and on the ride back to Rosecrance, the counselor commended me on my ability to keep the client on track while keeping the mood light and making him laugh. I did not realize it at the time, but maintaining a calm, laid back environment with the client gets more sufficient results. Additionally, treating clients like you would any other individual, instead of someone with a mental illness, is key to getting the client to open up. This experience reinforced what I learned in my health psychology courses about social support as a powerful treatment for any illness. With this particular population, casual conversation and friendliness can go such a long way in treatment, and it is a skill that I will always keep in my back pocket for when I need it again.

I continued to have powerful, emotional, and exciting experiences at the Ware Center via face-to-face interactions. The majority of my third week at Rosecrance was spent in the Triage Center, which is a 24/7/365 emergency center that handles severe incidences of mental illness. Clients can stay in this center for up to 23 hours before they are discharged to the hospital, back home, or to a two-week rehabilitation apartment complex. My first experience began two hours into my first day at Triage. I was handed the paperwork for a 20-year-old who was unstable, hearing voices, violent, and extremely untrusting. When he arrived, he was feeling threatened and overcome with feelings of violence. The voices inside his head were getting louder and telling him to do bad things.

As the situation escalated, I decided to take a chance. I remembered his file said he played football for a semi-pro team, so I asked what position he played. The client immediately stopped talking and responded with, “Who the f*** are you?” I answered by introducing myself

and explaining my involvement with football. For the next ten minutes, the client and I discussed various football topics until he calmed down. For the rest of the day I was in charge of keeping the client serene enough to fill out assessments and treatment plans. By staying composed in a high-stress situation, I was able to connect with the patient, while calming him down as well. I believe clients mimic the demeanor of the counselor, which is why maintaining tranquility throughout treatment is important. Calmness will definitely be a characteristic I will focus on throughout the rest of my education in the field of counseling.

After my counseling “debut” I was entrusted with the responsibility of accompanying the primary counselor to all of her clients the next day. This made me a little nervous, but I stayed confident and tried to focus on what my supervisor called “counselor’s intuition.” For my remaining time at the Triage Center, I was able to talk with many of the clients while keeping them occupied, calming them down from various episodes, or discussing what led them to this point in their lives. I learned many valuable counseling skills about personal boundaries, social support, coping skills, taking steps toward gaining support/acceptance, and how to explain the process of sustainable treatment. Not only have I learned such valuable lessons, but I am also continually honing such skills via repetition and consistency until they are second nature.

After my time at the Ware Center, I transitioned to Rosecrance’s Berry Campus, the child and adolescent mental health center. While interning at Berry, I shadowed an array of positions that fit in with my anticipated academic path, allowing me to observe the uniqueness of each counselor’s approach to the wide range of clients. In order to build rapport with children (ages three to twelve), the counselors utilized play-based therapy. This involves playing games or participating in activities that will eventually build trust, leading to honest, productive therapy sessions. For instance, popular forms of play-based therapy I observed with children were Jenga, Chutes & Ladders, Uno, basketball, duct tape art, and origami. For older individuals (ages thirteen to eighteen), rapport building was done through more advanced games and activities, such as Emotion Candy Land, casual conversations, Risk, and card games.

Throughout my experience at Berry, I learned an immense amount of theoretical knowledge, but also had the opportunity to learn experientially, in the form of play-based therapy. My first experience happened with three to five year olds who were diagnosed with ADHD. The main goal of these therapy sessions was to get the clients to focus on a particular activity for an extended period of time. I attempted this by taking all the boys outside for kickball and tossing a football around. I had so much fun directing and playing with these kids that the hour-long session flew by. Afterwards, the counselors discussed with me that making activities fun and engaging is the solution to building one’s attention span with ADHD. I also mimicked my high school basketball coach by encouraging everyone no matter what happened. At such a young age, it is imperative to build the children’s self-confidence, because that will make them focus harder on the task at hand, instead of simply walking away to find something new.

My next few experiences happened while with the Community Support Team (CST). This group allowed me to do much more with the clients than simply observe. Possibly the most inspiring experience I had with CST was on my final day with a counselor who had more than twenty years of experience. This made me a little nervous, but also excited to apply the skills that I had learned over the past four to five weeks. After we picked up the first client, she told me, “I’m going to sit on the bench over there. Come get me if you have any questions. Good luck!” She was giving me the freedom to do whatever I wanted with the client. I accepted that challenge and again found out that socializing while staying calm and collected is a useful technique while working with clients, especially adolescents. I felt the session went extremely well, due to the

constant conversation and lack of awkward silences. As a younger individual, adolescents feel more comfortable around me and perceive me as an appropriate outlet for their feelings. I was extremely lucky to get this opportunity from the counselor, because working with this particular individual showed me how rewarding working with adolescents can truly be.

My final significant experience occurred on my last day at Berry Campus. I was in charge of leading a group counseling session with children ages six to twelve. I chose to run the group session at my favorite childhood park; it had farm animals, volleyball courts, playgrounds, a creek, and open spaces. I hoped that the various activities would compensate for the diversity in ages and gender within the group so that everyone would have a great time. I enjoyed going from kid to kid feeding goats, playing football, catching turtles, swinging, and a variety of other activities. In group sessions, finding a common ground between clients is essential for successful treatment. Additionally, these group sessions allow the clients to interact with others just like them, which lead to increased social support and a feeling of companionship. It was a great ending to an unforgettable experience that I will cherish and use to become the best possible counselor I can be.

Being an untrained, undergrad interning at a counseling service where degrees and experience are necessary to thrive was intimidating and overwhelming. However, I learned certain skills that cannot be taught come in handy at the most pressing times. I also learned that something as simple as a conversation, having support and someone to talk to, can be extremely soothing for individuals with a mental illness. As suggested by the psychologist Carl Rogers, correcting behavior is not always the best remedy, but building relationships creates trust, which may improve behaviors more than any type of therapy. One commonality I noticed across counselors was the importance of the counselor-client relationship, especially with the vulnerable adolescent population. I observed that trust between client and counselor is the only way to yield maximum results in treatment. Finally, I learned that despite individuals with mental illnesses being a difficult population to counsel, when there is a breakthrough the results are incredibly rewarding.

Knowing that you helped someone on his or her way to recovery and a better life is one of the greatest feelings in the worlds. I honestly feel like I made a huge difference by going to work every day. My time at the Ware Center was an eye opening experience that revealed just how many people in Rockford need mental health services. Helping out citizens en route to bettering the city as a whole is such an incredibly powerful sentiment. My time at Ware made me feel that through this internship I bettered the lives of a few clients that otherwise would not have gotten the help needed for recovery. That is the kind of feeling that keeps me motivated and excited to learn more about social services and counseling.

Interning with Rosecrance's mental health services has given me many opportunities to experience face-to-face interactions, along with the knowledge of theories and the practical aspects of pursuing a career in counseling. This semester at Grinnell College I am in Abnormal Psychology, a class that focuses on mental illness. Through my time at Berry, I learned to navigate the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV), a skill that will be very useful in this class, even though the DSM-5 has recently been published. I also gained knowledge about local master's programs in social work and counseling, the two main fields Rosecrance looks for in mental health counselors. Thus, my post-Grinnell plans are already starting to come together because of this internship, and I could not be more thankful for the support Rosecrance has provided me. Without such an internship, I would most likely still be

searching for my inner purpose in life. Fortunately, I experienced five weeks of unforgettable moments that have helped form my social service aspirations.

There is no doubt in my mind that addressing a major problem such as mental illness in my hometown of Rockford, Illinois has positively changed my outlook on life. I have gained much knowledge about important facets of counseling; the primary feature is building rapport to create therapeutic relationships while being extremely sociable, but still establishing and maintaining boundaries. I have portrayed and been recognized for displaying core concepts that are extremely valuable in this field, which gives me an immense amount of confidence and hope for my future in the field of counseling. However, the most important and unforgettable facet of my internship has been helping this population. I believe we are on this earth not to make money but to make the world a better place, and doing so allows me to achieve a feeling of bliss, while bettering the lives of our world's future.

“From what we get, we can make a living; what we give, however, makes a life” – Arthur Ashe.

~

I would like to express my gratitude to Dr. E Maxwell Davis of California State University, East Bay and Professor Asani Seawell of Grinnell College for their investment of time, enlightening advice, and endless encouragement.