Developing professional competencies for rural health students through service-learning placements

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Background

Service-learning is an alternative model of work-integrated learning that enables students to develop generic skills and competencies that all rural health professional students require. These could include skills and knowledge such as cultural awareness, enhanced communication skills, teamwork, problemsolving and understanding of social determinants. Service learning has been described as ‘a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility and strengthen communities’. While relatively uncommon in Australia, it is has a long history in the US with a pedagogy drawn from educational theorists such as Dewey and Kolb where experiential and authentic learning enhances abstract learning of concepts particularly through reflection. There are various forms of service-learning and this paper will outline the use of service-learning by the La Trobe Rural Health School Occupational Therapy Program.

With the introduction of the Bachelor of Health Science/Master of Occupational Therapy Practice at La Trobe University’s Bendigo campus in 2009, planning began to seek appropriate community partners for service-learning placements to commence in 2010. Two local secondary colleges, Bendigo Senior Secondary College and Bendigo South East Secondary College were approached due to their geographical location and an existing relationship between the program coordinator and the college. Bendigo South East College (BSEC) is a 7-10 year level college located opposite the University campus with approximately 1200 students. Bendigo Senior Secondary College (BSSC) is located in central Bendigo with approximately 1800 students in year 11 and 12 enrolled in VET, Victorian Certificate of Education or Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning.

Implementation

Over 85 second year occupational therapy students have now undertaken a 12 week part-time service-learning placements. In pairs occupational therapy students spend two hours per week working with secondary school students. At BSEC, occupational therapy students assist students who have a variety of issues such as anxiety or depression, school disengagement, learning disabilities or Autism Spectrum Disorder. At BSSC, students are placed in the new arrivals program which supports students who are Burmese refugees who have limited English and little previous education. At university, preparation and ongoing workshops provide occupational therapy students with support and knowledge relating to learning and teaching, communication, professional behaviours and cultural competence. Students keep a reflective journal throughout the placement and give formal presentations on their placement experiences to fellow students, academic staff and college welfare and teaching staff.

Results

Service-learning has provided students with the opportunity to develop generic professional skills such as communication, rapport building with clients, time management, and skills in organising, negotiation and conflict resolution. University students have gained an appreciation of how socioeconomic, education, cultural and psychosocial factors impact on secondary students. The influence on the secondary students has been significant with college staff reporting increased engagement in school work, improved behaviour and communication skills. Other reported benefits include the positive role modelling by University students, lifting aspirations of rural students who have lowered self belief and educational goals, who would not have previously considered tertiary education or a career in health. Feedback from has been overwhelming positive with requests to expand these placements throughout the year and encourage other health courses to consider service-learning as part of their work-integrated learning.
Conclusion and recommendations

To adequately prepare for the complexity of rural practice, undergraduate students require work-integrated learning placements in a range of diverse settings including non-clinical services. Gaining essential generic professional self-management and communication skills can be achieved by students through service-learning placements, outside of the traditional health or human service setting. Although service-learning is well established in the US and in some parts of Europe, it is under utilised in Australia even though there is increasing acknowledgement for universities to develop long-term sustainable partnerships with communities to decrease the ‘town and gown’ divide. It is recommended that health professions view work-integrated learning placements more broadly particularly to acquire generic professional skills and consider innovative placements outside of the traditional settings for early year students. Service-learning placements provide universities with a vehicle for authentic community engagement to provide valuable services to community organisations and to increase higher education participation for rural and regional secondary students who often lack positive role models.

Health courses need to look beyond the traditional placement and provide additional learning opportunities that can have benefits for the university and the health profession, leading to increased recruitment of prospective students from rural and regional areas. Course accreditation or registration requirements need to be amended or interpreted differently to incorporate new innovative models of work-integrated learning that adequately prepare students for practice upon graduation.

References
