Breaking Down Barriers to Community Inclusion Through Service-Learning: A Qualitative Exploration

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Abstract
Lack of meaningful interaction between persons with and without disabilities contributes to prejudice and perpetuates barriers to community inclusion. The current study explored a university-community agency partnership designed to break down barriers to community inclusion by promoting interaction between college students and adults with developmental disabilities. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to discover and describe the experience of undergraduate university students involved in a service-learning project that included visiting the community homes of adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities receiving state services. Final course term papers of 156 undergraduate students were analyzed using a team-based approach. Nine salient themes emerged from the term papers and are discussed. Findings from this study have implications for university faculty and community agencies interested in promoting cultural competence and removing barriers to community inclusion.

Key Words: Service-learning; inclusion; university-agency partnerships; developmental disabilities

Community inclusion is of primary concern to researchers and practitioners in the field of intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). Initiatives for community living and related policies have resulted in the closure of large, state-run institutions creating the charge for community advocacy and provider agencies to provide quality care that fosters inclusion. Marking the 10-year anniversary of the landmark Supreme Court Olmstead v. L.C (1999) decision, President Obama launched the “Year of Community Living” on June 22, 2009 as a public commitment to the fullest inclusion of individuals with disabilities (The White House, 2010). However, moving from physical inclusion in a community to true social inclusion as a member of the community remains a challenge (Hewitt, Nord, Bogenschutz, & Reinke, 2013; Novak Amado, Stancliffe, McCarron, & McCallion, 2013).

Inclusion can be challenging for both individuals with IDD and community members without disabilities. Community members may be inexperienced and apprehensive about interacting with individuals with IDD, and individuals with IDD continue to experience stigma within their communities (Smart, 2009). Although federal mandates have resulted in changes to residential settings, efforts to raise awareness and educate community members have lagged behind. Inclusion is often met with resistance in communities where there is a lack of awareness, negative attitudes, and stigmatizing beliefs (Scior, 2011). As such, community agencies and service providers experience barriers as they are charged with the responsibility of providing quality care that fosters community inclusion. Further, they may also face the additional challenge of a public reluctant or unprepared to receive persons with IDD as members of their communities.

Increasing awareness and challenging negative attitudes is a first step towards creating more inclusive communities (World Health Organization, 2011). Individuals who report more favorable attitudes towards people with disabilities are those with increased personal contact that is mutually
rewarding (Hunt & Hunt, 2000; Thomas, Curtis, & Shippen, 2011). Thus, one path to promoting community inclusion would be to facilitate meaningful, mutually beneficial interactions among individuals with and without IDD.

The current study explores one such innovative practice developed through a university-community agency partnership. The partnership was designed to meet an agency need for volunteers and to meet a faculty member’s goal of engaging students in meaningful interactions with adults with IDD. Agency staff and faculty worked together to design a service-learning project with opportunities for all parties to engage in personal, mutually beneficial interactions.

As such, collaborative service-learning partnerships provide a unique avenue to enhance community inclusion for individuals with IDD, while also providing direct benefit to the agency and students.

Service-learning allows students to engage in real time critical thinking exercises while meeting the needs of community partners. Students are not only asked to complete specific community tasks, but to reflect upon their personal experience and assimilate new knowledge into their everyday lives (Stephenson, Stephenson, & Mayes, 2012). Guided reflection of the service experience is “the hyphen in service-learning; it is the link that ties student experience in the community to academic learning” (Eyler & Giles, 1999, p. 171). Structured reflection offers a validation of the service experience and provides an avenue for students to reflect on their own lives and the community in which they have engaged (Stephenson et al, 2012).

Service-learning benefits the community by accessing the vast resources and knowledge available within higher education institutions (Dorado, Giles, & Welch, 2009). Such collaborations offer experiential learning opportunities in diverse settings which provide lasting benefits to students. Goldberg and Coufal (2009) found that following exposure to various culturally diverse environments, college students showed increased cultural competence and better critical thinking skills. Many college students have limited experience with adults who have IDD. Research among preservice special education teachers indicates that combining formal instruction and structured fieldwork promotes positive changes in students’ attitudes towards disability and inclusion (Campbell, Gilmore, & Cuskelly, 2003). Santos, Ruppar, and Jeans (2012) found that participation in applied, service-learning projects increased special education preservice teachers’ knowledge of, advocacy for, and comfort around individuals with disabilities. Service-learning experiences that include meaningful interactions among individuals with and without IDD may provide students outside of special education and disability focused majors with the opportunity to develop cultural competence and pave the way for community inclusion.

The Present Study

The present study examined the self-reflections of college students enrolled in an undergraduate course, HDFS 2123: Developmental Disabilities Across the Lifespan (hereafter referred to as Developmental Disabilities). As part of the course, students participated in a service-learning project involving a community partnership with Tulsa Advocates for the Rights of Citizens with developmental disabilities (TARC). TARC is an Arc affiliated nonprofit community agency. The aim of the present study was to explore student learning processes and outcomes related to this service-learning project.

Method

A phenomenological theoretical approach was used for the current study. Phenomenological research methods allow researchers to “discover and describe the meaning or essence of participants’ lived experiences and knowledge as it appears to consciousness” (Hays & Singh, 2012, p.50). The current research explored the phenomenon of service-learning in Developmental Disabilities. Qualitative analysis focused on exploring student term papers for primary themes related to student learning processes and outcomes. The specific research questions addressed in this study are (a) how do students describe the process of learning and developing as a result of participating in the service-learning project, and (b) what personal and/or professional outcomes or benefits do students describe as a result of the service-learning experience?

Participants

Following University Institutional Review Board approval, 180 undergraduate students across three semesters of Developmental Disabilities were invited.
to participate in the present study. At the conclusion of each semester, after all term papers had been completed and turned in, students were invited to participate in the study. Student consent allowed the course instructor (first author) to analyze content from students’ term papers to assess the impact of the service-learning project. Students were informed that participation was voluntary and would not affect their course grade. Signed consent forms were collected by a university staff member not involved in the study or service-learning project and kept until final grades were submitted at the end of each semester.

One hundred and fifty-six students agreed to participate and the final sample was representative of all students enrolled across three semesters. The majority of students in the final sample were female (94.9%, n = 148) and were majoring in Human Development and Family Science (85.9%, n = 134). Human Development and Family Science majors included 111 students focusing on Child and Family Services and 23 students focusing on Early Childhood Education. Academic majors for the remaining 14% of students (n = 22) included Psychology (n = 3), Nutritional Sciences (n = 3), Communication Sciences and Disorders (n = 2), Hotel and Restaurant Administration (n = 1), or Undecided (n = 13). For the majority of student participants, Developmental Disabilities was the only course in their plan of study with a focus on disability.

Developmental Disabilities Course Description

Developmental Disabilities is a 2000-level course required for all Human Development and Family Science (HDFS) majors. Most HDFS students take the course during their sophomore or junior year. The course meets the general education requirement for Diversity; thus attracting students from multiple majors. The course content and requirements remained consistent across the three semesters of data collection.

Service-Learning Project

This service-learning project was developed as a result of a collaborative relationship between the OK AIM (Oklahoma Advocates in Monitoring) program coordinator (third author), and the course instructor, a faculty member at Oklahoma State University (first author). The OK AIM program is a contract between the state Developmental Disabilities Services (DDS) and TARC a non-profit community agency. TARC is responsible for training volunteers to monitor the quality of life for adults with developmental disabilities receiving state funding to live in the community. Students in this study served as volunteer monitors to assess the quality of life through home visits. Student responsibilities included attending training, conducting two to three home visits, engaging in group and individual reflection, and writing a final term paper integrating course material with their home visit experiences.

Training. TARC staff provided both curriculum and hands-on training for students. Curriculum training was completed over two class sessions for a total of 3 hours. Content included an overview of community living arrangements, legal and ethical issues, and instruction regarding the rating scale used to assess the quality of life for each individual. TARC also provided a hands-on training visit where an OK AIM staff member or experienced volunteer accompanied students on their first monitoring home visit.

Implementation and reflection. Home visits were completed in pairs with a minimum of two visits. Generally, home visits lasted 30 to 45 minutes depending largely on the type of residence (e.g., small group home, adult foster care, daily living supports) and the number of adults receiving services in the home. OK AIM staff train volunteers to promote a casual atmosphere during home visits. As such, students were instructed to leave all personal belongings, as well as paperwork, in their cars and enter homes with a respectful and relaxed tone. While in the home, students were trained to observe four distinct categories pertaining to the quality of life of the individuals visited: (a) regard for the individual, (b) personal growth, (c) staff, and (d) physical setting. Students were trained to use prompts and dialogue to promote engaging conversation with the mentors as well as the staff on duty at the time of the home visit. Following each home visit, students completed a quality of life rating form with 26 line items grouped by the four categories. For each line item students offered a rating of exceptional, good, needs improvement or unacceptable, along with a short narrative about their experience. Students mailed the quality of life rating form and narrative for each home visit to TARC and TARC compiled a monthly report for DDS. If students indicated that a home needs improvement in a quality of life area (i.e., regard for the individual,
personal growth, staff, or physical setting), DDS was responsible to provide feedback to TARC on how the issue was resolved within 30 days of receiving the report. For cases in which needs improvement was noted, TARC sent a final follow-up letter to students including DDS’s response to the concerns reported and changes made to improve the quality of life for the individual visited.

Structured reflection is fundamental to service-learning (Bringle & Hatcher, 1999). Thus, after students completed their first home visit, a debriefing session was conducted in class. Faculty members and community leaders facilitated small groups consisting of six to eight students in guided reflection of their home visit experiences. During this debriefing session students were asked to share the best part of their visit, the most surprising aspect, what they learned about home visits in general, how this project applies to their field of study, what they might do different on their next home monitoring visit, and what they learned about themselves as a result of this experience.

**Student term papers.** Consistent with previous service-learning research (e.g., Nikols, Rothenberg, Moshi, & Tetloff, 2013; Santos et al., 2012) data for the current study were collected from students’ reflective term papers across three semesters. In writing their term papers, students across all three semesters were instructed to describe their “mentor(s)” (the adults with IDD they met on their home visit) and apply the eight quality of life domains (Schalock, 2004) discussed throughout the semester. Students were also asked to integrate their observation and experience with course material. Specifically, students were asked to describe: (1) how the service-learning project enhanced their professional skills; (2) how they integrated and applied concepts from class discussions and assigned readings to their home visit experience; and (3) what they learned about themselves, their chosen field of study, and how this service-learning project impacted their personal and/or professional goals.

**Analysis**

Analysis of student term papers was conducted using a team-based approach. The research team consisted of two faculty investigators (the first author, an Assistant Professor of Human Development and Family Science and course instructor of *Developmental Disabilities*, and the second author, an Associate Professor of Marriage and Family Therapy with expertise in qualitative analysis) and two doctoral-level graduate students in Human Development and Family Science (including the third author who was the coordinator of the OK AIM program across the three semesters of data collection). With respect to personal identity, all four members of the research team are White females with previous clinical and research experiences involving individuals with IDD and their family members. Before conducting this study, the first author had taught the *Developmental Disabilities* class 14 times. The term papers used in this study were written during the first three semesters the service-learning project was incorporated in the course. During each of the three semesters for which student papers were collected and analyzed within the current study, the first author collaborated directly with the third author who served as the coordinator for OK-AIM and provided the in-class, hands-on training for students. It is important to highlight the involvement of research team members in the design, development, and instruction of the service-learning project. Considering the researchers’ identities, chances are high for filtering the content of student papers through the first author’s instructional design and goals as well as all team members’ desire to promote community inclusion among individuals with IDD.

To enhance the verification and validity of the analysis, analyst triangulation (Patton, 2002) was used during the analysis process. First, student term papers were divided across team members. Each team member independently identified themes within and across half of the student term papers assigned. Next, the team converged and established a consensus regarding the coding of themes emerging from the term papers. Team members then independently identified themes within and across the remaining student term papers assigned, guided by the themes for which team consensus was achieved. Finally, the team converged to decide if any new themes emerged from the data.

After reaching consensus on coding, the team organized the selected data from the transcripts according to identified themes in order to assess their substantive significance. Substantive significance is the method by which qualitative findings are evaluated for coherence, consistency, and the extent to which the findings increase and deepen understanding of the phenomenon being explored (Patton, 2002). To conclude the analysis, the team
identified the strongest of the themes, based on breadth and depth, and identified theme exemplars or quotes that particularly captured the essence of each theme (Patton, 2002). Thus, substantive significance was determined through the use of several methods of triangulation (e.g., multiple coders, team consensus).

In the current study, 10 initial themes were deemed most salient across the 156 student term papers. Themes were regularly revised throughout the analysis process and ongoing within and between term paper analysis resulted in the collapsing of the data into the final nine primary themes.

Findings

Following are the nine primary themes emerging from undergraduate student term papers. Themes will be briefly described and narratives from student term papers will be used to further capture the overall theme. The description of themes is focused on the commonalities shared across student papers. Students’ information has been disguised to ensure confidentiality and pseudonyms are used to further protect the identity of any mentors (individuals with IDD visited) named in the quotes selected. The nine unique themes that emerged include (1) Internalization of Knowledge, (2) Learning from their Mentors, (3) Challenging Past Experience & Understanding Bias, (4) Improved Cultural Competence, (5) Heightened Self-Awareness, (6) Enhanced Professional Development, (7) New-found Self-Confidence, (8) Making a Real Difference, and (9) Shaping the Future.

Internalization of Knowledge

Across the three semesters of student term papers analyzed, students described how the project differed from their previous educational experiences. In explaining the differences, students highlighted how the unique components of service-learning challenged them as students and prepared them as future professionals. One student described how the practical application within the service-learning project enhanced his learning and challenged him to grow as a professional:

One thing that most college classes lack is practical application. As a student, I spend the majority of my time writing papers, studying how to guess well on tests, and turning in assignments that do not serve any purpose but gaining points to steady my GPA. Some of the time, I wonder if I am truly growing as a person, and if college is doing more than teaching me how to memorize theories. I wonder if I will be able to handle the real world of home visits, interacting with difficult people, and helping make a difference. Volunteering with OK AIM was exactly what I needed to challenge and encourage me. This service-learning project helped me to learn professional skills, apply theories to life, and see the areas in which I need to grow as I pursue excellence in my career.

Students consistently described how concepts discussed in the classroom were illustrated, experienced, and validated through their service-learning experience. Students described how the “hands-on” nature of the service-learning project made learning easier and more meaningful. One student expressed:

This service-learning project helped in the application of academic theories and concepts to real world situations by allowing me to experience the things talked about in class first hand. It is a whole new level of learning when you get to do everything hands-on.

Learning From Their Mentors

Central to student papers was the description of the key role their mentors played in the learning process throughout the semester. Students described how the opportunities to apply and compare the concepts and ideas learned in class with the experience of their mentor made learning and understanding easier. One student explained, “Throughout this course there have been many concepts that were presented to the class, and by seeing these concepts lived out by the mentors during the home visits it has been easier to comprehend.” Another student stated, “Having Sarah as a mentor brought the concept of self-determination to life, and showed what it means to truly be in control of one’s own life, regardless of disability.” Through their reflections, students expressed how their mentors became their teachers:

Through this project I have gotten to see first-hand what it means for someone to be self-determined and even resilient. I got to experience Emily, one of my mentors, telling her staff to let her do things on her own and not to do them for her.

Another student shared how her mentor also illustrated self-determination:
It made me think of how we had been learning about self-determination and I thought that this was a great example of a woman with an intellectual disability completely motivated and willing to work for what she wants. She decided that she loved to make jewelry and that’s what she wanted to do, so she decided that she would work hard until it became a reality.

Students also expressed how visiting and interacting with mentors in their homes provided a new lens through which to understand disability.

I have learned that, especially in the case where the individual has cerebral palsy, just because they have difficulty forming words does not mean they don’t understand what I’m saying. It also doesn’t mean that I cannot treat them and talk to them in an age appropriate way. I’ve also learned that identifying these misconceptions can help in the process of inclusion for people with developmental disabilities.

The importance of community and social inclusion also became clear to students as they visited their mentors and learned about their lives:

Natalie said that if it weren’t for inclusion and people treating her the same way they treat everyone else, she wouldn’t be where she is today. She is going to college, taking classes, and even has a job as a hostess at a restaurant.

Challenging Assumptions and Understanding Bias
Students described how personally experiencing the concepts covered in the course not only assisted with the learning process, but also served to challenge their previous experiences and understanding of individuals with IDD. Students explained how this experience made them recognize their limited interaction with individuals with IDD. “Growing up, I was never really exposed to children with IDD because they were always in a separate classroom.”

Students described how their perspective shifted from seeing the disability to seeing the person as they got to know and interact with their mentors. Often, previous beliefs about individuals with IDD were challenged when they visited the mentors’ homes:

These projects allowed me to see that someone with an intellectual disability can function completely normal, even live on their own. I got to see that they are people just like us, and they should be given the same exact opportunities as everyone else.

Students were encouraged by their observations of the mentors in their home environments:

It was very inspiring to see my mentors in control of their lives and able to make their own decisions. Even though Leslie was nonverbal, she still got to choose what she wore, what she ate, and when she went to bed.

Several students were surprised at how “normal” their mentors’ homes were. One student explained how conducting a home visit helped her confront societal stigmas, “Personally, these experiences have seemed to ‘humanize’ the reality of the way of life for individuals with various types of disabilities. It is eye-opening to witness the different accommodations available to service recipients.”

Students also reflected on how the project challenged their prejudices and stereotypes, “After visiting with John, I stopped and pondered why I was so cautious about him in the first place and realized my prejudices could not have been more wrong.” Another student shared, “It was also through this experience and class that I became aware of the prejudice I have subconsciously acquired regarding the population of individuals with developmental disabilities.”

Improved Cultural Competence
Students described how the service-learning project not only challenged their previous biases, but ultimately served to enhance their cultural competence. “It helped me identify my prejudices and my preconceived notions toward people with disabilities and I am now able to break them down and replace them with a renewed perspective that I will carry with me personally and professionally.”

Common reflections indicated a greater level of acceptance for others who are different from them. One student explained, “I have learned that just because a person has a disability, doesn’t mean that the disability defines them. They are more than their disability: they are people and want to be treated as such.” Throughout the semester, students began to see the humanity among their mentors and their reflections indicated a departure from an “us and them” mentality:

Interacting, watching, and learning from these individuals really opened my eyes and made me
change my attitude and professionalism towards others. Too often I just ignore them, walk past them and keep going with my life, but not anymore. They are no different than me, we are all human and deserve to be treated equal.

Students’ reflections illustrated not only an understanding of the course concepts, but an assimilation of these into their personal beliefs, attitudes toward others, and values. The interactions with their mentors shed light on their own cultural identities, resulting in a new framework of beliefs that allowed them see and interact with their world differently. “This visit helped me realize both that people with disabilities are fully human and that no two are alike.” Another student recognized the difference in the personal experience and the limited lens of a stereotypical worldview, “The people I met through this experience have taught me how relatable we all are, no matter what the world stereotypes us to be.”

Heightened Self-Awareness
In addition to learning about individuals with IDD, most students expressed learning a great deal about themselves through the project and many wrote openly and honestly about their new understanding of self: “I have realized I am very passionate about helping people, but that I get emotionally attached very easily.” Another student reflected on how the project made her aware of the possibility of working with individuals with IDD, “One thing I learned about myself is that I am capable of and enjoy talking with persons that have intellectual or developmental disabilities.”

Common among students’ papers was the description of how their heightened self-awareness had influenced their perspectives, behavior, and choice of career. Students were more mindful of their words, attitudes, and actions. “Especially through the course of this class, I have become much more aware of my choice of words that I use when referencing an individual with a disability.” Another student wrote, “I do not believe anyone should be defined by their disability.” This understanding went beyond the use of person-first language to lessons of reciprocity and advocacy:

I have always been worried that I wouldn’t have the compassion and empathy required for that occupation but this project taught me that it’s not about feeling sorry for people, but that it’s about being willing to listen and to take action for them.

Other students reflected on how the project helped them assess what careers best suit their personalities, skills, and strengths. For one student, this was reflected in an awareness that working with individuals with IDD would not be the best fit.

I learned a great deal about myself personally, and about biases, tolerances, and levels of comfort concerning working with the IDD population. Working with this population would be challenging for me, and I am truly thankful to have that knowledge now, instead of knee deep in vocation revolving around that aspect.

Enhanced Professional Development
Asking undergraduate students to participate as volunteers with TARC offered several opportunities for students to practice professionalism. One student described this challenge, “This was a task with great responsibility and also required very adult and mature, professional communication.” A student compared this introductory experience to early physical development: “This project was more worthwhile than I could have fathomed. I was able to ‘cut my teeth’ and get my first real world experience working with the intellectual and developmental disability population.”

Through their reflections, students expressed that they greatly valued the service-learning experience and attributed their growth as future professionals to the project. One student reflected on the specific professional skills they gained and the importance of these visits to her mentors:

As a volunteer for TARC, I learned that communication is important from all aspects of a company or organization. Setting up meetings involved patience and cooperation from both sides and it was good practice to learn how to balance and work in those situations. It was important to show up on time to the visits because most of the mentors planned their whole day around these.

Similarly, another student described how the people skills she developed will assist her in whatever professional field she pursues:

Although this is not a profession that I will go into, I would not trade this experience for anything. I feel that this will help me in whatever direction I choose to go because I developed more people skills and how to communicate in a professional manner.
Increased Self-Confidence

Another salient theme that emerged among students’ papers was an overall increase in confidence. Students frequently expressed how this project helped remove their fear and uncertainty regarding interacting with individuals who have a disability. “I now know how to act around individuals with a disability and won’t feel out of my comfort zone.” Students applied this self-confidence and comfort to populations outside of those with IDD as well. “I learned I am able to be comfortable and confident in a new environment... I am capable of having a conversation with anyone, despite their conversation skills.”

Overall, students reflected on how their own dignity of risk experience in conducting home visits served to boost their self-assurance, “It was the best thing to know I had completed something on my own that I was once scared to do.” Another student realized her own potential, “I often fear the unknown and doubt my abilities but I can see now that things aren’t as scary as they first seem and I am fully capable of accomplishing tasks that I am nervous about.”

Making a Real Difference

Many students described how their own learning process was enhanced because they were able to see the real difference they could make in the lives of the individuals they visited. Students also realized how much their mentors enjoyed the visit, “I did not realize how much impact I could have on one person’s life by volunteering. Whenever we were visiting James, he seemed so excited to have us there and so proud to show off his home and trophies.” Students also shared that after completing visits, they realized how few opportunities for relationships with individuals with IDD they had experienced before this project, “There is a lack of quality, real life friendships between individuals with disabilities and those of us without.”

Students expressed a sense of empowerment, acknowledging their participation in this project could have lasting effects on the individuals they visited. One particular visit included students learning their mentor did not have staffing overnight yet he was unable to get out of bed without assistance. Students immediately reported the situation and their advocacy on his behalf resulted in the mentor’s staffing levels increasing within a 24-hour period of the initial report. One of the students involved reflected on this experience:

The concept of advocacy from our class really stuck out to me when participating in the service-learning project. This concept proved to be true in my visit because I was given the opportunity to talk to a mentor and find out that his living situation and overnight accommodations were not meeting his needs. It was cool to not only hear his story, but to respond with help and change in his life.

Shaping the Future

Students’ reflections highlighted the impact this experience will have on their work across a broad range of professional fields, including: medicine, occupational therapy, family therapy, early childhood education, and nursing. As one early childhood education student expressed, “This project also impacted my professional goals because I will now strive to create an inclusive community within my classroom more wholeheartedly and understand the massive positive effects that will have on society as a whole.” Another student also expressed how she would carry this experience forward into her career:

I have heard of inclusion for years, and have even agreed with this revolutionary concept. However, my opinions were never girded by passion and understanding, only facts and ideas. After experiencing relationships with individuals with IDD, I suddenly grasp its significance, and not just what it means to me, but what it means to them and their lives. This concept of inclusion has moved from merely a suggestion on a paper to a vision and a desired reality.

Students also shared how this project had helped them to think about their own sense of purpose or calling in their lives. “I should selflessly be willing to serve my community and be willing to step out of my comfort zone to make a difference in people’s lives, whether it be a person with a disability or not.” Another student expressed, “It has taught me to put other people’s needs before my own and take the time to show others how much I care for them.” Several students’ narratives reflected how they originally believed the primary goal of the OK AIM visit was to assist the mentors; however, throughout the process students realized they had received more than they gave:

Although I think the main goal of the program was to help my mentors and make sure they had high quality of life, I think in return, my mentors helped me even more than anything I did for them. They taught me a deeper meaning of life and whatever
obstacles you’re faced with, to take it and run with it. There are going to be situations in your life that you cannot change no matter how much you wish they could but that should not stop you from being able to do things in life that truly make you happy and for that I am so thankful I was able to meet John and Gerry.

**Discussion**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to discover and describe undergraduate students’ learning processes and outcomes after participating in a service-learning project. The project included students conducting home visits to help monitor the quality of life among adults receiving state services to live in the community. Students were also asked to reflect on their home visits and integrate their experience with course material in their final term papers. Qualitative data from 156 student term papers were analyzed utilizing a team-based, inductive analysis approach, resulting in nine salient themes: (1) Internalization of Knowledge, (2) Learning from their Mentors, (3) Challenging Past Experience & Understanding Bias, (4) Improved Cultural Competence, (5) Heightened Self-Awareness, (6) Enhanced Professional Development, (7) New-found Self-Confidence, (8) Making a Real Difference, and (9) Shaping the Future. The primary themes emerging from student term papers illustrate the unique learning processes and outcomes resulting from experiential learning opportunities involving adults with IDD. One student’s paper captured multiple themes and embodies the spirit of this service-learning project:

For 17 years I have sat at a desk, reviewing and memorizing theories and definitions. However, none of the flashcards or jeopardy games has ever instructed or taught me in a manner like my time with OK AIM. I could not hide behind knowledge or a textbook analysis, but had to gain understanding in the midst of my surroundings and interactions. As uncomfortable and as anxiety-filled as it was, this project was more useful and more powerful than any educational experience prior to it. At the completion of the semester project, I began to notice connections forming between ideas and concepts and how reality chose to display them. My mentors unintentionally made themselves visions of understanding, and became my teachers in a classroom with no walls. They displayed characteristics I had learned prior, and lived concepts that I had only read about. Each, in their own individual way showed self-determination, a quality of life, and sadly, some were even forced to become the vision and testimony of societal prejudice. In my time since visiting these homes, I have been determined to unpack and analyze my experiences. I want to learn from them and rather than forget these individuals and continue on in the life I have chosen prior, I hope they become my passion. I hope their memory remains and they continue to teach me as I move forward into new experiences and new relationships.

The findings from this study support previous literature on the benefits of service-learning in higher education (Jacoby, 2003). The experiential nature of this project required students to move beyond the classroom and assimilate course content through field observations and engagement with individuals with IDD. Case studies and concepts discussed in class became real as students entered the homes of their mentors and began relating to them on a personal level. Having taught this course many times before implementing service-learning, the first author believes that unlike any previous assignment, this project helped students comprehend core course material such as, supports and services, advocacy, policy, funding, inclusion, quality of life, and self-determination. Findings also indicate experiential learning through this university-community agency partnership promoted personal growth among participants. Students often expressed discomfort and concern before their visits—worrying they might forget to ask a question or offend the individual in some way. Student reflections indicate moving beyond this initial uneasiness to a deeper understanding of the humanity and individuality of their mentors. During guided reflection and throughout class discussions, many students expressed they did not realize people with IDD lived in neighborhoods similar to their own. Students often shared that prior to making home visits they were ignorant of the abilities of individuals with IDD, but after personal interaction with their mentors their perspective was reframed. Meaningful interaction cultivated in students a profound awareness and appreciation for individuals with IDD and elevated students’ willingness to engage with individuals with IDD and become advocates for inclusion.
The benefit to students’ learning and development is evidenced in the findings and is of interest to academics concerned with improving instructional outcomes. Perhaps of broader interest to multiple audiences is the potential for social change among the next generation of professionals working both directly and indirectly with in the field of IDD. After conducting home visits with OK AIM and interacting with TARC personnel throughout the semester, students were exposed to new career opportunities while simultaneously learning about the history of the field of IDD and issues of concern for individuals and families. Furthermore, the meaningful and purposeful interaction among students and their mentors may result in students becoming lifelong advocates with and for individuals with IDD. Particularly unique among the findings in the current study was the salient theme of improved cultural competence reported by students.

Limitations
This study provides important information about the benefits of collaborative university-community agency partnerships. The study is unique in its focus on student learning processes and outcomes associated with a service-learning project involving adults with IDD. However, there are a few limitations to be considered when interpreting and applying the results of the present study. The 156 undergraduate student term papers analyzed were completed as a requirement for the course and represented a percentage of students’ final grades in the class. As such, students had a vested interest in their papers and may have reported more favorable learning processes and outcomes due to the association with their course grade. It should also be noted that this sample was somewhat demographically homogenous, consisting of primarily white female students majoring in Human Development and Family Science. Therefore, findings from the current study should be interpreted according to the unique contextual demographics of the sample.

Although the goal of the current study was to begin to explore the potential learning processes and outcomes of undergraduate students it would be beneficial for future studies to include the perspectives of the staff and administration of community agencies as well. An investigation of the benefits and drawbacks of university-community agency partnerships from the perspective of both the community agency and adults receiving services is warranted. Perhaps the mentors in this study benefited from their interaction with students as it provided an opportunity for them to interact with community members outside of their paid providers and agencies; however, an investigation of such benefits was beyond the scope of the current study. Future research could benefit by including longitudinal study designs of the long-term impact of service-learning on students’ attitudes and beliefs, as well as future involvement in the IDD field.

Conclusion
Service-learning may be one avenue of promoting social change among an emerging generation of new professionals. Inclusion has been a primary goal for individuals with IDD for thirty plus years, yet communities often remain unprepared to engage individuals with IDD. Increasing awareness and challenging negative attitudes is a first step towards creating more inclusive communities (World Health Organization, 2011). By giving college students structured yet relational learning opportunities that challenge their biases, cultural competence, and self-awareness, university-community agency partnerships have the potential to challenge students’ paradigms in a unique way that sparks social change. Although this change may be “small” – a change in the language they use; a change in how they speak to a person with IDD at the grocery store – it has the potential to ignite social change among the next generation.

Removing barriers to community inclusion will require collaboration across multiple disciplines and among researchers, educators, community agencies, service providers, and individuals with IDD and their families. Findings from this study support the development of university-community agency collaborations to address the bilateral challenges of inclusion. Through promoting student learning, fostering meaningful interactions, and challenging negative attitudes and stigmas, the results of this study support service-learning as an instructional method to enhance community inclusion for individuals with IDD.

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