

ENSURING GRADUATION OF HISPANIC & AFRICAN-AMERICAN STUDENTS: THE VALUE OF PROBLEM-BASED SERVICE LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

Student learning can often be enhanced by real-world client service learning hands-on projects. For Hispanic and African-American students, the learning that takes place in these projects may be even more significant, although the research published in academic articles about client-based projects for Hispanic and African-American students is limited. This research begins to advance understanding of how and why problem-based service learning (PBSL) can enhance increased self-efficacy and graduation rates for these students. Data were gathered from 10 business courses and approximately 254 students, predominantly Hispanic and African-American, who provided real-world consulting services for various business organizations as part of their course learning.

Keywords: Hispanic college students, African-American college students, client-based learning, service learning, community engagement.

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This research examines how real-world problem-based community engagement projects increased the potential graduation success of Hispanic and African students and offers suggestions for improving learning for these key segments of college students. Learner-oriented techniques such as client-based community engagement projects, rather than traditional teacher-oriented techniques such as lectures and exams, are methods that can accelerate Hispanic and African-American students' learning, self-efficacy, and consequently, increase graduation rates. Learning that increases self-efficacy can be especially important for students who are challenged to fit into the traditional teacher-oriented paradigm. According to a report entitled *Crossing the Great Divide* (Carnevale & Fye, 2000), published by the Educational Testing Service of Princeton, New Jersey, Hispanic and African-American students were projected to compose at least 25 percent of our nation's college enrollment by the year 2015. Although the increase in Hispanic and African-American students attending college might sound like progressive news, it is only the first part of the predicted scenario for those students.

The second part of the future scenario is that unless Hispanic and African-American students' college graduation rates are increased during their four years of college, only a small fraction of the over 2.5 million Hispanic and African-American students will earn bachelor degrees (de los Santos, Hume, & Cortes, 2002). A significant deficit in graduation rates continues to exist between Hispanic and African-American students and other ethnic groups. This reflects a significant problem in terms of waste of human capital and economic losses. College instructors can help shift these statistics through their approach to learning college course material in classrooms that have a significant number of Hispanic and African-American students. The economic benefit of doubling college graduation rates of these students would yield a 400% return on costs.

The purpose of this study, then, was to examine the value Hispanic and African-American students attached to PBSL projects, and how likely the increased value attached might contribute to increased graduation rates. The material used in assessing the value attributed to the projects was drawn from daily journals maintained by 254 students, representing four different business courses. There were four primary questions we wanted to answer in assessing journal feedback:

Question 1: Did the PBSL projects help Hispanic and African-American students more fully understand course lecture and reading material after applying the concepts to a real-world problem?

Question 2: How did the project experience affect Hispanic and African-American students' attitudes about the course subject matter, their self-confidence, and their perspective of their future employment?

Question 3: Did the real-life project experience heighten self-efficacy to complete subsequent courses in their program needed for graduation?

Question 4: Did the problem-based service project alter Hispanic and African-American students' views of their community and of their acceptance as potential leaders within that community?

To address the objectives of this study we used a convenience sample of undergraduate students at a California state university that was designated as Title V campus. This means the campus has been earmarked to be specifically attuned to the needs of ethnic minority and economically disadvantaged students. We assessed students from 10 courses, including two marketing principles sections, an introduction to business course, a services marketing course, and an advertising course. All of these courses incorporated a real-world client-based service learning project into the required coursework.

The first overarching theme was reflected by most of the 254 students as they described an enhanced sense of understanding course material and lecture concepts. The second overarching theme that emerged from the journals was enhanced confidence in the ability to not only have a good opportunity at securing professional employment but also to perform at a high level within that job as a result of exposure to real-world application of skills needed. A third theme that emerged in the journals was an altered perception that students could be a valuable part of their community as they gained a sense of confidence in their ability to take the lead in making changes within their community. The fourth theme was an enhanced sense of self-efficacy or confidence in their ability to complete all subsequent coursework needed to graduate.

For this student segment, then, gaining confidence and hope that they can change this in their community was a shift forward. Students reported that this shift forward transpired in part because of their inactions and opportunity to engage in the professional community from which they often feel alienated. PBSL projects provide exposure and experiences they would not otherwise encounter until they were employed—if they could garner that employment in the first place. Projects not only provide the exposure and experience first but also enhance the employment avenues open to these students. Finally, nearly all of the students who participated reported an enhanced sense of commitment to future coursework, as well as a heightened sense of self-efficacy in their ability to complete all coursework for graduation.