

## Seeking to Achieve Inclusiveness and Equity in an Afterschool Activity Program

Kyle Ryan, Sheri Grotrian, Kaylee Gill, Spencer Kerwin,  
Noah Temme & Destiny Worthey

*Peru State College*

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**Abstract:** *Students who serve in long-term service-learning experiences have a robust amount of information to share. It is these individuals' personal stories where we might find answers to achieve equity in the educational arena. Through a combination of the qualitative methodologies—autoethnography and portraiture—the authors of this study sought to examine the shared experiences of undergraduate students who served for several months in an afterschool program. The use of autoethnography is an attempt to obtain a rich description of the participant's lives by asking them to “reflexively explore their personal experiences and their interactions with others as a way of achieving wider cultural, political or social understanding” (Pace, 2012, pg. 2). Additionally, the use of portraiture seeks to “capture the richness, complexity, and dimensionality of human experience in social and cultural context” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, pg. 3).*

**Key Words:** Service learning, AmeriCorps, qualitative research, portraiture, autoethnography

### PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Beginning in the Fall of 2017, Peru State College received funding from ServeNebraska and AmeriCorps to implement and oversee a 12-month service-learning endeavor. The federal grant, while addressing the obesity epidemic in rural Southeast Nebraska, further provided the opportunity for AmeriCorps members to examine four seemingly disparate areas: their ability to serve as mentors to promote higher education to Nebraska City youth, the propensity of the AmeriCorps members to serve as community leaders, their willingness and ability to model a healthy lifestyle, and their increased confidence leading to future careers and employment opportunities. As will be demonstrated, each of these underlying themes addresses the overarching conference theme of how to strive for and achieve inclusiveness and equity in the classroom and in all aspects of education.

## REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

The Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U) utilizes Kuh's (2008) work and lists common intellectual experiences, collaborative assignments and projects, undergraduate research, diversity/global learning, and service learning as high-impact practices commonly addressed in higher education. The AmeriCorps experience, as well as the subsequent reflections resulting in data suitable for conference presentation or publication, easily fulfills the definitions for these high impact practices. Additionally, these types of experiences are truly aligned with the Peru State College mission of essential engagement.

The students participating in the AmeriCorps experience have further been granted the unique option of satisfying general education requirements by enrolling in a section of SOC 395 as grant funded by the Rural Futures Institute. The existing course, entitled *Community Development: Obesity Intervention and Service Learning in Nebraska City Public Schools*, satisfies either elective credit hours or the Community, Regional, and Global Studies requirement. Furthermore, it could be proposed to fulfill the independent study requirement for Honors with Distinction. Unique aspects of this course included instruction on inclusiveness and equity while providing service to the underserved. This is the second available course as funded by the Rural Futures Institute and allows for increased engagement in the undergraduate curriculum.

While decisions have been made at an administrative level not to pursue AmeriCorps funding for the 2018-2019 academic year, this initial funding has created a partnership with ServeNebraska and has provided invaluable experience with regards to the pursuit of future federal funding. Funding in past years for AmeriCorps has been as a sub grantee through both Nebraska Campus Compact and the University of Nebraska Lincoln. Further grant applications through AmeriCorps would not only address obesity, but could also address the opioid epidemic, disaster services, economic opportunity, education, environmental stewardship, veterans and military families, and capacity building. These opportunities support the NSSE (2007) research which addresses students' undergraduate experience and the number of high-impact practices they participate in over their college career.

## RESEARCH METHODS

The authors of this proposal compiled results of the student reflections. The research methods, both portraiture and autoethnography, are unique in that they seek to portray the student experience in their own words and in the light of "what went right" rather than "what went wrong".

The use of portraiture implies that the researchers were not objective with regards to the subjects themselves, but rather they sought to fully disclose the "nature and character of relationships between researchers and their 'subjects'" (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005, pg. 8). Also, rather than seeking to generalize emergent themes, it was the intent of the researchers "to document and illuminate the complexity and detail of a unique experience or place, hoping the audience will see themselves reflected in it" (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005, pg. 13). It is in this way that the researchers hope the stories of these students can be shared in such a manner that they resonate with future students in service-learning roles.

The use of autoethnography within the study implies that the subjects were instructed by the researchers to write in their own voice when questions were posed in an attempt to meld "narrative and analysis, in its goal of speaking to broader audiences beyond the academy"

(Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, pg. 14). This method further allowed the students to “reflect critically upon their personal and professional creative experiences” (Pace, 2012, pg. 2).

### RESULTS/CONCLUSIONS

True to form, the use of high impact practice has resulted in increased opportunities for most of the students involved. Just within the last year, two of the students involved have been hired by the service sites to be site supervisors, and one of those two was selected as a Newman Civic Fellow. Another student was the only non-university student selected for a “serviceship” through the Rural Futures Institute, and the students majoring in teacher education involved in the afterschool program describe the experience as both fulfilling and educational in preparing them for their careers.

As a result of stressing the portraiture approach to study design, most reflections that took place during the aforementioned course focused on the positive aspects of the service experience. This would entail processing through experiences, in an open discussion, and eliciting feedback from members on ways to examine positive outcomes.

The extensive use of reflection writing further examined articulated learning in three domains: Educational, Personal, and Civic. This further entailed discussions on positive experiences as students were often instructed to delve deeper with their thinking with regards to how the experience would be beneficial not only to their experience as community leaders, but also as to how being an AmeriCorps member would be beneficial to their marketability with both employment as well as possible graduate school applications.

Specific evidence provided from students reflections to demonstrate a variety of means of ‘success’ of this initiative are as follows: one student, identified as SA, noted that she, “...plan(s) to use the knowledge...in a variety of ways” as she “...plan(s) to be a physician assistant and will promote the health of children to all the parents (she) meet(s).” Another, identified as EB, noted the experience had given her “the proper tools to become a community leader” and that she “will use this experience with any and probably all future social and community endeavors, as well as professionally, as (she has) an interest in public health.” Another student, identified as SD, reflected on her newfound knowledge of mentors for youth and their ability to promote “better decision making and understanding of life skills.” Finally, a student identified as BS, stated his appreciation of learning in-depth about issues he was not previously aware of in his quest to become a physical education instructor. He was specifically pleased learning about “helpful things such as the eight domains of wellness.”

### EDUCATIONAL IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY

Service learning as pedagogy has further been proven to be a high impact practice leading to increased retention. The importance of this study entails the ability of the researchers to secure grant funding for not only the AmeriCorps experience, but also for a course that would allow ample time for the students to reflect, in earnest, on their experience. What’s more, the implementation of autoethnography and portraiture allowed for the students to incorporate another high impact practice, research with a faculty member, into the experience. This novel approach to service learning as pedagogy further provided the students with an opportunity to take increased ‘ownership’ of the experience and is a potential model for other universities and colleges to implement.

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