

The Impact of University-Community Engagement: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

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Abstract- *This study employed interpretative phenomenological analysis as an approach in exploring the benefits of university-community engagement on faculty members and students at Batangas State University, Rosario, Philippines. Specifically, it looks at the University volunteers' experiences, personal and professional development from University-community engagement over three school years. The research was participated by thirteen (13) community volunteers composed of eight (8) faculty members, and five (5) students through focus group, reflective reports and semi-structured interview. Findings have generally identified university-community engagement as a practical practice to find individuals' true potentials, improve their key skills, and equip them with confidence to generate positive change in their lives and in the community*

Keywords- *University-community engagement, community engagement, personal development, professional development*

INTRODUCTION

University-community engagement is an active interpersonal process that allows communication, interaction, involvement, and exchange between an organization (such as the university) and a community for a variety of social and organizational outcomes. It is through University-community engagement that access to information, interactions, and involvement with each other and with organization can be realized. University-community engagement banks on greatly on partnership and mutual reciprocity between different stakeholders such as communities, universities, non-government organizations (NGOs), field experts and funding organizations. In order to sustain the engagement initiatives, it is important to know who the stakeholders of the program are, and to measure the impacts towards the stakeholders [1], [2].

The importance of university-community engagement to learning provides significant framework in higher education. Exploration on learning theory, collaborative learning, and student engagement has shown that individuals learn best in University-community engagement. [3]. Multiparty participation, such as in University-University-community engagement is dialogic and responsive [4]. In University-University-community engagement learning is co-constructed [5].

Moreover, university-community engagement over time therefore enables access to a deeper and more contextualized understanding of reciprocal, dialogic, responsive and learning-focused interactions [10], getting involved collaboratively and making a difference [6] in both the University and in the community.

It is what universities should be for. There is a need to change the perception of the faculty, students, and other stakeholders of the university and the community partners for thinking University-community engagement is just a charity work to one of an exceptional avenue of the reciprocity and mutuality of knowledge, skills, values and cultures for the university and the community [7].

The Batangas State University (BatStateU) Rosario has an extensive portfolio of university-community engagement through the development of innovative projects. The University works to engage, empower and enable all stakeholders to take individual or collective action in making difference in both their lives and the lives of other people through University-community engagement. The initiatives of University in enacting its commitment of university-community engagement are concentrated in environment and natural resources conservation, protection and rehabilitation; social development program and adopt-

a-school program; community outreach program; technical-vocational education and training program; technology transfer, utilization and commercialization program; technical assistance and advisory program to agencies, organization, association and other groups; parents' empowerment through social development program; gender and development; and disaster preparedness and response, and climate change adaptation.

Researchers showed that engagement in the community gained greater benefits in self-esteem, interpersonal, and problem solving skills than those with no service experience [8]. Further implications from their study [8] suggest that having engage is highly beneficial to the helpers in personal outcomes in areas such as self-esteem, civic engagement, and civically-minded attitudes.

MATERIALS AND METHOD

Research Design

This research utilizes the interpretative phenomenological analysis and narrative research which explores the subjective experiences of the teacher-and-student-volunteers. This qualitative approaches provide deeper understanding of the individual experiences in University-community engagement. Qualitative data was collated and subjected to thematic analysis using inductive methods. Several themes emerged which provide meaningful insights into the benefits of University-community engagement to the teacher-and-student-volunteers' personal and professional development.

Instruments

To ensure the reliability and acceptability of the research process, triangulation was used. The methods adopted in this research included the (1) focus group discussion to yield the collective view of the student-volunteers; (2) reflective reports to give deeper insight into the benefits of University-community engagement for teacher-volunteers; and (3) interviews to determine the individual valuation on University-community engagement.

Participants

The research were participated by thirteen (13) community extension program volunteers composed of eight (8) teachers, and five (5) students from Batangas State University Rosario, Philippines. The participants' ages range from 20 to 37 years. The study involved 7 females and 6 males. The participants were the

identified as active volunteers over three school years (in SY 2016-2017, SY 2017-2018, and SY 2018-2019). The participants were informed of this research and agreed to take part. The aspects of confidentiality and anonymity had been emphasized and made clear to them. The research also safeguards compliance to data protection.

Data Analysis

The data gathered were categorized to identify the themes and understand the University-community engagement experiences of the teacher-and-student-volunteers. The comprehensive descriptive and explanatory claims on the value of University-community engagement were obtained through interrogating of data in response to the questions posed on the benefits of University-community engagement in personal and professional development of the volunteers as well as the significance of University-community engagement.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In an exploration of the subjective experiences of teacher-and-student-volunteers at Batangas State University (BatStateU) Rosario in University-community extension program, faculty-and-student-volunteers (giver) recognized that being actively involved in the community is not just about giving. The findings of the reflective reports and interviews recounted that University-community engagement facilitates the exchange of skills, knowledge, values, and experiences that benefit both the giver and the receivers (stakeholders of the community). Also, during the focus group discussion, the faculty-and-student-volunteers realized that their contributions make a difference to the community and to the lives of the stakeholders of the community, and in return they get priceless and invaluable benefits.

Reported by the faculty-and-student-volunteers, University-community engagement helped them to (1) develop their communication and social skills through interactions with diverse groups of people and gaining of new friends; (2) enhance their self-esteem and self-efficacy through promoting and advocating the welfare of other people; (3) become better self-advocates; (4) develop their sense of gratitude and compassion to people; (5) boost morale and enthusiasm; (6) re-learn and learn completely new practical skills; (7) experience different cultures; and (8) improve life prospects.

Develop social skills. After their exposure to the three-year community outreach projects, the

participants were able to develop their social skills through interactions with diverse groups of people and were able to build new friendships. The process of communication led them to establish rapport, build relationships with the officials and other stakeholders of the community and thus complete the assignments. They learned how to interconnect effectively, deliberate positively and how to flourish with the collective tasks. Such experience assisted them in reaching the goal of community familiarization and partnership. Moreover, the University-community engagement allows participant-volunteers to interact with others outside of their natural social circle and provides them with the opportunity to advance their leadership skills to arm them with the confidence to produce positive change not just in their lives but in their community. This ability to implement positive change within a community is also contributory in creating a more connected and empathetic society.

Enhance self-esteem and self-efficacy. Both the teacher-and students-volunteers claimed that they were able to enhance their self-esteem and self-efficacy through promoting and advocating the welfare of other people. The ability to successfully performed in all tasks and the expectancy in achieving goals were purely imbibed by the participants through their positive experience in helping the stakeholders in the community, and with their constructive reflection that: (1) they were able to extend genuine help to others, (2) the good feeling they have in doing their best for and acknowledging one's competence to do social activities, (3) taking responsibility to success their assignments, and (4) the love they have to do public activities.

Become Better self-advocates. Their participations in the University-community engagement made them better self-advocates. They shared their opinions on how to be good people. They obtained high level of confidence that they can be able to help themselves transcend to becoming better and well in every circumstances that may come their way. Working with people from disadvantage backgrounds allowed them to find and fulfill their purpose and helped them to obtain self-actualization.

Develop sense of gratitude and Compassion. The engagement also permitted the participants to develop their sense of gratitude and compassion to people. They were humbled with their encounters with the diverse members of the community. They became more grateful and indebted to people around them and empathic and responsive to others in need and caught in overwhelming conditions.

Boost morale and enthusiasm. The engagement led them to enhance a character measurement that transformed their understanding of moral development and passion. The spirits and drives to do something for the community, work with others, and do more than those they think with greater zeal were reported as results of the participants' experiences.

Learn and Update Skills. Working with people from underprivileged backgrounds provided the participants with basic peer leadership skills and completely new practical skills, and provide them an opportunity to recognize, strategize and resolve a community concern. The journey of engagement enabled them to re-learn and learn skills ranging from writing project proposals; preparing business letters; using various technology gadgets and equipment for recording, updating, evaluating, monitoring, analyzing, and computing purposes; facilitating group activities such as group dynamics activities, FGDs, seminar-workshops, etc.; negotiating and bargaining; producing products from abundant raw materials in the community; and expediting technology transfer. Also, they were able to keep the skills up-to-date through attending in-house and external capability trainings and mentoring.

Experience different cultures. The journey supported participants in developing a learning community with their beneficiaries and interacting with them through competent approach and reciprocity relationships that in turn raising aspirations, confidence, courage and hope. The participants were able to be given chance to exercise their rights and abilities to have an input into civic life through integration of University's philosophy, principles and values and the community's own. They learned to recognize the sources of power, to ascertain their own position in relation to power and realize the political nature of what they learn, and to develop their own social actions.

Improve life prospects. The participants were able to unlock their true potential through University-community engagement. They were able to become engage, be empowered and enabled to discover their true potential through participation in the different community outreach activities. Additionally, the participants reported that having ownership of the activities and having work with different groups in the community gave them the understanding of group dynamics and how to manage challenging situations. The opportunity to put theory into practice really helped them to improved life prospects.

The findings have generally recognized the most important powers of University-community engagement which include upholding reciprocal connections across intellectual (co-constructed new learning), social (sharing of roles, responsibilities and decisions) and emotional (mutual respect and trust) domains, and countenancing innovative learning relationships. Thus, through University-community engagement, all stakeholders can grow.

Henceforth, there is a need for BatStateU Rosario to give much importance in promoting and sustaining University-community engagement among its stakeholders because this program offers substantial benefits for all stakeholders of both the University and the community.

CONCLUSION

This empirical research has provided clear and significant evidence which highlights the importance of University-community engagement to enhance the personal and professional development of faculty members and students.

University-community engagement is a collaborative and generative experience of teachers and the students of democratic education. In addition, University-community engagement is a practical practice to find individuals' true potentials, improve their key skills, and equip them with confidence to generate positive change in their lives and in the community.

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