Title of program:  Psychology of Community Based Learning: New Directions for Research

Type of program:  Symposium
Length of program:  50 min.

General statement:
Community based learning (CBL) has long been viewed as an effective pedagogical technique. In this method students engage in an applied community-based project as part of their coursework. This project often offers the opportunity for sustained direct contact with a sector of society that students may not have been exposed to (for example, socio-economically disadvantaged). CBL can provide a unique opportunity for student learning and personal growth, in addition to offering service to the targeted community. Moreover, such projects allow the university to develop meaningful partnerships with community-based and non-governmental organizations that can enhance the status of the university.

The positive impacts of CBL on student development are well-documented in the literature, especially when the community activity is carefully aligned with course learning objectives and students are required to critically reflect on their experiences. Students have the chance to integrate theoretical knowledge with real-world settings, thereby enriching and deepening their learning. The hands-on approach can help enhance students' sense of civic engagement, social responsibility, and social justice. Throughout the course students gain appreciation of the complex nature of social problems, develop self-efficacy for effecting change in their communities, hone their interpersonal skills, identify their own strengths and skills, and develop an appreciation for diversity.

Despite the positive outcomes of integrating community-based learning in courses, this technique is rarely applied in departments of psychology, with some undergraduate programs offering no courses that incorporate CBL. This symposium argues that psychology courses in particular stand to benefit from this learning method. We argue that in order to effectively integrate CBL in psychology curriculums, the body of research on this method needs to broaden and deepen. Audience members will gain information on creative ways to integrate CBL in their psychology courses while being introduced to new areas of research including the faculty perspectives, measurement of course outcomes, and cross-cultural applications.

Chair:
Mona M Amer, PhD
*The American University in Cairo & Yale University School of Medicine, Cairo, Egypt*
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Title of presentation 1: Faculty Experiences with Community Based Learning: A Different Perspective

Participant 1: Mona M Amer, PhD, The American University in Cairo & Yale University School of Medicine, Cairo, Egypt

Coauthor(s): Amani El Shimi, PhD, John D. Gerhart Center for Philanthropy and Civic Engagement, The American University in Cairo, Cairo, Egypt
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Summary: The bulk of research on community-based learning focuses on student experiences with learning and their psychosocial development, with some research studies additionally examining the impact of CBL on communities and organizations serviced by the projects. However, the voice of faculty in this research discourse has thus far been ignored. It is vital to understand the motivations of faculty who offer CBL in their courses, the benefits they gain, and the challenges they face in order for universities to offer better resources for these faculty.

This presentation presents results of a series of semi-structured qualitative interviews conducted with CBL faculty from different disciplines including psychology. These faculty members were asked about the type of projects incorporated in their courses and how it aligns with their teaching philosophies. Practical issues were discussed such as preparation for students and challenges in implementation (such as transportation and organization). Faculty were asked about how they personally benefited and grew from the experience. They also provided insights about the challenges faced such as the intensive time commitment (and thus potentially negative impact on producing publications for tenureship) and poor departmental and institutional support.

This presentation will offer descriptions on how CBL projects were implemented in a variety of psychology courses such as Personal Growth and Adjustment, Community Psychology, Educational Psychology, and Abnormal Psychology. Based on the "lessons learned" by the CBL faculty interviewed in this study, specific suggestions will be provided to the audience on how to effectively introduce CBL and successfully address any challenges.
Title of presentation 2: Cross-Cultural Student Perspectives on the Benefits of Community-Based Learning

Participant 2:
Mona Ibrahim, PhD, Concordia College, Moorhead, MN

Summary:
Numerous beneficial effects of Community-based learning (CBL) have been identified in the research literature on college teaching in Western cultures. The benefits seem to occur across multiple domains including academic development, socio-personal development, and civic engagement. However, most of the research evidence for the impact of CBL is qualitative in nature. This study used survey data in order to provide quantitative evidence for the positive impact of CBL on college students in the Arab region, an area which has been identified as one of the regions in the world where CBL is not well utilized and not well researched. The American University in Cairo (AUC) is among a few colleges in the Arab World that offers CBL opportunities to its students, due in large part to the effort and support of its Gerhart Center for Philanthropy. Yet, there have not been any studies done on the impact of CBL on Egyptian students in general, nor on AUC students in particular. Our study attempted to fill this gap by assessing AUC students’ perceptions of the impact that engagement in CBL had on them. In addition, this study explored how culture as a macrosystem might impact students’ perceptions of CBL. Given that Egypt as a culture differs from the US culture on several important dimensions, such as individualism-collectivism, we hypothesized that student perceptions of the reasons for and benefits of CBL would differ across these two cultures. This study explored these potential cross cultural differences by comparing data collected from AUC students to data collected from students in a similar-sized Liberal-Arts, private college in the Midwestern USA.
Title of presentation: Unique Development of Community Based Learning in Economically Developing Nations

Participant 3:  
Salma El-Sayeh, BA, The American University in Cairo, New Cairo, Egypt

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Hana Shahin, BA, The American University in Cairo, New Cairo, Egypt  
Joseph Simons-Rudolph, PhD, The American University in Cairo, New Cairo, Egypt

Summary:  
Although community-based learning and service learning have been used for decades across the world, virtually all of the body of research literature focuses on CBL in North America and Europe. This biases the understanding of the pedagogy of CBL because the experiences of developing nations may be quite unique. Firstly, the magnitude and intensity of social problems that could be targeted through CBL is compelling, with nations facing severe poverty, refugees, war and civil strife, and natural disasters. As the income gap between the rich and poor widens, it has become increasingly imperative that students in more privileged universities have an opportunity to acknowledge, serve, and foster relationships with those who are less fortunate. These nations may not have the economic and infrastructural supports often available in industrialized nations to facilitate CBL, and non-governmental organizations may not have the resources or experiences needed to successfully implement CBL. Additionally, some of the common traditions in CBL - such as having the community members provide written evaluations of the students - may be modified in other nations; for example, where literacy levels are low. Community engagement may be more challenging in lieu of class conflicts and a history of oppression and war. On the other hand, implementing CBL in these nations may offer a critical opportunity to bridge gaps between socio-economically isolated sectors of society, and provide scientifically-informed programming, perhaps impacting the country in a significant way. This presentation will present case studies of successful CBL and student civic engagement programs in economically developing nations, highlighting their shared experiences and successes. Recommendations for specific research questions and methods in this area will be offered.