Partners at Learning: A Service-Learning Approach to Serving Students from Military Families

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BACKGROUND

- The majority of roughly 4 million military-connected students, including those with active-duty, reserve, and veteran family members, attend public schools in the U.S. Many school-age children face increased social and academic difficulties that stem from factors directly related to military service.
- Schools have the ability to provide support for military-connected students through positive school climate and attention to academic and social emotional needs. Through service-learning programs, universities also have the capacity to effect change that enhances the experiences of military-connected students.
- The Building Capacity Consortium was formed in 2010 as a partnership between a large research university and several school districts. Goals for this project included increasing the capacity for public schools to create military-friendly school environments.
- Collaborating with the existing PAL program was one way to utilize existing an existing program and to achieve multiple goals: Serving K-12 military-connected students and providing enriching experiences for undergraduate students and implementing sustainable interventions.
- Partners at Learning (PAL) is a service learning program at the University of California, San Diego (UCSD), Educational Studies. PAL courses include coursework regarding theoretical and practical information about education, and a fieldwork component that includes tutoring and mentoring underserved students in K-12 schools.
- This poster presents an evaluation of a service-learning program, Partners at Learning, where undergraduate university students participate in coursework and fieldwork to provide tutoring and mentorship to diverse and under-served students in local K-12 school settings.

METHODS

Data was collected from PAL tutors, all undergraduate students at UCSD. Tutors completed online surveys at the beginning of their PAL course, and again near the end of their fieldwork. Surveys included quantitative and qualitative questions. 30 tutors completed surveys in the first year, 80 completed surveys in the second year, and 302 students (130 of these were matched) in the third year.

RESULTS

Initial Program Adaptation

- PAL was already geared towards addressing student needs; relatively simple additions allowed Building Capacity to target increased support for military-connected youth.
- A military-specific section of the PAL course was created with these objectives:
  1. Assisting all students in host classrooms.
  2. Supporting the host teachers' instructional goals.
  3. Providing additional support for military-connected students.
  4. Implementing projects to increase awareness of needs specific to military-connected students.
  5. Facilitating to support military-connected students and their families.

Second Year Modification

- Though reports from PAL tutors and K-12 teachers were positive, there were several hundred PAL tutors in contact with K-12 students who did not enroll in the military-specific PAL course.
- From the second year onward, military-connected students were included as one particular diverse group within the general PAL curriculum increasing their exposure to many more PAL tutors in many sections of PAL courses.

Table 1

Benefits for PAL tutors

	Not at all/a little true		Pretty much true		Very much true	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
I am now more aware of the issues of military-connected students	0	0	8	27.6	21	72.4
I feel like I have made an impact on the children I worked with	0	0	14	48.3	15	51.7
I have gained an appreciation for the diversity in our society	3	10.7	12	42.9	13	46.4
I have gained valuable teaching experience	3	10.3	10	34.5	16	55.2
I am now more interested in being an educator	11	37.9	11	37.9	7	24.1

Table 2

Percentage of participants reporting experiences in the PAL program, **year 2**

	Not at all true	A little true	Pretty much true	Very much true
I had an impact on the children with whom I worked	0	16.1	52.9	31
I gained appreciation of the social issues facing our society	1.2	8.1	43	47.7
I gained valuable teaching experience	0	9.2	41.4	49.4
I now have a better understanding of our public school system	1.2	9.3	41.9	47.7
I now have a better understanding of diverse cultural groups in P-12 schools	1.1	10.3	50.6	37.9
I am now more aware of issues of social justice and inequality	2.3	14.9	52.9	29.9
I am more interested in getting involved in social action on behalf of diverse groups in our society	5.7	21.8	42.5	29.9
I now have a better understanding of military connected students	34.5	24.1	24.1	17.2

Table 3

Percentage of participants reporting experiences in the PAL program, **year 3**

	Not at all true	A little true	Pretty much true	Very much true
I had an impact on the children with whom I worked	0.0	18.1	47.5	34.5
I gained appreciation of the social issues facing our society	.6	6.3	34.1	59.1
I gained valuable teaching experience	0.0	6.2	37.9	55.9
I now have a better understanding of our public school system	.6	6.9	37.1	55.4
I now have a better understanding of diverse cultural groups in P-12 schools	.6	12.4	43.5	43.5
I am now more aware of issues of social justice and inequality	1.7	11.3	42.4	44.6
I am more interested in getting involved in social action on behalf of diverse groups in our society	5.1	16.9	38.4	39.5
I now have a better understanding of military connected students	37.9	30.5	19.8	11.9

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

- Overall, this evaluation showed that PAL students gained valuable experience working with diverse students in K-12 classrooms. In particular, students reported that they had a better understanding of public education, a better understanding of diverse cultural groups in schools, and an increased awareness for social justice and inequality.
- Universities can make an important contribution to military-connected students and their families by including military modules in their service-learning courses. The adaptation of PAL presented here suggests that there are other programs that can be adapted to increase awareness and target resources to military-connected students and families.
- Finally, one goal of this program adaptation was to influence pre-service training for teachers and other school staff, and to increase the awareness of military-connected students for people entering the workforce and various communities. By focusing on PAL tutors, many of whom indicate their plans to enter education, this program has begun preparing future educators for their work with diverse students in their schools.

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