

Psychosocial Aspects of Healthcare is a service-learning course taken by all physical therapy students at Northeastern when they enter into the professional phase of the program. Students partner with community organizations that allow them to use their skills and knowledge from the classroom to develop not only their communication and professional skills but also their knowledge of exercise, patient transfers, and human development, among others. The direct service our students perform is a great way to engage with course material but also translates directly to their future physical therapy careers.

Below are two student reflections from this course. The first, written by Emily Werkheiser mid-semester, reflects on important social issues present at her service site. Emily demonstrates through her reflection how important it is and will be in her future as a physical therapist to be aware of the social factors impacting her patients.

The second reflection, written by David Kau at the end of the semester, reflects on the meaning of ethically responsible service, and the importance of acting for the best interest of the community partner. Together, these student reflections show and incorporation of classroom content with direct service, and the making of successful future physical therapists.

Reflection - Social Issues Affecting the Service Location – Emily Werkheiser

I am doing my service-learning project at FitKids, which is located in Roxbury. One social issue that affects this community is the lack of access to healthy foods. The US census declares that West Roxbury is one of the two food deserts in the city of Boston. A food desert is defined as a low-income area where access to grocery stores and affordable healthy food options is limited. Roxbury has a disproportionate concentration of corner stores vs actual grocery stores compared to other locations in Boston. These corner convenience stores often do not offer a wide selection of fresh produce and other healthy foods at an affordable price. In addition to the lack of geographical access, the average household income in this area can also limit community members access to healthy food. The median household income in Roxbury is \$28,000, which is significantly less than the median household income of \$52,000 for Boston as a whole. Therefore, individuals living in this neighborhood may not have been able to afford to purchase fresh, nutrient rich food, since this tends to be more expensive. This influences my role at FitKids, as the children I'm working with may not have exposure to a lot of healthy foods at home. While I cannot change this, I can try to help educate them about what types of foods are good/ bad for you so that they can make informed decisions when they get older.

Another problem facing this neighborhood is the lack of green space. Most individuals in Roxbury do not have back yards big enough to play in and parks may not be close by. Additionally, if a child's parent is working all day, they may not have anyone to take them to the park and it is likely unsafe for them to walk there alone. Not having an easily accessible, safe place to go outside and run around could limit a child's physical activity level. Therefore, one of my goals at FitKids is to help show kids how getting up and moving around can be really fun and can help to make someone feel good. Seeing as though all of our activities are done inside a classroom, we will be showing kids types of exercise that can be performed anywhere such as yoga, Zumba, and more. I hope that this is a lesson they will carry with them and potentially look to find different ways to be active to help maintain both their physical and mental wellbeing as they grow up.

I do believe that PTs have a role to play in the social and political issues affecting their patients. A patient's experiences outside of the clinic can have a large impact on how they respond to treatment. This can be due to a variety of factors including stress, time management, other responsibilities, difficulty performing home exercises, an unhealthy diet, lack of sleep and much more. It is important for PTs to be aware of these social factors in the area that they work as this could likely impact some of these factors that affect a patient's response to treatment. By being aware of these factors, the therapist can have a more open line of communication with the patient to determine what exactly the patient needs from their treatment and how their treatment can be catered to fit their lifestyle. When a PT is aware of their patients outside experiences and can make more individualized plans, the patient is more likely to continue with their home plan and will have a better chance of responding well to treatment and feeling better.

Reflection – Ethically Responsible Service – David Kau

Ethically responsibly conducted community-engaged service-learning must not bring any harm to the community it aims to serve. This means that the service providers must ensure that the community's needs are being put above their own and that they are acting in the community's best interests. They must also be welcomed or asked to serve the community as well. Barging in and providing service without an invitation or clear need may be considered rude.

Two aspects that facilitate being able to provide service in an ethically responsible manner are proper education and ample resources. Training of those serving the community is essential in providing responsible service. Without proper training, no matter how well-intentioned the actions are, there is a chance of doing more harm than good in the community. Especially with healthcare oriented service, proper training is vital for the success of the service. Education extends to the members of the community being served as well. Protocols need to be implemented so that the positive effects of the service can last well after the volunteers have left the community. Unless they plan on staying permanently, those performing the community service need to make sure that the skills and help they provide is able to be replicated by those in the community itself. In addition to the education, ample resources such as time, money, and manpower are essential to preserve the longevity of the positive effect on the community being served. Without these resources, again, there is a chance of doing more overall harm than good on the community.

A barrier to providing ethically responsible service is that community service is not usually meant to be a full-time job. Because it is not sustainable for volunteers to dedicate their lives to service without substantial monetary compensation, they usually do not stay to serve the community permanently. This is why it is extremely important that for any service-learning project, if the community relies heavily on volunteers for assistance, there is enough training and resources for all parties involved to properly continue the relationship.