INTRODUCTION

Community Engagement is defined by the Carnegie Foundation as a “collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity” (Carnegie Foundation, 2020). The recognition that both academics and the public sector hold a unique set of expertise allows for the legitimation of the community as partners, collaborators, co-educators and public scholars (Welsh & Pascarella, 2010).

The issue of “common community-engaged pedagogy” has been identified. These include the recommendation that both partners: 1) identify congruent goals while taking into account the expectations, capabilties and limitations unique to each partner; 2) clearly define roles and responsibilities within the partnership while sharing the control of activities and decisions; 3) balance long-term commitment with frequent communication and continuous assessment of both process and outcomes; 4) foster familiarity with each partner’s culture, norms, values, economic conditions, social networks, political power structures, demographic trends, and history.

OBJECTIVES

In 2015, the ‘Canine Learning and Behavior’ (CLB) undergraduate psychology course was developed as a partnership between faculty at Saint Francis University (SFU), the Animal Society of the Humane Society (ASHS), and the Huntingdon County Humane Society (HCHS) and the Cambria County Humane Society (CCHS). The course was designed according to recommended practices in community engagement.

Identifying the care for shelter dogs was as a mutual goal for both partners and incorporating the knowledge, strengths and expertise unique to the community, the course was taught by faculty and community co-educators, and enrolled students learned to train shelter dogs and write shelter-specific grant proposals. During the semester, students in the CLB course lived with the dogs (Figure 1) in approved residency units, attended faculty-delivered lectures and participated in community partner-led lab sessions in which they trained the dogs according to the course’s curriculum or wrote grant applications on behalf of the community partner. The end of the semester was marked with a “Puppy Graduation Ceremony” (Figure 2).

MATERIALS & METHODS

The assessment of learning outcomes included students enrolled in the CLB course and in the equally challenging “Sensation and Perception” (S&P) course, taught by the same faculty instructor within the same semesters. Twenty-one students were enrolled in the CLB course, and 47 students were enrolled in the S&P course in the fall semesters of 2021 and 2022. Six dogs were trained by students in the CLB course. All dogs had spent at least 4 months in the shelter prior to course inclusion and demonstrated a variety of maladaptive behaviors (e.g., excessive fear, lack of human/dog-socialization, complete lack of training).

Studen’s comprehension of course content was assessed in both courses using a simple distribution of final grades. Students’ confidence in acquired skills and attitudes towards community-engaged pedagogy were evaluated using an anonymous self-report survey, administered in both courses at the beginning and end of the semester. The survey consisted of the following components: 1) ability to apply acquired knowledge toward dog behavior analysis and modification (including obedience, agility and safe human-animal interactions), constructed to follow the American-Kennel Club’s ‘Canine Good Citizen Test’; 2) understanding of the grant writing process and capabilities to prepare and submit a grant application; 3) comprehension of the needs of the community, sense of responsibility towards the community and appreciation of community-engaged pedagogy. An anonymous survey was submitted in the S&P course who failed to complete the survey at either time point. Final survey analysis included 21 students in the CLB, and 37 students in the S&P course. Response within each group were combined.

The survey of students was approved by SFU’s Institutional Review Board (IRB00100002). Dog training protocols were approved by SFU’s Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee (Protocol #0017).

RESULTS

The findings demonstrated that the grade distribution of students enrolled in the CLB course was positively skewed compared with students enrolled in the S&P course. Across both years, a higher percentage of the grade-X% (2021; 51.5%; 2022) was allotted to students enrolled in the CLB course, compared with students enrolled in the S&P course (51.5%; 51.5%; 2022). Survey results point to differential self-evaluation scores within both courses. First, although at the beginning of the semester students’ estimations of their dog training skills were comparable across both courses, only students in the CLB course experienced an increased confidence in their skills at the end of the semester. Second, students in the CLB course felt that their grant-writing skills improved throughout the semester, an impression not seen among students in the S&P course (Table 1).

FINALLY, all trained dogs successfully “graduated” and were adopted at the end of the fall 2021 and 2022 semesters. All grant applications prepared in 2021 and 2022 were submitted. Thus, none of the 2021–submitted applications were funded, but some encouraging communication regarding the 2022–submitted applications had been received.

CONCLUSIONS

The project aimed to create a reciprocal academic-community partnership, designed according to recommended community engagement practices. The CLB course was thus built to combine the aspiration of higher-education instructors to provide their students with a transformational learning experience and the delivery of animal shelter personnel to improve the well-being of sheltered dogs. The course was taught by both the community and the academic partners, serving as co-educators and decision makers, creating a mutual exchange of knowledge and expertise. Efforts to clearly define roles and responsibilities, facilitate frequent communication, and nurture each partner’s familiarity with the expectations, capabilities and limitations of their collaborators, created a long-term alliance which benefits humans and animals alike (Figures 3 and 4). It is our hope that additional educators decide to take a leap of faith and adopt a community-engaged pedagogy into their curricula.

REFERENCES


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