

Operation Lighthouse: See the signs be the change

A Teen Dating Violence Prevention Program in the Macon Community

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Summary

The purpose of this project is to design a teen dating violence prevention program (Operation Lighthouse), implement it in a local afterschool program, and assess change in students' understanding and attitude towards dating violence.

Evaluation

The success of Operation Lighthouse was intended to be measured through psychological research methods (comparison of pre/post surveys between a treatment and control group) at one implementation site, Street to Success. The psychological surveys illustrated that the individuals who participated in Operation Lighthouse at Street to Success experienced a positive change in their attitudes, knowledge, and beliefs of dating violence. These results were replicated at an additional location, Campus Clubs, among the female participants, which led to the expansion of the program to Central High School (if you are interested in the research results, I can send in my research manuscript). Operation Lighthouse has now undergone three implementation cycles, has ten volunteers, and an executive board with four different positions, allowing us to expand the program outreach beyond our initial estimations.

The partnership with Central High School and the creation of an executive board are the two biggest achievements of this program. An agreement is underway to continue the partnership with Central High School and begin pilot testing the inclusion of the program in the annual health education curriculum. Furthermore, the commitment of younger service scholar cohorts to the Operation Lighthouse program has ensured the future sustainability of the organization. Overall, Operation Lighthouse has accomplished its previously outlined objectives and will continue to support Mercer students as they invest in the lives of high schoolers to reduce the prevalence of dating violence in Macon.

Recommendations

Factors that supported success

The success of Operation Lighthouse is in large part because of the investment of community partners, fellow Mercer students (especially service scholars), and faculty mentors. I think it is extremely beneficial for service projects to have multiple “backing” institutions or organizations that give the project financial support, advice, mentorship, and troubleshooting. Additionally, having an executive board to divide up project responsibilities has made Operation Lighthouse much more manageable to implement. Specifically, there are three separate positions that coordinate the curriculum/content implementation, volunteer recruitment, and research in addition to having a director. Therefore, I would recommend partnerships within and between service scholar cohorts to create and implement large, long-term projects rather than multiple smaller, single semester projects.

Additionally, working with afterschool organizations was advantageous because it enabled me to pilot test the program curriculum in a small, controlled environment. There are dozens of afterschool organizations in Macon and the two I worked with (Street to Success and Campus Clubs) were very enthusiastic about working with me and other volunteer programs. The afterschool realm gave me the freedom and flexibility to try out my program with limited oversight and enabled me to create a successful track record to persuade Central High School to allow Operation Lighthouse to present on our program.

Factors that created challenges

One of the biggest hurdles that I experienced was the unresponsiveness of individuals in leadership at the afterschool programs and within the school system. Persistence (almost borderline annoyance) was the key to overcoming this challenge. One particular instance comes

to mind, when the director of Campus Clubs was no longer returning my emails or phone calls, I showed up at his office unannounced multiple times until I could catch him and ask him if he would sign off on letting Operation Lighthouse come and present. Dozens of voicemails and unanswered emails was the norm throughout my service project, and I would advise future service scholars not to get too frustrated. Often times these individuals are overworked or understaffed and their decision to not return your call isn't because they don't like your project or don't want to work with you but rather because they simply don't have the time to respond. But that doesn't mean that you should give up. Keep calling them until you get an answer (and if it isn't the answer you want still keep trying).

The second challenge I encountered was the difficulty of coordinating schedules among volunteers, organization leadership, high school students, and myself. College students and high school students are on very different schedules (and even amongst college students there is a lot of variation), which made it extremely difficult to coordinate when we could physically go to the afterschool organization or the school. At first, I used the college student's availability to coordinate when we would go to the site location and present the curriculum. In hindsight, I should have used the high schoolers availability to coordinate when the Mercer students would come and present because we often experienced problems with high rates of participant attrition (i.e. participants not showing up consistently for curriculum sessions). This made it difficult to collect accurate data and carry out our mission teach high school students when there were only three high schoolers present. Nevertheless, this taught me the value in small victories. I truly believe that if Operation Lighthouse can impact the life of just one individual then the program is a success. Luckily our scheduling has gotten better, and we just finished presenting the curriculum to a cohort of about 20 students who attended more than three modules and

completed pre/post surveys. But again, I would encourage future service scholars not to get discouraged by small numbers or unresponsiveness from students. It takes time to build up a program and the purpose of MSS in my opinion is not to make the biggest impact but rather the most meaningful. Thus, I believe that the small group interactions fostered by low participant numbers enabled our program volunteers to build lasting and meaningful relationships with our students.

Improvements to implement

Going forward I would love to see three changes to the Operation Lighthouse program. The first is the creation of a training guide. I tried to write down as much as I could and teach the other volunteers through the third implementation cycle how the program runs. But unfortunately, I know that I probably missed something and there is a lot of information all over the place when it comes to the program's physical documents. Consequently, I would recommend that the next director create a training guide to pass on to future directors that provide more comprehensive and detailed guidelines of how the logistics of the program operate. Secondly, I would like to see a partnership with Central High School that allows Operation Lighthouse to be implemented during school hours. Right now, we are pilot testing the program in the afterschool realm and the girls that participate are recruited through convenience methods meaning that they want to participate. But the people that need to hear this program the most are those that won't necessarily come on their own. Thus, incorporating the Operation Lighthouse curriculum into the health education program at Central would give us a platform to consistently reach more students than we could have ever before. Lastly, I would like to see the creation of a male version of this program. Although we tried a mixed gender implementation at Central High School the program was not effective at improving male's attitudes, beliefs, and knowledge of

dating violence. This could have been a result of the heavily female influence on the creation and implementation of the program. Thus, organizing a group of men to create their own program and implement it alongside our program would reach yet another key missing demographic from our current program participant pool.

Lessons Learned

The most important lessons I learned from creating and directing the Operation Lighthouse can be summed up in three words: passion, community, adaptability.

Although it can be very difficult to discover what your passion is at such an early age, I think that it is essential that service scholars (or anyone interested in investing in a service project) decide to focus on an issue they are passionate about. There were many times throughout this process that I wanted to give up, the high schoolers were acting up, volunteers were dropping out, data collection was overwhelming, community partners wouldn't answer my emails, and so many other obstacles that seemed insurmountable. But despite these problems my passion and dedication for the issue motivated me to persevere. Additionally, working directly with the community (i.e. the high schoolers who want education about this issue and the college students who want to share their wisdom) was one of the most rewarding aspects of this entire project. Hearing the stories of marginalization and oppression that many of these women have experienced truly inspires me to dedicate my life to this cause.

Overcoming the many difficulties associated with this project is a personal moment of triumph and joy and taught me that I am capable of so much more than I ever thought. However, my inability to tackle every obstacle in my path or complete all aspects of this project to my inner perfectionist's satisfaction taught me the importance of community. I learned that I cannot and should not do it alone. You need to have buy in from the community for the project to

actually address an issue that the community cares about and for there to be any lasting, meaningful change. Without the support of multiple partners (i.e. Crisis Line, Service Scholars, the Psychology Department, Central High School, Street to Success, Campus Clubs, all my volunteers), there would be no Operation Lighthouse.

As this project grew and I recognized the need to include others, I was forced to delegate responsibilities. My desire for perfection and control is something I am still trying to work on, but I know that letting others take over different aspects of Operation Lighthouse has taught me more about leadership than my previous mentality to just do it all myself. I see the importance of positive and critical feedback (not everything can be dandy and rosy when it clearly isn't), clearly articulated responsibilities (creating contracts for my volunteers has been a vital part of accountability for myself and them), and not taking everything so seriously. People make mistakes (very often me) and a key part of service is adapting to the context. You should make plans, but you shouldn't plan on them always working out. As stated previously, I am not a very "go with the flow" kind of person so learning to change with the circumstances was a big learning curve, but I know that it will serve me well in the future.

Dissemination Plan

The service scholars taking over the project (Danielle Countryman, Jazmine Boykin, Ally Driver, and Claudia Newsome) have access to all the relevant Operation Lighthouse materials to continue the expansion and improvement of the program.