"I Now Feel More Comfortable Advocating for People:" Student Reflections on Service Learning

Elissa Thomann Mitchell
University of Southern Indiana, etmitchell@usi.edu

Erin E. Gilles
University of Southern Indiana

Recommended Citation

"I Now Feel More Comfortable Advocating for People:" Student Reflections on Service Learning

While many courses include types of active learning, service learning is pedagogically distinct. According to the oft-cited definition from Bringle and Hatcher (1996), service learning can be defined as:

a credit-bearing educational experience in which students participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and reflecton the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility. (p. 222)

Research shows that service learning is a widespread practice in higher education across academic majors. Although service learning has been used to varying degrees throughout the history of formal education, Lemieux and Allen (2007) contend that service learning's revival in the 1990's was due to academic institutions' renewed interest in the tackling of social issues. To this end, faculty have used service learning to engage college students in such projects as the exploration of slavery by Historically Black University students through the analysis of antebellum slave letters at the state historical society (Brogan et al. , 2014); teaching social justice concepts by pairing students with teens ina juvenile hall (Tilton, 2013); and learning about poverty through a weekly mentoring program pairing primarily middle and upper-middle class college students with high school students from an impoverished district (Hughes et al., 2012). A unique characteristic of service learning, as compared to traditional pedagogical approaches, is the student engagement with the community. This typeof experiential education benefits not just the community, but the students as well (Remley, 2012). Hatcher and Studer (2015) suggest that service learning in the curriculum can introduce students to the non-profit sector, show them new career options in charitable organizations, and engender positive associations towards philanthropy after graduation.

Schelbe et al. (2014) note that while service learning is sometimes conceptualized as field education or volunteerism, it is actually neither. Rather, it occupies a particular position of fulfilling community needs as they relateto course content, serving as a learning opportunity for the student. Although service learning may not have the sustained, supervised nature of field experience,it also typically lacks the sometimes fleeting or unreflective qualities of volunteerism. In fact, while both practices may develop student skills, it is the emphasis on giving back to the agency that sets service learning apart from field training or practicum experiences required in the social work (SW) field (Phillips, 2011). Despitethe long-term use of service learning, a survey of SW faculty indicates that there isstill a misapplication of the term service learning when faculty are actually referringto the required field education experience in social work programs (Cronley et al., 2014). It is important to differentiate these learning experiences for students and faculty.

Service learning has been shown to offer students benefits lasting beyond their college experiences. For some students, service learning experiences spurred undergraduate students to either consider attending or to feel more prepared for graduate school (Droppa, 2007; Postlethwait, 2012). In another example, college students who engaged in a project to offer career guidance to high school studentsfound that they had greater understanding of career decision-making strategies andcould better explain the associated theories than the control group, resulting in increased knowledge and skills (Coulter-Kern et al., 2013).

Because the community dimension of service learning is so prominent, another benefit is the confidence that students can gain as they transition their classroom-based

skills into the real-world setting (Maich & Hall, 2011). There is evidence that SW students gain learned experience across several dimensions, which can change even long-held stereotypes. For example, Nino et al., (2011) report that in a service learning project involving a campus-based agency serving at-risk and veteran populations, students reported radically shiftingattitudes towards people experiencing homelessness after exposure to these populations. Likewise, Opatrny and Statham (2014) reported that SW students were able to achieve course learning outcomes through service learning, including: increasing their ability to view situations from multiple perspectives, to understandhow one's beliefs and values impact assumptions and interpretations of events, to understand behavior within context, and to creatively solve problems.

Service learning has particular value for SW programs, in part due to the focus on social justice (Lemieux & Allen, 2007). Service learning can also help totransition students from the classroom to field education to employment by providing valuable experiential education in real community settings (Kropf & Tracey, 2002). A survey of baccalaureate programs accredited by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) indicated that nearly 80% of the responding programs required service learning componentsin one more or more classes (Schelbe et al., 2014). Specifically, some applicationsof service learning in SW have included teaching gerontological concepts tostudents through 30 hours of exposure to adult daycare and continuing care facilities (Singleton, 2007), improving the ecology of the community through student engagement in environmental tasks (Lucas-Darby, 2011), blending masters and undergraduate students with community stakeholders, people experiencing homelessness, and faculty teams to research whether new temporary emergency housing should be built (Ringstad et al., 2012), and learning policy implementationprocedures by working with senators or local organizations in the development of bills (Mink & Twill, 2012). While the majority of research on service learning focuses on student perspectives, some research has examined faculty motivations and patterns in developing service learning projects. In a survey of more than 200SW faculty, Madden et al. (2014) found that service learning projects were most often utilized in special topics or policy courses. SW faculty reported that the top three benefits of using service learning in courses were (1) student personal development, (2) the application of classroom skills to field sites, and (3) the development of student interpersonal skills. In addition, undergraduate SW programs had the highest usage of service learning projects, while doctoral SW programs had the most infrequent.

The amount of structure inherent in a service learning project can influencethe outcome. When resituating any of the curriculum outside of the traditional classroom and into the community introduces variables that can be difficult to predict, certain guidelines can be implemented in advance to reduce the opportunityfor unpredictability. This type of structured service learning creates multiple opportunities for student learning. Hollis (2002) offers a nine-point guide for creating structured service learning project, including: (1) careful planning of goalswith the community site, (2) student engagement in a formal site orientation, (3) allowing student input in choosing work assignments, (4) student performance of socially relevant and significant work, (5) the assignment of related readings and research projects, (6) the assignment of critically reflective journals, (7) directed in-class discussions, (8) a summative evaluation essay, and (9) feedback from the community/organization in the final student appraisal.

In a primer outlining the best practices for implementing service learning, Howard (2001) notes that the nature of service learning forces students to, "not only master academic material as in traditional courses, but also learn how to learn from unstructured and ill-structured community experiences and merge that learning with the

learning from other course resources" (p. 16). It is for this reason that he suggests that faculty carefully create as much structure as possible when creating service learning parameters for students, such as which types of communityorganizations will provide the right type of learning environments, and which will not. Projects, activities, sites, scope of work, and goals must align with the course objectives, because meeting those is ultimately the purpose of service learning.

Barriers to the Implementation of Service learning

Despite the many benefits of service learning, there are some drawbacks and barriers to implementation. According to Madden et al. (2014),the top three barriers preventing SW faculty from implementing service learning projects are the (1) lack of faculty reward, (2) complicated logistics, and (3) lack offamiliarity with the community. Incorporating service learning into a course can be time-consuming and challenging for the faculty member. For faculty on the tenure-track, there may not be a strong return on that time investment in relation to tenure and promotion decisions. Thus, many faculty may decide not to incorporateservice learning into their courses in order to focus on other, activities that may require less time and logistical planning. Organizing a large-scale service learningopportunity for students with a community partner also requires faculty to have connections and partnerships with agencies in the community. For newer faculty, this is especially problematic, as they may be unfamiliar with and/or disconnectedfrom the local community.

Despite a general interest in service learning from students, not all student reactions are positive. In an analysis of more than 2,200 student responses about service learning in courses across the curriculum at a large urban university, most of the complaints revolved around the service learning sites and resources. Students indicated that sites were often ill-prepared for students, students were not well- trained before approaching their assigned sites, and there was often not enough timeto truly connect with the community (Rosing et al., 2010). Additionally, student personality and their level of course involvement or project buy-in may dictate an individual's level of service learning engagement. Despite efforts by faculty, some students just may not connect with the project (Sessa et al., 2010).

While many educators value service learning for the benefits to the community and learning experience for the students, it is important to remember that service learning does not occur in a vacuum. Some may criticize the approachfor immersing students in a potentially biased agenda. It is important to rememberthat "service learning, or any pedagogy, is not a value-free, objectivistic endeavor,and that the act of using service learning is also a philosophical, if not political, statement" (Phillips, 2011, p. 11). One conceptualization, from a student enrichment perspective, states that service learning has:

> a distinct focus on developing students (a) as learners practicing andreflecting on skills, (b) as critical citizens simultaneously existing in and investigating relationships between people, values, and social issues in their communities, or (c) as informed change agents focused on exposing and alleviating systemic disparity. (Britt, 2012, p. 85)

On the other hand, service learning goals vary across discipline and educators, and may not be politically motivated or biased. In a study of service learning usage among SW faculty, social justice goals were not among the top motivations for using service learning as a learning strategy in the course (Cronley et al., 2014). However, as Twill et al. (2011) note, the nature of service learning in the SW field nearly universally puts students in contact with vulnerable populations. They suggest that this is an opportunity for students to focus on social injustices while putting into practice

the values of the discipline. It is also important to remember that while the service learning project itself may not be social justice focused, the field of SW is concerned with social justice and this value is inherent in all SW courses and programs.

Description of the Course

This paper is focused on a semi-structured service learning project implemented in an introductory master's level social work course at a small, public University in the Midwest. The social work program admits approximately 60 MSW students each year on two different tracks: an advanced standing track (for those students who enter the MSW program with a BSW) and the traditional track(for those who enter the MSW program with a different undergraduate degree). This course is taken in the first semester of the first year for the traditional MSW track. The majority of students in this track have not taken social work courses before (or perhaps just an introduction to social work course as an undergraduate),and many have limited work experience in the social work field. These students have undergraduate degrees in psychology, sociology, criminal justice, and other fields, but have chosen to pursue an MSW and become a social worker. The course is designed to provide foundational knowledge about generalist practice at the graduate level. Students are introduced to the profession, including theoretical perspectives and approaches, the National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics, and the potential roles and key skills of a generalist social worker. These students are in the first semester of a two-year program and do not enter their required social work field practicum until their second year. Thus, this service learning project was created to help orient students to the profession, to help them gain real world experience, and to allow them to develop a desired skill or knowledge base related to the profession. It also helps orient students to the local nonprofit sector and field of social work, preparing them for their social work field education experience in later semesters. Thirty-four MSW students in two sections of the Foundations of Social Work Practice course completed the service learning project and make up the sample for this study.

Service Learning Approach used in this Course

A less structured service learning approach was used in this course which allowed student to develop their own projects. Unlike traditional, more structured service learning (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996; Hollis, 2002) where the instructor organizes one or two larger projects in which the students participate, this semi-structured approach asks students to set their own learning goals and to find a local nonprofit or social service agency to partner with in pursuit of this goal, giving back to the agency in some way in the process. For example, students who identified a learning goal of improving communication skills might work with a local agency to provide a seriesof lectures or workshops on an identified topic; students who wish to gain experience working with older adults may work with an assisted living facility or nursing home to organize social events for the residents; students who want to understand fundraising in nonprofit organizations may find a community partner and hold a fundraiser or donation drive. This approach avoids the barriers previously identified by Madden et al. (2014) and aims to address Sessa et al. (2010) assertion that students just may not connect with a project organized by the faculty member. This approach follows the guidance of Hollis (2002) for a structured service learning experience (and reflective work in the classroom), but does put more onus on the student, appropriate at the graduate level.It also allows students to design a project of interest that builds their own knowledge and skills related to social work and course objectives.

Students were informed about the project during the initial class meeting and

provided with assignment guidelines and an overview of the goals and motivations behind service learning, as well as its basic requirements, benefits, and limitations. During this class, students were provided with examples of service learning projects in other social work courses and programs and asked to consider their areas of strength and weakness in relation to the course learning objectives. Students were also referred to our campus office of service learning for additional consultation and information, as needed.

The assignment guidelines for the project instructed students to develop a goal related to something they wished to learn about the social work field or a skill they want to enhance or develop. Given that these were new social work students, they lacked experience and/or confidence in many different areas of practice. Students were encouraged to review the course objectives for ideas, and the professor (the first author) provided examples of potential projects and brainstormed with each student individually about his/her interests, desired skills, and competence (or lack thereof) in certain areas of the social work field. Students were encouraged to strengthen areas of weakness or inexperience and/or to confront fears or insecurities through this project; to make the assignment meaningful to them and to focus on something that they truly wanted to develop or learn more about. After developing a learning goal, students were provided with a community resource guide which identified nonprofit and social service agencies in the region. Students selected agencies of interest and reached out to arrange meeting to discuss setting up a service learning project. Students were prepared by the professor for the agency meetings and instructed to discuss agency needs and how/whether their learning goal might be achieved through meeting an agency need. Some students met with two or three agencies before an agreement was reached. After confirming a project, students collaborated with agency staff to create specific objectives for achieving their set goal and helping the agency fulfill their mission or meet certain needs. The time commitment for the project varied depending on the student's goal and the agency's needs; these were unique to each student and negotiated with the agency and professor. Projects had to be approved by the professor before beginning, and the student was also required to complete a contract (created by the professor) with the partnering agency.

Method

Participants

The participants in this study were all first year, first semester MSW students who came into the MSW program without an undergraduate degree in social work. The students had a variety of undergraduate majors, career experiences, and diversity in age (this cohort is typically split between students coming right out of undergraduate education and those who are returning for a graduate degree after working for a few years). As this project was initially designed only as a course project and not a research study, no additional data was collected from the participants in this study (including demographics). Based on the professor's course records only 3 (9%) of the 34 participants were male; thus, in the results, *she* is used to describe all students so as not to identify the participants by gender. Before the project commenced, approval from the university's Institutional Review Board was sought and granted. While students were required to complete the service learning project for the course, informed consent was required for inclusion in the analysis for this paper ($N = 34$).

Data Collection

Once projects were completed at the end of the semester, students wrote reflection papers and created a presentation to give to the class. These artifacts were the data sources for this manuscript. In the reflection paper, students were asked to describe their goal(s) and objectives, to identify and describe their completed project, to discuss how it addressed their goal and met an agency need, and to reflect on their learning during

their interactions with their agency and in completing this assignment. They were also asked to reflect on their experience and provide comments or feedback on the assignment itself. The presentation included the same elements, but also asked them to address how this project was helpful to them and/or how they might build on this experience in the future as social workers.

Analysis

Presentations were transcribed and used, along with the reflection papers, as sources of qualitative data, matched to the respective student by an identification number (ID). Thus, each ID had a paper and a presentation, and both were analyzed. The results presented here are for both sources of data; we do not differentiate between sources for themes or quotes provided below but do indicate percentage of the sample who reported a specific theme/topic. All data (papers and presentation transcripts) was compiled and coded for emerging themes or topics by the authors using qualitative techniques developed by Strauss and Corbin (2008). Open coding was used to generate a list of broad topics or categories discussed by the students. Thematic analysis was then used to group data across sources based on these topics. Only the most common themes are reported here.

<p align="center">**Results**</p>

A brief summary is provided of the main themes derived from the data: freedom to choose own project, skill development, applying course content/learning about the field, and contributing to agency. Student quotes are provided here. Quotes were selected based on their representativeness of the theme.

Freedom to Choose Own Project

Most ($n = 30$, 88%) students commented about the freedom they had to choose their service learning project; some ($n = 22$) students embraced this freedom, while others ($n = 8$) felt overwhelmed by the possibilities. Several students reported they liked having the opportunity to choose something that interested them or that they wanted to learn more about. This enabled students to be creative and think outside the box or to work on a skill they felt they were lacking. As one student wrote in her reflection paper:

> I love that we got to choose our own project. I've done service learning before, but we all had to work on the same project. This was different because we all had different projects, but they served the same purpose and we were able to discuss them together.

This student was happy with the opportunity to select a project that was meaningful to her and was reflecting on the fact that while each student was doing something different, each project related to the class in some way and they were used as discussion prompts in the classroom setting.

Other students commented negatively on the openness of this assignment, noting that the freedom to create their own project was overwhelming and they did not know where to start. As one student said, "The biggest challenge of my service learning project was just trying to decide what to do." These students reported needing more direction, especially in terms of finding a local agency with which to work. One student commented:

> It was difficult for me to begin to know what I would do for this project. Being relatively new to the field of social work, and to the area, I was not entirely sure [of the] needs of the various agencies…and in what ways I could help them. Furthermore, I found it difficult for me to really think about what I knew I didn't know.

For this student new to the community and to the profession, coming up with a goal, an agency with which to partner, and a project was overwhelming. Not knowing

what she did not know, as she put it, impacted her ability to get started.

Despite these challenges, one student who struggled with getting started with the project wrote in her reflection paper, "I am grateful for this project and thefact that it forced me to get out of my comfort zone." She described that she had some social work experience but selected a new population she had never worked with for this project – children with disabilities. After completing her project, she reported:

> I now have a greater capacity of understanding people with disabilities andI feel more at ease being around them. Familiarity with any situation can take away the anxiety or unease, and I can say that this experience provided this.

Skill Development

Many students (*n* = 32*;* 94%) reported on specific skillsthat they developed from this project. After completing a project which included fundraising and a donation drive, one student reported: "From this experience, I now feel more comfortable advocating for people." She went on to say she felt learning this by experience was better and more effective than reading about it or discussing it in class. One student commented on the networking skills they learned and the opportunities that the project provided for connecting with others in the field. Another student wrote, "I think this [project] will be beneficial to myself andmy career as a social worker. [The project has left] me feeling more confident in the services I will provide for my…clients in the future." Likewise, another studentcommented that she "gained more confidence [in working with clients] due to the increase in knowledge of the resources" that she could provide. Many students reflected on certain skills that they used and developed during their projects, including advocacy, communication, and networking, all important in social work practice.

Applying Course Content/Learning about the Field

Closely aligned with specific skill development, but taking a broader perspective, many students (*n* = 24;71%) commented on the fact that they were applying or testing out course contentin the real world and learning about the field of social work as a whole. One studentcommented, "I am getting a better picture of what goes on inside a shelter and how it runs day-to-day." Some students commented about specific topics or skills we had learned and practiced in class and how they later applied those in their projects. For example, one student who worked with teens for her project talked about relationship-building skills and how developing rapport early on was important. While we talked about those skills in class, she had the opportunity to apply and use them through this project. Students also reported feeling like this service learning experience providedthem with a snapshot of what social work is and/or can be. For example, one student wrote in the reflection paper: "When I started the MSW program, I felt confident I knew a lot about the marginalized, homeless, and vulnerable populations, and I thought I could make a positive difference." This student wenton to say how much she had learned from the course, her service learning agency and project, and engaging with her peers in the class. She further added that she now felt "challenged to take a more active hands-on approach to make a difference"as a social worker.

Some students chose projects in completely new areas or specializations ofsocial work practice. This resulted in broadening the scope of social work practicefor these students. For example, one student who did have some case managementexperience chose to work closely with the IT department at a local nonprofit agencythat provides counseling and support services. She wrote, "This project was such an awesome opportunity. I truly learned a different side of things and I have a lot more respect for our IT department at work." Understanding what goes on behindthe scenes helped this student get a better sense of the importance of all departmentswithin an agency, not just the frontline or clinical staff. Another student who worked with an unfamiliar agency

and target population wrote, "I have a newfoundrespect for this organization and their staff members." Likewise, one student wrote about her experience working with a temporary emergency shelter and how the project increased her knowledge of the field as a whole. She reflected on this in her final paper, commenting that it solidified her choice to go into the field of socialwork.

I walked away from this project with a greater appreciation for the work that goes on in shelters. It takes a lot of patience and care to deal with the ups and downs of shelter work, and to not lose sight of the reason for beingthere.

Contributing to Agency

All students completed their service learning projects at a local nonprofit or social service organization or agency. Almost all ($n = 33$; 97%) students reported feeling that they contributed to or helped their agency in a concrete way. Comments related to this theme ranged from supervisorsexplicitly acknowledging the student's work to a feeling of satisfaction upon completing the project to a tangible outcome produced (e.g., donations received). Many projects culminated with a tangible final product, and students took pride inthose products and felt useful to the agency. One student remarked:

[The site supervisor's] appreciation boosted my confidence and assured meI selected the right agency for my service learning project. After [the project] was finished, I felt a huge sense of accomplishment and motivatedto start another [project] soon.

Discussion

The results of this qualitative study demonstrate the positive aspects of this service learning project for first year MSW students in an introductory course. By engaging these students in the field, they learned social work skills, increased their knowledgebase, were able to apply and translate classroom learning to the real world, were exposed to the field of social work (some for the first time), and were able to directly contribute to an agency in serving the local community. The themespresented here demonstrate the impact that experiential learning can have, even atthe graduate level.

Many service learning projects are highly prescriptive and coordinated between the faculty and a contact at a local agency before the course begins. This approach requires a lot of faculty time, planning, and coordination, as well as numerous connections in the community. Not all SW faculty have connections with local agencies and social workers; newer faculty especially may have limitedconnections and may not have strong ties to the local service community. Additionally, faculty time is limited and structuring a service learning project is notalways prioritized or possible. Using the semi-structured approach described here(i.e., letting students determine their own projects with guidance), prevents the faculty member from having to arrange and coordinate the service learning projectthemselves, and addresses two of the barriers to implementing service learning as identified by Madden et al. (2014): complicated logistics and a lack of familiarity with the community. While faculty time is used working individually with each student on his/her project, it is not significantly different from working with a student on any other individual assignment, and likely less complicated than settingup other structured projects for the class. Whereas the students were given some latitude to choose their sites and tasks, this service learning project adhered to the other criteria of structured service learning (i.e., meaningful projects, in-class discussions, reflective essays, summative essays, community site evaluations)suggested by Hollis (2002).

This approach also allows students the freedom to set goals and choose projects based on their interests and experience, personalizing the assignment for maximum learning potential and student engagement. As noted by Sessa et al. (2010), student buy-

in impacts engagement in the project. When students plan, develop, and implement the project themselves, buy-in is likely to be higher. This approach also addresses some of the barriers previously identified by Rosing et al.(2010), such as sites not being prepared for students. Because students approach and work with the agency directly, they are able to ask questions and actively collaborate to construct the project, instead of trying to fit into a project that was designed without them. By providing guidance, support, and encouragement for students to form their own projects, students' creativity and personal interests are the focus and allow for increased potential learning.

As Maich and Hall (2011) noted, service learning often builds student confidence as they transition classroom-based skills to into real-world setting. This boost of confidence was reflected in student comments and is especially important in the first semester at the MSW level, as students are learning about the profession and field of social work. Students commented on the applicability of their projects to classroom discussions and how this helped them to better understand course topics and the field and profession of social work. Seeing these concepts in the real world versus a classroom is helpful to students. Student reflections on their feelings of contributing to their agency helped them recognize the skills they have and/or need to further develop to be competent social workers in the field. This is consistent with the benefits of service learning in social work as identified by Madden et al. (2014).

Limitations

This paper provides a reflection on experiences with a semi-structured service learning project in an introductory graduate SW course. Service learning is gaining momentum as a pedagogical practice at the graduate level (Grassetti et al.,2020; Harris, 2017) and our findings demonstrate what can be gained from implementing service learning into the graduate curriculum, especially for new graduate students who do not have much experience in the field or profession. Although these findings are encouraging for those interested in implementing service learning, there are several limitations to consider. First, the sample size is small, and the study utilized students' self-reported qualitative data which was then analyzed and interpreted by their professor and a colleague. While student names were removed before data was analyzed and the professor made every attempt to remain objective, it is possible that there was some bias present in this interpretation. Similarly, the students were reflecting on an assignment in the course that the professor had created and implemented and that they were completing for a grade. While students were aware that data would not be analyzed until after the course was finished and grades submitted, students may have felt pressure to emphasize the positive aspects of their experiential learning and downplay the negatives. Some negative comments or complaints were received, and these comments were largely related to the challenges of selecting their own projects, as noted in the findings section.

Another limitation is the limited knowledge of the sample itself. It is unknown, for example, whether this sample had previous experience with service learning, how long the students had been out of school before returning for a graduate degree, or whether they had worked in the field in which they completed their service learning project. These factors may have played a role in their comfort level, performance, and feedback on the project.

A final limitation to the project itself was that all students completed different projects and thus, there was no central theme, skill, or knowledge base for the project. Therefore, it was difficult to assess class-wide learning or measure progress within a certain area or skill given that each student had an individual learning goal. All projects varied, and some were more successful than others. The professor had little control over

the type of projects students engaged in, the agencysupport and mentoring provided, and the final outcome of the service learningproject. This is a limitation of the approach itself and may have impacted the process and data.

Directions for Future Research

Since this study examined a small group of students in two sections of onecourse at a university, additional research should be done to further investigate student engagement and learning outcomes from service learning in various contexts and settings. Future research could incorporate a pre/post survey to ask about students' expectations and understanding of topics related to the service learning project. For example, a group of researchers has recently published a scaleto assess student learning from service learning or community-based projects called the Community-Based Learning Impact Scale (CBLIS; Carlisle et al., 2017). This scale could be used to assess student learning from immersionin community projects and could be very beneficial to the study of service learningin the graduate classroom.

These students reported feeling the time allotment for the completion of the project (the whole 16-week semester) was adequate. No students commented on the time commitment or workload this project required outside of the assigned classroom time. This was surprising as time constraints are a common complaint among students in general, specifically related to service learning projects. While the time invested varied from student to student, all students reported feeling that they had enough time to complete their projects during the course without being unduly pressured. Additional research could explore how the time constraints of the academic semester impact student satisfaction or feelings of accomplishment. Especially for students enrolled in bi-term courses or trimesters, the time pressuresmay manifest differently.

In conclusion, service learning is a valuable pedagogical practice for SW students. The increased confidence, coupled with learning experiences, may lead to increased student retention, greater insight among students about career aspirations, and even potential connections with future employers. As one studentnoted, the service learning project provided her with networking and learning opportunities she would not have had in the traditional classroom. Departments and universities are certainly interested in these positive outcomes for students. Thus, university support of service learning endeavors may help faculty to overcome barriers, including a perceived lack of support for service learning activities, difficulty building community connections, and various other logistical barriers, in order to incorporate service learning into their courses. The less structured approach to service learning presented here focuses on student freedomand choice to develop their own learning goals with the goal of making the learningexperience more meaningful and individualized.

References

Bringle, R. G., & Hatcher, J. A. (1996). Implementing service learning in higher education. *The Journal of Higher Education*, *67*(2), 221-239.

Britt, L. L. (2012). Why we use service learning: A report outlining a typology of three approaches to this form of communication pedagogy. *Communication Education*, *61*(1), 80-88.

Brogan, S. M., Gilles, E. E., & Woodard, T. J. (2014). Corresponding with the past, writing the future: A community-based service learning project. *Kentucky Journal of Communication, 33*(1), 12-25.

Carlisle, S. K., Gourd, K., Rajkhan, S., & Nitta, K. (2017). Assessing the impact of community-based learning on students: The Community Based Learning Impact Scale (CBLIS). *Journal of Service learning in HigherEducation*, *6*(1), 4-22.

Coulter-Kern, R. G., Coulter-Kern, P. E., Schenkel, A. A., Walker, D. R., & Fogle, K. L. (2013). Improving student's understanding of career decision-making through service learning. *College Student Journal*, *47*(2), 306-311.

Cronley, C., Madden, E., Davis, J., & Preble, K. (2014). Factors influencing service learning utilization in social work: Results from an online survey of faculty. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work, 34*(2), 147-166.

Droppa, D. C. (2007). Developing student competence in policy practice through policy projects in human service organizations. *Journal of Baccalaureate Social Work*, *12*(2), 83-97.

Grassetti, S. N., Solic, K., & Getz, Z. (2020). Bridging the science-to-service gap: Service learning in graduate-level psychology education. *Teaching of Psychology*, 1-7.

Harris, S. C. (2017). Graduating to the future of SLCE: An introduction to the special section on graduate education, service learning, and community engagement. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, *24*(1), 64-71.

Hatcher, J. A., & Studer, M. L. (2015). Service learning and philanthropy: Implications for course design. *Theory into Practice*, *54*(1), 11-19.

Hollis, S. A. (2002). Capturing the experience: Transforming community service into service learning. *Teaching Sociology*, *30*(2), 200-213.

Howard, J. (2001). *Service learning course design workbook.* OCSL Press. Hughes, C., Steinhorn, R., Davis, B., Beckrest, S., Boyd, E., & Cashen, K. (2012). University-based service learning: Relating mentoring experiences to issues

of poverty. *Journal of College Student Development*, *53*(6), 767-782.

Kropf, N. P., & Tracey, M. (2002). Service learning as a transition into foundation field. *Advances in Social Work, 3*(1), 60-71.

Lemieux, C. M., & Allen, P. D. (2007). Service learning in social work education: The state of knowledge, pedagogical practicalities, and practice conundrums. *Journal of Social Work Education*, *43*(2), 309-326.

Lucas-Darby, E. T. (2011). The new color is green: Social work practice and service learning. *Advances in Social Work*, *12*(1), 113-125.

Madden, E., Davis, J., & Cronley, C. (2014). A comparative analysis of service learning in social work and criminal justice education. *Teaching in Higher Education,* 1-14.

Maich, K., & Hall, C. (2011). Out in the field: Experiencing a research journey through a community-based pilot project. *College Quarterly, 14(2),* 1-19.

Mink, T., & Twill, S. (2012). Using service learning to teach a social work policy course. *Journal of Community Engagement and Scholarship*, *5*(1), 5-13.

Nino, M., Cuevas, M., & Loya, M. (2011). Transformational effects of service learning in a university developed community-based agency. *Advances in Social Work*, *12*(1), 33-48.

Opatrny, M. & Statham, A. (2014). Exploring the impact of service learning in students' mastery of sociology and social work learning outcomes. In A. J. Trevino & K. M. McCormack (Eds.), *Service sociology and academic engagement in social problems* (pp.103-119). Ashgate Publishing Company.

Phillips, A. (2011). Service learning and social work competency-based education: A" goodness of fit"? *Advances in Social Work*, *12*(1), 1-20.

Postlethwait, A. (2012). Service learning in an undergraduate social work research course. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, *32*(3), 243-256.

Remley, D. (2012). Re-considering the range of reciprocity in community-based research and service learning: You don't have to be an activist to give back. *Community Literacy Journal*, *6*(2), 115-132.

Ringstad, R., Leyva, V. L., Garcia, J., & Jasek-Rysdahl, K. (2012). Creating space for marginalized voices: Re-focusing service learning on community change and social justice. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, *32*(3), 268-283.

Rosing, H., Reed, S., Ferrari, J. R., & Bothne, N. J. (2010). Understanding student complaints in the service learning pedagogy. *American Journal of*

Community Psychology, *46*(3-4), 472-481.

Schelbe, L., Petracchi, H. E., & Weaver, A. (2014). Benefits and challenges of service learning in baccalaureate social work programs. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, *34*(5), 480-495.

Sessa, V. I., Natale, D. K., London, M., & Hopkins, C. A. (2010). How students learn in a service learning course: A quasi-experimental field study of generative learning. *Journal of Community Engagement & Higher Education, 1*(2), 1-20.

Singleton, J. L. (2007). Taking the class to the community with service learning: Gerontological macro social work practice. *Journal of Gerontological Social Work*, *50*(1-2), 105-118.

Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (2008). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory (3rd ed.).* Sage Publications.

Tilton, J. (2013). Rethinking youth voice and institutional power: Reflections from inside a service learning partnership in a California juvenile hall. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *35*(8), 1189-1196.

Twill, S. E., Elpers, K., & Lay, K. (2011). Achieving HBSE competencies through service learning. *Advances in Social Work*, *12*(1), 49-62.