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**SERVICE LEARNING FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE MAJORS ATTENDING COLLEGES  
IN RURAL REGIONS**

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**ABSTRACT**

Service learning is a pedagogical and learning strategy that integrates the use of community service accompanied with classroom instruction to enrich learning experiences at high education institutions. The following article synthesizes prior service learning literature and provides a qualitative analysis of the experiences undergraduate students had when participating in service learning activities in rural regions. Implications for future research and practice are discussed.

**Key Words:** service learning, rural, higher education.

**1. INTRODUCTION**

Service learning is a pedagogical and learning strategy that integrates the use of community service accompanied with classroom instruction to enrich learning experiences at high education institutions (Rodriguez & McDaniel, 2019). This combination of hands on learning and traditional classroom teaching methods are used to emphasize civic responsibility to students, while also strengthening their local communities (Rodriguez & McDaniel, 2019; Richard, Keen, Hatcher, & Pease, 2016). Through the use of qualitative methods, this study examines various social science majors taking a service-learning course located at a University in a rural region in the United States. The purpose of this study is to explore the reflections and opportunities obtained from the students' experience of participating in service-learning projects/hours at organizations that are serving rural communities. By focusing on rural environments, this study hopes to emphasize the vitality of understanding how service-learning experiences among social science majors in rural regions differentiate from other regions of the United States.

**2. SERVICE LEARNING**

Service learning is a teaching strategy commonly implemented in higher education institutions that allow students to obtain first hand transformative learning experiences about organizations in their community through community engagement/participation (Lough & Toms, 2018). In theory, this teaching strategy is often reciprocal, meaning both the student and the organization/community they are working in benefit from the experience (Clifford, 2017; Lough & Toms, 2018). This form of experiential learning is often used in social science related fields such as human services, social work, psychology, criminal justice, and sociology in order to provide students with enriching opportunities to learn about their major, while also servicing their community (Bringle, Ruiz, Brown, & Reeb, 2016). Often times, students are enrolled in a University or college level course that places them at a service-learning site within the

community located in the higher intuition resides in (Reed, Rosing, Rosenberg, & Statham, 2019). The students then will complete a minimum number of service hours at their placement site, accompanied by meeting in a weekly course to learn about the types organizations and the community they are serving. Thus, gaining first hand experience while also gaining classroom experience about their community, their field of study, and the specific population/organization they are working with (Salter & Halbert, 2019; Clifford, 2017).

### **3. SERVICE LEARNING IN RURAL ENVIRONMENTS**

Rural environments in the United States offer unique living experiences and challenges that urban and suburban regions do not (Walters, 2020; Branson, 2019; Bills, 2019). Some of these unique living experiences and challenges include lack of resources, lack of technology access, transportation difficulties, lower socio-economic status's, and less organizations to meet diverse needs (Crockett, Carlo, & Temmen, 2016; Bills, 2019; Williams, Martin, & Hess, 2010). Given the unique challenges and life experiences of rural communities, it is essential for high education students to learn about how their fields of interest and consumers operate in rural environments through the implementation of service learning courses. Through the combination of hands of experience and classroom instruction, social science majors are able to learn the unique barriers they may face in their future careers when working in rural environments.

### **4. SOCIAL SCIENCE AND SERVICE LEARNING**

Social science majors come from broad fields of studies that often result in career paths such as human services, social work, education, research, law enforcement, health care, policy, mental health, etc. (Crowe & Bow, 2019; Woodside & McClam, 2016). Given the broad nature of social sciences, many students enter their field of study with uncertainty of what specific niche they would like to pursue as a career path (Hutter & Fiedler, 2019). Studies have also indicated many students in social science related fields do not know of the career path options available to them until they have a chance to experience working in a social science related field or with a specific population (Banach, Foden, & Brooks-Carter, 2019). This hold especially true in rural environments where resources are lacking and students are not exposed to all of the facets of their specific social science career field (Walters, 2020; Steiner & Teasdale, 2019). The implementation of service learning in rural institutions is a possible pathway to allow students to learn more about their career choice interests, community's needs, resources, and their passions for their chosen major.

### **5. METHODS**

Data from this study came from semi-structured interviews derived from undergraduate students who were majoring in social science related studies ( $N = 13$ ). The interviews reflected on the participants' experiences in the service learning course they were currently enrolled in as a requirement for their major. The participants all attended a public University located in a rural region in the United States. The social science majors in the sample included social work, criminal justice, education, political science, and public health. All participants in the study completed their service-learning at agencies located in rural regions related to their chosen social

science related field. All students were asked semi-structured questions that were tailored to reflect on their experiences of service learning specifically in relation to rural environments and communities. The data used for this study came from the participants' answers to the questions (See Table 1)

**Table 1: Semi-Structure Interview Questions**

- 1.) Overall, what were your first impressions when provided with the list of organizations to choose from for your service-learning project?
- 2.) When looking at the duration of your service-learning project, what social needs did you learn about that your assigned organization, population, or community faced
- 3.) Overall, did you enjoy your experience? Why or why not?
- 4.) Do you see your assigned organization or population as a potential career interest for you in the future?

**Sample**

Of the sample ( $N = 13$ ), 11 of them were female and two of them were male. The racial break down of the sample was white ( $n = 1$ ), Hispanic/Latino(a) ( $n = 2$ ), and Black/African American ( $n = 10$ ).

**Data Analysis**

The data analysis employed in this study was a thematic analysis derived from the transcripts of the participants' answer to the set of questions. All transcripts derived from the students' answers of the questions provided to them. Students typed of the answers and submitted them to the researcher. As an added layer of research protection, the researcher assigned a pseudonym for each student in the analyzed transcript and disseminated results. To ensure data quality, each transcript was reviewed for accuracy by at least two different research team members. Comprehensive sets of open codes were identified by the principal investigator and other researchers, and were imported into NVivo, a qualitative research data analysis program. NVivo is a code-based theory-building program that allows primary investigators to discover relationships among codes or build higher-order classifications with in transcripts (Weitzman, 2000; Bills, Okamoto, & Helm, 2016). As an additional validation check, the content of conceptually complex codes was again reviewed and validated by the research team. Once the set of codes were established, a thematic analysis was conducted to identify themes.

**6. RESULTS**

The following themes were uncovered in the thematic analysis: 1) students learning about valuable community resources they did not know about before taking the class; 2) students

learning the needs in rural communities for more community resources; 3) students discovering populations that they enjoyed working with as a future career; 4) and students discovering if their chosen social science field was a potentially good career fit for them or not.

### ***Learning About Rural Community Resources***

One of the identified themes among the participants learning community resources that they did not know existed. Several students learned how many resources there were for children and adults who have special needs.

*Participant “Chris:” “The organization I volunteered for had a dance for people with special needs. I did not know this existed in our county.”*

*Participant “Sally:” “There are so many food banks, even one on campus, which I did not know was available to the public and the students. This is the perfect resource to tell my future clients about when I’m a social worker.”*

*Participant “Susan:” “I did my service-learning placement existed until I was assigned it.”*

### ***Learning the Needs Rural Communities***

Another theme that was identified was the need for more accessibility to social services in rural communities.

*Participant: “Cindy:” “There was a client that we wanted to find a support group for. There were no support groups within a 20 mile radius of us.”*

*Participant “Susan:” “I don’t have an issue with churches providing social services, but I wish there were more non-Christian agencies for our non-Christian clients.”*

*Participant “Greg:” “Many of my clients travel long distances to get to the agency I volunteered for. There were a lot of cancelations because people could not afford the gas money to travel so far.”*

### ***Discovering New Populations of Interest***

Many of the students also learned populations of interest that they did not know they had prior to doing their service learning hours.

*Participant “Ellen:” “When I was first assigned to a homeless shelter, I was upset because I wanted to be placed at a school. I learned to have a heart and a desire to help the homeless population, especially the children.”*

*Participant “Greg:” “Everyone seems to want to work with children when they go into social work. I still want to work with children, but I want to work with the Autism community now.”*

*Participant “Sara:” “Doing my hours at a nursing really opened my eyes to a population that I did not know I was passionate about.”*

*Participant “Cassie:” “I learned that I was very uncomfortable with the population I worked with. Some of the older men I encountered scared me.”*

### ***Discovering if Social Sciences as a Career Fit***

The last theme that was identified was the students learned if their placement was a good fit and a possible future career choice for them.

*Participant “Ellen:” “Now that I have work experience with two different populations and two different agencies, I know that I will make a good social worker.”*

*Participant “Cassie:” “I really did not like my placement because the clients scared me. Working with people who are homeless or doing drugs is not something I want to ever do again.”*

*Participant “Sara:” “I hope I get to do my social work practicum at the same nursing home I was at because I enjoy working with the elderly.”*

*Participant “Greg:” “When I first came to college, I was torn between being a teacher or social worker. I know that social work is a good fit for me.”*

*Participant “Cindy:” “My service learning experience makes me confident in my ability to do public health or possibly mental health.”*

## **7. DISCUSSION**

As indicated by several past studies, service learning experiences and courses in higher education is an imperative pedagogical method to provide students with hands on learning experiences, while also helping their local communities (Bringle et al., 2016; Clifford, 2017; Reed et al., 2019). Concurring with results of prior studies, the results of this analysis also indicated that the students gained insightful learning experiences related to learning about their local community resources, the needs of rural communities, discovering new populations of interests, and reflecting on possible career paths for themselves. However, these studies add to prior literature by emphasizing the vital need for service learning in rural regions due to the unique learning experiences that derive specifically from rural communities.

### ***Learning About Community Resources***

As discussed by Crocket and colleagues (2016), many social science students in the United States are unaware of the resources available in their local communities. These findings hold especially true in rural communities where resources are sparse. Past studies indicate that rural regions in the United States have significantly less community resources than urban or suburban regions (Walters, 2020). Thus, the findings of Walters (2010) emphasize the need for students in social science related majors residing in rural areas to learn more about their

communities and the resources they have to offer. The findings of Walters (2020) concur with this study because they further demonstrate that it is essential for higher education researchers to analyze service learning benefits in rural regions.

Results of this study indicated that three of the students did not even know their organizations existed until they were placed there to complete their hours for the course requirements. This finding is essential because it demonstrates how many individuals who live in rural regions are unaware of the different resources that are available in their community. Since many social science majors end up working in helping professions (Crowe & Boe, 2019), it is vital for social science majors to understand the resources available to them in their rural communities.

### ***Learning About Rural Community Needs***

The theme in relation to learning about rural community needs was very similar to the find theme of learning about community resources. Although the students learned in class that rural communities have less resources than more populated regions, the students did not seem to realize the severity of the lack of resources. Many of the students recognized that there were some clients that could not receive services due to the limitations related to living in a rural environment. For example, participant “Cindy” learned that one of her consumers did not have an appropriate resource for her needs within a 20-mile radius of her. A similar finding derived from participant “Greg.” Participant “Greg” encountered a client who did not have enough gas money to travel to the services he needed due to the lack of public transportation and the client’s socio-economic status. All of these learning experiences are very unique to urban communities due to a lack of resources and public transit (Walters, 2020). Thus, emphasizing the importance that students take service learning classes in rural environments in order to understand the difficulties consumers face when trying to access resources.

### ***Discovering New Populations of Interests or Disinterest***

Although there are several unfortunate eye opening experiences that occur when conducting service learning in rural environments, the findings of this study demonstrate that students were able to learn more about various populations they may be interested in working in or may not be interested in working with. When referring back to the study conducted by Hutter and Fiedler (2019), several social science majors enter a field without having prior knowledge of what population they would like to work with as a career. This is often due to not having the opportunity to be exposed to very many groups of people due to the growing up in a rural in environment (Walters, 2020).

The findings of this study demonstrate that the advantage of service learning is students were able to discover what populations they felt comfortable with and what populations they did not feel comfortable with. For example, participant “Greg” learned that he had a special interest for the Autism Community due to his rural service-learning placement. On the other hand, participant “Cassie” learned at her placement that she did not feel comfortable working with older men at her service learning location. Although one experience was positive and the other

was negative, the service learning opportunities were essential in this study order to help these students recognize what populations they are able going to be comfortable with in their future careers,

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