Leveraging HIPs to Enhance Student Wellbeing: Evidence from Academic Service-Learning

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Academic Service-Learning

In academic service-learning (SL) courses, students deepen and apply academic knowledge while addressing a real-world community need through projects or placements, coupled with critical reflection. As a well-known High-Impact Practice (Kuh, 2008, 2013), SL research already clearly demonstrates potential for supporting two of the Boyer 2030 provocations: "world readiness" and "teaching… using evidence-informed pedagogies." Based on evidence from one large, Carnegie community-engagement classified, public research university in the southeast US, we posit that SL also supports a third provocation: nurturing mental health and well-being (cf. Brewer, 2023).

Student Resilience

Resilience entails being able to regain or sustain levels of healthy functioning following exposure to adversity by using individual, community, and societal resources. It is an important predictive and protective factor to help students succeed personally and academically. Although studied in psychology and human development, no research has directly investigated how SL might influence college student resilience, despite conceptual arguments (Daniels et al., 2015; Mercer, 2010; Swaner, 2007) that SL should do so.

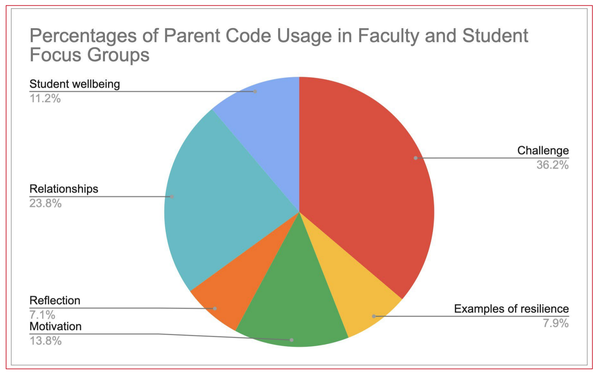
Data

End of Course Survey Item	**Total** (n=530) Fall 2021-Spring 2023	
The service-learning component of this course helped me develop resilience.	Strongly Agree:	**47.4%**
	Agree:	**35.7%**
	Neutral:	13.0%
	Disagree:	2.3%
	Strongly Disagree:	1.7%
The service-learning component of this course enhanced my mental or emotional well-being.	Strongly Agree:	**38.7%**
	Agree:	**32.8%**
	Neutral:	19.6%
	Disagree:	6.5%
	Strongly Disagree:	2.5%

Focus Groups: Participants & Methodology

Qualitative investigation through **one-hour focus groups** via Zoom (IRB approved)

- **17 faculty** who taught a **service-learning course within the prior 2 years** were interviewed, across **5 focus groups**
- **8 students** who took a **service-learning course within the prior 2 years** were interviewed, across **3 focus groups**



Findings

We found **five key themes** on how students and faculty explained SL and resilience:

(1) SL allows students access to models of resilience, in peers, the instructor, and/or community partners;

(2) the less-hierarchical student-faculty relationships typical of SL allows students and faculty to get to know each other in more authentic ways (in particular when the instructor is on site during service), leading to greater trust, sharing and activation of resources;

(3) the complexities inherent in community-based work naturally create challenges (or even "failures") that students work to overcome;

(4) the accountability of SL to external stakeholders and its "real-world" impacts further motivate students to persevere to accomplish these challenges; and

(5) SL provides a context for reflection that helps students understand that they are developing resilience, particularly when explicitly focused on overcoming obstacles and demonstrating mastery.

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Discussion

Motivation has been hypothesized as necessary to develop resilience (e.g., Martin, 2002; Resnick, 2018). Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2020) posits that motivation and behavior are based in needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. S-L courses have been shown to provide motivation-enhancing experiences for students through this model (Levesque-Bristol et al., 2010), and for our study we suggest:

- Instructor, peer and community connection; & reflection → relatedness
- Choice and support; doing work for community; & reflection → autonomy
- Appropriate levels of challenge; real-world impacts of service; & reflection / feedback supporting growth mindset → competence

As many of the elements and themes from our study of SL are also present across HIPs (Kuh, 2013), future research may investigate the extent to which other HIPs also contribute to student wellbeing and resilience.

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