

Service projects increase learning, social impact for undergrads

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Service learning involves the incorporation of community service into a course as a requirement for credit or graduation. In the service learning model, students participate in "real life" and hands-on activities while also working within the community. Researchers T.M. Waliczek and J.M. Zajicek reported on a study of service learning integrated into a university-level horticulture course in *HortTechnology*. The team found that involvement in service learning changed students' opinions regarding community involvement and also increased their understanding of course material.

Proponents of service learning say the experiences enhance learning and improve students' [academic achievement](#), civic attitudes, and social values. Additionally, supporters of the methodology believe that it improves "town and gown" relationships while linking academic ideas with practical applications. Opponents of the methodology cite drawbacks that include time constraints for students and instructors, and the tendency for service projects to distract students from academics. Some opponents argue that service learning promotes technical rather than theoretical learning.

To ascertain the impact of service learning on undergraduate horticulture students, Waliczek and Zajicek incorporated service projects into an undergraduate landscape design course. Students were taught the process of landscape design using real-life activities that included developing designs for campus gardens, the city post office, neighborhood parks, the campus childcare center, city road median areas, and the city

women's shelter.

The team developed a [survey tool](#) to measure how students felt about service learning as a means to learn skills in class and to measure their perceptions of community involvement and [social impact](#). Currently enrolled students and alumni from five classes taught in a similar manner in previous years were surveyed. Results from the study showed that students felt more positive about community involvement after the course compared with before the course; students rated their feelings of social impact and learning course material above the neutral levels in both categories.

Other differences were found between the responses of alumni and those of current students, with alumni feeling more positive about how well they learned course material compared to current students. Alumni provided responses such as: "Without this kind of experience in the field, it would be much harder for students pursuing this profession to learn what it takes to be successful in the real world." Another alumnus wrote: "I currently own a landscape design business. This design class was crucial in building my confidence and expanding my awareness."

"Past research has found that students appear to perceive more benefits from service-learning experiences if they have the opportunity to reflect on the experiences with peers or their professors. Because alumni have had more time to reflect and process the past course experience, they may have noted the benefits of those experiences more", Waliczek and Zajicek observed.

The authors said that the research shows that service-learning activities teach course content and help [students](#) become aware of their potential to impact the community as they move into their careers. They recommended that more opportunities for service learning be incorporated into horticulture curricula.

More information: horttech.ashspublications.org/...nt/abstract/20/5/934

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