

Virginia Commonwealth University

2014-2015 Service-Learning Impact Measure Report

May 2015



VCU

VIRGINIA COMMONWEALTH UNIVERSITY

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Executive Summary

During fall and spring semesters of the 2014-2015 academic year, the service-learning office implemented the VCU SLIM (Service-Learning Impact Measure) for students using REDCap. The electronic survey was sent to all 2,994 students enrolled for credit in service-learning courses during those semesters, and 783 students (26%) completed the survey. This represents an increase of 7% from the previous (2013-2014) academic year.

Findings

Course Demographics: There were a total of 117 distinct service-learning courses offered during the fall and spring semesters. There were 92 instructors of whom 17% were tenured and 12% were tenure track. 70% of instructors were ineligible for tenure or adjunct instructors. 29% of instructors were male and 71% were female.

Student Demographics: 80% of respondents that disclosed their student status were undergraduates while nearly 20% were graduate or professional students. Nearly 22% of respondents were male, 76% of respondents were female. Less than 1% were transgender. Nearly 2% of students chose not to disclose their gender. 55% of respondents identified their racial background as white, 17% were black, nearly 8% were Asian, nearly 7% were Hispanic, nearly 7% identified as biracial or multiracial. Less than 1% identified as Hawaiian/Pacific Islander. Native American and International each made up less than 1% of respondents each. Nearly 5% of respondents chose not to identify their racial background. Of the undergraduates who responded 36% indicated that they are first-generation college and 34% of undergraduates indicated that they are Pell grant recipients.

Types of Community Partners Served: Nearly 44% of respondents had their placements in an educational setting or with organizations that serve youth. Environmental agencies represented 11% of placements, while 23% of students were placed at health organizations. 4% served at art-related organizations. 16% of placements fell into a variety of other categories.

Intent to Continue Serving: When asked whether they have any desire or plans to continue serving at the location where they had their service placement, 31% said “yes.” Another 44% said “maybe,” and 25% said “no.” This response pattern clearly indicates the potential impact that service-learning has for community partners in terms of future volunteer service.

Reflection: Reflection is a required component of all service-learning courses that takes place in various forms. Students were asked to select all the methods of reflection used in their course. Nearly 48% of students completed journals, 71% completed formal papers, nearly 50% completed class presentations, 69% participated in class discussions, 21% did community presentations, nearly 19% completed blogs, 19% did interviews with service receivers, 13% interviewed their professor or TA, while 7% completed other activities ranging from wikis to digital stories.

Benefits of Reflection: The survey asks students to rate the degree to which they found reflection a beneficial aspect of the course. Ratings are on a 7-point scale, where 1=NOT BENEFICIAL AT ALL and 7=VERY BENEFICIAL. For each of the outcomes, the average rating was 5 or greater. Detailed descriptive statistics for each item can be found in the table below.

	N	Mean Rating (7-point scale)	SD
How beneficial to your learning were the reflection activities/assignments of this class?	771	5.26	1.72
How beneficial to your learning was the community service component of this class?	767	5.88	1.551
How beneficial to your learning were your interactions with the instructor of the class?	768	5.71	1.634
How beneficial to your learning were your interactions with the other students in the class?	764	5.59	1.614

Service-Learning Outcomes: The survey asks students to rate the degree to which their service-learning class helped them develop specific skills. Ratings are on a 7-point scale, where 1=NOT AT ALL and 7=VERY MUCH. For each of the outcomes, the average rating was 5 or greater. Detailed descriptive statistics for each item can be found in the table below.

	N	Mean Rating (7-point scale)	SD
As a result of this class I am better able to...			
Connect my learning to societal problems or issues.	777	5.81	1.476
Examine the strengths and weaknesses of my own views on a topic or issue.	777	5.75	1.532
Be more aware of local, state, national, or global issues that need to be addressed.	768	5.78	1.528
Be more aware of some of my own biases and prejudices.	775	5.53	1.671
Work effectively in a group where people from different backgrounds feel welcomed and included.	774	5.95	1.423
Clarify my career or professional goals.	773	5.41	1.792
Be an active and informed citizen.	775	5.66	1.576
Consider different cultural perspectives when evaluating social problems.	773	5.77	1.567
Be more committed to using the knowledge and skills I have gained in college to help address issues in society.	768	5.86	1.479

Be a role model for people in the community.	772	5.82	1.529
Feel comfortable interacting with people from a cultural group that is different from my own.	771	5.9	1.46

Qualitative Data. At the end of the VCU SLIM, students are asked to “Tell us in your own words what you got out of your service-learning experience.” Student responses to this open-ended question were overwhelmingly positive. Of the 491 responses 96% reflected positive comments, 4% were negative, and the remaining 2% had a mixture of positive and negative comments. A few examples of student quotes provided below are representative of the responses to the question.

“The service learning class I took part in helped me grow more in my professional life than my personal life. This is because our class was working in a research fashion. We were faced with helping a company improve their social media campaign to increase their volunteer basis. This really allowed my classmates and me to get hands on PR experience that we wouldn't get from the traditional class setting.”

“My service-learning experience has been amazing! I have gotten to see a real classroom setting and observe such a fantastic teacher at Holton Elementary. I really have gained a lot of knowledge for my future career and I am so grateful to have had this experience.”

“From this service-learning experience, I got the chance to really understand and learn about many different communities surrounding VCU and how we, college students, have an impact on them. Also, I was able to meet new people, as well as make bonds with them, which was very touching.”

“I gained more skills and familiarity with public speaking and I was also able to work on my interpersonal skills by communicating with the students in the classroom. I went from not knowing anyone's name on the first day of class, to knowing their face and name outside of the classroom and also knowing their writing style. It was such a good experience. I also feel like I gained confidence in teaching others and guiding them to do better. When I first accepted the position, I was really nervous and did not know what it was that I could contribute to the class and students. But, after having spent 15 weeks with them, holding office hours, and visiting with my TA mentor and going over my progress and reflecting, I can look back on this experience and see how enriching it has become and I am thankful for having had the opportunity.”

“I was able to experience what it was like to be an educator, which is more difficult than I originally thought. I will be able to use everything I learned from my professor, the students, and my experience leading the class, for every aspect of my life.”

“I liked gaining tangible knowledge through hands on experience. It is important to apply classroom concepts to everyday life.”

“This experience has made me comfortable with talking to patients and has opened my eyes to real word barriers to communication.”

“It was an incredibly inspiring opportunity that opened my eyes to a part of society few people acknowledge. Many people have prejudice against people with felonies and I understand now just what they have to go through in order to reenter society as a contributing member of the community.”

“It was an opportunity I wish every student at VCU would have. Working with people of other backgrounds that don't fully know the English language really changes your perspective of life in general. You really do feel the struggles that some of these people/immigrants go through and it changes your view about who they are and why they are here. It is a form of education about the world that I think most people in the United States lack. It was a phenomenal experience for me.”

“This course demonstrated and presented a chance to experience, in a manner similar to real-world affect, what the work necessary is like to successfully engage in a social media campaign. It further taught me the difficulties faced by non-profits with running a campaign as well as the tools at their disposal and how to properly reach the community.”

“Our professor made this service-learning class one to remember. Wow. Never have I ever considered the injustices that face many different people. I was so focused on oppression from my own eyes, I never thought to see it from someone else's. Our prof. made sure we were not FORCED into her beliefs but UNDERSTOOD OURSELVES how to think about these social problems. These teachings connected with my service outside the classroom so perfectly. I would take it again if I could!”

“I have grown so much as a person. I have learned so much and understand so much more about myself and how I am a part of the community.”

“I learned a ton about public policy and the inner workings of local government, and how many obstacles there are when trying to identify and mitigate problems.”

“This was a unique class, and I have never taken one like it. It was a very new experience and a learning one at that. I believe the class went well, and I discovered that I have much to develop with my writing and analyzing.”

“A clarification that education is the correct field for me and the experience of being in a classroom.”

“This class was the single most important thing I did while studying at VCU. I learned how to be a real reporter, interacted with politicians every week, traced stories as they evolved over time and developed a working knowledge of an incredible number of resources that I will continue to use in my career for years to come. Prof. South is absolutely the only person who could take on a class of this magnitude, and he does an exceptional job of teaching and editing stories so quickly that nothing falls behind. I would take this class again in a heartbeat if I was not graduating so soon.”

“I received clarification on my future career dreams and goals. I loved working with another culture, but I really disliked the research aspect. I now feel that I want to work with people and other cultures instead of working in a lab analyzing data.”

“This class was very challenging because of the high coursework demand and all of the extra work and reflections that needed to be done. But I do think it was very beneficial to think about art making and teaching art this way and reflecting on it in a meaningful way.”

Students were also asked for suggestions to improve the service-learning course in the future. Several themes emerged from the responses. The most frequent suggestions are listed below.

- More structure, clarity and organization within the class (i.e.-clearly written syllabi)
 - More options for service sites with regard to location, activities, and schedules of students
 - More opportunities for reflection discussions to connect service with course content
 - More flexibility within the service model
 - More alignment of service activities with course goals
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Summary and Next Steps

The results of the SLIM survey reflect a generally positive view of service-learning courses based on the responses of the students that completed the survey. Of the surveyed items, the theme of working with others effectively emerged as the highest rated aspect of taking a service-learning course. Other highly rated aspects were the importance of the service to the course and an increased social awareness for students. These perceptions are emphasized in the vast majority of comments provided by students in the qualitative section of the survey.

The survey provided valuable information for the Service-Learning Office to consider in efforts to improve and enhance program quality. These include working closely with faculty to ensure that reflection activities fit with course content and are meaningful learning tools and ensuring that there are opportunities in courses for students to have civil discourse with others on topics.

The SLIM will continue to be a tool for quality assurance in the Service-Learning Office and will be provided to students each semester. In the future, the Service-Learning staff will work to increase the percentage of students that participate in the SLIM survey to ensure that results are reflective of the general student population taking service-learning courses. These efforts will include looking at the timing of the survey release to ensure it does not overlap too closely with institutional course surveys and providing reasonable incentives to students for completion. Additionally, the staff will continue to work with faculty and Service-Learning Teaching Assistants (SLTAs) to promote the SLIM survey to the students in their courses and encourage participation.

Virginia Commonwealth University

Appendices

Appendix A-

SLIM Survey Questions

SECTION 1: ABOUT THE COURSE

Please select the service-learning course that you are evaluating:

Where did you do your service? (i.e. , Where or for what organization did you serve?)

Approximately how many total hours of service did you perform during the semester?

Which category best describes the type of organization where you served?

- Education
- Access to health
- Economic Development
- Sustainability (Environmental)
- Vibrant Communities (Arts)
- Other (please specify below)

Do you have any desire to continue serving at this location?

- Yes
- No

What reflection activities did you engage in as part of this class? Check all that apply.

- Written journal
- Reflection paper
- In-class presentation
- Class discussions
- Community presentation
- Blog
- Interview with service receiver
- Interview with professor or TA
- Other

If you selected 'other' please describe the reflection activities/assignments you completed.

For each item below, select the number that describes the degree to which this service-learning class has been beneficial in the areas listed. Use a scale of 1 to 7 where 1=NOT BENEFICIAL and 7=HIGHLY BENEFICIAL.

How beneficial to your learning were the reflection activities/assignments of this class?

How beneficial to your learning was the community service component of this class?

How beneficial to your learning were your interactions with the instructor of the class?

How beneficial to your learning were your interactions with other students in the class?

SECTION 2: ABOUT YOUR EXPERIENCE

For each item below, select the number that describes the degree to which this service-learning class has been beneficial in the areas listed. Use a scale of 1 to 7 where 1=NOT AT ALL and 7=VERY MUCH.

Apply theories or concepts to practical problems or new situations.

Examine the strengths and weaknesses of my own views on a topic or issue.

Generate alternative solutions to problems.

Argue effectively for a particular alternative or idea.

Clarify my professional goals.

Be more aware of the needs of the community.

Be more concerned about community issues.

Contribute to the welfare of my community.

Believe I can have positive impacts on social problems.

Be more aware of some of my own biases and prejudices.

Develop a personal code of values and ethics.

Work together with others.

Adjust to others' expectations.

Be a team player.

Work collaboratively in groups.

Appreciate others' opinions.

Be a role model for people in my community.

SECTION 3: ABOUT YOUR DEVELOPMENT

For each item below, select the number that describes the degree to which this service-learning class has been beneficial in the areas listed. Use a scale of 0 to 4 where 0=Strongly Disagree and 4=Strongly Agree.

I experienced positive growth in my level of empathy (e.g., ability to walk in another's shoes and understand their perspective) as a result of my service-learning course.

I experienced positive growth in my level of morality (e.g., understanding right and wrong) as a result of my service-learning course.

I gained the appropriate skills and experiences for my desired career as a result of my service-learning course.

SECTION 4: ABOUT YOU

What is your student level?

- Undergraduate
- Graduate/Professional student
- Non-degree student

What is your gender?

- Male
- Female
- Transgender
- Prefer not to answer

Which option best describes your racial background?

- White
- African American
- Asian
- Hispanic
- Hawaiian/Pacific Islander
- Native American
- Two or more races (biracial or multiracial)
- International (i.e., visa holder)
- Prefer not to answer

Tell us in your own words what you got out of your service-learning experience.