LEARNING BEYOND THE FOUR WALLS OF THE CLASSROOM: AN EVALUATION OF SERVICE LEARNING PROGRAM IN GRADUATE EDUCATION

Darin Jan Tindowen
University Research and Innovation Office
University of Saint Louis
Tuguegarao City, Philippines

Pyrene Quilang
School of Graduate Studies and Continuing Professional Development
University of Saint Louis
Tuguegarao City, Philippines

Lailanie Pattaguan
School of Graduate Studies and Continuing Professional Development
University of Saint Louis
Tuguegarao City, Philippines

Abstract— **This research paper explores the evolving landscape of graduate education, shifting from traditional research and classroom-based learning towards more holistic and experiential methodologies, particularly through the incorporation of Service Learning Programs (SLPs). The study aims to assess the conduct and impact of SLPs among graduate school students within the academic environment, employing a mixed-method design with an explanatory sequential approach. Quantitative data were collected through a survey questionnaire, while qualitative insights were obtained through interviews. The research focused on 30 graduate school students enrolled in the Master of Arts in Education (MAEd) and the Doctor of Education (EdD) programs at the School of Graduate Studies and Continuing Professional Development (SGSCPD) of the University of Saint Louis. The survey results revealed a very high level of assessment among graduate students regarding the effects of SLPs on academic development, civic engagement, personal growth, perceived community impact, and global inclusivity.**

Keywords— *service learning programs, graduate education, experiential learning, academic development, civic engagement, personal growth, community impact, global inclusivity*

I. INTRODUCTION

The landscape of graduate education is undergoing a transformative shift, departing from conventional models centered around research and classroom-based learning. This evolution is marked by a heightened demand for holistic and experiential learning methodologies, leading to the integration of Service-Learning Programs (SLPs) in graduate curricula. SLPs at the graduate level encompass educational initiatives that seamlessly blend community service experiences with academic coursework, offering students practical, hands-on opportunities to apply theoretical knowledge to real-world situations. This departure from traditional education, which often emphasizes theoretical understanding in isolation, is a deliberate effort to bridge the gap between academic learning and practical application. The overarching goal is to foster a more comprehensive and experiential approach to education (Chiva-Bartoll & Fernandez-Rio, 2021).

Research studies provide support for the incorporation of SLPs in graduate education. Notably, Pais et al. (2022) found that service learning enhances the connection between theory and practice, enriching the learning experience. Moreover, Martin-Sanches et al. (2022) underscore the contribution of service learning to the development of a holistic perspective, promoting personal and intellectual growth. Beyond individual growth, SLPs also emphasize community engagement and social impact, as evidenced by Dapena et al.'s study (2000), which demonstrated a positive association between service-learning participation and increased civic responsibility.

Service-learning programs not only contribute to the development of practical skills but also enhance employability. Filges et al. (2022) revealed that service learning positively influences critical thinking, problem-solving, and communication skills, crucial attributes in the professional realm. Additionally, SLPs often include reflective components, fostering critical thinking skills and a deeper understanding of the subject matter (Hartman et al., 2023).

This paper explored the conduct and impact of SLPs among graduate school students, specifically focusing on academic development, civic engagement, personal growth, perceived community impact, and global inclusivity.

II. METHODS

An explanatory sequential design was employed, combining quantitative and qualitative research methods. The quantitative phase involved a survey questionnaire to collect data on graduate students' perceptions of the impact of SLPs, while the qualitative phase utilized interviews to gain in-depth insights into their experiences. The study focused on 30 graduate school students enrolled in the MAEd and EdD programs at the SGSCPD of the University of Saint Louis.

A structured questionnaire was administered to gather quantitative data on the participants' assessments of SLPs. In-

depth interviews were conducted to explore the factors influencing the participants' perceptions and to gather qualitative data.

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to determine the level of assessment. Qualitative data obtained from interviews were subjected to thematic analysis to identify recurring themes and patterns.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1. Assessment among graduate students regarding the effects of SLPs

Dimensions	Mean	Qualitative Description
Academic Development	4.58	Very High
Civic Engagement	4.74	Very High
Personal Growth	4.52	Very High
Perceived Community Impact	4.55	Very High
Global Inclusivity	4.50	Very High
Overall Mean	4.58	Very High

The survey results revealed a very high level of assessment among graduate students regarding the effects of SLPs on academic development, civic engagement, personal growth, perceived community impact, and global inclusivity. The survey results indicated that graduate students expressed a notably high level of satisfaction with the impact of Service Learning Programs (SLPs) on their academic development. This suggests that students perceive SLPs as effective tools for applying theoretical knowledge in real-world contexts, thereby enhancing their overall academic experience. The results align with existing research highlighting the benefits of SLPs in these areas. The result of the study by Schuetze et al. (2019) has demonstrated that students engaging in service learning exhibit significant improvements in academic learning outcomes, indicating the effectiveness of SLPs in enhancing academic development. Moreover, Millar et al. (2019) suggest that participation in SLPs correlates with increased levels of civic engagement, which is essential for active participation in society. It can be stressed that the survey results echo the findings of these studies, suggesting that SLPs serve as effective tools for graduate students to apply theoretical knowledge in real-world contexts, thereby enriching their academic experience and contributing to their overall development.

In terms of civic engagement, the quantitative data revealed that graduate students strongly believed that SLPs positively contribute to their sense of civic responsibility and community involvement. This finding suggests that the programs successfully instill a commitment to social issues and community welfare among the participants. The survey participants reported a substantial positive impact on their personal growth through SLPs. This could include the development of interpersonal skills, self-awareness, and a heightened sense of confidence. The data implies that SLPs serve not only as academic exercises but also as platforms for personal development. Brown (2017) found that students who participated in service learning demonstrated higher levels of social responsibility and community involvement compared to their non-participating peers. This supports the notion that SLPs effectively instill a commitment to social issues and community welfare among participants.

Graduate students, according to the survey, perceived a significant positive impact on the communities involved in SLPs. This indicates that students recognize the tangible benefits and positive changes that their contributions make to the communities, reinforcing the notion that SLPs are meaningful and impactful. Previous studies have consistently demonstrated that participants in service learning programs perceive their contributions as positively impacting the communities involved. These studies indicate that SLPs not only benefit students but also address community needs and enhance community well-being. By actively engaging with local communities through service-oriented projects, graduate students gain firsthand experience of the issues facing these communities and recognize the tangible benefits of their contributions (Salam et al., 2019; Kilgo et al., 2015). Furthermore, the quantitative findings suggest that graduate students feel that SLPs contribute to their understanding of global issues and inclusivity. This implies that the programs successfully broaden students' perspectives, fostering a global mindset and awareness of diverse cultures and contexts. Millar et al. (2019) conducted research highlighting the role of service learning programs in promoting global understanding and inclusivity. Their findings suggest that SLPs with an international focus can broaden students' perspectives, fostering cross-cultural understanding, empathy, and awareness of global issues. By participating in service learning activities that address global challenges or involve collaboration with international communities, graduate students develop a deeper appreciation for diverse cultures and contexts, contributing to a more inclusive worldview.

Factors that Led to their Very High Level of Assessment

1. Real-World Application of Knowledge
Qualitative analysis of interviews revealed that graduate students appreciate the real-world application of knowledge gained through SLPs. They highlighted instances where theoretical concepts learned in the classroom were directly applied to address practical challenges, enhancing their understanding and skill application in real-life situations. Some of the responses of the participants are as follows:

GS04: *By taking part in service-learning programs, I was able to observe how directly what I had learned in the classroom applied to actual circumstances.*

GS12: *I've been able to apply educational theory to practical situations like creating and carrying out lesson plans for a variety of student demographics because to these experiences. I now have a greater understanding of the real-world applications of teaching, which extend beyond the theoretical concepts covered in the classroom.*

This aspect of SLPs resonates with the fundamental pedagogical principle of experiential learning, wherein theoretical concepts are brought to life through practical engagement. Bradberry and De Maio (2019) emphasize the importance of experiential learning in higher education, positing that learners develop deeper understanding and retention of knowledge when they actively engage in real-world experiences. Similarly, Santiago-Ortiz (2019) advocates for the integration of service learning into academic curricula, highlighting its potential to bridge the gap between theory and practice. The graduate students' testimonials align with these theoretical frameworks, as they express how SLPs provide opportunities to directly apply classroom learning to address practical challenges. By engaging in hands-on experiences within real-life contexts, students not only enhance their understanding of theoretical concepts but also develop the skills necessary for effective problem-solving and application in various professional settings.

2. Enhanced Empathy through Immersive Experiences

A recurring theme in the qualitative data was the development of enhanced empathy among graduate students participating in SLPs. The immersive nature of these programs seemed to cultivate a deeper understanding of others' perspectives and challenges, fostering a more empathetic and compassionate worldview among the students. Some of the responses of the participants are as follows:

GS12*: I've discovered the value of placing myself in other people's shoes. I had the opportunity to observe directly the hardships and injustices faced by underprivileged people while we worked with them. My perspective was widened by this encounter, and it also made me more empathic. It increased my awareness of the structural problems that support inequality.*

GS20: *We got to know people from different backgrounds and hear their experiences as we worked at neighborhood community centers. Because of this immersive experience, I was able to comprehend the difficulties that people encounter on a daily basis, which helped me to feel empathy and sympathy for them on a deeper level.*

The qualitative data reflecting the development of enhanced empathy among graduate students engaged in Service-Learning Programs (SLPs) aligns with existing research on the transformative impact of immersive experiences. Studies have highlighted the role of service learning in fostering empathy and understanding among participants. These studies emphasize how direct engagement with individuals and communities facing various challenges can lead to a heightened awareness of others' perspectives and struggles (Hess & Fila, 2016; Hebert & Hauf, 2015).

3. Sense of Social Responsibility

The qualitative findings indicated that graduate students attributed their sense of social responsibility to their participation in SLPs. Engaging in activities that directly contribute to community well-being appeared to instill a strong sense of duty and responsibility towards addressing societal issues among the students. Some of the verbalizations of the respondents are as follows:

GS01: *This practical experience strengthened my resolve to promote social change and increased my understanding of societal inequities.*

GS16: *I was inspired by this activity to embrace more environmentally friendly habits in my daily life and to promote environmental stewardship in my neighborhood. It has given me the confidence to understand my responsibilities as a citizen and as a force for good in the community.*

The qualitative findings from graduate students participating in SLPs echo these research findings, indicating that engaging in activities that directly contribute to community well-being indeed instills a strong sense of duty and responsibility towards addressing societal issues. By actively participating in service-oriented activities and reflecting on their experiences, students develop a deeper understanding of their role in creating positive social change, leading to a heightened sense of social responsibility. Mitchell (2015) suggests that reflection on service experiences plays a crucial role in deepening students' understanding of their social responsibilities and encouraging continued civic engagement.

4. Meaningful Community Impact

Students perceived that their contributions through SLPs had a meaningful and positive impact on the communities involved. Recognizing the actual benefits and changes resulting from their efforts reinforced the belief that SLPs are not just educational exercises but impactful initiatives with tangible outcomes. Some of the verbalizations of the respondents are as follows:

GS20: *Through Service-Learning Programs, I've had the opportunity to directly engage with community members and address pressing needs.*

GS24: *Being a part of service-learning programs has been tremendously fulfilling since I've seen the significant influence that our contributions have had on nearby areas.*

The perception of meaningful community impact among students participating in SLPs underscores the importance of incorporating community-based learning experiences into higher education curricula. It not only enhances student learning but also fosters a sense of civic responsibility and social justice, ultimately contributing to positive societal change. Therefore, the recognition of meaningful community impact reinforces the value and effectiveness of SLPs as transformative educational experiences with far-reaching benefits for both students and communities. Research in this area consistently demonstrates the significant benefits that SLPs bring to both students and the communities they serve. These benefits include improved academic outcomes for students and positive community development outcomes, such as increased civic engagement and enhanced community well-being. When students recognize the actual benefits and changes resulting from their efforts in SLPs, it reinforces the notion that these programs are not merely educational exercises but impactful initiatives with tangible outcomes (Maul, 2015; Archibald, 2017; Stehle Wallace et al., 2022).

5. Community Partnerships and Collaboration

Strong partnerships with communities and collaborative efforts were highlighted. Collaborating with communities in a meaningful way strengthened the impact of SLPs, creating a sense of shared responsibility and mutual benefit. Some of the verbalizations of the respondents are as follows:

GS15: *My involvement in service-learning programs has made me realize how important it is to build solid community ties and encourage teamwork. For example, our strong collaboration with the neighborhood schools helped us create and implement educational programs more successfully. In addition to increasing the impact of our programs, our cooperative efforts with educators and community people also fostered a sense of mutual benefit and shared responsibility.*

GS24: *This experience demonstrated the capacity for transformation that SLPs with roots in genuine partnerships and cooperative projects with local communities possess.*

Recommendations to Further Improve the Implementation of SLP in the Graduate School

Based on the responses of the informants, six themes were revealed as their recommendations to further improve the implementation of SLP in the Graduate School, which are as follows: Refine Program Structure, Strengthen Community Partnerships, Integrate Reflective Practices, Provide Adequate Training and Support, Promote Interdisciplinary Collaboration, and Encourage Long-Term Engagement.

1. Refine Program Structure

Improving the structure of Service-Learning Programs (SLPs) involves enhancing the organization, clarity, and coherence of program components such as goals, curriculum alignment, and assessment methods. This can be achieved through strategic planning, stakeholder consultations, and ongoing program evaluation to ensure that SLPs effectively meet the needs and expectations of graduate students and community partners.

2. Strengthen Community Partnerships

Building strong and sustainable partnerships with community organizations is essential for the success of SLPs. This involves actively engaging with community stakeholders to identify shared goals, establish clear communication channels, and foster collaborative decision-making processes. By strengthening community partnerships, SLPs can enhance the relevance, impact, and sustainability of their initiatives.

3. Integrate Reflective Practices

Incorporating reflective practices into SLPs allows graduate students to critically analyze their experiences, values, and assumptions, thereby deepening their learning and personal growth. By integrating structured reflection activities into SLP curricula, graduate students can develop a deeper understanding of their roles as community members and agents of social change.

4. Provide Adequate Training and Support

Offering comprehensive training and ongoing support to both students and faculty involved in SLPs is crucial for ensuring successful implementation and positive outcomes. This may include workshops on community engagement, cultural competence, ethical considerations, and effective communication skills. Providing mentorship and resources for faculty and students can also help address challenges and promote meaningful engagement.

5. Promote Interdisciplinary Collaboration

Encouraging interdisciplinary collaboration within SLPs can enrich learning experiences, foster innovative solutions to complex issues, and promote holistic approaches to community engagement. By bringing together students and faculty from diverse disciplines, SLPs can leverage a range of perspectives, expertise, and resources to address multifaceted societal challenges effectively.

6. Encourage Long-Term Engagement

Fostering long-term engagement and commitment to SLPs among graduate students, faculty, and community partners is essential for sustaining meaningful impact over time. This may involve offering opportunities for continued involvement beyond individual projects, such as internships, leadership

roles, and alumni networks, as well as recognizing and celebrating the contributions of all stakeholders to SLP success.

IV. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study contributes to the growing body of literature on the impact of service learning in graduate education. The findings affirm the positive influence of SLPs on academic and personal development, emphasizing the need for continued integration and enhancement of these programs within the graduate curriculum. Further research is encouraged to explore additional dimensions of experiential learning and its long-term effects on graduate students' professional and personal trajectories.

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