

#### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received April 25, 2022

Accepted September 10, 2022

Published Online September 30, 2022

#### CORRESPONDENCE

Ruth Boyd

[rboyd@marymount.edu](mailto:rboyd@marymount.edu)

Marymount University at 2807 N.  
Glebe Rd., Arlington, VA 22207, USA.

#### AUTHORS DETAILS

Additional information about the authors is available at the end of the article.

**How to cite:** Boyd, R., Boyd, G. A., & Alexander, T. (2022). *Cocurricular Assessment: Aligning Service-Learning With General Education Goals*. *Educational Process: International Journal*, 11(3): 87-96.



OPEN ACCESS

**Copyright** © 2022 by the author(s). This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (CC-BY-4.0), where it is permissible to download and share the work provided it is properly cited.

#### RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Cocurricular Assessment: Aligning Service-Learning With General Education Goals

Ruth Boyd  G. Allen Boyd  Taler Alexander 

#### ABSTRACT

**Background/purpose** – Cocurricular offerings should appropriately align with academic learning goals to ensure undergraduate students' development of professional dispositions that lead to civic and career success. This study provides a framework for implementing high impact practices into cocurricular instruction, as well as steps on how to align this instruction to the general educational goals of institutions.

**Materials/methods** – Case study methodology was used to examine university students' perceptions of the effect a course-embedded service-learning activity had on their development of professional dispositions.

**Results** – University students reported a perceived positive impact of the service-learning activity on their attainment of general education goals. Specifically, they reported positive growth in collaboration skills, community connections, and an understanding of the relevance of these skills as professional dispositions.

**Conclusion** – Leveraging high-impact practices such as service-learning and the first-year experience course to meet the general education goals of an institution is an effective use of cocurricular curriculum design.

**Keywords** – cocurricular assessment, service-learning, first-year experience course, general education outcomes

**To link to this article** – <https://dx.doi.org/10.22521/edupij.2022.113.5>

## 1. INTRODUCTION

When designing cocurricular programming and assessment, student affairs practitioners are uniquely positioned to further the development of undergraduate students. This work is grounded in a commitment to the institution itself, one that appropriately reflects the shared identity and purpose of the university by incorporating the mission, vision, and values of the organization, and to sustaining the values of general education through cocurricular programming (McClellan, 2011; Wells, 2016). Cocurricular practitioners can utilize these ideals to implement instructional strategies that reinforce the general education goals and contribute to student learning and development.

The conceptual framework for this study is based upon John Dewey's (1882-1953/2015) philosophy of the educational process as one of persistent growth; whereby learners are continually reorganizing, reconstructing, and transforming knowledge that affects their environment. This process is action-oriented. "Experience is *trying*...When we experience something we act upon it, we do something with it...we do something to the thing and then it does something to us in return" (Dewey, 1882-1953/2015, p. 44). As Seaman (2010) noted, Dewey argued that to know the world is to interact within it socially. In this way, experiential learning positively impacts upon knowledge acquisition and personal growth. Seaman (2010) reminded us that Dewey believed "knowledge was a tool for acting in the world and, through acting, for changing the conditions for our future" (p. 7).

This conceptual framework provides the foundation for aligning cocurricular programming to the institution's general educational goals to further the development of undergraduate students. For the purposes of student service-learning as a cocurricular activity, instructional strategy was embedded into the curriculum of a First-Year Experience course. The student learner outcome of the service-learning experience was aligned with a general educational goal that focuses upon the development of undergraduate students' intellectual and professional aptitudes. This study shares students' perceptions of the service-learning experience and how it affected their acquisition of these professional dispositions.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 General Education Goals

In the United States, most institutions of higher education employ degree plans consisting of general education requirements, academic specialty courses, and elective hours. General education courses typically comprise approximately one-third of total credit hours required for a baccalaureate degree. The concept of general education is entrenched in the ideal that a thorough education extends beyond a single academic discipline and encompasses broader, integrative learning (Wells, 2016). Although general education philosophies continue to evolve, one contemporary emphasis includes providing students with intellectual and professional aptitudes. The Essential Learning Outcomes, as identified by the Association of American Colleges and Universities [AAC&U] (2011) provide colleges and universities with a framework that can be aligned to institutional strategic plans and general education outcomes. Criteria include Intellectual and Practical Skills (teamwork, problem solving) as well as Personal and Social Responsibility (civic knowledge and engagement). Mackes (2017) documented how similar dispositions are reinforced by the National Association of Colleges and Employers' (NACE) definition of career readiness, "...the attainment and demonstration of requisite competencies that broadly prepare college

graduates for a successful transition into the workforce” including Teamwork/Collaboration, described as the ability to “build collaborative relationships with colleagues... the individual can work within a team structure” (p. 16).

## *2.2 Cocurricular Design*

The responsibility for effective course design to advance general education goals has historically fallen to academic faculty. However, Wells (2016) advised that the term general education “reflects a wide variety of outcomes that are achieved through different curricular and cocurricular programs that occur within and across institutional contexts” (p. 71). Through thoughtful cocurricular design, student affairs professionals can bridge elements of the strategic plan with the general education goals of the institution. To successfully do so, Wells (2016) advised student affairs’ practitioners of the need to “be oriented to the broad objectives of the general education program as well as the curricular structures that advance these objectives” (p. 62). Such structures are typically identified as high-impact practices (HIPs), encompassing instructional strategies such as first-year seminars and service-learning experiences (AAC&U, 2011).

The first-year experience (FYE) course can be an important vehicle for implementing a commitment to general education goals. For decades, the FYE seminar/course has provided an avenue to ease students’ transition to higher education, providing social as well as academic support (Kuh et al., 2010; Tinto, 1997). Kuh (2008) found that quality FYE courses also emphasize the development of student competencies that prepare them for employment and citizenship upon graduation. Although the FYE course curriculum may vary across institutions, common elements exist aimed at achieving these goals (Bers & Younger, 2014). Service-learning activities are reasonably easy to embed within a FYE course and provide another layer of HIPs that supports students as they engage with the community, develop professional dispositions, and find a sense of purpose and belonging (Felten & Clayton, 2011; Kranzow & Foote, 2018).

## *2.3 Service-learning*

Service-learning is an instructional strategy that links community service to course outcomes. As Ehrlich (1996) stated, “The basic theory of service-learning is Dewey’s; the interaction of knowledge and skills with experience is key to learning” (p. xi). This framework is further reinforced by Bringle et al. (2006) in their definition of service-learning, as a “course-based, credit bearing educational experience in which students (a) participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and (b) reflect on the service activity [to gain] ... an enhanced sense of personal values and civic responsibility” (p. 12). Campus Compact, a national coalition within the United States of over 1,000 colleges and universities, advocates for service-learning to engage students in developing collaborative partnerships and professional dispositions that extend beyond the campus (Campus Compact, 2020). When embedded in a FYE course, the pedagogy of service-learning enables student affairs’ professionals with the opportunity to collaborate with students as well as the community. The institution and greater community benefit as well, as students become better prepared for the job market thanks to their service-learning experience (Jacoby, 2015).

## *2.4 Cocurricular Assessment*

Intentional cocurricular planning strengthens general education goal assessment across institutions (Fallucca, 2018). In fact, regional accreditation bodies, such as the Higher

Learning Commission (HLC), challenge divisions of student affairs to do so, providing accreditation criteria to ensure that cocurricular offerings appropriately assess student learning goals and that universities support claims that cocurricular activities “prepare students for informed citizenship and workplace success” (Higher Learning Commission, n.d., Core Component 1.C.1). Additionally, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) in its Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP) initiative provide student affairs professionals with a roadmap for designing assessments targeted at professional skills embedded in general education outcomes (Nitkin et al., 2016). The LEAP Vision for Learning in Brief identifies essential learning outcomes “across general education and majors, curriculum and cocurriculum” enriched by high-impact practices such as “first-year seminars and experiences [and] service and community-based learning” (AAC&U, 2011, p. 2).

### 3. METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 Action Research

This research study was implemented as an action research that employed a case study approach. Action research “is concerned with working on particular activities to make direct improvements” and case studies often try to determine what a particular situation means to the participants (Guthrie, 2010, p. 5). In this case, the institution was seeking knowledge to improve the institution’s first-year experience (FYE) course and to determine students’ perceptions of a service-learning activity as it related to the development of professional dispositions. Participants were students in the institution’s FYE course, a purposeful sample to yield information-rich results (Patton, 2002). Data was collected using a survey sent to 768 students enrolled in the FYE course, rounding out a service-learning module of study and acting as a summative assessment of the activity (Guthrie, 2010).

The university’s student affairs staff embraced the FYE course as a high-impact educational practice that can positively enrich student engagement (Kuh, 2008). Beginning in 2018, curriculum design for the FYE included a service-learning component, designed to introduce students to the concept of service, promote collaborative skills, develop community and peer connections, and foster professional skills and dispositions (Felten & Clayton, 2011; Jacoby, 2015). Planning for this initiative began with the institution’s strategic plan goal to promote student achievement of educational and professional goals (Southwestern Oklahoma State University [SWOSU], 2018) and proceeded to the General Education goal associated with the strategic plan element, the mastery of Intellectual and Professional Aptitudes (SWOSU, 2020). As is common among institutions of higher education, a day of service is embedded within the course curriculum. Service days provide “opportunities for new students to meet one another and to begin the process of building a community, familiarize themselves with the community in which the campus is located...and become interested in further service-learning” (Jacoby, 2015, p. 130).

#### 3.2 Instrument

The assessment instrument, a quantitative survey administered upon completion of the day of service, was collaboratively designed by institutional experts in education, service-learning, and student affairs, and was administered through the university’s assessment center so as to minimize researcher bias. Surveys were applied as anonymous, online, and took about 20 minutes to complete. The survey consisted of 10 statements, which participants ranked on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1: *strongly agree* to 5: *strongly disagree*. Each survey question was linked to the institution’s general education goal

addressing professional aptitudes, with a particular focus on the aspects of collaboration, community connection, and relevance. Aggregate data from the survey was prepared by the institution's assessment center.

### *3.3 Participants*

The survey was administered via campus email to the 768 freshman students enrolled in the first-year experience course who had also completed the service-learning activity. The response rate was 59.11%, giving a total of 454 students who participated.

### *3.4 Procedure*

Permission to complete the study was first obtained from the Institutional Review Board. The survey was then distributed to all students enrolled in the first-year experience course, comprising 25 separate course sections of approximately 30 student each. Although multiple instructors taught these sections, uniformity of instruction occurred due to the standardized service-learning curriculum module, developed by senior student affairs' professionals.

### *3.5 Data Analysis*

After the survey was closed, the university assessment center provided de-identified aggregate data to the researchers. Each statement was correlated to one subset supporting the general education goal: The degree to which the service-learning activity affected students' perception of their ability to collaborate, develop community connections, and the relevance of the activity to support their growth of professional aptitudes.

## **4. RESULTS**

The perceptions of the study participants indicated a positive correlation between the service-learning experience and their development of professional aptitudes, as defined by the institution's general education goal. Responses illustrate that students are mastering professional skills such as collaboration, community connection, and an understanding of the relevance of the activity within the scope of becoming responsible citizens.

### *4.1 General Education Goal Element: Collaboration*

As defined by the institution's general education goal, collaboration means to collectively engage in activities and contribute information and resources to accomplish group goals (SWOSU, 2020). Four survey questions specifically addressed this tenet. When asked about their sense of ownership and responsibility for the outcome of the service-learning project, most participants (72%) affirmed that they either agreed or strongly agreed. Students' self-confidence in their ability to work as a team to achieve results also increased throughout the project, as 47% agreed and 28% strongly agreed with the prompt. Students overwhelmingly (82%) affirmed that they appreciated how their institution of higher education collaborated with community partners, indicating an awareness of collaboration for the greater good of the community. On the final prompt in this sequence of questions, 75% of students affirmed a feeling of enjoyment in collaborating with classmates for a good cause. Table 1 visually summarizes the students' responses.

**Table 1.** Collaboration

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Mean Score
<u>Collaboration</u> As a result of my experience with service-learning:						
I feel a sense of ownership of responsibility for the outcome of a community project.	23.79%	48.46%	22.25%	3.96%	1.54%	2.11
I enjoyed collaborating with my classmates for a good cause.	27.76%	47.14%	20.70%	2.64%	1.76%	2.04
I feel more confident in my ability to work as a team in order to achieve results.	26.21%	45.81%	21.81%	3.96%	2.21%	2.10
I appreciate how my university collaborates with community partners.	34.58%	47.14%	16.52%	1.10%	0.66%	1.86

#### 4.2 General Education Goal Element: Community Connection

Community connection is the ability and willingness to participate in community service, engage in self-reflection and investigation to identify solutions to problems, and develop a sense of belonging with those whom one interacts (SWOSU, 2020). Three survey questions addressed this concept. As a result of their service-learning experience, students indicated that they felt a greater sense of belonging within the campus community; 41% strongly agreed and 27% agreed with the statement. The experience also instilled 74% of responding students with a feeling of responsibility to seek out community connections. The same percentage indicated that they felt motivated to become more civically involved in the future.

**Table 2.** Community Connection

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Mean Score
<u>Community Connection</u> As a result of my experience with service-learning:						
I am motivated to become more civically involved in the future.	25.55%	49.34%	20.26%	3.31%	1.54%	2.06
I believe it is my responsibility to seek out community connections.	26.87%	47.58%	20.48%	3.74%	1.33%	2.05

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Mean Score
I feel a greater sense of belonging to the campus community.	27.31%	40.53%	24.89%	5.29%	1.98%	2.14

#### 4.3 General Education Goal Element: Relevance

The institution identifies relevance as a professional aptitude because it emphasizes the importance of a liberal education in the modern world, empowering students to explore what it means to be a thoughtful and responsible citizen (SWOSU, 2020). Participants perceived the service-learning experience as beneficial to both their present and future endeavors. Almost three-quarters of respondents (74%) reported increased knowledge about social issues because of their service-learning experience. Looking to the future, 76% expected to be civically engaged throughout their lifetime, whilst 86% felt it important to improve society through their career field.

**Table 3.** Relevance

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Mean Score
<u>Relevance</u> As a result of my experience with service-learning:						
I have increased my knowledge about social issues.	24.23%	50.22%	20.93%	3.30%	1.32%	2.07
I expect to be civically engaged throughout my lifetime.	27.75%	48.68%	19.60%	2.86%	1.11%	2.01
It is important to me to improve society through my career.	42.29%	44.05%	12.33%	0.45%	0.88%	1.74

## 5. DISCUSSION

Our research was guided by the philosophy of John Dewey, that one's education is continual, a process of perpetual growth based upon experiential learning (Seaman, 2010). The foundation for this study was strengthened by the intentionality of student affairs' practitioners to map cocurricular student learner outcomes to the university's general education (GE) goals (Wells, 2016). To support the institution's broad objectives of the GE programs, cocurricular educators combined two High Impact Practices (HIP) beneficial to student learning – service-learning and the first-year experience course (Kuh et al., 2010). A service-learning experience was embedded within the first-year experience course for the purpose of understanding students' perceptions of whether the experience strengthened their acquisition of professional goals, as stated by one GE goal of the institution. Survey questions intentionally focused on three types of professional dispositions addressed by the

GE goal, including collaboration and community connection skills, as well as an awareness of their relevancy to professional aptitudes.

Focusing on essential learning outcomes prepares post-secondary students for the challenges beyond the university experience. The AAC&U (2011) LEAP vision for learning identifies intellectual and practical skills (teamwork) and personal and social responsibility (civic knowledge and engagement) as essential learning outcomes. Survey data indicated that university students perceived their ability to collaborate was positively impacted by their service-learning experience. A sense of responsibility for project outcomes, an enjoyment of the collaborative process, confidence in the ability to work in a team setting, and an appreciation for university collaboration with community partners received mean scores of 2.11, 2.04, 2.10, and 1.86, respectively, on the 5-point, Likert-type scale.

The concept of community connection may encompass settings that are “on-campus, in the local neighborhood, in a nearby municipality, in another state or country, or online” (Felten & Clayton, 2011, p. 77). In our study, response analysis revealed that students perceived a positive correlation between the service-learning experience and a feeling of connection. On the 5-point, Likert-type scale, mean scores indicated that students felt a great sense of belonging to the campus community (2.14), felt a responsibility to seek out community connections (2.05), and were motivated to become more civically involved in the future (2.06). The development of this personal and social responsibility mirrored employers’ responses that colleges and universities “place more emphasis” on these essential learning outcomes (AAC&U, 2011, p. 26).

Relevance, or the understanding of how one’s education is applicable to the modern world, was also addressed by this survey. The participants strongly affirmed that the service-learning activity increased their knowledge about social issues. Further, the participants expect to be civically engaged throughout their lifetime and acknowledge the desire to improve society through their chosen career field. Service-learning promotes behavioral engagement among university students, “demonstrating how our actions can help others and positively impact society” (Simonet, 2008, p. 3).

## 6. CONCLUSION

This study hopes to contribute to the literature regarding effective cocurricular design to assess general education goals using High Impact Practices such as service-learning of the first-year experience course. There were, however, several limitations regarding data collection and generalization of these results. Although the service-learning activity was assigned to all freshmen students at the university, the survey was anonymous and not required for course completion. Although the response rate was 59.11%, it may be assumed that highly engaged students who enjoyed the service-learning project were more likely to participate in the survey. Follow-up studies might make survey completion required as part of course completion in order to ensure a broader response scope.

## 7. SUGGESTIONS

Future research might follow this freshman cohort so as to determine their long-term commitment to collaboration, community connections, and other professional dispositions. Additionally, future research could aim to disaggregate the data according to gender, major, socioeconomic status, and other factors for more in-depth analysis. Continued implementation of the survey as a cumulative assessment of the service-learning module is



recommended so that the institution can maintain a record of students' perception of the instructional strategy as correlated to a specific student learner outcome.

## DECLARATIONS

**Author Contributions:** All authors contributed equally to this manuscript and have read and approved the final version of the article.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

**Ethical Approval:** Ethical approval was received, and all procedures were performed in accordance with IRB (International Review Board) guidelines.

**Data Availability Statement:** To review the data from this study, contact the primary author for more discussion about the request. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

## REFERENCES

- Association of American Colleges and Universities. (2011). *The LEAP vision for learning: Outcomes, practices, and employers' views*. <https://www.aacu.org/publications-research/publications/leap-vision-learning-outcomes-practices-impact-and-employers%E2%80%99>
- Bers, T., & Younger, D. (2014). The first-year experience in community colleges. *New Directions for Institutional Research*, 160, 77-93. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ir.20062>
- Bringle, R., Hatcher, J., & McIntosh, R. (2006). Analyzing Morton's typology of service paradigms and integrity. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, 13(1), 5-15. <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.3239521.0013.101>
- Campus Compact. (2020, December 12). *Who we are*. <https://compact.org/who-we-are/>
- Dewey, J. (2015). *The collected works of John Dewey: The complete works*. (D. Reed, Ed. & Trans.). PergamonMedia. [Original work published 1882-1953].
- Ehrlich, T. (1996). Forward. In B. Jacoby and Associates (Eds.), *Service-learning in higher education: Concepts and practices* (pp. xi-xvi). Jossey-Bass.
- Fallucca, A. (2018). Student affairs assessment, strategic planning, and accreditation. *New Directions for Institutional Research*, 175, 89-102. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ir.20238>
- Felten, P., & Clayton, P. H. (2011). Service-learning. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, 128, 75-84. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tl.470>
- Guthrie, G. (2010). *Basic Research Methods: An Entry to Social Science Research*. Sage. <https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9788132105961>
- Higher Learning Commission. (n.d.). *Criteria for Accreditation*. <https://www.hlcommission.org/Policies/criteria-and-core-components.html>
- Jacoby, B. (2015). *Service-learning essentials: Questions, answers, and lessons learned*. Jossey-Bass
- Kuh, G. D. (2008). *High-impact educational practices: What they are, who has access to them, and why they matter*. Association of American Colleges and Universities.
- Kuh, G. D., Kinzi, J., Schuh, J. H., & Whitt, E. J. (2010). *Student success in college: Creating conditions that matter*. Wiley.
- Mackes, M. (2017). Employer-preferred skills and attributes. In A. Peck (Ed.), *Engagement & employability: Integrating career learning through cocurricular experiences in postsecondary education* (pp. 3-18). National Association of Student Personnel Administrators.

- Nitkin, M. R., White, S. K., & Shapiro, M. (2016). Professional skills as cornerstones of liberal education: Moving students from theory to action. *College Teaching* 64(1), 10-18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/87567555.2015.1062742>
- Seaman, J. (2010). John Dewey's influence and legacy. In T. E. Smith & C. E. Knapp (Eds.), *Sourcebook of experiential education* (pp. 6-9). Taylor & Francis.
- Simonet, D. (2008). *Service-learning and academic success: The links to retention research.*: <http://www.mncampuscompact.org/wp-content/uploads/large/sites/30/2016/04/Service-Learning-and-Academic-Success1.pdf>
- Southwestern Oklahoma State University. (2018). *SWOSU's Strategic Plan, 2018-2020*. Southwestern Oklahoma State University.
- Southwestern Oklahoma State University. (2020). SWOSU general education objectives. In *SWOSU's Undergraduate Catalog, 2020-2021*. Southwestern Oklahoma State University.
- Tinto, V. (1997). Classrooms as communities: Exploring the educational character of student persistence. *Journal of Higher Education*, 68(6), 599-623. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.1997.11779003>
- Wells, C. A. (2016). Realizing general education: Reconsidering conceptions and renewing practice. *ASHE Higher Education Report*, 42(2), 1-85.

#### ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

**Ruth Boyd, Ph.D.**, is an Assistant Professor of Education at Marymount University in Arlington, Virginia (USA), where she teaches and mentors doctoral students. She previously served as Vice President for Student Affairs at Southwestern Oklahoma State University (USA).

Email: [rboyd@marymount.edu](mailto:rboyd@marymount.edu)

**Allen Boyd, Ed.D.**, is an Associate Professor of Education at Southwestern Oklahoma State University (USA), where he teaches undergraduate and graduate coursework in teacher preparation and leadership studies. He also serves the institution as service-learning coordinator. His primary research interests include service-learning, teacher preparation, and sport leadership.

Email: [allen.boyd@swosu.edu](mailto:allen.boyd@swosu.edu)

**Taler Alexander, M.Ed.**, is Assistant Director of Enrollment Management at Southwestern Oklahoma State University (USA), where she is responsible for curriculum development for the first-year experience course. She is currently pursuing her doctoral studies in Higher Education Administration.

Email: [Taler.alexander@swosu.edu](mailto:Taler.alexander@swosu.edu)

---

**Publisher's Note:** ÜNİVERSİTEPARK Limited remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

---