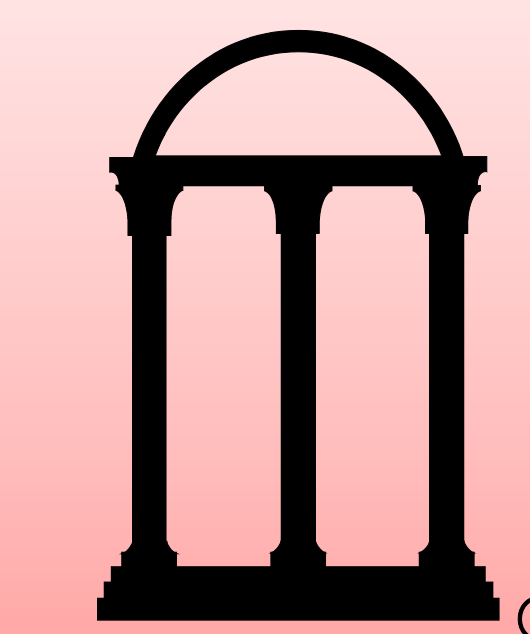# CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE PRACTICE BY FACULTY IN SERVICE-LEARNING COURSES

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How do faculty instructional choices affect student outcomes in SL?

Academic service-learning (SL) is a high-impact educational practice (Kuh, 2008) with demonstrated student benefits ranging from increased understanding of course content to enhanced civic outcomes (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Warren, 2012). However, not all SL courses are equally effective at bringing about positive outcomes for participants. Understanding what factors influence particular student outcomes has both theoretical and practical importance for our institutions and faculty. While there are clearly student- and community-partner-level variables which influence these outcomes (Eyler & Giles, 1999), here we investigate elements which are more directly under the control of the course instructor.

Instrument:
- Voluntary, end-of-course online survey administered each semester to students in SL courses at a large, public land-grant university in the southeast US. (Study approved by Institutional Review Board; informed consent provided by all participants.)

Respondents:
- N = 546 students (AY 2013) from 42 unique courses
- Age: 17-50; 70% between 19 and 22
- Gender: 57.0% female, Race/Ethnicity: 60.8% White
- Class Standing: freshman through doctoral; 56.6% 3rd, 4th, or 5th year undergrad

Composite Outcome Variables: (from original variables, all on 1-5 Likert scale)
- **Professional skills** (α = .838, 6 items)
- **Citizenship skills** (α = .867, 4 items)
- **Communication skills** (α = .788, 3 items)
- **Academic learning** (α = .845, 6 items)
- **Values clarification** (α = .905, 7 items)
- **All student outcomes** (α = .962, including all 26 items from subscales)

Instructor-Controlled Variables: (as reported by student participants)
- Block 1: % in-class **time dedicated to service-learning**. Range 0-100%; m = 35.87%(28.9)
- Block 1: % of time that **instructor was present** at off-campus service activities. Range 0-100%; m = 46.92%(41.6)
- Block 1: "(Instructor) had the primary **responsibility for selecting** the community partner or making the service placement". Dummy variable
- Frequency (Block 2) and effectiveness (Block 3) of 8 **reflection strategies**

Control Variables:
- Block 4: Composite of Best Practices (α = .764) from prior SL research on quality indicators
  - "The service activity provided real **benefit** to the community"
  - "The service activity was **relevant** to the academic content of this class"
  - "The **community partner's perspective and voice** were critical elements of this service-learning course"
  - "I felt that I had the necessary access and **resources** to appropriately serve the community in the service-learning component of this course"
- Block 5: Other service-learning or service experience
- Block 6: Demographic controls

Analysis & Results

Multivariate stepwise linear regression (IBM SPSS Statistics 22.0), with 6 blocks in the order listed previously. The final model is presented, representing the best model fit. R^2 values show total variance explained by the final models' included variables:

All Student Outcomes (R^2 = 0.991, F = 45.09**)

	B	Std. Error	t	Sig.
Reflection Frequency: Small group class discussions	-0.811	0.329	-4.465	0.090*
Best Practices	1.186	0.127	9.324	0.003***
Female	-1.006	0.278	-3.618	0.036**

Professional Skills (R^2 = 0.995, F = 57.51**)

	B	Std. Error	t	Sig.
Reflection Frequency: Small group class discussions	1.337	0.111	12.023	0.001***
Other volunteer hours	0.869	0.071	12.18	0.001***
Previous UGA SL courses	-0.594	0.109	-5.465	0.012**

Citizenship Skills (R^2 = 0.992, F = 50.80**)

	B	Std. Error	t	Sig.
Reflection Frequency: Small group class discussions	-0.138	0.138	-1.000	0.391
Best Practices	0.578	0.062	9.362	0.003***
Previous non-UGA SL courses	0.095	0.026	3.628	0.036**

Communication Skills (R^2 = 0.926, F = 24.05**)

	B	Std. Error	t	Sig.
Reflection Frequency: Written journaling	0.426	0.174	2.447	0.071*
Best Practices	0.512	0.135	3.804	0.019**

Academic Learning (R^2 = 0.924, F = 24.32**)

	B	Std. Error	t	Sig.
Reflection Effectiveness: Final project presentation or showcase	1.015	0.201	5.060	0.007***
Reflection Frequency: Written journaling	0.721	0.177	4.081	0.015**

Values Clarification (R^2 = 0.883, F = 17.11**)

	B	Std. Error	t	Sig.
Reflection Effectiveness: Blogging/online discussions	0.909	0.183	4.961	0.008***
Reflection Frequency: Arts-based reflection	0.915	0.299	3.065	0.037**

(* $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, ***$p < 0.01$)

Discussion

- The variable that most consistently impacted student outcomes was the composite Best Practices factor, which accounted for much of the variance in the outcomes investigated.
- Reflection—another best practice—also impacted student outcomes, though different reflection strategies seem to have varying impacts.
- Other instructor decisions (class time spent on SL; instructor selection of the service placement; instructor presence during the service) did not seem to influence the outcomes investigated in this study.
- Other elements outside instructor control did also show influences– e.g., female students reported lower levels of overall impact; prior SL had varying impact on students' professional and civic growth.

Conclusions

- The large coefficients of determination and B values indicate that instructor choices do play a major role in student outcomes, especially the decision to follow SL best practices and reflection strategies.
- As long as instructors incorporate confirmed best practices in SL courses, there are many pathways to positive student outcomes.
- Future research is needed to better understand why different reflection strategies impact student outcomes differently, and to cross-check student reports with course syllabi and instructor perceptions.

References

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