

Does Service-Learning Make Graduates (Feel) More Employable?

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In what ways do college graduates perceive that having taken service-learning courses impacted their subsequent employment?

Service-learning (SL) can influence students' career choices (Fenzel & Peyrot, 2005; Smedick, 1996; Smith Korfmacher, 1999; Warchal & Ruiz, 2005), and SL is hypothesized to help with job-related outcomes (Overby, 2011) due to enhanced professional skills and direct experiences that might make them more competitive candidates (Duncan & Taylor, 2013; Sternberg, 2013). However, little is known about how SL influences job-related outcomes post-graduation. Our related research (Dorfman, Matthews, & Wu, 2014) has investigated outcomes for salary and job timing in matched pairs of graduates with and without SL experience, finding **significantly higher starting salaries and significantly shorter time to first raise for graduates with SL experience**, though no difference in time to employment or to first promotion.

Here, we consider to what extent the **graduates themselves think that their SL experiences impacted their subsequent employment**. Do they perceive or believe that SL courses made a difference in their employment outcomes?

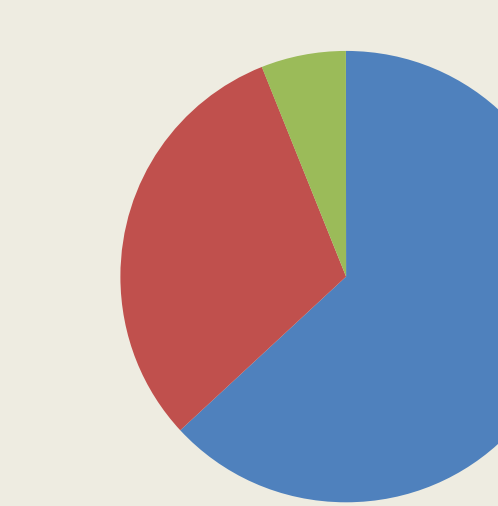
Methodology: From our larger 2013 online surveys (sent to >2,000 graduates; completed by >500), this study's sample includes **239 graduates** from one **large, public land-grant institution** in the Southeast US who **took SL courses** (based on self-report and review of course registrations).

Participants responded to the prompt, "**what impact did taking a service-learning course have on your employment?**", picking **one or more of six choices**; they could also provide open comments. Data are reported (results below) as descriptive statistics and verbatim comments. All research was conducted with IRB/Human Subjects approval and informed participant consent.

Participant Characteristics:

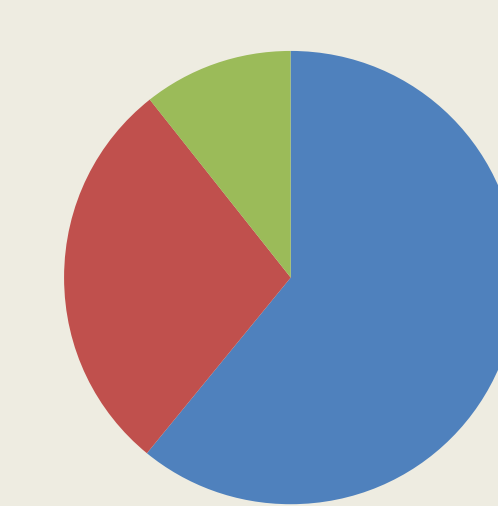
- All graduated in 2010
- >60 distinct majors
- 57% female
- >90% White

Upon Graduating...



- Sought a job
- Grad/Prof School

SL courses reported:



- 1 class
- 2 classes
- 3 or more

Results: Participants felt that their undergraduate service-learning coursework...



"I only wish I had taken my service learning course earlier so that I would have had the insight I gained into possible future careers before the end of my undergraduate degree."

Helped them decide on their choice of field: 41.0% (98/239 respondents)

"The service-learning courses I took at [university] helped me decide on a career in Public Health. They helped me get into my MPH program and helped me get my current job at a health department."

Helped them get a job: 27.2% (65 respondents)

"The courses gave me something unique to discuss during my interviews. I believe the experience helped set me apart from other candidates."

Had no impact on their employment: 46.9% (112 respondents); however, their comments suggested other benefits:

"Helped me graduate."

"The service learning did not help me get a job, but it helped me with skills necessary to complete my job well."

"[SL] gave me on the job experience that I believe improved my résumé and experience that helped me get my job."

Helped them get promoted faster: 3.3% (8 respondents)

"No impact on my direct employment, but I am a better more well-rounded employee because of it."

"My jobs were more of 'who you know' but courses at [university] helped to ensure I was competitive."

Helped them get a higher starting salary: 2.5% (6 respondents; no comments)

Helped them get a raise: 2.1% (5 respondents; no comments)

Discussion: Consistent with earlier studies, the largest perceived benefit of taking SL was in terms of helping students **determine their field of interest**. While nearly half of the respondents felt their SL coursework did **not directly impact** subsequent employment, many did identify benefits, with over 1 in 4 attesting it **helped in getting their first job**. Their comments also suggested more global benefits from these courses, which may have had **indirect impacts** on their job skills, competitiveness, and performance. Interestingly, though few respondents believed SL helped them with salary or promotion, related research from this same data set **did** find significant salary-related benefits for graduates with SL experience; so, in some cases, graduates may actually receive **employment-related boosts without attributing them to SL**. Further research on employer perspectives, as well as the interplay between graduates' perceptions and their actual salaries, may help clarify these issues.

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