

“I Felt We Were Actually Learning Things, Then Applying Them”: Students’ Perceptions of a Service-Learning Course

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Academic journals continue to produce articles that highlight record levels of student disengagement and lack of motivation. Faculty have been encouraged to use high-impact, active learning strategies to increase student engagement and success (Patrick et al., 2016). One technique, service learning, allows students to become active learners through applying learned skills and theory from the classroom to community settings (Connolly et al., 2017). The purpose of this study was to highlight students’ perceptions and experiences through three semester-long service-learning courses in which students provided a fitness and mindfulness program to local teachers to help them address stressors. Undergraduate sport management students enrolled in a service-learning course for sport development were tasked with planning, organizing, implementing, and evaluating three nine-week-long programs. Students were given increased responsibility and control over the semester, which resulted in real-world experiences. The students gave their perceptions and experiences in an end-of-semester paper. Three independent coders reviewed the papers using thematic analysis. Emergent themes were consistent with the service-learning literature suggesting increased engagement, sense of purpose, and applying knowledge. The service-learning course proved to have a positive impact on the sport management students and produced high levels of engagement. Sport management faculty could implement service-learning courses to increase student engagement and opportunities to apply theories, skills, and knowledge in real-world settings. Sport management courses should further explore using high-impact, active learning environments to increase student engagement and enhance student learning outcomes.

Keywords: service learning, student engagement, mindfulness and fitness intervention

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Introduction

Student engagement has become a core aspect of education in efforts to improve learning. Student engagement, both behavioral and emotional, increases when students have a sense of belonging (Gillen-O’Neel, 2021). According to Krause and Coates (2008), student engagement involves the contribution made by students toward their learning by devoting their time, resources, and commitment. Studies have shown that student engagement is significantly affected by human interactions—either student–student or student–instructor (Awidi & Paynter, 2019; Salta et al., 2022). Active learning has been shown to improve students’ learning and success, while promoting students’ engagement through collaboration and teamwork, discussion, and participation (Johnson & Johnson, 2018; Patrick et al., 2016).

In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, faculty, researchers, and higher education have identified even more than ever a need to enhance students’ engagement in the classroom as there has been an increase in students reporting feeling disengaged (Spitzer et al., 2021). Students’ engagement significantly decreased during the COVID-19 pandemic, which has been linked to the transition from classroom settings to virtual settings (Salta et al., 2022). According to numerous reports through *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, expectations of current college students are not aligned with faculty expectations because, in contrast with professors, students prefer remote learning over traditional classroom learning (The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2022).

In this article, we discuss increased student engagement through a service-learning course. A service-learning setting is valuable, as students enjoy enhanced learning and success through involvement in high-impact practices (HIP) such as service learning, undergraduate research, internships, and capstones (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2022). According to the recent National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), 51% of first-year students reported that they had taken at least one HIP course (NSSE, 2022). Cavanagh said, “When students don’t see the social connection and the value of what they’re learning, they’re going to have trouble engaging” (The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2022). Although there are various high-impact practices that have shown increased engagement, for this article, we will focus on a service-learning course that was offered in a sport management program.

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Service learning is a form of experiential learning that allows for students to connect theory to practice through real-world experiences in the community (Felten & Clayton, 2011; Myers, 2020). Service-learning pedagogy is an ideal way to engage students as they learn by doing as opposed to traditional courses that involve passive learning through listening, taking quizzes, and writing papers (Mumford et al., 2008). Felten and Clayton (2011) identified three core characteristics of service-learning: (1) advanced learning goals and community purpose, (2) reciprocal collaboration among students, faculty/staff, community members, community organizations, and educational institutions to fulfill shared objectives and build capacity among all partners, and (3) inclusion of critical reflection and assessment to produce and document meaningful learning and service outcomes.

There is no set structure for service-learning courses. For instance, they can occur at all levels of higher education from first-year classes to graduate seminars. These classes can include short-term modules, semester-long activities, multi-year projects, and multi-course projects (Felten & Clayton, 2011). Due to the variety of course objectives, service-learning courses may be direct or indirect and require high or low levels of involvement. Likewise, *community* can take on different contexts and can be construed as on-campus, in the local neighborhood, in another state or country, or online (Felten & Clayton, 2011).

Service learning has been well-researched and associated with positive learning outcomes, personal growth, civic engagement, and improved social skills (Prentice & Robinson, 2010; Warren, 2012; Yorio & Feifei, 2012). Studies have highlighted that service learning results in a deeper understanding of course material (McKenna & Rizzo, 1999), growth in writing and critical thinking skills (Astin et al., 2000), and enhanced ability to apply course materials to real-world problems (Markus et al., 1993). Such courses can be attractive to future employers as students develop soft skills that are not typically acquired or practiced in traditional classes, including social awareness and social skills. Bennett et al. (2003) found that students who participated in service learning had improved social interaction skills, interaction with diverse cultures, and awareness of social responsibility. Service learning can provide students with perspective-altering experiences that can impact students' future careers and professional development (Bush et al., 2016). Experiences derived from service-learning courses help students improve critical thinking skills and social awareness vital to the sport industry (e.g., Bennett et al., 2003; Bush et al., 2016; Mumford et al., 2008). Similarly, research suggests that service learning fosters social responsibility and the development of practical skills (Bennett et al., 2003).

Despite the many benefits of service learning, few sport management programs implement the pedagogy of service learning. Traditional sport

management classes promote learning through lecture-based classes with reading and tests. More recently, there has been a push toward experiential learning that involves a hands-on approach to learning through real-world experiences (Sattler, 2018). Most sport management programs attempt to achieve experiential learning through the requirement of internships, but rarely interact with the community through service-learning courses (Sattler, 2018). Sattler (2018) found courses that include volunteer exploration are not as widely adopted as in past years and strongly suggested that sport management directors consider adding service-based projects to introductory sport management courses. Incorporating more service-learning courses could not only expand the student experience but also improve students' interpersonal skills and ability to connect with different populations, both vital skills that do not get developed in traditional management courses (Bootsma et al, 2021; Pinnel & Chuck, 2004).

The types of service-learning courses that do currently exist in sport management programs vary drastically from program to program. For example, some service-learning classes plan and implement programs for the community while other classes are required to fulfill 15 hours of community service outside of class (Mumford & Kane, 2006). Some sport management service-learning courses involve giving back to the community through partnerships with local elementary and middle schools (Bush et al., 2016; Escofet & Rubio, 2019; Mumford & Kane, 2006). Bush et al. (2016) implemented service learning by partnering with a local elementary school located in a disadvantaged area to implement a program centered on arts, athletics, and academics. The one-day program included an age-appropriate college application for the elementary students, a fun run and sport stations that included rugby, ball handling, soccer, or tennis, and an art station to learn about art programs available at college and to depict their own journey to higher education (Bush et al, 2016). The students also hosted a food drive for the school, to bring awareness of the poverty experienced by the elementary students (Bush et al., 2016). The goal of the program was to encourage elementary students to visualize themselves attending higher education and to address the structural barriers that the students face. Escofet and Rubio (2019) also partnered with an elementary school in which they completed service by working with kids in schools to help improve their reading comprehension. Other examples include working with middle school kids to encourage more physical activity and fundraising to distribute bed nets for malaria mitigation projects (Mumford & Kane, 2006).

This current study involves an undergraduate sport management program that has a concentration in sport development located in southeast Georgia. This program developed a course that could be used like a lab to offer students

hands-on experiences working with people in the community. Some sport management programs have adopted sport for development (or sport development) programs because they have been identified to impact communities and participants “beyond physicality, in ways such as building character traits, creating unity, and overcoming bias” (Martin & LeCom, 2021, p.125). According to Lyras and Peachey (2011), sport for development is “the use of sport to exert a positive influence on public health, the socialization of children, youths and adults, the social inclusion of the disadvantaged, the economic development of regions and states, and on fostering intercultural exchange and conflict resolution” (p. 311). As highlighted in the literature, most sport management courses focus on business aspects of the industry, such as sales, directing, and managing people. Leadership courses are offered within programs, which all address working with people. However, rarely do courses focus on growing and developing students and communities in ways that exhibit servant leadership or teaching students within community-service based settings. For this case, the course was designed to teach and implement servant leadership within a community and to encourage students to put others first while working toward the desired outcome of using fitness and mindfulness techniques to help local elementary teachers identify, address, and manage stressors in their lives. The purpose of this study was to explore students’ perceptions and experiences of the semester-long service-learning course.

Methods

Design

In this article, we highlight undergraduate sport management students’ experiences and perceptions of course engagement through a service-learning setting. As the literature highlights that service-learning courses can be extensive and exhaustive to design and establish, leading to few sport management programs adopting this style of teaching, we found it best to use a qualitative approach.

Participants

There were 72 undergraduate sport management students enrolled in the service-learning course for fall 2021 ($n = 34$), spring 2022 ($n = 16$), and fall 2022 ($n = 22$). Of the 72 students enrolled in class, 57 agreed to participate in the research component. Of the 57 participants, there were more males ($n = 41$) than females ($n = 16$), which resembled the makeup of the general sport management program, and more students classified as seniors ($n = 51$) than juniors ($n = 6$). There was no other demographic data collected.

Course Design

The service-learning course was completed across the fall and spring terms. The fall term focused on leadership and program design, and the spring term focused on program assessment. Service learning was defined in the course description, and one or more student learning outcomes (SLO) were linked to this component each term. For example, students completing this course were expected to be able to respond, engage, assess, and implement a community-based intervention. Each year, the course partnered with a local elementary school to offer a nine-week fitness and mindfulness program to the teachers for the purposes of identifying, managing, and reducing stress. The nine-week program was offered to the same school in both fall and spring terms during a set class time, starting at 4 p.m. The sessions lasted one hour and fifteen minutes and took place at a local gym and off-campus classroom across the street from each other. All students and teachers had to drive to the location and commit to attending during the specified time. At the beginning of the fall course, students chose the component of the teachers' program they wanted to deliver and focus on, either fitness or mindfulness. Students were split into these groups during the second week and engaged in four weeks of extensive workshops and trainings around their chosen topics, in order to have a general understanding of fitness techniques that can be used to help reduce stress and mindfulness techniques that can be used in the classroom or during personal time to reduce stress. The course instructors led the first week of the teachers' program, and then the students led the remainder of the program. Students wrote and practiced their program sessions with their peers in the group and received feedback.

Throughout the program, students were tasked with planning, organizing, implementing, and evaluating their weekly lessons. Students were given increased responsibility and control over the semester, which resulted in real-world experiences and up to 27 hours of leading the teachers each semester. On days that students did not engage with the community, they were required to record themselves practicing their sessions with peers or friends outside of class. They also submitted a lesson plan detailing how the session would be run, how much time was spent on each activity, the purpose of the activity, how the purpose of the activity was linked to the purpose of the program, and each person's role throughout the session. The video and lesson plan were submitted one to two weeks prior to delivering the session to allow time for instructor feedback and any necessary adjustments. All sessions were run under the guidance of a certified group fitness instructor and a certified athletic trainer, with formal training in crisis management and mindfulness strategies. Beyond the assessment described in this study, the course instructors completed a formal assessment of each student-led session using a rubric with criterion for preparation, knowledge,

content delivery, and effective control of the classroom environment. Students also provided peer assessments based on objective observations, strengths of session, suggested improvements, and suggestions on how the group could assess if their objectives with the teachers were met.

Assessment

Student perceptions and experiences were explored through the completion of an end-of-semester paper. Grades were not based on written content. Instead, students were given a completion grade to encourage full honesty and recommendations. Students were given the following prompts:

1. Address the strengths of the class. Discuss what you **LIKED** about the class. What was positive about learning in a different manner in a class that is service-learning based? What captured your attention about the class being service-learning that you liked?

Brainstorming prompt: Were there skills you learned, fostered, and/or enhanced by participating in a service-learning course?

2. Address the weaknesses of the class. Discuss what you **DID NOT LIKE** about the class. What was negative about learning in a different manner in a class that is service-learning based? What captured your attention about the class being service-learning that you did not like?

Brainstorming prompt: Describe any frustrations you experienced throughout the program.

3. What was your overall experience in the service-learning course?

Brainstorming prompt: What could we do differently to enhance the service-learning course in the future?

Of the 57 participants, two papers were removed because of concern with authenticity. Three independent coders reviewed the papers using thematic analysis. The papers were analyzed through a general qualitative content analysis. Open coding was completed by independent coders, and through meetings and discussions to build a consensus, final codes were identified and applied.

Findings

The purpose of this study was to highlight students' perceptions and experiences of service-learning courses. The emergent themes were consistent with the service-learning literature, suggesting students felt they had increased engagement, had a sense of purpose, and were applying their knowledge throughout the service-learning courses.

Increased Engagement

Increased engagement was identified when students discussed learning in different settings, enjoying class, being more involved in class, and identifying different class teaching and learning techniques. In numerous cases, students compared their experiences in the service-learning course to traditional courses.

All the participants were upper-level students. The majority never participated in a service-learning course or an internship and therefore made comparisons to experiences in traditional classes. For example, Adam, a junior male, described traditional class settings as taking “the same lectures, notes, and clock-gazing.” He continued by describing the service-learning classes as “engaging, involved, and very hands-on class, and I thought that was one of the bigger strengths of this course.” Sam, a senior male, made the comparison of the traditional classes he attended throughout his four years as “come into the classroom and listen to your professor read off a screen in the front of the room. It gets very, very boring after a while.” Although physical activity is not part of the sport management major, he enjoyed “engaging in physical activities during the class period,” which kept him engaged and interested in the class. Further, he recognized that he had to learn material first, stating, “Yes, at the beginning we did have sort of a traditional lecture, but we had to learn the things necessary for the course. It was a different experience that made this class so much better than your traditional lecture.”

After completing a service-learning course, students gained a new perspective of the value of the course. For example, Tom, a senior male, stated:

I am a firm believer that you cannot replace learning from experience and this class takes learning from experience even further than simply doing something and learning from a mistake. While there is a lecture aspect associated with the class, it is necessary to provide the background information for the students so he or she can be successful and gain knowledge from the experience.

Similarly, Anna, a senior female, highlighted that:

I also think it was a positive that this class is and was unlike any other. I think each student, no matter the role they were in, enjoyed how different it was and being able to be a part of something for the first time. Instead of a lecture class, it was a hands-on environment which made it easier to learn concepts academically, and really experience what service learning is truly like. There was someone in this class who I previously had a lecture class with, and we bonded so much more and agreed we learned so much more in a hands-on environment.

As the students saw the differences in styles of classes and their own increased engagement as they were not clock watching or had feelings of boredom,

they also highlighted getting to know peers better, creating memorable experiences, and enjoying and being dedicated to the class. For instance, Jasmine, a senior female, recognized that “more of the students were dedicated to coming to class and participating in topics.” She found that for herself, it made it easier to engage in the class. Heather, a senior female, recognized that “classes like these encourage participation and attendance because our actions affect others.”

It appeared that engagement for current students was also linked to feeling motivated and excited about the course structure and content. James, a senior male, felt like traditional courses “don’t motivate you to be better for others, they motivate you to just get by and want to succeed for yourself.” Justin, a senior male, had similar feelings as he stated, “Even though this was considered a class, I never thought of it as a class. Usually, I don’t like going to class or have no motivation to go but when it came to this course, I was excited and ready to go every time I was leading or helping out.”

Brandi, a senior female, found meaning in the content while also having her own needs met as she stated:

Another strength of the class was that the classwork completed was always meaningful, therefore, it was easy to get excited about going to class and challenged us to put our best foot forward. On days where I felt I was craving social interaction, this class met these needs for me and allowed me an opportunity to connect with others.

Student engagement expectations appear to be changing. As highlighted in the review of literature, professors and students have different views on engaging students. The participants in this study admitted to struggling with engaging in traditional courses and find they are more engaged in courses where they are actively involved. They even aligned engagement with motivation and enjoyment.

Sense of Purpose

Sense of purpose emerged as students realized they were doing something for more than themselves. As service-learning courses focus on community outreach, the students in this study shared moments of finding purpose through the course. John, a senior male, described his involvement as having to “step out of our comfort zones and lead these sessions because it was meant to be bigger than us . . . It made me want to be a great servant leader and really learn and get something out of this course that would really stick with me for life.”

Through sport management courses, students are taught about leadership and management, but rarely is it from a servant leader perspective and then getting to apply it to the real world. Mark, a senior male, was able to identify connections to his career goals with such leadership lens, stating, “I believe the

program taught us well how to be servant leaders and give people all the tools we can in order to help them become their best or at least better selves, which is also important in my eyes as a director of a rec-department.” Not only did he align it to his career goals, but also highlighted that he wants to help others better themselves, which is aligned with other leadership theories, but perhaps not played out the same way. Additionally, the course exposed students to more ways to use their sport management education. James, a senior male, stated, “I could have a career in serving my community while still utilizing the skills and abilities I have learned from the sport management program.”

Students shared that their role was aligned to feelings of fulfillment. For instance, Carl, a senior male, stated the class gave him “a real experience and gaining a sense of fulfillment by helping the participants.” Austin, a junior male, stated, “this gave us a sense of nobility knowing that we provided a service to women who help their community.” Concurring with his classmate, Michael, a senior male, stated, “It is so great to hear the impact that we are having on others. Normal classes wouldn’t give you this opportunity to impact on someone else’s life like this.” And Jason, a junior male, felt more connected to the city because the teachers are not part of the university, which is all that some students know. He stated that the teachers “work and interact within the community. Having this aspect belong in this class was one of the better strengths in my opinion as I was able to have a sense of belonging to the whole [local] community, not just the [local] university community.”

Even more powerful for the researchers are the students that highlighted this class helping identify, reinforce, and confirm their life purpose. Simone, a senior female, stated, “I believe my purpose is to help others be the best they can be and I feel as though I can help them achieve that version of themselves.” Justin, a senior male, added:

Service-learning as I continue on my journey is my calling so I will never see the negative in something that I’m passionate about ... This class made an impact on my life in a positive way because it helped me find a piece of my purpose. I always knew my purpose was to help people, but now I think it’s to help people bridge the gap between wellness and sport.

If college is about helping students figure out what is important to them, this service-learning class provided the space to clarify their purpose and calling, the environment to discover what makes them feel good about themselves as a whole, and permission to have feelings of fulfillment.

Applied Knowledge

Students described being interested in the service-learning class because they felt like they had real-world experiences. Having a hands-on feeling was important to students because they felt like it was “preparing us for our future careers” (Ethan, a senior male); “putting skills I learned in class into practice in real world situations helped me to accurately correct mistakes and track my own progress” (Brandi, a senior female); and “gave us great leadership experiences that I don’t get with other classes. I was able to see what it is like to be in the shoes of a leader and see how I like it” (Mark, a senior male). Heather, a senior female, referred to the material in the hands-on environment as learning “material and took them and put them to use almost immediately. Not only did this help me learn and retain information, but it allowed me to use my knowledge in the real world.”

Students admitted being a bit skeptical about the experiences, as many “never had a course that allowed me to do this” (Jayden, a senior male). The same student stated, “At first, I thought it was going to be weird leading them since I am so much younger than them and they are teachers ... But I was proven wrong by how coachable and open-minded they were. They never complained.” As students graduate from college, they will work with a diverse group of people, and as sport management majors, they will eventually be in leadership positions and roles where they do lead people of different ages and different levels of experiences. As this student thought it was weird, another student recognized that her expectations in college are that classes are “preparing for life after school. Often times students don’t feel prepared after they graduate, or they have no takeaways. This class has afforded those opportunities” (Jasmine, a senior female). Oliver, a senior male, said that through this class it:

... finally allowed us to apply skills that we’ve been constantly reminded about throughout our time in college: public speaking skills, collaborative skills, planning skills, etc. ... this class’s structure was the melting pot for all the things to prepare us for what is to come as a sport manager.

This class was valuable for some students as they found it “difficult to learn how to be a leader through a textbook or a PowerPoint ... because I haven’t been put in many leadership positions before this class” (Sam, a senior male). The responses provided a consistent response to the learning environment, as John, a senior male, stated, “I feel in most classes we are simply handed a multitude of information, but I am never asked to actually put some of it into practice as I was with this class. I also felt like I was an important part of the class rather than just a cog in a machine.”

The service-learning course provided students multiple opportunities to combine new skills and knowledge learned in the course with skills previously learned in the program and apply them to a real population. The quotes support that this hands-on approach was valuable to their ability to apply knowledge.

Limitations and Future Research

A few limitations have been present throughout the design and delivery of the service-learning course and community-based teachers' program. Due to equipment needs for the fitness component, all students and teachers were required to drive to sessions. The location was less than two miles from main campus, and students had the option to take the university bus; however, the timing of the bus was not conducive if students had classes prior to or following this course. The class time was set to fit teachers' work schedules and was outside of the traditional morning or early afternoon class times to which our students were accustomed. Additional foreseeable limitations were the potential for physical injury when completing fitness tasks and mental health concerns when exploring topics related to stress in the mindfulness sessions. These concerns were addressed on the first day of the course, but no such incidents or concerns were reported or suspected. Although the current limitations may affect the ability of this service-learning course to expand in the absence of additional campus and/or community resources, the course has made a positive impact on student engagement, sense of purpose, and applied knowledge.

The course design and findings may be used as a foundation and motivation for future service-learning courses within sport management. There are two major recommendations for future research. First, future research should explore students' perceptions of a service-learning course on career readiness. Therefore, we recommend conducting a longitudinal study on employers' perceptions of career readiness in students who have and have not completed a service-learning course, as this understanding would be beneficial to faculty.

Additionally, sport management curriculum focuses on planning, organizing, leading, and controlling, which, in essence, is preparing students to be managers. As sport management faculty consider employing service-learning classes, they could consider implementing the PARE model (Preparation, Action, Reflection, and Evaluation). The PARE model continues to be utilized in service-learning projects within higher education and can be found in faculty handbooks for service learning, originating with the University of Maryland in 1999. Although additional service-learning models exist, this one fit our course design and timeline. Specifically, a sport management service-learning course is aligned with the PARE model, as there are clear links between the curriculum and components of

the model. For instance, when employing the model aligned to sport management curriculum, faculty should be intentional with proper preparation for the students to make sure students are *prepared* to: (1) engage in the service-learning project, (2) approach the project with an open and critical mind, and (3) have a clear plan of action when working within the project and when serving the participants. As mainstream sport management does not focus on continuously working with marginalized or underrepresented groups, a service-learning course would give students the opportunity to serve and interact with people in the community. Students would engage in *action* by serving and volunteering with an underserved population. The more engaged the students are in the planning and organizing of the program, the more initiative and investment they make to their own action in the program. Service-learning courses expose students to new settings in which they may not be familiar. Therefore, through these settings, sport management faculty can be champions for *reflection* on activities. As managers and business owners, it is important for individuals to be flexible for making adjustments and changes for the future benefit of an organization, and students have the opportunity to obtain this opportunity through a service-learning program. Lastly, sport managers use *evaluation* to better their programs, work setting, and events. The PARE model builds on evaluation of the program to adjust, advance, and change the program in which the students are invested. The evaluation component of the model is both holistic and formal to assess the success, benefit, and future improvements of the service along with student knowledge and understanding.

Conclusion

Student success and assessment of student learning outcomes have become hot topics within higher education. More than ever, professors and educational programs are asked to provide evidence of student success and meeting student learning outcomes. One way that educators target student success is through student engagement and active learning strategies. In the current study, a written paper was implemented as a course assignment to seek student feedback at the completion of a service-learning course that contained a nine-week teachers' fitness and mindfulness program run by the students and facilitated by the course instructors. Through the qualitative assessment of these papers, the service-learning course proved to have a positive impact on several components of student success, including increased engagement, sense of purpose, and applying knowledge. For the theme of increased engagement, quotes from the papers supported that students were excited to come to class, were more motivated than in a traditional course, and bonded with their classmates. For the theme of sense of purpose, quotes supported that the class gave them a sense of fulfillment in

providing a service that benefited others. For the theme of applied knowledge, quotes supported the idea that students enjoyed putting learned skills into practice right away, which they felt would benefit them in their future career.

It has already been established that increased engagement and active learning provide benefits to successfully achieving learning outcomes. This study contributes to the growing body of literature on enhanced student engagement through service-learning courses. Moreover, this study supports how a service-learning course can be beneficial within an undergraduate sport management program. Sport management faculty should implement service-learning courses to increase student engagement and opportunities to apply theories, skills, and knowledge in real-world settings. Based on the current study, we found success when students were provided with clear expectations of their role and time commitment to the service-learning component of the course. We recommend giving time to class sessions for debriefing throughout the semester. We found that when students feel they have a role in the development of a program and they practice their learned skills, they are more engaged and excited in the classroom.

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