STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF RECOMMENDED PRACTICES FOR SERVICE LEARNING: A MIXED-METHODS APPROACH

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Service learning is often considered a powerful way of reforming educational practices by connecting communities and schools, and most colleges and universities in the U.S. currently offer students some form of SL experience during their undergraduate years. Students who take service learning courses in college have demonstrated gains above and beyond those of their peers in academic learning, civic competence, and commitment to civic action, but these reported gains are wildly inconsistent across the available research. The varied approaches to practicing service learning are thought to be a leading source in this disparity, meaning that the specific instructional practices that we use for service learning courses are likely to significantly impact students’ outcomes. Recommendations for how to best practice service learning are vague and have little-to-no support for their relationship to college students’ learning outcomes.

This proposal outlines the need to evaluate recommended practices for service learning in three areas: 1) describe how they are being conceptualized and implemented in college classrooms, 2) explain students’ experiences with how their instructors do service learning, and 3) evaluate the impact that instructional practices have on students’ perceptions of their academic learning, civic competence, and civic action. To achieve these goals, the proposed study will take place in two phases using a national voluntary sample of undergraduate college students and their instructors. The first phase will provide evidence for construct validity and reliability by conducting a confirmatory factor analysis based on student responses to a 25-item questionnaire that will be used to assess the three dependent variables. The second phase will utilize a convergent mixed-methods design to assess recommended service-learning practices. Qualitative data in the form of interviews and open-ended survey questions will serve to explain how recommended practices are being implemented in college classrooms and to describe students’ experiences within those courses. Quantitative analysis, in the form of a 2-level hierarchical linear model, will be used to evaluate how instructional practices impact student outcomes.