

# Infusing Service Learning Into the Counselor Education Curriculum



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Kristen Arla Langellier, Randall L. Agramovich, Elizabeth A. Doughty Horn

Counselors are frequently called upon to be advocates for their clients and, more broadly, to advocate for the counseling profession. However, many new counselors struggle with integrating advocacy work in their counseling practice. This article provides an overview of service learning and identifies ways counselor educators may foster advocacy skills among counselors-in-training through the use of planned service learning experiences in the counselor education curriculum. The authors then provide examples of service learning activities for use within the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) 2016 core curricular areas, including professional orientation and ethical practice, social and cultural diversity, career development, helping relationships, and group work.

*Keywords:* advocacy, service learning, counselor education, ACA, CACREP

University faculty members frequently include service learning experiences in the undergraduate curriculum as a means for helping prepare students to develop as community members through meaningful civic engagement experiences that are augmented with classroom education (Servaty-Seib & Tedrick Parikh, 2014; Stanton & Wagner, 2006). Unfortunately, service learning assignments tend to diminish significantly as students make the transition from undergraduate to graduate education (Jett & Delgado-Romero, 2009; Servaty-Seib & Tedrick Parikh, 2014; Stanton & Wagner, 2006). Much of the existing scholarly literature centers around the impact of service learning on students who are at a traditional undergraduate age (Jett & Delgado-Romero, 2009; Servaty-Seib & Tedrick Parikh, 2014). The lack of service learning opportunities in the graduate curriculum is surprising, given that service learning may help students develop a deeper sense of community, appreciate others' perspectives, and identify avenues for contributing to social change (Cipolle, 2010).

Within graduate counselor training programs, counselor educators could more frequently utilize service learning projects (SLPs) in order to enhance knowledge of diverse community cultures among counselors-in-training (CITs) as well as provide CITs with opportunities to assess community needs and implement advocacy efforts. The counseling profession's Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (MSJCC), revised in 2016, states the importance of "integrating social justice advocacy into the various modalities of counseling" (Ratts et al., 2016, p. 31). In addition, the MSJCC posits that counselors and counselor educators conceptualize clients through a socioecological lens so as to understand the social structures affecting their world. Service learning curricula often include a social justice focus, which has been demonstrated to help students understand the structures in place that oppress others (Tinkler et al., 2015). With these guidelines in mind, the purpose of this article is to provide practical suggestions to help counselor educators infuse service learning into their curriculum, thus offering CITs more opportunities for personal and professional development.

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Kristen Arla Langellier, PhD, NCC, is an assistant professor at the University of South Dakota. Randall L. Agramovich, PhD, LCPC, is an associate professor at Idaho State University. Elizabeth A. Doughty Horn, PhD, LCPC, is a professor at Idaho State University. Correspondence may be addressed to Kristen Langellier, Division of Counseling and Psychology in Education, University of South Dakota, 414 E. Clark St., Vermillion, SD 57069, [kristen.langellier@usd.edu](mailto:kristen.langellier@usd.edu).

## Service Learning

Service learning was first introduced in the early 1900s as a method for fostering academic and social learning and advancements for students via community involvement (Barbee et al., 2003). Bringle and Hatcher (1995) defined service learning as

a 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 in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility. (p. 112)

Since its inception, many disciplines have found service learning useful as a method of merging the academic with the practical; it has become popular with disciplines such as nursing (Backer Condon et al., 2015), teacher education (Tinkler et al., 2015), and public health (Sabo et al., 2015).

With respect to counselor education, there has been a diminutive amount of research related to the implementation and effectiveness of service learning. In 2009, Jett and Delgado-Romero described service learning as an area of developing research in counselor education, and this could still be said today. There is a paucity of literature regarding service learning in graduate education (Servaty-Seib & Tedrick Parikh, 2014) and, more specifically, within counselor education. Yet university faculty, particularly counselor educators, are tasked with the challenge of bridging academic theory and research with “real-world” experiences. Therefore, SLPs may serve as a method for students and faculty to connect with the community in which they live and beyond (Nikels et al., 2007).

After reviewing service learning literature, Dotson-Blake et al. (2010) determined successful SLPs contain five essential characteristics that contribute to the overall intention of service learning. They contended successful SLPs should be developed in concert with a community or professional partner, contain coherent and well-defined expectations, incorporate stakeholder support, consider students’ developmental levels, allow ample opportunity for reflective practices, and broaden or expand because of the impact of the project (Dotson-Blake et al., 2010). Focusing on the above underpinnings of successful SLPs could potentially assist counselor educators in the planning and implementation stages of these sorts of projects, as they can take time and considerable effort to develop.

### Service Learning and Social Justice

According to Cipolle (2010), social justice and service learning are interrelated. She asserted that service learning and social justice need to be considered together so as to accomplish a larger goal of connection with the community. An additional component to service learning is the development of critical consciousness. Students engaging in service learning as a means of social justice may gain compassion and understanding from their participation (Cipolle, 2010). A by-product of service learning with a social justice focus may be the development of self-awareness through students’ opportunities to see for themselves how others live their lives; perhaps students will also see the impact of the dominant culture (Cipolle, 2010). Self-awareness is a key component of the 2016 MSJCC (Ratts et al., 2016) and is found throughout the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) 2016 Standards (CACREP, 2015). Additionally, the *ACA Code of Ethics* asserts that counselors should ascribe to self-awareness to maintain ethical practice and reflection (American Counseling Association [ACA], 2014).

## Service Learning Versus Community Service

An important distinction between community service and service learning lies within the beneficiaries of each. Within community service, the beneficiaries are those receiving the service. Service learning posits a reciprocal model, with both the recipient of service and student benefitting from the project (Blankson et al., 2015). Thus, SLPs provide students with opportunities to be exposed to issues of social justice that may foster empathy and cultural self-awareness. Students can benefit from service learning as it may assist them in developing increased compassion for others (George, 2015). With the continued focus on social justice within many disciplines, SLPs may provide another avenue for counselor educators to help students more fully understand the diverse needs of their communities and advocate for the underserved.

Throughout participation in an SLP, and at the completion, students are encouraged to apply critical thinking to their efforts and reflect on progress, barriers, and benefits (Blankson et al., 2015). For successful service learning to occur, projects should be connected to specific course objectives. Such a curricular emphasis is not generally a component of community service initiatives. By combining student projects and course material, instructors are able to help students solidify course material into practical applications (McDonald & Dominguez, 2015). This experiential avenue may appeal to non-traditional learners and provide more integration of material than didactic coursework alone (Currie-Mueller & Littlefield, 2018).

## Effects of Service Learning

Cipolle (2010) reported that students participating in early service learning received numerous benefits, including having higher self-confidence, feeling empowered, gaining self-awareness, developing patience and compassion, recognizing their privilege, and developing a connection and commitment to their community. All of these outcomes are consistent with the aims and goals of standards, competencies, and codes of ethics within the counseling profession (ACA, 2014; CACREP, 2015; Ratts et al., 2016).

Scott and Graham (2015) reported an increase in empathy and community engagement for school-age children when participating in service learning. They also reported that several previous works measured similar favorable effects among high school- and college-age individuals. Because of these overlapping desired effects and the need to incorporate social justice throughout the curriculum, service learning would fit well into current models of counselor education.

## Service Learning Efforts in Counselor Education

The *ACA Code of Ethics* (2014) calls upon professional counselors to donate their time to services for which they receive little to no financial compensation. The incorporation of SLPs could provide an opportunity to fulfill this ethical obligation while training students and connecting with the community. A dearth of literature exists as to specific counselor education service learning efforts. Of the few results, many are focused on pre-practicum level SLPs (Barbee et al., 2003; Jett & Delgado-Romero, 2009), pedagogical tools woven into the multicultural and diversity-based courses (Burnett et al., 2004; Nikels et al., 2007), and group leadership training (Bjornestad et al., 2016; Midgett et al., 2016). Alvarado and Gonzalez (2013) studied the impact of an SLP on pre-practicum-level counseling students and found that students reported an increase in their confidence in using the core counseling skills and a deeper connection with the community outside of the university setting. Havlik et al. (2016) explored the effect SLPs had on CITs and found similar themes to Alvarado and Gonzalez, particularly that of raised levels of confidence in the ability to use the core counseling skills.

In other counselor education–related studies, researchers also reported positive impacts of service learning. One such impact was that of raised student self-efficacy (Barbee et al., 2003; Jett & Delgado-Romero, 2009; Murray et al., 2006). An added and practical benefit for students has also been a greater understanding and familiarity of the roles and settings of professional counselors and a deepened understanding of counselors’ roles within professional agencies. Students were able to examine their own professional interests prior to practicum work and participate in valuable networking experiences with other professionals (Jett & Delgado-Romero, 2009).

An increased compassion for the population with whom they work has been reported (Arnold & McMurtery, 2011) as a result of service learning. Burnett et al. (2005) reported increased counselor self-awareness, which is an important component of counselor education, regardless of delivery method, program accreditation, or instructor pedagogy. They also reported a component of a successful service learning course to be peer-learning. Peer-learning involves the giving and receiving of feedback, and this provides a foundation for experiences of group supervision feedback later in counseling programs (Burnett et al., 2005). A frequent reported result of participation in service learning has been increased multicultural competence and social justice awareness on the part of the student (Burnett et al., 2004; Lee & Kelley Petersen, 2018; Lee & McAdams, 2019; Shannonhouse et al., 2018). In short, the incorporation of SLPs would benefit counselor educators in developing desired qualities in beginning counselors while giving them opportunities to network and more fully integrate material.

### **Integrating Service Learning Into Counselor Education**

Freire (2000) espoused that education should inspire students to become active and engaged members of the classroom in order to develop a deeper critical consciousness of society. Keeping Freire’s goal in mind, counselor educators could utilize service learning to bridge the divide that exists between the “ivory tower” and communities outside of academia. Counselors are called to apply their theoretical knowledge to real-world clients and to be advocates for those whose voices are silenced because of various forms of oppression (ACA, 2014; CACREP, 2015; Ratts et al., 2016). Through participation in SLPs, students are able to see firsthand the effects of oppression and assist with creating solutions; often, the projects chosen contain an element of social justice (George, 2015). Furthermore, SLPs woven into coursework may provide the opportunity for students to begin finding their voices as advocates and activists in a supportive environment, where peers are available to assist with potential problems that may arise.

By encouraging CITs to participate in SLPs earlier and often within their graduate education, students may have more opportunities to engage with diverse populations and to experience community environments and sociopolitical influences faced by different groups. The focus of clinical work during the practicum and internship phases of counselor education typically emphasizes counselor skill development and client progress rather than community-focused perspectives (Barbee et al., 2003; Jett & Delgado-Romero, 2009). Thus, by incorporating SLPs into regular coursework, students may feel freer to engage holistically in a community system rather than focus narrowly on their own counseling skill development and individual client progress. For all SLPs, there is the potential for students to experience the project components as challenging to complete. In this situation, students may be redirected to identify and analyze barriers to the success of the project and to identify strategies for eliminating those barriers.

Gehlert et al. (2014) argued that SLPs can also serve as potential gatekeeping tools. They posited that by engaging with individuals outside of the classroom experience, especially earlier than the

practicum stage, students might decide for themselves that the counseling profession is not the right choice for their career (Gehlert et al., 2014). They further contended that utilizing SLPs early in students' programs of study will allow the opportunity for faculty to identify students who might be in need of remediation plans before they are working with clients (Gehlert et al., 2014).

Counselors are urged to be advocates for the profession and for clients (ACA, 2014). Service learning may function as a natural initiation into that identity (Manis, 2012; Toporek & Worthington, 2014) and could possibly provide a bridge between an identity as a counselor and that of a counselor advocate. Another potential benefit of service learning is that students may be able to gain knowledge as to the realities of the profession beyond specific contact hour requirements to satisfy internship and licensure requirements. This could prove helpful as a gatekeeping tool as well. Students who find themselves disliking significant aspects of the profession might choose to leave the program without requiring faculty intervention.

Experiences of SLPs can be distilled into poster presentations or conference presentations. In this context, SLPs benefit both CITs and counselor educators, as professional development can occur for both. For students, conferences can be valuable networking opportunities, and for counselor educators, conference-related activities fall under required professional development (ACA, 2014; CACREP, 2015). Experiences could also serve as the foundation for manuscripts and research projects, both of which are considered professional development.

## **Service Learning Opportunities Within Specific Counseling Content Areas**

CACREP (2015) provides counselor educators with standards for training that can be used to facilitate course development, learning objectives, and class assignments. Several core content areas within a CACREP-aligned counseling curriculum may offer instructors and students the chance to engage in SLPs. Because little information currently exists regarding best practices for service learning within counselor education, the authors created example SLPs that are based on CACREP standards and rooted in the relevant content area literature. These are designed to facilitate the development of advocacy skills in a variety of environments. It should be noted that with any SLP, it is important for counselor educators to engage in continued monitoring of projects and student placements. Given that SLPs provide a reciprocal benefit for both students and the community, it is important to ensure everyone involved is experiencing ongoing added value. Therefore, counselor educators are encouraged to create and maintain relationships with stakeholders for feedback throughout the SLP and to make adjustments as necessary.

### **Professional Orientation and Ethical Practice**

Licensure remains an important topic within the counseling profession (Bergman, 2013; Bobby, 2013) and professional counselors are now able to obtain licensure in all states (Bergman, 2013; Urofsky, 2013). In order to become more familiar with state licensure policies and procedures, an SLP might involve student interviews with a member of the state licensure board and reflection upon that experience through a written journal entry. Questions posed to the board member could range from the practical aspects of obtaining a license in their state to the broader implications of ethical issues the board encounters. Student findings could then be utilized to develop a project involving the entire class in which students brainstorm ideas about what assistance the board might need in terms of outreach or advocacy. Examples could include barriers to licensure because of cost or English as a second language (making the testing aspect of obtaining licensure difficult). Students and faculty could use class time deciding what action to take and then implement and assess their plan.

Another example of an SLP that falls under this core content area is for students to volunteer time (e.g., 6 hours or more over a semester) assisting their state branch of ACA. An important aspect of the profession of counseling is involvement with relevant policy and legislation (Bergman, 2013). Students interested in getting involved in this area could spend time working with the lobbyist for their state's ACA branch (provided the state has retained a lobbyist) in order to assist them in advocating for the profession. Simple tasks such as assisting with office work can be of significant help to one working in a high-stress position and can prepare students for the realities of clinical work. State and federal government have a significant role in shaping the profession (Bergman, 2013), and because of this, counselor educators can utilize service learning in order to inspire students to become involved early in their careers.

Should the state ACA branch not have retained a lobbyist, students can work with branch leadership in order to determine barriers. Perhaps costs are prohibitive, in which case students could help with fundraising efforts and outreach. Encouraging master's students to take interest in policy and legislation pertaining to the profession will give them the foundation for making meaningful change and assisting with social justice efforts (Cipolle, 2010; Bergman, 2013).

### **Social and Cultural Diversity**

Much of the existing literature regarding service learning and counselor education focuses on social and cultural diversity with regards to SLPs (Burnett et al., 2004). Philosophically, SLPs align with the aims and scope of the MSJCC (Ratts et al., 2016). Frequently, course assignments contain a cultural immersion project in order for counselors to encounter experiences in which their personal values might cause a conflict when working with clients (Burnett et al., 2004; Canfield et al., 2009). Service learning experiences could easily augment the student learning process within multicultural or diversity courses by helping students experience cultural immersion, which may foster greater compassion, empathy, and cultural sensitivity (Cipolle, 2010; Burnett et al., 2004).

One possibility for a social and cultural diversity–focused SLP would involve students working at a shelter for homeless populations or a center for refugees. Students could also find an organization that serves a minority or oppressed population and partner with them to help fill a need they are experiencing. Students would therefore gain experience working with people from groups with whom they may have limited prior experience. This can assist with students identifying their own privileges prior to working in the counseling setting. Ideally, students would contact the shelter or center at the start of the semester in order to ascertain the exact needs of the agency.

An additional SLP could focus on assisting an organization that advocates for minority or oppressed populations. This also emphasizes gaining experience with diverse populations; however, students would have more freedom in choosing the specific population and could gain more experience in understanding the systems involved in advocacy work. Ideally, the instructor would encourage students to choose organizations in which the student is challenged by their privileges (e.g., not being identified as a member of the population served). Through this project, students have the opportunity to work with a wider variety of individuals and help to bring about social change via their specific project goals. For instance, students could choose a women's health center that has experienced a decline in attendance. The students might investigate and discover a particular city bus route was discontinued, making transportation to the health center difficult for residents. Students might then partner with various organizations with van access (such as churches) and raise money for weekly transportation in and out of the area.

## Career Development

Within the career development area of the CACREP core curriculum, students have the possibility of learning about their own careers and the impact careers have on the lives of clients. Examples of SLPs can include opportunities for students to immerse themselves within various aspects of career development. Several SLPs could come from partnering with a local employment agency. Students could discover barriers to employment for members of the local community and implement a project to alleviate some of those barriers. For example, students might discover a lack of late-night childcare in their community, which affects those working during the evening and night. They might implement a project in which university students provide childcare for a reasonable cost to the parents, making finding employment easier. If liability issues make this too difficult, students could focus their attention on fundraising to hire more qualified individuals to provide the childcare.

As mental health and wellness are primary foci of professional counselors (ACA, 2014; CACREP, 2015), a second potential SLP assignment related to career development could be for students to partner with a local business and provide mental health and wellness screenings, and education via seminars or workshops. Ideally, students would familiarize themselves with the company insurance (or lack thereof) and prepare referrals and resources accordingly. Workshops and seminars could be an avenue for educating employees and the community at large about wellness, prevention, and good mental health. These could be delivered via “brown bag lunches” or more formal trainings for employees.

## Helping Relationships

As CITs progress through counselor education programs, it might be helpful for them to discover new ways to employ their skills in helping relationships outside of counseling sessions. Much of the aforementioned scholarship exploring service learning within counselor education discovered an increase in self-efficacy with respect to core counseling skills as a result of participating in SLPs (Alvarado & Gonzalez, 2013; Havlik et al., 2016). An SLP suitable for this core curriculum could be to partner with a suicide prevention agency and provide assistance where needed. For example, students might work on a suicide hotline or provide referrals for people in distress, utilizing their relationship-building skills and reflective listening while learning about suicide assessment or prevention efforts within the community. Of course, it is important to consider students’ level of development and readiness to work with individuals who are suicidal. Counselor educators should ensure there are appropriate supports and supervision for students in these settings. A related project could be for school counseling students to partner with such an organization to create a developmentally appropriate suicide education presentation for high school–age children and deliver it to area schools.

Another SLP focused on the helping relationship might involve students seeking non-counseling placements at local counseling agencies or private practice settings. Ideally, students would have the opportunity to immerse themselves in many elements of practice without having a focus on accruing direct client contact hours. Spending time at an agency before practice might provide students with opportunities to learn many aspects of the profession and the operations of the agency, which in turn could help students decide within which settings they would like to work. This project might also help inform students about potential barriers clients might face in accessing services. They could develop a plan for removing the barriers, which might include identifying potential sources of funding for the project (e.g., grants, scholarships, community donations) and providing an outline of how to access this funding. Another potential benefit to this project is that it could provide students with the opportunity to network within the local counseling community and connect agencies with potential interns.

## Group Work

SLPs that correspond to group work can be similar to those under the helping relationships core curriculum. For example, students could partner with a local counseling agency that provides group counseling services. Students could determine if clients encounter any barriers to receiving group counseling and implement a plan for eliminating the barrier(s). A further example is perhaps if the agency has a group in which they would like to see more culturally relevant topics used in order to attract a more diverse group of clients. Students partnering with this agency could perform outreach to discover what clients would like to see at the group and any barriers, such as transportation, to attending this group. Another possibility for an SLP is for students to facilitate a group counseling experience for an agency or shelter for no cost to those participating in the group.

## Conclusion

SLPs have the potential to enhance the learning experiences of students within graduate counselor education programs. Although not previously emphasized within counselor training, SLPs may be developed and implemented within a variety of core counseling content areas as suggested by CACREP (2015). From an advocacy and social justice perspective, SLPs also may provide students with multiple opportunities to experience the needs of clients and identify barriers to providing counseling services with diverse client populations. Ultimately, by utilizing SLPs, counselor educators can help foster CITs' advocacy and social justice identities, preparing them for work as responsible citizens and effective counselors.

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