

## **Engaging MSW Students in Policy Practice: Evaluation of Service-Learning Outcomes**

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**Abstract:** Social policy courses are a staple in social work curricula, particularly in graduate-level social work education. Indeed, policy practice is among the nine social work competencies stipulated by the Council on Social Work Education. The purpose of the present study was to measure the effectiveness of service-learning compared to traditional-learning methods in achieving civic and course-learning outcomes. This study compared a purposive sample of 89 graduate-level social work students enrolled in advanced social policy courses (30 in a service-learning section, and 59 in traditional sections). Employing a quasi-experimental design, we found that service-learning is associated with better civic and course-learning outcomes. Service-learning may be used to enhance policy practice efficacy based on knowledge, skills, values, and competence.

**Keywords:** Policy practice efficacy; service-learning outcomes; course-learning outcomes; competence

Social policy courses are a staple in graduate-level social work curricula. *Policy practice* is an essential field of social work practice that can be used to address the dynamic nature of 12 pressing social issues, termed *grand challenges* (Uehara et al., 2013). Policy practice is included among the nine social work competencies stipulated by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE, 2015), the accrediting body of the profession. In the context of an uncertain and complex sociopolitical environment, the significance and need for competent social workers in policy practice has never been greater. However, policy courses are among those in which students have the least interest (Anderson & Harris, 2005; Henman, 2012).

Social policy instructors must therefore find new and effective ways to hold students' attention and foster their curiosity and interest in the subject matter. Team-based learning (Macke, Taylor, & Taylor, 2013), films (Anderson, Langer, Furman, & Bender, 2005), and tablet computers (Young, 2014) have all been employed to promote student engagement in policy courses. Another promising approach is the use of service-learning methods to engage Master of Social Work (MSW) students in social policy course material.

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## Literature Review/Background

### Service-Learning

First introduced in the 1960s (Stanton, Giles, & Cruz, 1999), service-learning is a form of school-based community service in which students engage with community members for mutual benefit. Service-learning promotes civic engagement by demonstrating the impact students can have on their communities simply by becoming involved in meaningful ways. According to Bringle and Hatcher (1995),

Service-learning is most commonly defined as a course-based, 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)

To reiterate, the key features of service-learning are the community-identified need, which becomes the service, and the meaningful reflection in which students engage during and/or after the experience.

Service-learning is implemented in classrooms from kindergarten through college and is appropriate for learners of any age (Kielsmeier, Scales, Roehlkepartain, & Neal, 2004; Lu & Lambright, 2010). Community partners can come from within or outside the immediate area (Karasik & Wallingford, 2007) and can come from the non-profit, for-profit, and public sectors (Blouin & Perry, 2009). Service-learning is suitable for a variety of disciplines and has been applied in accounting, biology, environmental studies, nursing, psychology, and sociology (Campus Compact, n.d.).

Service-learning generally results in one of two end products: services or deliverables. Services are activities that are typically performed on-location; performing the service is the end product in and of itself. Examples of services are cleaning/restoration/beautification projects, reading/literacy/tutoring programs, and community organizing. Deliverables are tangible products that may be completed on-site or off and are given to or left with the community partner. Examples of deliverables are construction projects, written reports or white papers, and brochures/pamphlets/resource lists.

### Service-Learning in Social Work

Service-learning, with its philosophy of helping communities in need, finds itself at home in social work, whose emphasis is on serving vulnerable populations (Byers & Gray, 2012; Cipolle, 2010; Peterson, 2009). That the two are so close in their end goal may lead some faculty, and perhaps students as well, skeptical of the need for service-learning in social work and leaves them unable to differentiate the two (Cronley, Madden, Davis, & Preble, 2014; Madden, Davis, & Cronley, 2014). In addition to being complementary, however, there are, indeed, differences.

Service-learning, the most common type of experiential learning (Moore, 2010), is similar to other approaches such as cooperative education (i.e., paid work experience that coincides or alternates with academic coursework) and internships (tied to academic institutions; Cooperative Education and Internship Association, n.d.). However, service learning embodies several key differences. Primary among them is their purpose. Social work field education prepares students specifically for the profession and is guided by core competencies outlined by CSWE. The purpose of field education is to develop these competencies through direct or indirect social work practice in a professional setting under the supervision of a licensed social worker. Moreover, unlike service-learning, in which the service is driven by the community-identified need, social work field education is driven by the student's need to gain professional experience. Although the internship setting may benefit from the work performed by the student, that benefit is a byproduct and not the sole intent of the student's placement. Secondary is the academic credit awarded for the student's participation in and successful completion of the activity. In service-learning, students earn credit for a course in which service-learning is one part of the learning experience, in addition to, typically, classroom lecture, assigned reading, and graded assignments. In field education, students earn credit for the experience as a whole.

Service-learning has been used at both the undergraduate and graduate levels in social work education. Gerontology (Ames & Diepstra, 2006; Gutheil, Chernesky, & Sherratt, 2006), poverty (Forte, 1997), research methods and statistics (Wells, 2006), and special populations, such as burn survivors (Williams, King, & Koob, 2002), are just some of the topics in social work curricula taught using service-learning. Social policy is among them, although to a lesser degree than other courses (Anderson & Harris, 2005; Lim, Maccio, Bickham, & Dabney, 2017) and with less known about this merger (Droppa, 2007a).

### **Service-Learning in Social Policy Curriculum**

Along with research methods, social policy courses are generally the least liked among social work students. Students find the material dry and uninteresting (Gordon, 1994), a perception that may interfere with learning. Moreover, social work students who pursue direct-practice (i.e., micro- or mezzo-level) tracks find little relevance of macro-level social policy (Kilbane, Freire, Hong, & Pryce, 2014). However, policy is crucial to understand at any level of practice and is thus prescribed by CSWE's (2015) Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards. This requirement in the face of student disinterest and reluctance, then, places social work educators in an unenviable position. In an attempt to make the course more palatable and thus foster learning and acquisition of the material, instructors must find creative ways to expose students to the material and keep them engaged. Service-learning is an effective means of accomplishing that goal.

There is some evidence of successful implementation of service-learning in social policy curriculum. For example, Rocha (2000) compared experiential learning, including service-learning, to traditional learning on the variables of policy-related values, competency, and activity levels. The sample was comprised of 72 recent MSW graduates, 39 (54.2%) of whom had taken a social policy course using an experiential learning method (30 using service-learning and 9 using another method) and 33 (45.8%) of whom had taken policy via traditional classroom-based instruction (Rocha, 2000). Students in the

experiential learning condition worked in small groups for several hours a week both inside and outside of the classroom (Rocha, 2000), engaging in “planning change at the organization, community, and state levels; policy development and implementation of projects; and increasing public awareness of political issues” (Rocha, 2000, p. 56). Each of the three outcome variables—value of policy-related tasks, competency of performing policy-related tasks, and participation in political activity—was comprised of 8 indicators, each measured on a 5-point Likert-type scale. Data were analyzed using *t*-tests and multiple regression. Findings revealed no significant differences between the experiential and traditional-learning groups on social policy-related values; however, students in the experiential learning group were more likely to perceive themselves as competent in the area of policy, which was associated with engaging in policy-related activities after graduation.

Service-learning thus assists social work educators in meeting the course goal of increasing competency in policy practice (Rocha, 2000). Service-learning not only increases students’ social policy comprehension (Droppa, 2007b) but also improves their attitudes toward social policy (Anderson, 2006; Sather, Carlson, & Weitz, 2007). To the former point, 19 students enrolled in an undergraduate social policy course completed 16 different projects with 14 organizations (Droppa, 2007b). Although the research question was not clearly defined, the author’s goals were 1) for students to choose a partner organization from the community, 2) for students to “relate in a more intensive fashion to a community organization or entity” (Droppa, 2007b, p. 86), and 3) for students to have “gained more knowledge, skills, and confidence in their ability to engage in policy practice and policy advocacy” (p. 86). Data specific to the third goal, the most salient of the three, were captured through a focus group. The author used no formal method of qualitative analysis; however, according to the author, the students reported that the course and its infused policy project gave them a better understanding of course content, various levels of government, and advocacy; made them more marketable; and encouraged them to become involved in various policy activities. Similarly, in a course involving a cultural immersion program, service-learning facilitated an understanding of the link between policy and advocacy (Mercier, Harold, Johnson, & Pond, 2016). Twenty-eight undergraduate social work/pre-social work students over a period of three years participated in a week-long camp for LGBT-parent families. After working closely with these families, eight (29%) of those students remarked on the role that policy and advocacy play in social work practice.

In an effort to promote positive attitudes toward social policy, Anderson (2006), through an extensive literature review, makes the case for service-learning and community-based research as means to better prepare students for policy analysis, promote civic engagement, and improve their collaboration with community members. Sather et al. (2007) integrated service-learning into a research methods course and a macro practice course for senior undergraduates and came to a similar conclusion. The two courses, taught during the same semester and containing the same students, shared one service-learning project. Although unclear how the data were collected, after engaging all semester with a homeless and housing services agency, 75% of the 24 students reported an increased interest in policy.

Service-learning is not without its limitations, however. Some colleges and universities fail, through various means, to support the community engagement of their faculty, despite touting institutional missions and values to the contrary (Jaeger & Thornton, 2006). Research-intensive universities in particular may lack incentives and rewards for faculty who engage in service-learning and similar activities. These institutions prioritize research over teaching and service, two areas that service-learning taps into. In fact, engaging in service-learning may negatively impact faculty at institutions that offer little to no salary or tenure and promotion rewards for community engagement activities, leaving tenured faculty to discourage their tenure-track colleagues from such pursuits (Jaeger & Thornton, 2006).

These factors and others were borne out in a study conducted by Abes, Jackson, and Jones (2002) focused on service-learning motivators and deterrents. More than 500 ( $N = 518$ ) service-learning and non-service-learning faculty in various disciplines from 29 institutions of higher education returned a survey regarding factors that motivate and/or deter them from engaging in service-learning. Participants cited motivators such as encouragement from institutional administrators, the support they received in the form of advice from colleagues, and student learning outcomes. Regarding deterrents, service-learning faculty cited "time, logistics, and funding; student and community outcomes; reward structure; and comfort with ability to effectively use service-learning" (Abes et al., 2002, p. 10) as factors that might make them less likely to continue using service-learning. Among non-service-learning faculty, logistical challenges, lack of skill in using service-learning, the perception of service-learning's irrelevance, and the lack of time to prepare for service-learning courses served as the greatest deterrents.

Social work faculty report many of these same challenges. Madden et al. (2014) surveyed 208 social work faculty and 68 criminal justice faculty on, among other variables, perceived barriers to using service-learning. Social work faculty cited "lack of faculty reward" (73.1%), "logistically unfeasible" (71.2%), "unfamiliarity with the community" (69.7%), and "lack of teaching preparation time" (65.9%) as the top four barriers to implementing service-learning. Despite these challenges, service-learning has repeatedly demonstrated positive outcomes in student learning across a number of domains in various undergraduate and graduate disciplines.

This paper adds to the literature on the infusion of service-learning in graduate-level social policy courses in social work education. The present study builds on Rocha's (2000) work; however, it is different from Rocha's in several important regards. First, this study evaluated the effectiveness of service-learning pedagogy exclusively as compared to traditional-learning methods, whereas Rocha evaluated the effectiveness of experiential learning methods, which included service-learning rather than traditional-learning methods. Secondly, this study uniquely measured civic outcomes as well as course-learning outcomes that comprised both knowledge-oriented proficiency and advocacy- (action-) oriented proficiency, whereas Rocha measured three outcomes including value of policy-related tasks, competency of performing policy-related tasks, and actual participation in political activity. Thirdly, this study used a comparison group consisting of students who opted to enroll in the traditional (i.e., non-service-learning) course during the same semester (spring 2015). Students in Rocha's comparison group were in two other policy

courses in another substantive area, whereas her service-learning course focused on child and family policy at five different times from spring 1995 to summer 1996. Fourthly, this study administered a pretest at the beginning of the semester to identify any differences between the two groups in terms of values and attitudes toward community, social responsibility, and civic awareness before taking the Advanced Social Policy course. Rocha did not administer a pretest survey, which makes it impossible to gauge whether students who had opted to take the experiential-learning course would have been equivalent to their counterparts who had opted to take the traditional-learning course. Lastly, this study measured the pre- and post-test differences between two groups to ascertain whether the service-learning approach produced a greater difference in both civic and course-learning outcomes, whereas Rocha administered only a posttest survey after students had graduated. It is possible that factors other than the type of policy course taken could have affected post-graduation differences in values and competency in policy-related tasks and political activities.

### About the Course

Three sections of an Advanced Social Policy course were offered to advanced-year MSW students: two traditional classroom-based sections and one service-learning section. Service-learning was an obligatory rather than voluntary component of that section, and students were allowed to self-select into the section of their choice. The service-learning project was service in nature, namely serving low- and moderate-income individuals with tax preparation assistance and educating human service workers and clients at two social service agencies about the benefits of Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) as well as potential disadvantages of using refund anticipation loans and commercial tax preparers for the 2014 tax filing season.

In tandem with the service-learning projects, course assignments included writing a paper analyzing state EITC policy to effect positive change. The purpose of this analytic paper was to “aid lawmakers who sponsor a bill that increases the state Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) from the current rate of 3.5% to an increased rate of 7% (of the federal EITC amounts) during the 2015 legislative session” (Lim, 2015, p. 6). Additionally, in order to encourage critical reflection on their service-learning activities, the students were asked to compose five reflective journal entries to document their service-learning experiences throughout the semester. Reflection topics included understanding the social problem of poverty; the working poor and the decline of the middle class; the contribution and limitations of the federal EITC, state EITC, and VITA in reducing poverty; the rise of a fringe economy such as commercial tax preparation and refund anticipation loans (RALs); and the implications their services have for the aforementioned social/community issues. Together, the ultimate goal of this service-learning course was to learn and craft the best policy practices to present to the community partners and stakeholders for policy advocacy.

Once the service-learning project was selected and community partners were on board with the proposed project, the instructor of the course submitted a study proposal to the university’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) about a month prior to the spring 2015 semester. The IRB approved the study proposal to measure the effectiveness of engaging MSW students in policy practice that involves students as researchers, educators, and

practitioners in the lives of the individual clients, social service agencies, and the broader community. After reviewing the project details and signing consent forms, students were asked to voluntarily complete pre- and post-surveys.

**Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC).** EITC is a tax credit for low- and moderate-income earners based on annual income, number of dependents, and filing status. For example, using 2015 tax year figures, an unmarried individual with no dependents, making less than \$14,820 per year, would qualify for a tax credit of \$503. At a maximum, a married couple filing jointly, with three or more dependents, making less than \$53,267, would qualify for a credit of \$6,242 (U.S. Internal Revenue Service, 2015a). Despite the benefits and relative ease of claiming this credit, nearly a quarter (24.7%) of claimants do not. The southeast region of the U.S., of which Louisiana is a part, was tied for second-lowest EITC participation rates in 2005 (Plueger, 2009). The failure to claim the credit may be due to taxpayers' lack of awareness and understanding of and complexity surrounding EITC (Bhargava & Manoli, 2015).

**Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA).** Tax return preparation assistance is available free of charge for those who qualify at sites scattered throughout communities nationwide and staffed by volunteers certified by the United States Internal Revenue Service. Eligible participants are those "who generally make \$54,000 or less, persons with disabilities, and limited English-speaking taxpayers" (U.S. Internal Revenue Service, 2015b, para. 1). Over one-quarter (25.5%) of Baton Rouge residents/residents in the city in which the university is located live in poverty, a rate far higher than that of the US (14.8%), state (19.8%), and parish (18.4%; U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). This results in a considerable number of people eligible for VITA.

**Service-learning projects.** A local association of nonprofit organizations, charity coalition, and credit union served as the community partners and identified the underutilization of VITA sites as a concern within the community. Therefore, the students in the service-learning section (1) became VITA-certified volunteers after completing an 8-hour United Way tax assistance training; (2) served low- and moderate-income individuals with tax preparation assistance for at least 20 hours; and (3) educated human service workers, clients, and community partners at two social service agencies on the benefits of the EITC and VITA. One of the most critical components of the service-learning pedagogy for students was the five written reflections on their experiences as well as class discussions throughout the semester about the tax assistance services they provided.

On one Saturday at the beginning of the semester, students attended an 8-hour training offered by United Way to become VITA-certified. In exchange, students were to provide at least 20 hours of assistance with tax filing to residents from low- and moderate-income households who stopped by VITA sites. These sites were funded and operated by United Way during the 2014 tax year (2015 calendar year) beginning in February and lasting through April 10<sup>th</sup>. Students also approached two social service agencies to educate workers and clients about EITC and VITA. At the close of the semester, students presented their experiences with VITA training, tax assistance, and the VITA and EITC education campaign, as well as research findings on state EITC to stakeholders (i.e., the three community partners). The research on state EITC was based on a request from community

partners so they could use that information to lobby for the state EITC expansion during the legislative session in upcoming years.

## Method

### Sample

Service-learning pedagogy was incorporated into a required Advanced Social Policy course during the spring 2015 semester at Louisiana State University. Students voluntarily registered for one of three sections. Service-learning projects were mandatory for those who were enrolled in the service-learning section. Thirty-one MSW students were enrolled in the service-learning section, while 67 were enrolled in two traditional-learning sections. The final sample included 89 students who completed both surveys ( $n=30$  for the service-learning section;  $n=59$  for the traditional-learning sections). Student outcomes in the service-learning section were compared to those in the traditional-learning sections.

### Instrumentation

This study assessed two types of student outcomes: civic outcomes and course-learning outcomes. The Virginia Tech Service-Learning Participant Profile (Virginia Tech Survey; see Roemer [2000] for the instrument) served as the survey instrument to measure the five civic outcomes of personal social responsibility, importance of community service, civic awareness, self-oriented motives, and service-oriented motives (Parker-Gwin & Mabry, 1998). Personal social responsibility was assessed using a composite score of five items that measured the value that students placed on advocating for improving social justice issues that adversely impact vulnerable populations. The importance of community service was assessed using a composite score of five items that measured the value that students placed on community volunteerism. The civic awareness variable consisted of a composite score of seven items that measured the students' self-evaluations of their competency in advocating for change for social justice issues. The self-oriented motives and service-oriented motives consisted of composite scores of four and three items, respectively, that measured the students' self- and service-oriented reasons for participating in community service and/or volunteer activities.

The students could select from four response options for personal social responsibility (from 1 [*not important*] to 4 [*essential*]), five response options for importance of community service (from 1 [*strongly disagree*] to 5 [*strongly agree*]), five response options for civic awareness (from 1 [*lowest*] to 5 [*highest*]), and three response options for both self-oriented motives and service-oriented motives (from 1 [*not important*] to 3 [*very important*]). Thus, higher composite scores indicate higher degrees of each dependent variable of interest (Parker-Gwin & Mabry, 1998; Roemer, 2000). Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficients ranged between 0.74 and 0.77 for the personal social responsibility variable, 0.77 and 0.83 for the importance of community service variable, 0.71 and 0.72 for the civic awareness variable, 0.68 and 0.79 for the self-oriented motives variable, and 0.77 and 0.80 for the service-oriented motives variable, suggesting that the Virginia Tech Survey reliably measures these five dependent variables.

In addition to the civic outcomes, 12 learning objectives on the Advanced Social Policy course syllabus were used to measure two dimensions of course-learning outcomes—knowledge-oriented proficiency and advocacy- (action-) oriented proficiency. Knowledge-oriented proficiency consisted of a summed composite score of six learning objectives such as “understanding dimensions and dynamics of social welfare policy,” while advocacy- (action-) oriented proficiency consisted of a summed composite score of six learning objectives such as “understand and demonstrate policy practice skills.” The students could select from nine response options for each learning objective from 1 (*extremely incompetent*) to 9 (*extremely competent*), with the higher composite scores indicating higher competency levels. Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficients were 0.91 for knowledge-oriented proficiency and 0.93 for advocacy- (action-) oriented proficiency. The independent variable was dichotomous and indicated whether a student was enrolled in the service-learning class (coded as 1) or a traditional-learning class (coded as 0).

The students' participation in the study was voluntary, and their responses were collected confidentially at the beginning and end of the semester. To assure the voluntary nature and confidentiality of survey participation, each survey was numbered on the back according to the order of the students' appearance on the class roster, for matching purposes only. Additionally, students were asked not to write any identifying information on the surveys.

### Data Analysis

A pretest-posttest comparison design was used to explore the impact of taking a service-learning course compared to taking traditional-learning courses. To compare group differences in demographic characteristics between students in the service-learning and traditional-learning courses, a chi-square test for nominal variables (i.e., race and gender) and a *t*-test for the continuous variable (i.e., age) were used. Paired *t*-tests were used to compare pretest mean scores to posttest mean scores in civic and course-learning outcomes for students in the two course formats. In addition, independent samples *t*-tests were employed to compare mean differences in the civic and course-learning outcomes between students in the two course formats. Although independent samples *t*-tests results show whether there are statistically significant mean differences between two groups, it does not tell the magnitude of a treatment effect (i.e., taking the service-learning class for this study). To test effect sizes (ES) of taking a service-learning class compared to taking traditional-learning classes in the outcomes, Cohen's (1988) *d* tests were utilized:

$$ES\ (d) = \frac{(\text{Experimental group mean}) - (\text{comparison group mean})}{(\text{pooled standard deviation})}$$

According to Cohen (1988),  $d \geq .2$  is considered a small effect size,  $d \geq .5$  is a medium effect size, and  $d \geq .8$  is a large effect size.

### Results

Table 1 displays descriptive statistics for the sample by course format. A majority of the students were White (77.3%) and female (87.5%), with an average age of 26.7 ( $SD =$

6.92) years. The service-learning students were more likely to be White, female, and slightly younger than the traditional-learning students. However, chi-square and *t*-test result showed no significant group differences at the .05 level.

*Table 1. Student Descriptive Statistics by Course Type (n=89)*

	Service Learning (n=30)	Traditional (n=59)	All (n=89)
<b>Race (%)</b>			
White	80.0%	75.9%	77.3%
Black	13.3%	20.7%	18.2%
Other	6.7%	3.5%	4.6%
<b>Female (%)</b>	90.0%	86.2%	87.5%
<b>Age (years)</b>			
Mean	26.0	27.1	26.7
SD	6.2	7.3	6.9
Range	22–53	21–63	21–63

*Note.* Chi-square tests and a *t*-test showed no statistically significant difference at the 0.05 level between students in the service-learning course and students in the traditional course.

Table 2 shows the independent samples *t*-test results, which compare the mean differences in the civic outcomes between the service-learning and traditional-learning courses at pretest. Although the mean scores for each of the five civic outcomes for the service-learning class were slightly higher than the scores for the traditional-learning classes, the results indicated that before taking the service-learning class, the service-learning students did not differ significantly at the .05 level from the traditional-learning students.

*Table 2. Differences in Civic Outcomes Between Service-Learning Course and Traditional Course at Pretest: Independent Samples t-test*

Civic Outcomes	Service Learning (n=30)		Traditional (n=59)		<i>t</i>
	M	SD	M	SD	
Personal social responsibility	17.93	1.62	17.42	2.08	-1.27
Importance of community service	21.50	2.67	21.15	2.54	-0.59
Civic awareness	27.00	2.85	26.88	2.91	-0.18
Self-oriented motives	10.33	1.63	10.51	1.56	0.49
Service-oriented motives	8.63	0.85	8.47	0.90	-0.82

*Note.* No statistical significance was found at the 0.05 level. Only civic outcomes are reported here because course-learning outcomes were measured only at posttest.

Table 3 reports the paired *t*-test results, which compare the mean differences in the five civic outcomes before and after taking the Advanced Social Policy course for students in the service-learning and traditional courses. The service-learning students showed

significant increases in three of the civic outcomes: personal social responsibility,  $t(29) = -2.80$ ,  $p = 0.005$ , importance of community service,  $t(29) = -3.44$ ,  $p < .001$ , and civic awareness,  $t(29) = -4.63$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . The traditional-learning students showed significant increases in two of the civic outcomes: importance of community service,  $t(58) = -2.07$ ,  $p = 0.021$ , and civic awareness,  $t(58) = -3.17$ ,  $p = 0.001$ . The results indicated that taking an Advanced Social Policy class, regardless of the type of course, significantly increased students' perceptions of the importance of community service and civic awareness. However, the increase in the two civic outcomes (importance of community service and civic awareness) was greater for students in the service-learning course. Furthermore, a significant increase in students' personal social responsibility between pretest and posttest was found only in the service-learning course.

*Table 3. Differences in Civic Outcomes Between Pretest and Posttest for Both Service-Learning Course and Traditional Course: Paired Sample t-test*

Civic outcomes	Service Learning (n=30)			Traditional (n=59)		
	M (SD)		t	M (SD)		t
	Pre-test	Post-test		Pre-test	Post-test	
Personal social responsibility	17.9 (1.62)	18.7 (1.17)	-2.80**	17.4 (2.08)	17.9 (2.15)	-1.48
Importance of community service	21.5 (2.67)	23.0 (1.93)	-3.44***	21.2 (2.54)	22.1 (3.13)	-2.07*
Civic awareness	27.0 (2.85)	29.1 (2.54)	-4.63***	26.9 (2.91)	28.4 (3.10)	-3.17**
Self-oriented motives	10.3 (1.63)	10.6 (1.67)	-0.95	10.5 (1.56)	10.8 (1.48)	-1.43
Service-oriented motives	8.6 (0.85)	8.9 (0.40)	-1.49	8.5 (0.9)	8.6 (0.78)	-1.47

Note. \* $p < 0.05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ . Only civic outcomes are reported here because course-learning outcomes were measured only at posttest.

Table 4 presents the independent samples  $t$ -test results, which compared the mean differences in the five types of civic outcomes and two types of course-learning outcomes between the service-learning class and the traditional-learning classes at posttest. There were no significant differences in civic awareness and self-oriented motives between the two groups. Upon completion of the class, however, students in the service-learning class showed higher levels of personal social responsibility,  $t(86.47) = -2.47$ ,  $p = 0.007$ , importance of community service,  $t(83.65) = -1.70$ ,  $p = 0.047$ , and service-oriented motives  $t(86.95) = -1.91$ ,  $p = 0.030$ , compared to students in the traditional-learning classes. Regarding the degree of effectiveness in civic outcomes of the service-learning class, Cohen's  $d$  ES results showed medium effect sizes for personal social responsibility ( $d = 0.50$ ), importance of community service ( $d = 0.35$ ), and service-oriented motives ( $d = 0.39$ ).

**Table 4. Mean Differences and Effect Sizes in Civic and Course-Learning Outcomes Between Service-Learning Course and Traditional Course at Posttest: Independent Samples t-test**

Civic and Course-Learning Outcomes	<i>M (SD)</i>		<i>t</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i> ES
	Service Learning ( <i>n</i> =30)	Traditional ( <i>n</i> =59)		
<b>Civic outcomes</b>				
Personal social responsibility	18.73 (1.17)	17.86 (2.15)	-2.47 **	0.50
Importance of community service	23 (1.93)	22.08 (3.13)	-1.70 *	0.35
Civic awareness	29.1 (2.54)	28.39 (3.10)	-1.16	0.25
Self-oriented motives	10.63 (1.67)	10.83 (1.48)	-0.55	0.13
Service-oriented motives	8.9 (0.40)	8.66 (0.78)	-1.91*	0.39
<b>Course-Learning Outcomes</b>				
Knowledge-oriented	44.97 (0.76)	42.62 (0.76)	-2.18*	3.09
Advocacy (action)-oriented	46.03 (0.64)	42.34 (0.82)	-3.55***	5.02

Note. \**p*<0.05. \*\**p*<.01. \*\*\**p*<.001.

In addition, students in the service-learning section showed significantly higher average scores on course-learning outcomes than students in the traditional-learning sections including both knowledge-oriented,  $t(77.52) = -2.18$ ,  $p = 0.016$ , and advocacy-(action)- oriented,  $t(86.05) = -3.55$ ,  $p < 0.001$  outcomes. Cohen's *d* results showed large effect sizes on both civic outcomes: knowledge-oriented (*d* = 3.09) and advocacy- (action)- oriented (*d* = 5.02).

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to measure the effectiveness of service-learning compared to a traditional-learning methods in an Advanced Social Policy MSW course. The study measured five civic outcomes and two course-learning outcomes. This study demonstrated the effectiveness of service-learning in enhancing students' responsiveness to social problems, human rights, and social and economic justice issues. Moreover, the service-learning version of the course boosted knowledge- and advocacy- (action)- oriented proficiency (i.e., the course-learning goals). While this study did not use randomization, the absence of group differences at pretest provides a relative level of confidence that the group differences at posttest were a result of the different course formats (i.e., the service-learning course compared to the traditional-learning courses).

The data revealed that, regardless of course format (either service-learning or traditional-learning), upon completion of an Advanced Social Policy class, students' sense of personal social responsibility, importance of community service, and civic awareness increased. This is good news for all social work educators, irrespective of their teaching methods, who desire to effectively teach advanced policy in a way that will instill in students civic-minded attitudes toward community and social problems that lend to post-graduation involvement (Rocha, 2000). However, the pretest/posttest differences for these civic outcomes were more pronounced for students in the service-learning course. Social work educators may want to adopt service-learning when teaching graduate-level policy

courses to achieve better civic outcomes. Consistent with conceptual articles about the positive effect of service-learning on cultivating students' personal social responsibility (Anderson, 2006; Bringle & Hatcher, 1996), the present study found that students' attitudes toward responsibility increased significantly (Lim et al., 2017). Students in the service-learning class may have "gained a deeper understanding of the social problem" (Anderson, 2006, p. 13) of taxpayers' failing to claim the EITC and underutilizing the VITA sites, having worked with EITC-eligible individuals and social work agencies that assist low- and moderate-income families. With "a deeper commitment to social action and change" (Anderson, 2006, p. 13), the students' sense of civic awareness also increased significantly. Then, they would have wanted to implement individual, agency, and policy responses that address the issues (Jansson, 2013) of under-utilization of social policies and services that would have helped economically vulnerable families if they avail themselves of the policies/services. This increase likely stemmed from the service-learning project and the course content, bolstered by critical reflections and in-class discussions of those reflections throughout the semester.

Second, and probably the most notable finding of this study, is that service-learning methods are effective not only in enhancing several civic outcomes (specifically, personal social responsibility, importance of community service, and service-oriented motives) but also in enhancing course-learning outcomes (both knowledge-oriented and advocacy-[action]- oriented proficiency). Effect size also showed that the group differences between service-learning and traditional-learning courses in the course-learning objectives appeared more substantial for the service-learning course, implying that service-learning is more likely to meet educational goals. This presents a great opportunity and a challenge for the social work profession, as knowledge-based policy advocacy skills may be becoming more indispensable to address the dynamic nature of the 12 grand challenges (Uehara et al., 2013).

Thirdly, the self-oriented motives score was lower for service-learning students at both pretest and posttest, which is not surprising given that service-learning students more than traditional-learning students tend to want to give back to the community and are thus service-oriented (Lim et al., 2017). Given that service-learning students' self-oriented motives were non-significant in both paired sample and independent samples *t*-test results, social work educators may want to consider ways to better market to students the personal benefits of service-learning policy courses. It may be interesting to investigate the motivations of students who opt to take a service-learning class: Is it unbecoming to choose to take a service-learning class when motivated by self-oriented interests? Can self-oriented motives complement other types of motivations for taking a service-learning class? Social work educators who implement service-learning in social policy courses need to explore the reasons why the decreases in the self-oriented motives among students were not significant, and possible ways to increase those motives, if desired.

## Limitations

The present study has a number of limitations. First, while it instituted pre- and post-test surveys with a comparison group (and the two groups did not statistically differ on several characteristics), the study could not control for other possible participant

characteristics and, thus, could not establish causality. Using a sample from a larger theoretical population and more rigorous research designs (i.e., longitudinal studies, experimental designs) may pose difficulties from an administrative standpoint (Lim et al., 2017). Doing so, however, does promise a next step up for pedagogical research that measures the effectiveness of service-learning methods. Second, to run a paired samples *t*-test, the instructor recorded identifiers of survey participants to match pre- and post-test surveys. While it was explained to students that participation was voluntary, students might have felt pressure to participate and/or to respond in certain ways due to the identifiable responses between pretest and posttest. Third, the present study used purposive sampling, and thus, findings are not generalizable to all MSW students. Fourth, a few or several students could have been previously or simultaneously enrolled in more than one service-learning course. Some of the change in students' attitudes could have been ascribed to the additive effect of being enrolled in multiple service-learning courses. On the other hand, these students could have become fatigued with labor-intensive service-learning courses and projects, producing counter-intuitive changes in the direction opposite of the expected improvement in the outcomes.

### **Implications and Conclusion**

A unique contribution of the present study is its engagement of students in service-learning social policy courses that encompassed working directly with community members, campaigning for EITC policy and VITA programs in the community, and interacting with macro-level stakeholders. This study demonstrates that service-learning fosters a sense of personal social responsibility, importance of community service, and civic awareness. Moreover, service-learning in social policy courses is more effective than traditional methods in helping students increase both knowledge- and advocacy- (action-) oriented social policy course goals.

Professional values and attitudes toward social personal responsibility and community services influence not only social workers' perceptions of policy practice but also their actual involvement in advocacy activities (Weiss-Gal & Gal, 2008). As Rocha (2000) attested, students in the experiential learning courses, including service-learning, rate themselves as more efficacious policy practitioners, and consequently are more likely to perform policy-related activities. Participation in service-learning promotes a sense of personal social responsibility (i.e., personal value systems) and, subsequently, encourages students to become more involved in their communities (importance of community service and service-oriented motives) as informed citizens and motivated social work practitioners (Anderson, 2006). Social work students often receive little or no exposure to macro-level systems (Figueira-McDonough, 1993; Miller, Tice, & Harnek Hall, 2008). Service-learning social policy courses help to fill that void.

Some universities like Duke (2018) and Purdue (2018) have a variety of excellent compendia of service-learning resources for faculty. The most important motivations for faculty members who adopt service-learning pedagogy are intrinsic—"passion and personal interests" for better student learning outcomes, "social commitment," and "intangible rewards" (Hou & Wilder, 2015, pp. 3-4). By aligning intrinsic faculty values with extrinsic rewards such as institutional commitment to facilitate the integration of

faculty responsibilities (i.e., research, teaching, and service) in tenure and promotion (Abes et al., 2002; Hou & Wilder, 2015), research-intensive universities can bolster civically-engaged scholarship and promote the civic mission of higher education.

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