

THE IMPACT OF SERVICE LEARNING ON LEARNERS' SKILL DEVELOPMENT AND PROFESSIONAL ATTITUDES: A CASE STUDY OF CAN THO UNIVERSITY

TÁC ĐỘNG CỦA HỌC TẬP PHỤC VỤ CỘNG ĐỒNG ĐẾN SỰ PHÁT TRIỂN KỸ NĂNG VÀ THÁI ĐỘ NGHỀ NGHIỆP CỦA SINH VIÊN:
TRƯỜNG HỢP TẠI ĐẠI HỌC CẦN THƠ

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Tóm tắt: Học tập phục vụ cộng đồng (HTPVCD), một trong những mô hình học tập tích cực được khuyến khích áp dụng trong phát triển năng lực nghề nghiệp và trách nhiệm công dân của sinh viên; tuy nhiên, các nghiên cứu ứng dụng của phương pháp này trong giáo dục đại học tại Việt Nam vẫn còn hạn chế. Nghiên cứu này đánh giá tác động của mô hình HTPVCD đến sự phát triển kỹ năng và thái độ nghề nghiệp của sinh viên tại Đại học Cần Thơ thông qua thiết kế nghiên cứu hỗn hợp, kết hợp khảo sát hai nhóm đối tượng liên quan và phỏng vấn bán cấu trúc. Kết quả cho thấy mô hình HTPVCD được thừa nhận có tác động tích cực đến sự phát triển kỹ năng cá nhân, nhận thức về cộng đồng và thái độ nghề nghiệp của sinh viên bên cạnh một số rào cản trong quá trình triển khai mô hình này. Nghiên cứu khẳng định tiềm năng của HTPVCD trong việc nâng cao năng lực của người học, đồng thời đề xuất một số hàm ý thực tiễn nhằm mở rộng việc tích hợp phương pháp này vào chương trình đào tạo chính khóa ở bậc đại học.

Từ khóa: học tập phục vụ cộng đồng, giáo dục đại học, kỹ năng, thái độ nghề nghiệp, tích hợp vào chương trình đào tạo.

Abstract: Service Learning (SL), one of effective pedagogical approaches for developing students' professional competencies and civic responsibility, yet empirical evidence from Vietnamese higher education remains limited. This study investigates the impact of SL on students' skill development and professional attitudes at Can Tho University using a mixed-methods design involving surveys of two stakeholder groups, complemented by semi-structured interviews. The findings indicate that SL positively enhances students' professional skills, community awareness, and professional attitudes, despite facing institutional barriers to implementation. The study highlights the potential of SL to strengthen graduate competencies and provides practical implications for expanding its integration into higher education curricula in Vietnam.

Keywords: service learning; higher education; professional skills; professional attitudes; curriculum integration.

1. Introduction

In response to the shift toward competency-based education and the demands of the digital economy, higher education institutions are increasingly adopting active learning approaches to develop students' professional competencies, transferable skills, and civic responsibility. However, a gap remains between university education and workplace expectations in Vietnam, particularly regarding practical skills and professional readiness. Service Learning (SL) has emerged as an effective pedagogical approach that integrates academic learning with meaningful community engagement, enabling students to apply disciplinary knowledge while developing professional skills, civic responsibility, and positive attitudes. Although extensive international research

has confirmed the educational benefits of SL (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Celio et al., 2011), empirical evidence in Vietnamese higher education, especially in the Mekong Delta, remains limited. Therefore, this study examines the impact of SL on students' skill development and professional attitudes at Can Tho University to provide evidence for strengthening its integration into higher education curricula.

2. Research Methodology and Results

2.1 Theoretical Background

2.1.1 Concept and Characteristics of Service Learning

Service Learning (SL) is widely recognized as an experiential educational approach that integrates academic learning, community service, and structured

reflection to promote reciprocal benefits for students and communities. Previous studies consistently emphasize that SL strengthens academic learning, professional competencies, civic responsibility, and community engagement through authentic service experiences (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Prentice & Robinson, 2010). Despite differences in emphasis, these conceptualizations share four common characteristics: integration into academic curricula, engagement with real community needs, structured reflection, and mutual benefits for students and community partners. Accordingly, this study defines SL as an experiential learning approach that integrates meaningful community engagement into academic coursework through structured reflection to foster students' professional skills, professional attitudes, and civic responsibility.

2.1.2 Theoretical Foundations of Service Learning

SL is grounded in Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb, 1984), which viewed knowledge as being created through a cycle of experience, reflection, conceptualization, and application. Reflection Theory (Schön, 1983) further emphasizes that meaningful learning occurs when students critically reflect on their experiences, transforming community service into educational outcomes rather than volunteer activities. In addition, Constructivist Learning Theory (Vygotsky, 1978) views students as active learners who construct knowledge through authentic collaboration and problem-solving, with instructors serving as facilitators. Together, these theoretical perspectives explain how SL promotes students' knowledge acquisition, professional skills, critical thinking, and personal development.

2.1.3 Service Learning and Student Development

A substantial body of international research has demonstrated the positive educational outcomes of SL. Bringle and Hatcher (1996) and Eyler and Giles (1999) found that SL strengthens students' civic responsibility, social awareness, and commitment to community engagement. Meta-analytic evidence by Celio et al. (2011) further indicates that participation in SL significantly improves academic achievement, critical thinking, communication, teamwork, leadership, and problem-solving skills. These competencies are increasingly recognized as essential employability skills in contemporary labor markets.

Beyond skill development, SL also contributes to learner professional attitudes by fostering empathy, ethical awareness, civic engagement, adaptability, and lifelong learning. Through authentic community experiences and structured reflection, students

develop stronger professional identities and a greater commitment to social responsibility. Although these benefits have been well documented internationally, empirical evidence regarding the implementation and educational impact of SL in Vietnamese higher education remains limited, particularly in universities located in the Mekong Delta.

2.2 Research Methodology

A mixed-methods approach was employed to investigate the impacts of SL on students' skill development and professional attitudes at Can Tho University (CTU). Quantitative data were collected through structured questionnaires administered to 53 alumni and 95 lecturers, with items adapted from established SL measurement frameworks (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Celio et al., 2011) and assessed using a five-point Likert scale. The data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics, employing descriptive statistics and Cronbach's alpha to assess respondents' perceptions and the reliability of the measurement scales. Quantitative findings were complemented by qualitative evidence to provide a comprehensive understanding of SL implementation and its educational impacts at CTU.

2.3 Results and Discussion

2.3.1 The impact of SL on learner attitude toward beneficial community

The survey results indicate that SL positively influenced alumni's attitudes toward community engagement and social responsibility. As presented in Table 1, all five items received high mean scores, ranging from 4.146 to 4.542, indicating strong agreement that participation in SL enhanced respondents' awareness of community needs and civic responsibility. Variable 5 recorded the highest mean score ($M = 4.521$), suggesting that SL was particularly effective in fostering positive attitudes toward community engagement. The relatively low standard deviations ($SD = 0.651-0.883$) further demonstrate a high level of consistency in respondents' perceptions.

Table 1: Impacts of SL on alumni attitude toward beneficial community

	Mean	Std. Deviation
1. I got a deeper understanding of social problems through SL activities.	4.146	0.7716
2. I have changed my thought of the community that I have ever participated in.	4.229	0.7506
3. I feel that SL is important for university - community networking	4.521	0.7435
4. SL helps me get a deeper understanding of the future working environment.	4.333	0.8833
5. SL helps me develop the necessary attitude and qualities of a learner.	4.542	0.6510

Source: Adapted and compiled by the authors from Bringle and Hatcher (1996), Eyler and Giles (1999), and Celio et al. (2011)

These findings are consistent with the theoretical perspectives of Bringle and Hatcher (1996) and Jacoby (1996) as well as Eyler and Giles (1999) and Celio et al. (2011) about the effect of SL participation on students' social awareness, civic responsibility, and commitment to community engagement. Taken together, these findings highlight the educational value of SL as an effective pedagogical approach that not only enriches students' learning experiences but also promotes the development of socially responsible and civically engaged graduates.

2.3.2 The impact of SL on soft skill development

The results presented in Table 2 indicate that SL made a positive contribution to students' skill development. All seven items received high mean scores (4.104 - 4.417) suggesting that respondents strongly agreed that participation in SL enhanced their soft skills and increased their confidence in addressing real-world problems. Variable 1 received the highest mean score ($M = 4.354$), indicating that students clearly recognized the value of learning through practical experience. Variables 3 and 6 also recorded high mean scores ($M = 4.417$), reflecting respondents' perceptions that SL effectively supported the development of personal and professional skills.

Table 2: Impacts of SL on soft skill development

	Mean	Std. Deviation
1. I have learned from practical experience more than from theory.	4.354	0.7576
2. I can apply my previous knowledge in to practical situations.	4.104	0.9048
3. I have improved my problem solving skills after experiencing SL programs	4.417	0.7672
4. I was inspired of facing to my troubles and making my own decision to solve them.	4.292	0.8495
5. I have developed my leading skills through SL activities at university.	4.229	0.9280
6. I feel more confident in communication with other people through SL experiences.	4.417	0.7672
7. I have improved my presentation skills after experiencing SL programs.	4.396	0.7363

Source: Adapted and compiled by the authors from Bringle and Hatcher (1996), Eyler and Giles (1999), and Celio et al. (2011)

These results have a remarkable consistency with the evidence of Eyler & Giles (1999) and Celio (2011) about SL impact on students' transferable

skills. Thus, SL brings back valuable experiential learning opportunities that strengthen students' soft skills and better prepare them for future professional practice.

2.3.3 The impact of SL on learner satisfaction of academic training results

The results presented in Table 3 indicate a high level of alumni satisfaction with their SL experiences at university. The five measurement items recorded mean scores ranging from 3.833 to 4.458, evidenced for positive perceptions of SL activities. Variable 3 received the highest mean score ($M = 4.458$), indicating that students particularly valued the opportunities for social interaction and experience sharing provided through SL. Meanwhile, Variables 1 and 2 recorded mean scores of 3.833 and 3.896, respectively, reflecting respondents' positive evaluations of the quality of SL activities organized by their lecturers. These results reinforce that SL contributes to a more engaging and rewarding learning experience while fostering interaction and collaboration among students and community members.

Table 3: Impact of SL on learner satisfaction of academic training results

	Mean	Std. Deviation
1. The SL programs that I had participated had well – organized.	3.833	0.7810
2. The SL programs that I had participated were well- prepared and supported by lecturers.	3.896	0.8565
3. SL programs brought many opportunities to network and develop social relationships.	4.458	0.6829
4. The SL programs that I had participated had high feasibility in practice.	3.896	0.9507
5. The duration of each SL program was moderate and not affected to my personal schedules.	3.938	0.9765

Source: Adapted and compiled by the authors from Bringle and Hatcher (1996), Eyler and Giles (1999), and Celio et al. (2011)

2.3.4 Lecturer perception and experience on SL integrated in curriculum programs

The survey of 95 lecturers from various colleges and schools at Can Tho University (CTU) provides insights into faculty members' perceptions and experiences regarding the integration of SL into academic programs. Most respondents had substantial teaching experience, with 87.4% reporting more than ten years of teaching experience. Although the majority were familiar with the SL approach, their

knowledge was acquired primarily through self-directed learning (56.8%), while fewer respondents reported learning about SL through training workshops (27.4%), professional conferences (16.8%), or mass media and other information sources (31.5%). These findings suggest that although awareness of SL has gradually increased among faculty members, systematic professional development opportunities remain limited.

Regarding perceptions of the educational value of service learning, 34.7% of lecturers believed that SL effectively promotes students' transferable skills and strengthens their sense of social responsibility. However, 30.5% indicated that they had not yet observed convincing evidence of its educational effectiveness in practice. This discrepancy suggests that while faculty members generally recognize the theoretical value of SL, uncertainty remains regarding its practical implementation and measurable learning outcomes.

Despite this awareness, the integration of SL into teaching practices remains relatively limited. Only 16.8% of lecturers reported regularly or partially incorporating SL into their courses, whereas 42.1% implemented the approach only occasionally and 41.1% had never adopted it in their teaching. These results reveal a noticeable gap between faculty members' awareness of SL and its actual implementation within curriculum programs, indicating that knowledge of the approach alone is insufficient to encourage sustained pedagogical adoption.

Interview data further identified several institutional and operational barriers to implementing SL in academic programs as time constraints and heavy teaching workloads (16.8%), curriculum incompatibility (13.7%), limited community partnerships and collaboration networks (12.6%), insufficient financial resources (12.0%), and low levels of student participation (10.5%). These barriers demonstrate that successful implementation of SL depends not only on lecturers' willingness to adopt innovative pedagogies but also on institutional support mechanisms, including curriculum flexibility, professional development opportunities, sustainable community partnerships, and adequate financial and administrative resources.

Collectively, the above evidences indicate that although lecturers generally acknowledge the educational impact of SL, its integration into curriculum programs at CTU remains at an early stage. The gap between positive perceptions and actual implementation reflects the influence of

multiple institutional constraints rather than a lack of faculty interest. Therefore, expanding SL within higher education requires a comprehensive institutional strategy that combines faculty capacity building, curriculum redesign, stronger university–community partnerships, and supportive policies to facilitate the sustainable integration of SL into teaching and learning.

3. Conclusions

This study demonstrates that service learning (SL) at Can Tho University positively contributes to students' skill development, professional attitudes, civic responsibility, and learning satisfaction through meaningful community engagement. However, the integration of SL into formal curricula remains limited due to institutional constraints, including heavy teaching workloads, limited professional development, curriculum rigidity, insufficient resources, and weak university–community partnerships. To strengthen SL implementation, the university should enhance lecturer training, establish supportive policies and incentives, promote collaboration between academic and extracurricular activities, and develop sustainable community partnerships. Overall, the findings provide empirical evidence of the educational value of SL and offer practical implications for institutionalizing SL at Can Tho University and other higher education institutions in the Mekong Delta with similar educational contexts.

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