

## Service as a Component of Graduate Training in Professional Psychology

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# **Service as a Component of Graduate Training in Professional Psychology: Can Cleaning out a Basement Make a Difference?**

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*This article examines the outcomes of a Community Service Weekend in Residence (CS-WIR) program for students engaged in graduate training in professional psychology. The data were collected from eight clinical psychology students' feedback about their experiences during the CS-WIR as well as self-reports of perceived satisfaction and impact on various areas of professional development. Results suggested that students were satisfied with their experience in the CS-WIR and perceived that the weekend contributed to their professional development, even though the tasks of the community service project differed from tasks typical to training in professional psychology. Further, students voluntarily identified the community service project as one of the most beneficial aspects of the entire experience in terms of their professional development and noted that the likelihood to engage in future service had been significantly impacted as a result of their participation.*

*Keywords: Service, Learning, Community, Engagement, Graduate Training*

The benefits of various forms of service (i.e., community service, service-learning) have been well documented across many disciplines and educational levels. Service programs have been implemented in elementary schools (Menchaca, 2014), high schools (Winans-Solis, 2014), and colleges as a way to teach leadership, community involvement, and personal responsibility as well as to increase discipline-specific learning in fields from music to math (Hadlock, 2013; Rubin, 2001). However, very little research has focused on the role of service in graduate education, and in particular, the graduate training of professional psychologists.

## **Learning Outcomes**

Service-learning (a more focused form of community service which links academic/professional learning with community needs and projects) has been well established as a pedagogical tool that is effective in increasing student learning (Warren, 2012). When students are presented with opportunities to put their developing skills into practice while also engaging their communities, they tend to engage in critical thinking and application that facilitates learning at a deeper level (Hammer, 2008). This phenomenon has been demonstrated in areas such as language acquisition (Brown & Purmensky, 2014), communication (Katz, DuBois & Wigderson, 2014), and math/science (Hayford, Blomstrom, & DeBoer, 2014; Wyss & Tai, 2012). Brown and Purmensky (2014) noted that

students participating in a service component of a study abroad trip reported significant relationships between their service experiences and the development of language skills. They also reported a relationship between the acquisition of cultural knowledge and experience gained while participating in service that added significantly to their overall language proficiency (Brown & Purmensky, 2014). Wyss and Tai (2012) noted the importance of service in similar disciplines at the high school level, especially with regards to piquing student interest in math/science related college majors. Hayford, Blomstorm, and DeBoer (2014) reported similar results with regards to improved learning outcomes in the scientific and mathematical disciplines at the university level. In each case, service was shown to be effective in improving outcome scores, increasing literacy and proficiency, increasing student confidence in skills, and developing a sense of self-efficacy that fosters continued growth and development (Brown & Purmensky, 2014; Hayford, Blomstorm, & DeBoer, 2014; Wyss & Tai, 2012).

### **Personal Outcomes**

In addition to learning outcomes, educators at all levels and across disciplines have sought ways to instill various desirable attributes in students such as social responsibility, commitment to diversity, and a positive sense of self. These values represent personal attributes that are not only important for responsible global citizenship but also necessary for successful, ethical practice in many professional disciplines including professional psychology. Service has been shown to have an impact on many areas associated with personal growth and development such as political and social involvement (Kilgo, Pasquesi, Sheets, & Pascarella, 2014), autonomy, competence and relatedness (Kackar-Cam & Schmidt, 2014), and intercultural competence (De Leon, 2014).

Manring (2012) argued that traditional knowledge and skill is no longer sufficient in order to be successful in the global marketplace. Students need additional skills in civic engagement and leadership as well as the cognitive and affective skill sets to process those experiences. This is relevant especially in fields that require significant interpersonal interaction and problem solving, such as business, education, human services, and psychology. Further, the opportunity to engage in service-learning may prove to be more meaningful and advantageous for students who have been marginalized in the past and perhaps have never had the opportunity to engage in service, especially those who identify as low-income, first generation college students (Conley & Hamlin, 2009; Winans-Solis, 2014). Winans-Solis (2014) noted that service may have the power to actually counteract many of the negative educational experiences had by marginalized students and increase their sense of validation and empowerment, a factor crucially important in programs that cater to under-served students.

A sense of lasting personal change along with a long-term commitment to continued service is yet another critical personal outcome that service shows promise in facilitating. If students participate in a single project or even a set of projects in order to fulfil a single requirement, immediate goals may be reached, but the future benefits of a life of service will be lost. However, studies have found that service not only facilitates the learning and personal growth outcomes desired at the time of participation but that students continue to identify their service experiences as some of the most meaningful and impactful experiences of their college careers for many years post-graduation (Fullerton, Reitenauer,

& Kerrigan, 2015). The general sense of connectedness inspired by service may also help students develop the personal responsibility necessary to fight apathy and disengagement throughout their lives (Kackar-Cam & Schmidt, 2014).

### **Service in Psychology**

While learning and personal outcomes have been demonstrated in a wide variety of disciplines, such as foreign language and math/sciences, results specific to general psychology at the undergraduate level have also been found (Kretchmar, 2001). Service components have been implemented in research based courses (Kranzler, Parks, & Gillham, 2011), theory based courses (Harnish & Bridges, 2012), and more clinically based courses (Naude, 2015; Weiler et al., 2013). Most of this research has focused on the undergraduate experience and the acquisition of skills and personal attributes commensurate with that level of training. Naude (2015) investigated a pre-practicum type experience where undergraduates were trained to staff a telephone helpline. While these types of experiences may be associated with complicated ethical and supervisory issues (Brakke & Thompson, 2012), many researchers suggest that the benefits far outweigh the risks. In Naude's (2015) study, researchers found that after only 10 weeks of participation in a volunteer helpline, undergraduate psychology students showed significant improvement in communication skills and confidence from baseline. In a questionnaire based analysis of participation in a mentoring program, Weiler et al., (2013) found that college students who participated in a mentoring program for at-risk youth experienced significant gains in civic attitudes, community service self-efficacy, self-esteem, interpersonal and problem solving skills, political awareness, and civic action as compared to undergraduates who did not participate in the program. Harnish and Bridges (2012) found that psychology undergraduates enrolled in psychology courses with service-learning components reported higher levels of satisfaction and achieved higher final grades than those who participated in equivalent courses without service-learning components.

### **Service in Graduate and Professional Training**

While the majority of existing literature on the impact of service in the helping and psychology-related fields has focused on undergraduate students engaged in discipline-related service-learning projects, a few researchers have sought to understand the benefits of service experiences for adult students as well as graduate and professional students. There is also evidence to suggest that as level of education increases from high school to associate's to bachelor's degrees that level of student engagement in service actually increases which would further support the need to study the impact of service on graduate students (Newell, 2014). LeBeau (2013) differentiated between traditionally-aged undergraduates and adult students in a study designed to investigate the academic achievement and student-faculty interaction impacts of service on this particular population. Because older students have different educational needs along with additional life responsibilities outside of the classroom, engagement in service, the life of the university, and student/faculty relationships is often difficult. This lack of engagement is additionally problematic as it has a potential negative impact on retention as well as student learning. These issues are most likely applicable in graduate education in that adult graduate students have many of the same external life responsibilities as undergraduate adult learners (McClatchey & Kirk, 2014).

Service, specifically the reflection and contextualization in community settings, was found to be an effective means by which to engage adult learners in student-faculty relationships which may have a positive impact on academic achievement and success (LeBeau, 2013). However, the demands on graduate students' time is a significant factor that must also be taken into consideration, as many must work and/or manage family responsibilities while in graduate school and are not available to participate in service projects during regular business hours. Thus, service projects that utilize non-traditional hours such as weekends or evenings may be most effective (McClatchey & Kirk, 2014).

Barrett (2013) investigated first year pharmacy students' engagement in a service activity, focusing specifically on the professional development that occurred as students engaged with other professionals (outside of pharmacy) across a variety of healthcare settings. Qualitative analyses revealed that the students attributed the acquisition of new skills, attitudes, and abilities as well as specific ideas about how to implement service in their future roles as pharmacists to their service experience (Barrett, 2013). This finding may have particular importance to the field of professional psychology as cross-disciplinary teams across diverse health care settings are becoming more commonplace. Many professional groups and accrediting bodies have called on professional psychology programs to increase their efforts in training graduates to function under these new conditions (American Psychological Association, 2015). Thus, experience in service may be a way in which to achieve these goals.

Even more closely related to the field of professional psychology are studies which highlight service related activities that simulate actual clinical activities. Due to various ethical and legal requirements, clinical service provision by student trainees in the United States must follow strict guidelines in terms of supervision by licensed professionals and occurrence within the confines of a graduate training course. Therefore, for the purposes of this study the differentiation is made between service (i.e., activities that may be performed without a license) and the clinical experiences (i.e., practica and internships) that students are required to complete for graduate training in professional psychology. The following study conducted in South Africa found that seven graduate students who provided volunteer counseling services on commuter trains indicated gains in problem-solving, personal motivation for community service, and awareness of differences in socioeconomic status and cultural orientation (Bonthuys, Khumalo, & Flusk, 2013). This study provides evidence that students experience additional gains while participating in volunteer, community service activities in excess of those gains typically expected in practica or internships such as clinical skill acquisition and an increase in professional competence. The cultural gains (De Leon, 2014) are particularly interesting as cultural competence and cultural sensitivity have been established by the American Psychological Association as a guideline for practice (American Psychological Association, 2002). These skills have also been adopted by many state psychology boards as necessary for licensure and shown by research to be critical to effective practice (Sue & Sue, 2013).

Finally, given the limited resources of time and the variety of competing demands, implementation of service interventions must maximize impact in the shortest amount of time possible while also including time for meaningful reflection (Sifers, 2012). While weekend trainings have been shown to be moderately effective under some circumstances, such as in the training of Motivational Interviewing skills (Miller & Mount, 2001), little is known about the impact of brief (i.e., weekend) experiences in service for graduate

students in professional psychology.

## **Purpose**

Clinical psychology, a graduate-level specialty area in professional psychology, is a helping discipline focused on a particular type of service to individuals and the community. However, the curricular, experiential/clinical, and research requirements typical of a graduate program in professional psychology leave little room for students to be trained in the importance of service and exposed to service experiences. Many students say they want to be helpers and want to make a difference in their communities. However, their efforts in graduate school are focused solely in the clinical arena through the provision of psychological services. While training in the provision of clinical services is both appropriate and necessary, students often lack an awareness of what service (more broadly defined) looks like in the life of a professional psychologist. More importantly, they may miss understanding the impact that service may have on the development of personal and professional characteristics important for ethical and successful practice. In response to the need for specific service training and experiences, a Community Service Weekend in Residence (CS-WIR) program was created aimed at addressing these deficits in an efficient and effective manner.

The purpose of this exploratory study is to discuss the general response of students to the CS-WIR. Descriptive and qualitative analyses of student self-report items related to satisfaction and impact on professional development are discussed. Possible implications for graduate training in professional psychology in general as well as future research directions are also offered. Overall, the following questions were considered:

1. Will graduate students in professional psychology
  - a. Be satisfied with a training experience focused on a community service project involving tasks seemingly disparate from those typically associated with training in professional psychology;
  - b. Perceive that the experience contributes in a meaningful way to their professional development?
2. Will students voluntarily identify the service project as the most beneficial aspect of the experience over the more didactic or academic aspects?
3. Will students voluntarily identify an increase in their commitment to performing service in the future as a result of their participation in the CS-WIR?

## **Method**

### **Background and Program Description**

Teaching professional psychology trainees about the value of service through community service participation has the potential to achieve all of the learning and personal outcomes described above. These benefits become even more salient in a program that specializes in

training the under-served to serve the under-served. The professional psychology program in which this project took place is unique in that it includes a program goal specifically related to service and officially documents in the materials a desire to train graduates who “. . . commit to service. . .” and who “. . . reinvest into local, disadvantaged communities as clinical leaders.” (Mission and Goals, retrieved from <http://gradweb.ucumberlands.edu/psychology/phd/mission>, n.d.) The university mission is also highly service oriented as it has enjoyed a long tradition of serving the Appalachian community of which it is a part. Therefore, in order to achieve these program and university goals and missions given the limited space within the existing curriculum and required content and experiences, the faculty implemented and evaluated an innovative CS-WIR program designed to expose students to the ideas and experiences of service in the most efficient manner possible.

### **Weekend in Residence Description**

The CS-WIR program began as a way to supplement curricular and professional development needs while building strong relationships and community within the program. The WIR format is used to cover a variety of topics over the course of a student’s program such as preparation for internship or special topics in health psychology. Because service is a defining feature of the clinical psychology program, the faculty wanted to embed an intense experience focused solely on this topic into each student’s degree program. So, in the spring of 2015, the faculty chose service as the focus for the CS-WIR. The goal for the CS-WIR was for students to learn about the theories, research, and practice of service and also reflect on the role of service in each of their personal and professional lives. The faculty also hoped that by modeling service through a collaborative student/faculty service project, students would be encouraged to frame service as a central feature of their developing identities as professional psychologists.

Eight students and three faculty members began the CS-WIR by participating in a lecture and discussion session led by a national expert in the area of service. Participants were challenged to think about their roles and responsibilities as community and clinical leaders and how service might be a part of their professional identities. Students were also asked to think creatively about ways they might contribute to their communities beyond traditional clinical practice.

Students and faculty then traveled to a local shelter that specializes in housing solutions for homeless or under-housed individuals. The group received a tour and an introduction to the variety of services and facilities administered by the agency. The group was then introduced to the project: a complete clean-out and re-organization of the agency’s pantry and basement storage areas. At first, the task appeared overwhelming and unmanageable as there were hundreds of bags, boxes, and stacks of various goods that had been randomly strewn about both areas. However, as students and faculty began the project, everyone quickly started to communicate, cooperate, and collaborate. Students and faculty organized themselves into various groups: some focused on organizing a particular area of goods such as the soap/shampoo section while others took on particular tasks such as general cleaning. Faculty participated alongside students performing the same tasks in a collaborative manner. As the time passed, the areas became more and more organized as goods were stored properly, dirt/dust were cleaned, and random bags and boxes were sorted and put away. Everyone was amazed at the progress that occurred in the physical space, including the staff at the agency. The following is an excerpt from an email received immediately

after the project concluded from the agency liaison:

You have no idea how excited the staff is here. . . . As soon as you all left, I took them on a tour of the newly organized basement and they were so ecstatic. It's truly the little things that make our day and we so appreciate the time and energy the group took to help us! We would be more than happy to have you back and just want to thank you a thousand times over for the help! (K. Baldini, personal communication, March 6, 2015)

While some content lecture and discussion continued on the second day, students focused primarily on reflection of their experience. Students processed, both verbally and in writing, various elements related to the personal and professional gains they experienced as a result of the service project. Faculty also participated in the reflection and discussion, both as facilitators and also through sharing of their own personal feelings and experiences. Students were encouraged to articulate the meaningfulness of the experience, especially given the fact that the actual tasks (i.e., cleaning, organizing, etc.) were not closely related to the typical tasks of a professional psychologist.

## Participants

The clinical psychology program currently has around 40 active students. While all students were invited, due to programmatic changes, only students from the most recent two cohorts are required to participate in WIR programs. Students may select which WIRs to attend over the course of their program, as long as they attend a total of 3 over the course of 4 years. For this reason, not all students would have selected to attend the CS-WIR. Further, the campus received an unprecedented snow storm the day before the CS-WIR which made attendance unsafe or impossible for many students. However, despite adverse weather conditions, the CS-WIR proceeded with eight students in attendance, all female. Four were first year doctoral students and four were second year doctoral students in the program.

## Measures

As a way of evaluating the program and the students' experiences, all students were asked to complete Likert-type surveys through Survey Monkey as well as two open-ended questions through the university's course delivery system. Students were asked to rate items on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The first survey measured their general satisfaction with the event (Table 1), and the second survey asked students to describe to what degree various aspects of their professional development had been enhanced by participation in the CS-WIR (Table 2). Students were also asked to respond to the following open-ended questions: "What was most helpful about this weekend in residence?" and "What do you plan to do differently as a result of the weekend in residence?"

Descriptive statistics of survey items were reviewed. Students' qualitative statements about their experiences were also reviewed to determine frequency of direct references to service.



Table 1

*Satisfaction Survey*

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Items

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1. I would recommend attending this weekend in residence to future students.
  2. I received helpful information at the weekend in residence.
  3. The immediate feedback from faculty facilitated my goals.
  4. I met my personal goals for the weekend in residence.
  5. I was encouraged to set goals for the weekend in residence.
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Table 2

*Professional Development Survey*

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Items

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As a result of participation in the Weekend in Residence:

1. I feel a stronger sense of professional identity as a psychologist in training.
  2. I have a greater understanding of the connection between service and the professional role of a psychologist.
  3. I have a stronger sense of empathy for others.
- 

## Results

### Quantitative Data

Data were collected via Survey Monkey and the university's course delivery system and then de-identified before being entered into SPSS. The quantitative data demonstrate that overall students were highly satisfied with their CS-WIR experience despite the fact that the actual tasks including cleaning and organizing were significantly different from tasks typically associated with graduate training in professional psychology. The data also seem to demonstrate that students believe the experience contributed to their professional development. Therefore, even beyond being basically satisfied with the CS-WIR, they perceived that the tasks and experiences associated with the weekend actually helped them develop professionally in areas such as feeling a stronger sense of professional identity as a psychologist in training, gaining a greater understanding of the connection between service and the professional role of a psychologist, and developing a stronger sense of empathy for others. Descriptive statistics appear in Table 3.

Table 3

*Satisfaction and Professional Development Items*

Item	Mean	Standard Deviation
Satisfaction 1	4.63	.518
Satisfaction 2	4.13	.641
Satisfaction 3	4.63	.518
Satisfaction 4	4.75	.463
Satisfaction 5	4.88	.354
Professional Development 1	4.25	1.389
Professional Development 2	4.50	1.069
Professional Development 3	4.50	1.414

**Qualitative Data**

Students were also asked open-ended questions including, “What was most helpful about the CS-WIR?” Responses to this question noted various aspects of the CS-WIR such as faculty/student interaction and the acquisition of information about service; however, four of eight (50%) of the students listed participation in the service project (i.e., cleaning and organizing at the host agency) as the most helpful aspect of the CS-WIR as opposed to other aspects of the weekend such as lecture or verbal/written reflection time. One student simply listed, “Work project at [agency]” as the most helpful aspect of the entire experience in her opinion. Another student highlighted the intersection between relationship building and community service by answering, “Meeting other cohorts and working together to help others in need.” Another student focused on how the service made her feel by explaining, “The service project made me feel good.”

In addition to asking students about the most helpful aspect of the CS-WIR, they were also asked what they plan to do differently as a result of participation and five of eight (63%) of the responses specifically noted an increase in actual service to their communities. This result aligns well with research which has suggested that one of the most valuable outcomes of service is not only the learning and experiences that result from the actual project but the impact on students’ plans and desire to engage in future service and behavioral change. One student commented that she planned to, “Look for more community outreach programs” as a result of her participation in the CS-WIR. Another noted that she plans to, “Make an effort to give back to my community.” Another student focused on the importance of combining service with leadership by explaining that she hopes to, “Help the community more and take on a more leadership role as my field does require it.” In general, students’

positive responses to the CS-WIR seemed to focus on both their experiences of service over the course of the weekend as well as their desire to continue engaging in future service activities in their respective communities.

## Discussion

Initially, it seemed unclear as to whether students would see the value in not only learning about the role of service in the life of a professional psychologist but also in participating in a service project. However, the response was clearly positive. The students were highly satisfied with the event and noted that the CS-WIR had a significant impact on several aspects of their professional development. The achievement of these results seems even more significant given the brief timeframe of the event as well as the possible perception of disconnect between the topic/tasks and the training of professional psychologists. Their community service involved cleaning and organizing rather than providing psychotherapy or assessment and yet the average rating for satisfaction with the experience was 4.60 (5-point scale) and average rating for contribution to professional development was 4.4 (5-point scale).

The results of this study also suggest that the professional development benefits perceived by the student were related to key elements of becoming an effective professional psychologist: developing a professional identity, a commitment to service, and empathy (Rodolpha et al., 2005). These are difficult, complex skills and yet students reported that the CS-WIR experience, given its brevity and hands-on service focus, actually had an impact on all three of these developmental tasks. This result seems especially important given that many graduate training programs in helping or health related fields already include supervised, practical or clinical learning experiences built into their curriculums. Therefore, additional activities that provide practical learning related to one's field of study while also providing a service to the community may not be feasible or appropriate. However, this study suggests that community service in a broader sense may still be highly beneficial in not only promoting the character and attitudinal qualities many programs wish to foster in their students but in also facilitating significant professional growth and development.

The next questions posed were, will students voluntarily identify the service project as the most beneficial aspect of the experience over the more didactic or academic aspects? And, will students voluntarily identify an increase in their commitment to performing service in the future as a result of their participation in the CS-WIR? While some students mentioned the beneficial nature of various other aspects of the experience, many highlighted the importance of actually engaging in service. It seemed clear throughout their responses that the service itself was perceived as beneficial, meaningful, and impactful. Perhaps most hopeful is that many of the students stated that they planned to change their behavior post CS-WIR in order to intentionally include more service to their local communities. Given the open-ended nature of these questions, students could have easily focused on other features of the CS-WIR (i.e., time spent with cohort members or expertise of the guest speaker) or listed other changes they planned to make as a result of participation, yet they independently and consistently identified the areas noted.

## **Limitations**

The limitations of this exploratory study are obviously related to the small number of students participating in an experience in a single program. By only looking at the perceptions and experiences of eight participants in a professional psychology doctoral program, broad generalizations to other students in other programs or disciplines would not be warranted. Because the results are descriptive in nature, the findings may identify interesting areas for further investigation, but cannot be construed as inferences or generalizations to larger populations. Further, because this CS-WIR only included a single service project, it is unclear as to whether different types of service activities might produce similar results and how (or if) the particular type of service embedded in the CS-WIR would interact with unique characteristics of the students in the sample such as year in program, gender, and discipline to produce different results. While students identified the service project as one of the most beneficial aspects of the weekend, it is not clear which aspects of service were most meaningful, resulting in an additional limitation. It is possible students responded positively due to the team-building/cohesion experienced while performing service or perhaps the sense of altruism, but without articulating and measuring these facets it remains unclear how much of the result is due to the service itself or the by-products mentioned. It is possible that these results might only be found in team-based service projects as opposed to more solitary tasks. Finally, the Likert-style surveys used were developed solely as a means of evaluating this CS-WIR and have not been validated on a larger sample or used in previous research projects.

## **Conclusion**

Overall, the professional psychology students who participated in the CS-WIR were satisfied and perceived that the experience contributed to their professional development as psychologists in training. While broad generalizations to other programs and disciplines may not be warranted at this time, a continuation and expansion of this experience in this particular psychology program is clearly supported. Implications for other doctoral programs in professional psychology include exploring the possibility of embedding service into the program of each student in addition to and separate from required clinical training experiences. Because time and financial resources are typically scant, the implication is that these experiences do not have to be long-term and extensive in order to be impactful. In fact, perhaps a weekend or series of weekends over the course of a student's program would suffice in order to produce the desired changes in awareness, professional development, and future behavior. And, while it is generally assumed that service will be a part of one's professional identity in any helping or health-related profession, professional psychology programs should continue to find ways to infuse this value intentionally and overtly.

## **Future Directions**

It is unknown at this time whether the planned behavioral changes noted by students in their qualitative responses will actually occur and/or how long those gains will be maintained; however, future inquiry into this question is certainly warranted perhaps through a follow up assessment conducted at six and 12 months post experience. Additional inquiries should explore a variety of related topics such as whether service is more impactful at the beginning of a student's program or later in the program. Other questions include: Is

there a difference between various types of service activities in terms of positive perception and impact on professional development? Does service differentially impact various types of graduate and professional students such as masters vs. doctoral or different disciplines (medicine, social work, dentistry, or law)? What are the most effective formats for delivery of information about service and the facilitation of service projects? What specific aspects of service are most meaningful: a sense of team-building and group cohesion or a sense of altruism associated with giving back to one's community? Future research should focus on examining each of these questions as well as the research questions explored in this study in larger samples of diverse graduate students across the helping professions through the use of more detailed instruments designed to investigate both the positive and negative aspects of the experience. Future research might also include a pre and post assessment of desired learning and professional development outcomes or a comparison group of similar students who do not participate in a CS-WIR experience.

As the knowledge base surrounding service grows, the expansion into the graduate and professional arena is ripe with many opportunities. This study sought to introduce and explore these possibilities and establish that the intersection between service and graduate training in professional psychology is a viable, relevant area for future inquiry.

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