

The Impact on College Students of Service-Learning in After-School Programs

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Abstract

In the United States, the dearth of quality expanded learning opportunities (ELO), such as afterschool and summer programs, has long been recognized as a national concern (DeKanter et al., 2000). The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated this problem, as expanded learning opportunities of all kinds became increasingly limited in spring 2020 (Carver & Doohe, 2021). This research evaluated a new service-learning project, Honors Afterschool Clubs, which allows college students to fill ELO needs by creating and leading afterschool clubs for high-needs, low-income youth. By analyzing college student pre- and postexperience surveys, semistructured interviews, and focus groups, the authors evaluated the perceived impacts of this project on college students and their learning. Our preliminary results suggest that in addition to providing an essential service to the community, families, and youth, college participants who lead afterschool clubs perceive an improvement in their self-efficacy, interpersonal skills, and career confidence.

Keywords: expanded learning, afterschool, service-learning, community engagement



High-quality schools are essential for student learning, growth, and success, but learning does not stop at the end of the formal school day. The last few decades have witnessed the emergence and growth of expanded learning opportunities (ELOs) like afterschool and summer programs in K-12 settings, which have been shown to positively affect youth interpersonal and social skills, behavior, and academic performance (Durlak & Weissberg, 2010; Vandell et al., 2007). Despite the positive outcomes of afterschool and summer programs on youth development, not all students are able to receive the benefits that these programs provide. In fact, nearly 25 million children in the United States are not enrolled in an afterschool program, even though they would attend if given the chance (Afterschool Alliance, 2021). Part of the reason for the disconnect lies in the lack of well-trained staff and intentional programming that are required for a high-

quality afterschool program (Little et al., 2008).

Cost is also a factor, especially for low-income families; in 2011, high-income families were spending nearly \$8,000 more a year on ELOs than low-income families (Cline, 2018; Duncan & Murnane, 2011). Unfortunately, growing inequality among American families has translated into additional resources for children from high-income families both before and after the school day, thus exacerbating the achievement gaps between children from high-income and low-income households (Reardon, 2011).

While ELO programs are looking for resources and people to provide more services to K-12 youth, especially for low-income and rural individuals, postsecondary institutions like the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL) are seeking ways for their students to participate in out-of-classroom, experiential learning opportunities. In 2021,

UNL initiated a process that will make experiential learning a requirement for all undergraduate students because of its transformative impact on college students and their academic success. Experiential learning includes a variety of high-impact practices, such as service-learning and community-based learning, which are recognized as practices that promote college student engagement, personal growth, and skill development (Kuh, 2008).

The Nebraska Honors Program at UNL serves high-achieving students from all colleges on campus, and like other honors programs at public, land-grant universities, it highlights community engagement and service-learning as core elements. Starting in fall 2018, these overlapping imperatives fueled the idea and creation of Honors Afterschool Clubs in Lincoln and eventually greater Nebraska, hosted by the Nebraska Honors Program. Forging partnerships with Beyond School Bells (BSB), a program of the Nebraska Children and Families Foundation that serves as Nebraska's statewide ELO Network, and Lincoln's Community Learning Centers (CLCs), a citywide network of partners that work on ELO opportunities, the Nebraska Honors Program encourages its high-ability college students to create and implement hands-on curricula for expanded learning opportunities in local K-12 schools.

Honors Afterschool Clubs were created to respond to a specific and growing community need, while also enriching the academic experience for undergraduate student service-learning and reflection. In line with the Carnegie definition of community engagement, these hands-on service-learning projects allow undergraduate students numerous chances to create curricula for, teach, and manage K-12 youth in collaboration with community partners for mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources (New England Resource Center for Higher Education, 2018). This article provides information on the rationale for this service-learning project. It then explains Honors Afterschool Clubs and how they are structured. After detailing our research design, it provides our preliminary findings based on data we collected during the fall 2021 semester from August to December. Our overarching research question is "How does this service-learning initiative in the afterschool space impact college students and their learning?" Given the anecdotal

feedback the Nebraska Honors Program received from students who had participated in Honors Afterschool Clubs previously, we anticipated that this service-learning project would positively impact certain skills, such as communication and problem-solving; improve students' understanding of the community; and increase their awareness of equity and diversity.

Service-Learning and the Benefits to College Students

The concept of service-learning comes from the pioneer writing and research of John Dewey (1938/1997), who long ago advocated for quality educational experiences that promote continuity for growth and interactions with both objective and internal conditions. Kezar and Rhoads (2001) described Dewey's philosophy of continuity as "based on a belief that people, as holistic beings, learn best by engaging mind, body, spirit, experience, and knowledge" (p. 162). In higher education, these ideas take shape in the teaching and learning methodology known as service-learning. Often used as part of a credit-bearing course, service-learning aims to facilitate transformational learning through an experience that serves the community and the individual's reflection on providing that service. As Jacoby (1996) noted, the two key components that differentiate service-learning from community service and volunteer programs are reflection (intentionally structured for learning about important societal issues) and reciprocity (mutual benefits for the server and the people being served, which in turn fosters a greater sense of community). From the perspective of the Nebraska Honors Program, reflecting on the experience and their impact in the community is important for Honors students' growth and development.

From its emergence in an institutional educational setting in the 1960s until today, research on service-learning consistently points out the academic (Astin et al., 2000), social (Simons & Cleary, 2006), and professional (Lim, 2018) benefits to college students who participate in service-learning. A meta-analysis by Celio et al. (2011) found that students at all educational levels (elementary through professional school) who participate in service-learning show gains in five primary areas: attitudes toward self, attitudes toward school and learning, civic engagement, social skills, and academic

performance. A subsequent meta-analysis study by Yorio and Ye (2012) on college students found that service-learning improved students' understanding of social issues, personal insight (defined as an individual's perception of self), and cognitive development.

Simons and Cleary's (2006) research similarly demonstrated the academic gains for college students participating in service-learning, finding that these students scored higher on exams and had overall higher grade point averages (GPAs) than nonparticipating students. In his review of service-learning literature since 1980, Brandenburger (2013) delineated five areas of personal development that were positively impacted by service-learning: agency and identity; perspective transformation and ways of knowing; moral development and spirituality; sociopolitical attitudes, citizenship, and leadership; and career development and well-being.

More recent studies have focused on the discipline-specific pedagogy used by college students in afterschool program activities and its impact on the college students' teaching skills and desire to pursue a career in teaching (Cartwright, 2012; Fogarty & Lardy, 2019). One study that analyzed the outcomes of college students who facilitate an afterschool service-learning program focused on physical activity found that the college students were more likely to consider working with children professionally and learned how fun, creativity, and patience can be employed to work effectively with youth (Carson & Domangue, 2010). Another study that focused on preservice teachers working in an afterschool program found salient themes of students' increased diversity awareness, relationship-building, and flexibility through analysis of reflective student journals (Jozwik et al., 2017).

Studies that analyzed a STEM afterschool program in Omaha, Nebraska found that college student mentors developed confidence, communication skills, and the recognition of the impact on their own education through experiences in the program (Cutucache et al., 2016; Nelson et al., 2017). Based on this research in afterschool programs and the feedback we received from students who participated in leading afterschool clubs from 2018 until 2021, we anticipated similar gains for Honors students facilitating Honors Afterschool Clubs.

The Need for Quality Afterschool Programs

Although the idea of afterschool programs started in the late 19th century, the current structure of afterschool programs is shaped by various social, cultural, and economic factors. Consequently, programs making up the afterschool landscape vary widely in terms of scope, emphasis, sponsorship, and target audience; they span intramural sports to 4-H clubs and church-sponsored activities, to programs focused on academic enrichment, remediation, and tutoring. The formalization of primary education, the passage of laws regarding child labor, and the need for safe spaces for kids were all early drivers of the need for programs both before and after the school day. In the 1970s, as middle-class women increasingly joined the workforce and American families transitioned from single- to double-earner households, afterschool programs experienced considerable growth (Halpern, 2002). What are now referred to as "out-of-school learning" and "expanded learning" programs grew substantially in the 1990s because of state and federal funding, specifically the federal 21st Century Community Learning Center grant program (Finn-Stevenson, 2014). This federal program provides funds for the creation of community learning centers (CLCs) and networks that offer academic enrichment opportunities during nonschool hours for children, particularly students who attend high-poverty and low-performing schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2018).

For federal and state grant programs, expanded learning opportunities (ELOs), such as afterschool programs, have the potential to be the great equalizer in American education. Given that students who are not able to participate in afterschool programs are likely to go home to an empty house with no adults or supervision, afterschool programs can provide a way for learning to continue after the school day ends, as well as a safe and enriching environment. Thus, ELOs constitute an important, albeit grossly underutilized, society-wide educational resource. An abundance of research on afterschool programs focuses on the benefits to the youth in these programs. Throughout this body of work, findings are consistent and clear about the role, value, and impact of ELO programs (Weiss, 2005). In brief, afterschool and summer programs are a powerful vehicle for promoting academic,

social, and emotional development (Miller, 2003).

Compelling research has also shown that regular participation in high-quality, intentional out-of-school programs has a dramatic impact on improving youth attitudes and behaviors, especially for low-income children (Durlak et al., 2010; Tannenbaum & Brown-Welty, 2006). Although the presence of afterschool programs has been shown to produce positive outcomes in students, researchers are increasingly documenting the widening gap between the ELOs available to youth from different socioeconomic backgrounds. Putnam (2015), for example, demonstrated how family income translates into different learning experiences for children. Specifically focusing on participation in extracurricular activities, Putnam showed a deep decline in low-income youths' participation in ELOs over the past several decades, while wealthy classmates' participation rates in these activities stayed at the same high level. Other research supports these trends, with wealthier parents now spending around seven times as much on enrichment activities as their children's low-income classmates benefit from—a dramatic increase from three decades earlier (Reardon, 2011).

This gulf in access is troubling, because it suggests that decades-long efforts to promote educational equity may be undermined by differing levels of access to ELOs. Other research indicates that regular participation in high-quality before- and afterschool learning and enriching summer school programs helps low-income students catch up academically with their more affluent peers (Reardon, 2011). These programs, characterized by strong school-community partnerships, can also help high-performing students stay engaged in school activities. Although numerous studies tout the benefits of participating in service-learning in various contexts, surprisingly little research looks at the impact on college students engaged in ELOs as a specific form of service-learning.

Community Need in Lincoln, Nebraska

With support from Lincoln Public Schools, the mayor's office, and the Lincoln Community Foundation, referred to collectively as the interlocal, the city created the Lincoln Community Learning Center (CLC) initiative to provide a broad range of

expanded learning opportunities that support youth, families, and neighborhoods. A medium-size Midwestern city, Lincoln has a population of just under 300,000, with almost 14% of its inhabitants living in poverty (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). As of 2022, Lincoln's CLC initiative served 29 public schools, partnering with 10 local agencies to serve more than 6,500 students in an array of afterschool and summer enrichment opportunities (Lincoln Community Learning Centers, 2022). Lincoln CLCs have had funding, resources, and administrative staff to oversee programming; however, their growing network of schools, many of which are Title I schools serving at-risk youth living in poverty, lacks a reliable supply of staff to support K-12 youth during the school year and throughout the summer. Nebraska, in fact, reflects a national trend, with numerous unfilled positions in the afterschool space, particularly within science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM; Cutucache et al., 2016; Yamashiro, 2022).

The Nebraska Honors Program is based at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL), a land-grant institution committed to teaching, research, and extension. As a land-grant institution, it values community engagement and collaboration with community partners. Given local staffing needs in the CLCs, alongside the Honors Program's interest in promoting service-learning and community engagement, in the fall of 2018 the Nebraska Honors Program partnered with BSB and Lincoln's CLCs to create college-powered afterschool programs. This multifaceted partnership supplements afterschool programming, specifically for low-income, high-needs elementary, middle, and high schools, with reliable, energetic Honors students who create and lead hands-on, interactive Honors Afterschool Clubs.

Honors Afterschool Clubs: Objectives and Structure

The Nebraska Honors Program at UNL has more than 2,000 undergraduate students, constituting about 10% of the total undergraduate enrollment of UNL, with nearly all the 150 majors on campus represented. When the Nebraska Honors Program began working in the afterschool space, it initially functioned as a matchmaker, providing information on Lincoln's CLCs and their needs to the program's high-achieving, purpose-driven undergraduate students,

who were eager for real-world experiences and professional development opportunities. In fall 2018 the program's role was limited to connecting students to CLCs as a mechanism for high-ability students to have meaningful, transformational experiences; however, the Nebraska Honors Program and UNL invested in expanding their involvement in ELOs, providing training and additional support to the college students who worked in afterschool programs.

In the last 3 years, and despite the ongoing effects of COVID-19, the Honors Afterschool Club initiative has developed and grown, from simply an opportunity for students interested in working with youth, to an integral pillar of the Nebraska Honors Program and its effort to prepare students professionally through opportunities to engage with the community. For the Nebraska Honors Program, this initiative genuinely prepares college students for an uncertain, globalized world through engagement that is not highly curated by the university and allows for meaningful community service with diverse populations.

In its current form, one full-time staff member coordinates with community partners, while a graduate student facilitates training and provides ongoing support to college students. This service-learning project supported more than 150 college students in developing engaging Honors Afterschool Clubs from January 2021 to December 2021. During that period, the Nebraska Honors Program's responsibilities increased to ensure a quality experience for college student club leaders, K-12 student participants, and our community partners. Honors Program staff now recruits, matches, and provides basic training for UNL Honors college students. It also offers ongoing support for college students to develop and implement creative, engaging, and educational clubs for Lincoln's CLCs.

For this service-learning project to be transformative in a student's education requires more than just developing and leading a club; it also requires regular opportunities to reflect on what they have done, sharing their experiences to help create knowledge and learning (Christian et al., 2021). In fall 2021, with community partnerships established with 19 Lincoln CLCs located at Title I schools, the Nebraska Honors Program started to collect data on the effects of this project to begin assessing the impact of creating and leading Honors Afterschool Clubs

on college students (Lincoln Public Schools, n.d.).

Honors Afterschool Clubs have several objectives. First, the clubs seek to address an established community need by encouraging and supporting reliable, energetic Honors college students to create fun, educational activities for youth. Second, because it is well established that one of the best ways to learn is to teach, college students deepen and extend their own learning. Third, this work-based learning project allows students the opportunity to develop professional and interpersonal skills. Fourth, the interaction of students with the local schools and community partners helps students better understand the local Lincoln community and cultivates a professional network for college students that might someday lead to employment or career opportunities.

Given the potential of this service-learning project to positively impact Honors students and their learning, the Nebraska Honors Program created a zero-credit, tuition-free course (UHON 201H) for students who participate in this service-learning project, either during the academic semester or the summer. This new course was first offered in the fall 2021 term to provide students with ongoing training, support, and opportunities for oral and written reflection. The Honors Afterschool Clubs class is one of several options aimed at community involvement, service-learning, and professional skill development for students enrolled in UHON 201H, which is now a requirement for all Nebraska Honors students.

The creation of Honors Afterschool Clubs is a dynamic and synergistic process between CLCs and the Nebraska Honors Program. The Nebraska Honors Program is responsible for advertising the opportunity to students, brainstorming early idea development, and collecting information from both CLCs and students to make an initial match with each site based on needs and availability. In Lincoln, the CLCs hire Honors Afterschool Club students at a minimum of \$10 per hour, though the average wage is \$13 per hour. Throughout the semester, students are supported through the UHON 201H course in their development of activities and classroom management techniques by Honors staff. The Nebraska Honors Program has a coordinator who, as part of their position, manages staffing issues with the CLC staff, acting as an intermediary, if necessary, while also modeling professionalism

for students who sometimes face various challenges and conflicts.

Honors Afterschool Clubs are diverse in every respect. Since the primary goal is serving the community, CLC school community coordinators and community partners provide thematic preferences for both afterschool and summer clubs. At the same time, Honors students can pitch an idea for the topic of a club, based on their major or passion. This process aligns with the goal of recruiting energetic, dependable staffing for each academic term. During the school year, Honors Afterschool Clubs last between 50 and 60 minutes and usually meet once a week. Depending on the school, the clubs run for a minimum of 8 weeks and a maximum of 12 weeks. During fall 2021, college students participating in Honors Afterschool Clubs coled clubs once or twice a week for about an hour, for a total time commitment of 36 hours. This included the preparation of lessons and materials (approximately 1 hour a week), writing eight reflections for their zero-credit course (30–60 minutes per reflection), and working at school sites (approximately 1 hour per week).

Before the clubs begin for a given term, the Nebraska Honors Program, in collaboration with Lincoln CLCs and BSB, provides students with 3 hours of training. During the COVID-19 pandemic, training sessions were prerecorded for students to complete online. The training is divided into three general topics: a brief introduction and orientation to the afterschool space, explaining the benefits of their involvement to the youth and the community; lesson planning; and behavior management. Since most college students have not been exposed to curriculum development, our trainers who are former public-school teachers and now administrators for the CLCs provide students with tools and examples to create lesson plans for their Honors Afterschool Clubs. Students learn to create age-appropriate, engaging, and interactive curricula, which complement and amplify what K-12 students learn during the school day (Lincoln Community Learning Centers, 2022). Finally, college students learn tips and tricks for behavioral and classroom management. Facing a classroom of children for the first time can be intimidating. Honors Afterschool Club training seeks to alleviate students' apprehensions by providing club leaders with the tools, techniques, and resources to feel safe and prepared to lead the clubs. In addition

to the training provided by the Nebraska Honors Program, local CLCs provide training on school policies, available resources, and connections, explaining what is expected of Honors students during their interactions with youth. The college students are organized in pairs to encourage collaboration and cooperation, and to provide additional stability and capacity for the club.

Honors Afterschool Clubs diverge somewhat from what higher education has traditionally considered service-learning. Instead of following the traditional pedagogical practice of embedding a service-learning project in a three-credit course as part of an undergraduate curriculum, students leading Afterschool Clubs register for the zero-credit class (UHON 201H). Since this zero-credit-hour course is free, and students are paid for their efforts, it incentivizes their involvement. Students earlier had indicated that they were more likely to participate in a service-learning project if it was free and not tied to a three-credit course. As Keen and Hall (2009) contended, cocurricular, non-course-based programs that contain reflection activities are as much service-learning related as those that are course based, with the students obtaining similar benefits. By creating, leading, and implementing afterschool learning activities, in collaboration with community partners and input, Honors Afterschool Clubs are reimagining service-learning to respond more effectively and easily to community need (Anderson et al., 2019; Bringle, 2017; Kezar & Rhoads, 2001).

Methods and Data Collection

To understand the impact of this unique service-learning project on college students, we used a mixed-methods approach that included surveys, semistructured interviews, and focus groups, as well as content analysis of student discussion board responses (Celio et al., 2011). Afterschool club research emphasizes the importance of reflective practice through utilizing open-ended questions (Nelson et al., 2018). Questions used for this approach were developed based on similar research designs, demonstrated outcomes for afterschool learning, conversations with previous student participants, and learning goals identified during our teacher training. Utilizing mixed methods, we were able to draw from multiple qualitative reflective practices as well as an additional quantitative Likert scale. Triangulation of these dif-

ferent methods by three different researchers allowed us to identify commonalities and to code themes of student perceptions of their learning. The study was reviewed by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and determined not to fall under the requirements for human subjects research (45 CFR 46.102). Data for this project was collected from August to December 2021, during UNL's fall semester. The 34 students who participated in Honors Afterschool Clubs were asked to participate in all information-gathering exercises and to complete consent forms. Students who completed the pre- and post-surveys were entered into a drawing for a \$100 gift card as an incentive. The pre- and postexperience surveys included 27 and 29 questions, respectively, related to student demographics, afterschool training, student perceptions, and self-evaluation of certain skills. Open-ended questions were included to allow for additional feedback (see surveys in Appendix A and Appendix B).

In their coteaching pairs, students also participated in two 30-minute online interviews with the course instructor, who was a graduate student, or an Honors staff member. The first interview took place during the first quarter of the semester to elicit student feedback, troubleshoot problems, and offer support. The second interview took place during the last quarter of the semester, asking students to reflect on what they learned and talk about the skills they believed they developed (see interview questions in Appendix C). Interview questions were used to identify other ways involvement in Honors Afterschool Clubs might impact students personally or academically. Interviews were intentionally informal to allow students to put experiences and learning into their own words. The interviews were recorded by the interviewer, who reviewed notes and content to identify themes.

Students also participated in one small focus group of four to six students halfway through the semester (see focus group questions in Appendix D). The goal of the focus groups was to create a space for students who were leading Honors Afterschool Clubs to share their experiences and hear about what others were doing, to encourage and facilitate students to think more broadly and deeply about their experiences. Finally, students submitted three written reflections (see prompts in Appendixes E,

F, and G). The prompts encouraged students to consider their learning and skill development through their experiences creating and implementing Honors Afterschool Clubs with youth. Table 1 summarizes the methods used to assess student experiences.

Findings

In this section, we examine *whether* and *how* creating, leading, and implementing afterschool activities for Nebraska youth impacted Honors college students. Our Likert scale questions from course surveys were compared to assess differences in perceived skills before and after the Honors Afterschool Club experience. Frequencies and percentages of differences in student skill perceptions can be seen in Table 2. With a sample size of 36 individuals pre- and postexperience, we compared only the 31 students who filled out both the pre- and post-surveys for the frequencies in Table 2. Interestingly, the quantitative comparison of skills gained suggested that 86% of students perceived that their skills in communication, problem-solving, relationship building, collaboration, and organization stayed the same throughout the experience; 43% of the students responded that their skills decreased over the course of the semester, and only 11% indicated that their skills improved.

Although students' evaluation of their perceived skills was mixed in surveys, their responses to interviews, focus groups, and in other assignments indicated that students gained a lot from this experience. The differences in the quantitative and qualitative findings can be explained in a few ways. One reason may be that at the beginning of the experience, students overestimated their skills. This reasoning falls in line with results from a National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) survey that found differences between student- and employer-perceived proficiencies in areas of professionalism and work ethic, oral and written communication, and critical thinking and problem solving, with students estimating their proficiencies at least 20 percentage points higher than employers in each area (NACE, 2018). Alternatively, students may have felt they did not improve these skills during the experience, or the experience itself may have provided them with more of a reality check in terms of these skills and their abilities.

Table 1. Assessment Methods of Student Experiences

Assessment	Purpose	Timing
Preexperience survey	This survey encourages students to reflect on training and what they expect to gain and learn. It includes questions that allow students to put expectations into their own words.	At the initial training and before any activities begin.
Focus groups	Focus groups are used to gain an in-depth understanding of the cocreation of meaning between participants (Morgan & Hoffman, 2018). Focus groups also allow students to hear about the experiences of others and build on the comments of others.	Halfway through the experience (50% of the program completed) and at the end of the experience.
Postexperience survey	This survey encourages students to reflect on what they learned and any surprises they encountered. It includes questions that allow students to put expectations into their own words.	During the postexperience celebration and after all activities were completed (100% of the program completed).
Semistructured interviews	Semistructured interviews are an effective method for collecting qualitative, open-ended data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The interviews explore participants' thoughts, feelings, and beliefs about a particular topic, and allow for delving into personal and sometimes sensitive issues.	Students were interviewed twice (when 25% and 75% of the program was completed) during the experience to capture as much reflection as possible.
Content analysis/reflection essays	Throughout the experience, students also provided written reflections to eight prompts. These prompts were created intentionally to encourage students to think about what they learned, skills they gained, their influence in the community, how being a role model affected them, and how this experience affects children and community.	Prompts and written responses took place during the experience (at the 10%, 25%, and 75% marks of the program completion).

Table 2. Differences in Student Skill Perceptions Between Pre- and Postexperience Surveys

	Preexperience survey		Postexperience survey		Change in percentage points	
	Strongly agree	Agree	Strongly agree	Agree	Strongly agree	Agree
I am good at communication.	42%	58%	35%	65%	Down 7	Up 7
I am good at problem solving.	53%	47%	52%	48%	Down 1	Up 1
I am good at building and maintaining interpersonal relationships.	56%	42%	52% ^b	39% ^b	Down 4	Down 3
I am good at collaborating and working well with others.	53%	47%	52%	48%	Down 1	Up 1
I am good at organizing and organization.	50% ^a	36% ^a	52% ^c	32% ^c	Up 2	Down 4

Note. ^a 14% marked "Neither disagree nor agree."

^b 3% marked "Neither disagree nor agree."

^c 6% marked "Neither disagree nor agree," and 10% marked "Disagree."

The survey results are, in fact, quite different from the student responses and feedback we received during the interviews and focus groups, in which students talked at length about the skills they gained from this experience. Their written reflections, moreover, indicated that students felt they had improved different skills and learned a great deal about the community, equity, and themselves. Our open-ended questions, as well as interviews and focus groups, also provided richer and more wide-ranging insights into student learning and their unique experiences with this service-learning project. The written and oral feedback we received was coded independently by three of the authors, with frequent terms, phrases, and ideas highlighted. Evaluators then performed a second round of axial coding to relate students' feedback to overarching themes we identified at the beginning, and related to our expectations of academic, social, and emotional development (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Themes from these independent reviews were then compared as a measure of interrelator reliability. Different and complementary methods allowed us to triangulate salient themes (Patton, 2015) and learning outcomes related to education, careers, and skill development, as well as the impact on individuals' mental health and knowledge of the community. We grouped our findings from these different methods into six themes: (a) general learning, (b) skill development, (c) career confidence, (d) mental health, (e) awareness of diversity and inequity, and (f) overcoming challenges.

General Learning

About 75% of the Honors students who participated in this research were not planning to become K-12 teachers. Given this fact, the prevalence of Honors students talking about how much they learned about the practice of teaching, preparing lessons, and working with students is not surprising. As one student wrote,

The orientation and training were very helpful in preparing me for the Afterschool Club. One reason was that it taught us about management and how to manage behavioral issues. We have utilized structure and consistency in our club, which we learned was helpful to manage a classroom. It was also very helpful in creating our lesson plans, such as

blocking out time for each activity.

This comment reflects what many students said about the training session organized by the Nebraska Honors Program, with students indicating that they learned how to create a lesson plan, how to adapt lesson plans, and the importance of learning about classroom management—specifically, what to expect in the classroom and strategies to respond to student behavior. These teaching skills, we contend, constitute transferable skills (e.g., organization, problem-solving, time management, adaptability, and the ability to work under pressure) that will help students in future professional and academic settings.

Students also regularly mentioned that they learned how demanding and satisfying it was to work with children, as well as how much fun it was to be part of the community through the Honors Afterschool Clubs. One student wrote, "It was a challenge to keep all [club students] engaged and acknowledge everyone's backgrounds and interests, but with consistent boundaries and incentives, the club was fun for everyone." Many of the students (around 70%) acknowledged how proud they were to be part of Lincoln's Community Learning Centers and this community endeavor, with several students offering explanations for why afterschool clubs are important for the community and should continue being an option for Honors students. As one student put it,

What is important to keep in mind during this experience is that you are in this position because you care—for your student[s], your subject, and for your own personal growth. Hands-on experiences like this are hard to come by and while it is ideal to have everything go according to the plan, learning to roll with the punches is just as valuable a skill.

Skill Development

One of the strongest themes to emerge from our qualitative data was the development of personal and interpersonal skills, specifically patience and adaptability. Although students regularly mentioned developing and improving communication, presentation, and problem-solving skills, they were even more likely to elaborate on how much they learned from working with children. They

cited frequently how much patience and persistence were required to be facilitators of their clubs. The most represented comment from interviews with Honors students was that “working with children demanded more than they expected.” As one student acknowledged, “Above all, I learned how to be patient. Working with these kids was an exercise in taking deep breaths and remaining calm in the face of chaos.”

Several students also indicated that because of this experience, they feel more confident working with kids, specifically understanding kids’ emotions. Moreover, because of their Honors Afterschool Club, the Honors students felt they had more empathy for others and possessed a greater capacity to adapt to new and changing situations. In part, the experience made college students more aware of the challenges that some children faced in school or the home, which manifested in behavioral issues in the Honors Afterschool Club. One Honors student commented:

It was important for my partner and me to recognize that their behaviors do not stem from disrespect, but from the desire to channel emotions, although not in a constructive way. We have become aware of how the actions of students reflect their emotions, rather than assuming that they mean to cause us difficulty.

For some of the Honors students, fluctuations in the number of children attending their club each week required flexibility and adaptability to adjust activities and resources on the fly. Most students indicated that the experience had also helped improve their communication skills as they managed time and children’s behaviors in their clubs. In surveys, students also listed critical thinking, creativity, problem solving, collaboration, interpersonal skills, adaptability, and flexibility as the most important skills they gained. In the interviews, students explained how they were aware of improvements in their communication skills, which in turn helped them in their classes at UNL. Students also discussed feeling more confident with public speaking and taking an active role in subsequent group work assignments because of their leadership in the afterschool space.

Mental Health

Almost every Honors student indicated that working with children is challenging; most also pointed out that the experience was fun. Honors students discovered that leading clubs helped improve their own mood and mental health. Since students had to be flexible and adapt to new situations, many students indicated that this whole experience made them less worried and anxious about their future, in part because they had to be in the moment to respond to children’s immediate needs. In different reflective assignments, around 95% of students noted that even when first club meetings were stressful, the experience helped their mental health. Having something to do that is fun and different from their daily studying allowed club leaders to create an escape from their university bubble, giving them an excuse to be excited about a different activity they enjoyed. One student viewed it as “a good break.” Another student wrote,

There were some days when we were dealing with so many behavior issues that I walked away from the club feeling defeated, because it felt like our youth learned nothing. However, providing a place for youth to have fun, learn, and de-stress after class was extremely rewarding for me.

The uplifting nature of the experience was a dramatic change from the relative pressures of university education. Not only that, but many students agreed that this program also helped them develop personally. Having the opportunity to do something fun away from the university, at least one hour a week, was reported to be beneficial for their mental health. One of the most powerful aspects of this program is that college students can implement their own ideas into the club curriculum and be a role model to youth on how learning transfers outside the classroom. In many cases, club leaders realized and noted they were proud they could present to youth on topics that were unique and different from the general curriculum, which in turn inspired the college students and reaffirmed their own interest in these topics. One student illustrated this point by writing:

Leading the club allows me to have fun and remember how much I love sciences and why I decided to study [science] for my degree. Dealing

with the difficult science courses at the university and attending lectures had made me lose interest in the science field but seeing how fun it can be for children has reminded me why I chose what I chose.

At the most basic level, Honors students noted the importance of fun for the club's success. Relatedly, club leaders realized that a fun environment makes it easier for children to learn new things, be interested in topics, and ask more questions. Honors students also acknowledged that their own mental health and behavior was important for providing a space for better learning and helping the youth have a positive club experience.

Awareness of Diversity and Inequality

Since our Honors students were working at Title I, low-income, high-need public schools in Lincoln, we anticipated that this experience would have some impact on their awareness of diversity. In our preexperience survey, Honors students did indicate that they thought their involvement in clubs would impact their views on diversity and inequality. However, their answers were broad and vague. In post-surveys, students gave specific examples of the diversity and inequity issues they encountered in their clubs. Being "exposed to kids from diverse backgrounds" was the most mentioned comment related to the topic of diversity, including racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic demographics. Several college students mentioned how surprised they were by the diversity in their schools. One pair of leaders, who were from Lincoln, noted how different their own elementary school experience was from the population they were serving in their club. One student wrote:

The community is very diverse and kids within the same small school experience a lot of different things, so it made me realize to be more conscientious of others' experiences and backgrounds before forming an opinion.

In several interviews, students expressed how interesting it was to observe that the youth in these programs did not seem to notice diversity. "In our case," a student said, "I don't think diversity affects them [youth] in any way. That is their reality and so it is not something important for them.

They all play together and seem to treat each other the same way." Another Honors teaching pair mentioned how their students were surprisingly quite knowledgeable about places and cultures around the world.

Quite a few of the Honors students noted the differences in socioeconomic status they saw through their club experience. One club pair, teaching a geography club, commented on how kids in their club were very unfamiliar with various locations in the United States, because their families could not afford to travel. Conversely, another Honors student stated that "hearing about [youths'] home lives increased [the college students'] awareness of how socioeconomic status could impact home life and the student's success in school." Other students commented that their club experience exposed them to gaps in the education system, which, in turn, made them realize the importance of correcting inequalities in education for the future. Many of the college students remarked that they heard from youth that they were "the only college student" they had ever met. Many of the youth participants were also quite interested in college and the students' lives.

Career Confidence

For most students, facilitating an Honors Afterschool Club was the first time they worked with children in a formal setting. Some students had experience with babysitting or being summer camp counselors, but leading activities as an educator was quite new, and it impacted how some students thought about their future careers. According to our data, students participating in Honors Afterschool Clubs who were already majoring in disciplines that involved children (e.g., education) were reassured of their future careers. However, for the Honors students majoring in STEM fields, the club experience did not seem to have a direct or obvious impact on their future career goals, though some students did acknowledge their increased confidence in their postgraduate career goals and the importance of this exposure. An environmental studies major put it this way: "This was very helpful in getting me out of the world of technical jargon and everyone having the same interests, and it got me a very real-world experience working on the environment."

Students pursuing premedicine or pre-health fields expressed different answers to the question of how the Honors

Afterschool Clubs impacted their career goals. Although most students stated that they were not likely to change their future plans, one student said that, because of the club experience, he started thinking about becoming a pediatrician as he realized that he could communicate well with children and make them understand difficult topics. Additionally, even if the Honors students had not previously been considering working with children, they still found the experience valuable for improving their communication skills. As one student said, “Learning how to explain concepts about health and the human body in a way that children can understand will be very helpful if I ever work with kids in a healthcare setting.”

Overcoming Challenges

Facilitation of Honors Afterschool Clubs was not without challenges. In online discussion boards, Honors students regularly recounted the challenges they faced, mostly related to behavioral issues and classroom management. For most students, the skills and tools learned in the training sessions provided by the university at the beginning of the program were useful for most situations. However, children have unique needs, and Honors students regularly remarked on the various techniques they used to manage youth and how they learned from the experience. Facilitating Afterschool Clubs in pairs helped them address challenges quickly, allowing one student to continue with the lesson plan while the other would leave the class with a child or separate a child from the group to take care of physical or emotional needs.

Although most clubs have a fixed schedule, location, and group of children, some Honors students had to adapt to having different students, new locations, or adjusted schedules. Students discussed how they had to learn to adapt their expectations, lesson plans, or sometimes even their activities to make them a better fit for the children in their classroom. College students sometimes revealed that they were, in fact, proud of themselves for addressing ongoing challenges while keeping in mind the goal of the Honors Afterschool Clubs. As one student poignantly wrote, “[The children] are worthy of all the attention they receive, and they are capable of achieving great things.” Despite the challenges Honors students faced in leading their clubs, they stated that they enjoyed their afterschool club

experience. Almost all of them indicated they wanted to participate in an Honors Afterschool Club in the future.

Limitations of the Study

Although this research points to some of the positive outcomes for college students creating and facilitating afterschool clubs, this study has important limitations. First, the number of Honors students participating in this study was small, and the research relied on unique partnerships between UNL and local organizations in Lincoln, Nebraska. Thus, the results might not be generalizable to other students or service-learning in different afterschool spaces. The Nebraska Honors Program’s partnerships and close working relationships with Lincoln’s CLC programs, school community coordinators, and BSB may be difficult to replicate elsewhere. These trusting relationships provide the Honors Afterschool Clubs with the access, training, and support that other afterschool initiatives of this kind might lack. Similar collaborations between higher education institutions and local afterschool clubs will, thus, depend on close, trusting, and open relationships.

Despite the close coordination and collaboration between the Nebraska Honors Program and community sites, challenges remained, because of the high number of stakeholders and the complex administration of staffing, funding, and training necessary. As the survey data indicated, some students had difficulties establishing a schedule with afterschool sites. Other challenges included miscommunication, unclear expectations, and classroom and behavior management issues. A frequent issue college students mentioned was the high turnover rate of staff in the local schools and in the afterschool programs. We know that COVID played a role in the staff shortages for on-site school coordinators, and we hope this issue is addressed in the future.

Conclusion and Lessons Learned

Previous research established that college students working in afterschool programs learned, among other things, the power of fun, creativity, and patience when working with youth (Carson & Domangue, 2019). Others noted that working with youth can increase students’ awareness of diversity, relationship building, and flexibility (Jozwik et al., 2017). Our exploratory re-

search suggests that Honors Afterschool Clubs, as a service-learning project, provide college students with many of these benefits. However, the differences between our students' quantitative and qualitative responses stand in contrast to the more dramatic self-reported growth expressed by college students in a comparable ELO experience hosted at the University of Nebraska-Omaha, which found positive significant college student development gains across qualitative and quantitative measures in organization, content knowledge, preparedness, and engagement (Cutucache et al., 2016). In the future, the Likert scale of our student survey could be expanded from the 5-point scale that we used to delve further into quantitative differences. Our research is nonetheless important, because much of what is written about service-learning suggests that the benefits might accrue only when these activities are part of a credit-bearing college course. An important takeaway from our research is that our model, which provides students with limited training and ongoing support through a non-credit-bearing college course, suggests that we could and should reimagine service-learning to provide this opportunity at no extra cost to students through a non-credit-bearing course. Put differently, this research indicates that colleges can respond to community needs without a lot of additional costs while providing students with important educational benefits.

Student feedback has been essential to sustaining and growing Honors Afterschool Clubs. In seeking feedback on program design, some students indicated that the amount of training provided did not prepare them adequately for the many challenges they faced. However, in the post-survey and in interviews, other students stated that they felt they had had enough training, because "you just had to experience the club to really understand and value it." Moreover, both schools and the CLCs provide extra training that is specific to their sites; thus, we are likely to provide additional training as needed for students. Awareness regarding various sources of training is also important. Many educators suggest that students need a great deal of training before they engage in service-learning and work with the community; however, since such training requires both time and money, many students do not engage in service-learning, and thus community needs are not met. Our research and experiences suggest that an additional col-

lege course and extensive training are not essential for college student learning.

In addition to learning the ways in which participation in the Honors Afterschool Clubs impacted college students, this research project also gave us the opportunity to critically analyze some administrative issues that impact the coordination and effectiveness of the clubs. For example, we discovered that the enrollment in the zero-credit class should be managed *after* students are matched to a school site, as the placement timeline and the university semester enrollment timeline do not always align perfectly. This change allows the Honors students and the CLC organizations flexibility to respond to staffing changes and needs without negatively impacting a student's transcript (i.e., dropping a class) if the site placement falls through. Additionally, based on the needs of the CLC school community coordinators, we adjusted the minimum number of weeks from 10-12 weeks to 8-10 weeks to account for the CLC programs that run on a quarter or trimester.

Collaboration between the Nebraska Honors Program and the CLCs did have to work through ongoing communication challenges. For example, we realized that email is not the best form of communication for school community coordinators since they are frequently away from their computer, working with students. Instead, we found that using a combination of phone calls and emails, as well as communicating with the school staff overseeing collaboration with the CLCs, works best. The Nebraska Honors Program also realized how important it was to develop paperwork that was easy for college students to fill out and to collect this as quickly as possible, because working in public schools requires a significant amount of paperwork and security checks. Creating online forms and a straightforward process ensured that Honors Afterschool Clubs started on time and necessary paperwork did not prevent college students or K-12 youth from engaging in the clubs. Developing easy processes also simplified work for Honors staff since they did not have to manage individual emails from students while they were creating a database of requirements for area schools and programs that will be helpful for coordination of Honors Afterschool Clubs in future semesters.

The future holds many possibilities to improve both Honors Afterschool Clubs and college students' experiences. In terms of

research, we will continue gathering data from college students on their experiences and perceived learning. We also would like to know more about the impact of having college students work in the afterschool space from the perspectives of the community learning center staff. Additionally, we wonder if members of the community and parents are aware of anything different related to kids' experiences in clubs run by college students. We are also interested in knowing if Honors Afterschool Clubs are responding sufficiently and appropriately in addressing ELO disparities within our community, and how their facilitation can be improved. Although it is difficult to research and to know with much precision, we are, naturally, interested in the overall impact on K-12 participants in the Honors Afterschool Clubs. Further research on this unique program, especially interviews and focus groups with K-12 students and their parents, can hopefully provide answers to these questions.

This study did not gather data on the program's impact on the community or the effects on youth, but ongoing conversations with community representatives from BSB, Lincoln's CLCs, and school community coordinators are encouraging and quite positive in terms of the impact of this program on Lincoln youth. Such feedback constitutes further evidence that Honors Afterschool Clubs are fulfilling an important community need, as they help compensate for the dearth of people who are able and willing to work

in afterschool programs. For Jeff Cole, state-wide network lead for Beyond School Bells, "The Honors Afterschool Club initiative is a great model for addressing the current staff crisis in the expanded learning space. This is an example of how everyone wins—the community, youth, and college students."

Indeed, this probe provides us with valuable information for our community partners, the Nebraska Honors Program, and UNL as we move forward. Because of the academic, social, and emotional benefits to college students from this service-learning experience, and our ability to provide an important community service, we plan to continue, if not expand, our program and offerings. Our findings, moreover, indicate that Honors Afterschool Clubs are a high-impact practice for college students, with the potential to influence students' skills, understanding of the community, and views on equity and diversity while also positively impacting their mental health. Importantly, this pilot demonstrates that higher education institutions not only can but should partner with community organizations and schools to address the growing demand for affordable, quality afterschool and summer programs to engage, excite, and inspire youth. Although much remains to do in tackling the growing educational disparities for K-12 students throughout the country, our hope and aim is that Honors Afterschool Clubs will continue to provide the quality ELOs that youth in our local community need and deserve.



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Appendix A. Preexperience Survey Questions

1. What did you LEARN from the orientation and training you received? Provide a few take-home points.
2. What QUESTIONS, if any, emerged after the training and orientation about the work you will be doing? Is there anything you wished you had learned/covered?
3. What CHALLENGES based on the training and orientation do you think you might face during your summer or afterschool activity ?
4. In what ways do you think you will LEARN and grow during your afterschool or summer work?
5. How do you think this experience will IMPACT your understanding of DIVERSITY and INEQUALITY?
6. How do you think this experience will IMPACT your EDUCATION or current major/minor, if at all?
7. How do you think this experience will impact CAREER interests and skills, if at all? Identify some professional skills you think might be impacted by this experience?
8. How do you think this experience will shape your knowledge of the COMMUNITY and the education system in Nebraska, if at all?
9. Self-assessment of skills (on a 5-point Likert scale of “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree”):
 - I am good at communication.
 - I am good at problem solving.
 - I am good at building and maintaining interpersonal relationships.
 - I am good at collaborating and working well with others.
 - I am good at organizing and organization.
10. Is there anything else about your experience that you would like to add?

Appendix B. Postexperience Survey Questions

1. In what ways were the orientation and training received were sufficient to prepare you for Honors Afterschool Clubs?
2. In what ways could the orientation and training received be improved?
3. What do you think that students engaging in afterschool clubs should know?
4. How would you describe the support you received from the Honors Program during the experience?
5. What additional support, if any, would you have appreciated?
6. What challenges did you face during your afterschool experience?
7. In what ways did you learn and grow during your afterschool work?
8. How did this experience impact your understanding of diversity and inequality?
9. How did this experience impact your education or current major/minor?
10. Identify some skills you learned through this experience.
11. How, if at all, did this experience impact your mood, mental health, or personal drive?
12. What has this experience taught you about the community and the education system in Nebraska?
13. Would you participate again in the afterschool space? If yes, why would you participate again in the future? If no, why would you not want to participate in the future?
14. Self-assessment of skills (on a 5-point Likert scale of “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree”):
 - I am good at communication.
 - I am good at problem solving.
 - I am good at building and maintaining interpersonal relationships.
 - I am good at collaborating and working well with others.
 - I am good at organizing and organization.

Appendix C. Interview Questions

Interview #1

1. What are you doing at your club? Where? How many kids do you have there?
2. Reflect on the “Communication Roadmap” essay. What type of communication are you using with students? What are some difficulties you are finding communicating with them?
3. Self-reflection: How do you think this experience is impacting you?
4. How is this experience affecting your career? Would you consider working with children in the future?
5. How is this experience affecting your skills? What are you learning that you are good at or that you need to work on?
6. How is this experience affecting your mental health? Is this experience and the course a burden for you or is it a safe space for your mental stability? Is this experience adding much anxiety and work to your schedule?
7. Impact on children: How do you think this experience can affect children? Do you feel like they are learning about the topic? How do you think this experience might impact their behavior or teamwork?
8. Impact on the community: How do you think the afterschool Club Program in general and your work in particular help/affect the community (parents, schoolteachers, school boards, community centers . . .)?

Interview #2

1. Reflection on the Club: How has the dynamic with the children and among them changed now that you are at the end of the program? How does time affect your relationships?
2. Self-reflection: What have you learned about yourself in this experience?
3. Self-reflection: What skills have you gained during the program?
4. Self-reflection: How does this program affect your mental health?
5. Self-reflection: Is this experience going to affect your career?
6. Reflection on schools and children: How do you think you being at the school affected the children?
7. How can the program be more beneficial for the community?

Appendix D. Small Focus Group Questions

Classification of questions: O = opening, T = transition, K = key, and E = ending

- O: Tell me about your experience facilitating this educational program.
- T: Tell me about some of the activities you organized/facilitated.
- T: What do you think you are learning (about yourself, the community, broader issues: inequality)?
- K: How do you think this experience impacted your understanding of diversity and inequality?
- K: Do you think this experience will impact your education or current major/minor?
- K: Identify some skills you think you have learned by this experience (problem-solving; communication; critical thinking; collaboration; etc.) and provide some examples.
- K: What challenges did you face during your afterschool experience?
- E: Do you have any ideas on how you think we could improve this experience for you (allowing you to learn more from this experience)?

Appendix E. Communication Roadmap

Please fill out this communication roadmap. This roadmap is intended to help you assess the quality of communication that you have with your club attendees throughout your Honors Experience:

1. Describe the different types of communication you are planning to use in this experience (verbal, written, slideshow) and how you are dividing those throughout the time in each club session.
2. What are the challenges in communicating with your club attendees?
3. What have you tried to face those challenges? Has it worked? Do you feel you can make it work but it needs a little more time?

Appendix F. Problem-Solving Discussion Board Post

Answer the following prompt in 500–600 words on the discussion board and respond thoughtfully to one other post on the discussion board.

1. Identify a problem you encountered during this experience that did not have a clear or immediate solution. How did you approach the problem? What solutions did you consider, and how did you ultimately choose to proceed? Would you do anything differently if you encountered this problem again?

When answering to the other person's post, think if there is anything they could have done differently or give any tip or comment on what to do if it happens again.

Appendix G. Advice Board Post

Answer the following prompt in a paragraph on the discussion board and respond thoughtfully to one other post.

1. What is the best advice you have received as an afterschool club leader? Identify the situation you were in and who gave you the advice.

When answering to other person's post, think about how useful that advice would have been in a situation you encountered.