

# Faculty and Student Perceptions of Service-Learning's Influence on University Student Resilience

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## Abstract

Resilience—the ability to persist, bounce back, and achieve, despite setbacks or challenges—is an important predictive and protective factor for university students' personal and academic success. Qualitative research at one large U.S. land-grant university investigated faculty and student perceptions of how and why academic service-learning courses impact student resilience. We used thematic coding and analysis for responses from focus groups of faculty and students with recent service-learning experience. We found five key themes illustrating participants' perceptions of how service-learning enhances student resilience, including (a) opportunities for community members, peers, and instructors to serve as models of resilience; (b) more authentic and less hierarchical relationships among students and instructors; (c) natural opportunities for overcoming challenges inherent in community-based activities; (d) real-world consequences that increased student motivation to persevere; and (e) reflection activities that further helped students perceive and develop mastery and resilience. Suggestions for practice and future research are offered.

*Keywords: resilience, service-learning, student outcomes, focus groups, faculty perceptions*



Even before the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic, “concern over the resilience and mental health of university students [was] a global issue” (Brewer et al., 2019, p. 1113), and during the pandemic large percentages of young adults reported experiencing mental health issues (Adams et al., 2022; Ang et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2020; Son et al., 2020). Indeed, students continue to experience challenges completing their coursework and balancing school and other obligations (Ezarek, 2022), and college campuses report a growing number of students seeking mental health services (Abelson et al., 2022). Consequently, universities in the United States and worldwide are interested in activities and interventions that can support student well-being and resilience (Brewer et al., 2019).

Resilience, the “capacity to rise above difficult circumstances” (Ginsburg, n.d.), is an “essential component in managing stress” (Ang et al., 2021) and has demonstrated

benefits for students both within courses and beyond. As Brewer et al. (2019) noted, “Reviews of the higher education literature have highlighted the key role resilience plays in assisting students to overcome challenges, manage their well-being and complete their studies” (p. 1106), with multiple research studies supporting “the association between resilience and academic success” (p. 1108). The American Academy of Pediatrics (Ginsburg & Jablow, 2020) and American Psychological Association (2012) have contended that educators should provide opportunities and an appropriate contextual framework that can facilitate the development of resilience in children and youth. However, how universities can best support students in developing this sort of protective resilience is not yet fully understood.

As a pedagogical practice, academic service-learning has a demonstrated track record of benefit to university students, including but not limited to improved content mastery, self-efficacy, civic competencies, retention

and graduation, and employment outcomes (e.g., Celio et al., 2011; Conway et al., 2009; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Kuh, 2008; Matthews et al., 2015; Song et al., 2018; Yorio & Ye, 2012). This high-impact (Kuh, 2008) practice engages students in applying their academic learning to real-world issues and challenges, utilizing critical reflection to help them connect their campus and community experiences. In the context of one large, public research university in the southeastern United States, this article investigates potential components of service-learning courses and activities that faculty and student experiences suggest may lead to positive impacts on university student resilience.

## Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

### Resilience and Service-Learning

In their scoping review, Brewer et al. (2019) noted the lack of consistent definitions of “resilience” across relevant research literature. They proposed conceptualizing resilience as “a dynamic process of positive adaptation in the face of adversity or challenge . . . [which] involves the capacity to negotiate for, and draw upon, psychological, social, cultural and environmental resources” (p. 1114). Resilience is further characterized by students regaining or sustaining levels of healthy functioning following exposure to adversity (Duckworth et al., 2007; Ginsburg & Jablo, 2020; Gucciardi et al., 2015; Henderson, 2007; Masten, 2011). For this study, we operationalize resilience as students’ ability to persist, bounce back, and achieve, despite setbacks or course-related challenges. Resilience includes tenacity, being able to cope with adversity, being able to solve problems, and using resources and supports (individual, community, or societal) to be successful in their academic endeavors.

Service-learning is a high-impact pedagogy (Kuh, 2008)—a

course-based, credit-bearing educational experience in which students (a) participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and (b) reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility. (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995, p. 112)

Little research has directly investigated how service-learning might support college student resilience, despite some conceptual arguments for such benefits. For instance, in considering a range of engaged pedagogies, Swaner (2007) posited that these sorts of “active engagement” activities could “moderate stress levels and potentially reduce mental health problems” among college students (p. 22). In Ginsburg’s (n.d.) 7 Cs model of “essential building blocks of resilience” for youth, several of the guiding questions for programs map onto components likely to be found in service-learning, such as creating “opportunities for each youth to contribute to the community” (Contribution), “demonstrat[ing] the importance of community” (Character), and “helping to build the authentic skills that make them competent in the real world” (Competence).

Goertzen and Whitaker (2015) investigated the impact of a multicourse sequence in a leadership education program on students’ “psychological capital,” operationalized as “self-efficacy, optimism, hope and resiliency” (p. 775). Although their study primarily focused on how leadership education programs (rather than service-learning) might impact these characteristics, the program they described included one course with service-learning, and they conducted three surveys of over 200 students in online, international, and on-campus leadership courses across a 3-year period. They found that student resilience ratings peaked at the end of the second course, which alone included a service-learning element, showing significant increases from the start of the program. Goertzen and Whitaker described the service-learning experience, including reflection and instructor and peer feedback, as enhancing student resilience:

These powerful reflection experiences provide students with the confidence (e.g. self-efficacy) to avoid obstacles and adversity (e.g. resiliency) in their own projects as they continue through the semester. Students responded to the survey at Time 2 at the conclusion of the service-learning project. Students may experience a euphoric high from successful completion of a major community-based, service-learning project and as a result report a high level of confidence in their own abilities to set challenging goals, identify relevant

pathways and navigate adverse situations, thus accounting for the significant increase. . . . (p. 781)

However, these gains were not permanent; upon testing after the third (non–service–learning) course in the sequence, student resilience scores declined again. The authors were not able to fully explain this difference but suggested that students “perhaps are not provided with the sufficient and necessary pathways to reinforce their self–efficacy and resiliency in identifying alternative courses of action when challenging leadership situations arise” as in the third, academic–only course (Goertzen & Whitaker, 2015, p. 782).

In her 2010 dissertation, based on her review of student development theory, Mercer argued that service–learning and reflection should enhance “resilience protective factors” among college students (p. 23). Her study used a pretest/posttest design with students in eight undergraduate courses in counseling, social work, and kinesiology in either a service–learning or non–service–learning version. Slightly over half the students in service–learning courses demonstrated increases in their resilience scores, but no significant changes pre– to posttest were apparent between the service–learning and non–service–learning students overall. In comparing the three service–learning classes, she found that the kinesiology students’ resilience scores declined from pre– to posttest, while scores increased moderately in the other two disciplines; Mercer suggested this difference may have been due to different structural features, including increased opportunities for student choice in the counseling and social work service–learning experiences. Existing differences between the two groups at pretest, as well as some gender and age differences and differences in test administration timing, may have also contributed to the overall lack of significant findings.

Daniels et al. (2015) described a “critical service–learning research” training program for African American students at an HBCU intended to enhance participants’ research interest and persistence. Their 13 participants all agreed that the program increased their resiliency, and the authors suggested that the service–learning experience “strategically connect[ed] them to learning in a more authentic way than traditional classroom experiences” (p. 186). Although this small–scale study was not

designed to investigate resilience directly, student comments indicated that activities like presenting at conferences, mentoring from faculty, and group discussions about overcoming challenges were helpful in enhancing student resilience.

Although not directly exploring resilience, in her dissertation study, Brewer (2023) interviewed seven undergraduates with service–learning experience to inquire into how service–learning impacted their mental health and well–being. She posited (p. 121) that reflection and knowledge development helped students develop their identities. Further, developing a sense of belonging, having opportunities to practice empathy and caring, developing agency through making decisions, and expressing gratitude for their experiences all helped participant wellness and mental health.

On our campus (described further below), end–of–semester survey data has consistently indicated that students who participate in service–learning courses do perceive that this experience benefits their resilience. A Likert–scale question in this IRB–approved institutional survey assessed student perceptions of the service–learning activity’s impact on their resilience. The majority (82.7%) of student respondents “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that “the service–learning component of this course helped me develop resilience,” with the most frequent response overall being “strongly agree.” From fall 2021 to spring 2024, 676 students across 115 different course sections responded to this item. Survey respondents were primarily, but not exclusively, White, female, non–first–generation students, and the largest class standing represented undergraduate seniors. Although not a representative sample, they represented 115 different course sections at both undergraduate and graduate levels. All respondents provided informed consent for their responses to be used for research purposes.

Consistent with the literature reviewed, students believed that the service–learning elements in their courses enhanced their resilience (e.g., Daniels et al., 2015; Mercer, 2010); however, this end–of–semester survey was not designed to explore reasons for this response. Thus, our primary research question for the current study addressed investigating further the ways in which service–learning faculty and students felt such courses impacted resilience—that is, the “why” and “how.” We posed this research

question: What features of service-learning do university faculty and students suggest might explain possible positive influences on student resilience?

## Methodology

### Institutional Context

The study site was a large public research university in the southeastern United States. This land-grant university, holding the Carnegie Foundation's 2010 and 2020 community engagement classification, annually enrolls over 40,000 students in undergraduate, graduate, and professional degrees across multiple schools and colleges. During the 2021–2022 and 2022–2023 academic years, the institution's service-learning office reported over 9,000 enrollments in about 500 course sections per year that incorporated service-learning. About 175 of the 250 unique courses had received the university's formal curricular designation for academic service-learning through its curriculum committee.

To address the research question, a basic qualitative study was designed using semi-structured faculty and student focus groups to explore and triangulate perceptions of how and why service-learning might impact student resilience. This study, also approved through the university's human subjects/IRB office, was designed and led by an interdisciplinary group of participants (this study's authors) in a university-sponsored faculty learning community on service-learning scholarship. As described in further detail below, an initial set of faculty focus groups was conducted in 2022. The research team collaboratively conducted emergent coding with the content from these first three focus groups, then additional faculty and student focus groups were conducted to gather additional data, followed by "second cycle coding" (Saldaña, 2021) of themes.

### Faculty Focus Groups

The university's service-learning office provided a listing of all faculty who had taught a designated-service-learning course between fall 2019 and fall 2021; these 140 faculty members were emailed with an invitation to participate in the study's focus groups. Seventeen responded with interest, provided informed consent, and (based on their availability) were scheduled for one of a series of focus groups held through Zoom, first in early spring 2022 (Focus Groups 1, 2 and 3),

then in fall 2022 (Focus Groups 4 and 5). The 17 faculty participants were all full-time faculty in both tenure- and non-tenure-track roles, representing 16 disciplines (see Table 1 for details on participants). Participants were offered their choice of a water bottle or coffee mug from the university's service-learning office as a thank-you/incentive.

Each focus group was led by two of the faculty learning community members (also experienced service-learning instructors), and with the participants' permission all but one discussion was recorded via Zoom. A consistent set of open-ended discussion prompts and questions was used to guide each session, although other topics were also brought up by participants and moderators. Generally, in each focus group, participants self-introduced, then described the service-learning courses they had recently taught. Facilitators provided the study's working definition of resilience and asked participants for perceived examples of student resilience from their courses. Additional questions explored the nature of student/instructor relationships in service-learning courses from the faculty perspective, service-learning and non-service-learning course organization and characteristics, potential explanations for participants' observations, and recommendations from participants for other faculty interested in developing student resilience. Each focus group lasted approximately one hour.

For the four faculty focus groups with Zoom recordings, the Zoom-generated transcriptions were reviewed and corrected as needed by one or more of the research team members; participant names were removed and identifiers added. The facilitators' field notes for the one session that was not recorded were also reviewed and used as a data source.

### Student Focus Groups

In fall 2022, a new set of focus groups was undertaken with student participants to triangulate, test, and confirm the findings that had emerged from the faculty focus groups. (Additional IRB approval and informed consent was also obtained for the student group, and participants were also offered a water bottle or coffee mug as a participation incentive.) Emails were sent via Qualtrics to all students who had taken part in a designated-service-learning course during the prior year. Eleven students responded with interest. After scheduling focus groups during the semester break in December,



**Table 1. Faculty Focus Group Participant Demographics**

Focus group	Discipline	Faculty role	Gender	Assigned ID
1	English	Lecturer (non-tenure-track)	Female	J5.1
1	Kinesiology	Professor (tenure-track)	Male	J5.2
1	Parks, recreation & tourism	Professor (tenure-track)	Male	J5.3
1	Environment & design	Senior lecturer (non-tenure-track)	Male	J5.4
2	Law	Associate professor (tenure-track)	Male	J6.1
2	Crop and soil sciences	Research scientist (non-tenure-track)	Female	J6.2
2	Music	Associate professor (tenure-track)	Female	J6.3
2	Horticulture	Associate professor (tenure-track)	Female	J6.4
2	Academic enhancement	Lecturer (non-tenure-track)	Female	J6.5
3	Forestry and natural resources	Lecturer (non-tenure-track)	Male	J11.1
3	Geography	Associate professor (tenure-track)	Male	J11.2
3	English	Senior academic professional (non-tenure-track)	Female	J11.3
4	Public administration	Associate professor (tenure-track)	Male	J66.1
4	Romance languages	Lecturer (non-tenure-track)	Female	J66.2
4	Marine science	Academic professional (non-tenure-track)	Female	J66.3
5	Entomology	Assistant professor (tenure-track)	Female	J77.1
5	Biological sciences	Professor (tenure-track)	Female	J77.2

*Note.* Although discipline, role, and gender are presented for faculty participants, no differential analysis was conducted based on these demographic categories.

eight total students (undergraduate and graduate students) took part in three Zoom focus groups in spring 2023 (see Table 2 for student demographics).

As with the faculty focus groups, each student focus group was led by two members of the research team over Zoom. After self-introductions, the facilitators asked a series of semistructured questions to understand student participants' experiences in service-learning courses, how they perceived resilience, whom they considered to be resilient, examples of challenges and resilience, recommendations, and perceptions of how their service-learning and non-service-learning courses differed. The Zoom-generated transcriptions were reviewed and corrected by one or more of the research team members, and names were replaced with participant identifiers.

### Code Development and Analysis

Thematic analysis was undertaken in three primary steps. First, the final transcriptions and field notes for the first three (spring 2022) faculty focus groups were imported into the qualitative software analysis program Dedoose. Each member of the faculty learning community individually read through each set of transcriptions and notes, identifying prospective and emergent themes in an "open" or "initial coding" process (Saldaña, 2021). These themes were then discussed extensively by the team in a series of group meetings to clarify and ensure consistency and shared understanding (exploratory coding). All areas of inconsistency and questions about coding were resolved through extensive discussion by the entire research team, resulting in an agreed-upon set of initial themes.

**Table 2. Student Focus Group Participant Demographics**

Focus group	Student major	Degree pursued	Gender	Assigned ID
1	Kinesiology	Undergraduate	Female	S12.1
1	Agriculture leadership	Undergraduate	Female	S12.2
2	Education	Graduate	Female	S13.1
2	Elementary education	Undergraduate	Female	S13.2
2	Social work	Undergraduate	Nonbinary	S13.3
3	Business	Undergraduate	Male	S14.1
3	Landscape architecture	Graduate	Female	S14.2
3	Landscape architecture	Graduate	Female	S14.3

*Note.* Although student level, major, and gender are presented for student participants, no differential analysis was conducted based on these demographic categories.

Next, the additional two faculty focus groups were conducted in fall 2022 to determine whether thematic saturation had been reached. Transcripts from these two focus groups were reviewed and coded to determine if the initial codes sufficiently captured participant perspectives. No new themes were found from this second set of confirmatory focus groups. Finally, three student focus groups were carried out in spring 2023 to ensure that at least some student perspectives on resilience in service-learning courses were also incorporated in the data set.

Then, using the entire set of faculty and student focus group data, the researchers met iteratively during summer 2023 for “second cycle coding” (Saldaña, 2021): “constructing concepts from categories; outlining based on code frequencies; . . . and reorganizing and reassembling the transformed data to better focus the direction of [the] study” (p. 280). This step included reviewing, finalizing, categorizing, and organizing the codes into a set of clustered (i.e., “parent” and “child”) themes. Frequencies of the emergent themes were compiled and reviewed with the intent to identify all salient themes while also being attentive to developing a manageable number of overall codes and themes (Friese, 2014) and avoiding code proliferation (Saldaña, 2021). About 35 discrete thematic topics were identified and coded (e.g., “community as a model of resilience”; “awareness of benefit to community”; “explicitly discussing resilience in class”) through this focused and axial coding process (e.g., Charmaz, 2014); the

transcriptions were then revisited and collaboratively coded in Dedoose, resulting in over 400 non-mutually exclusive instances across the student and faculty focus groups, though not all subthemes were ultimately deemed by the research team to be relevant to this study’s research question. This collaborative process resulted in the identification of five overarching themes representing both student and faculty responses related to resilience and service-learning, as presented in the following section.

## Findings

### Faculty and Student Focus Group Thematic Findings

Our research into features of service-learning courses that were perceived to influence student resilience resulted in five key themes supported by both faculty and student focus groups. These themes illustrate separate but interrelated ways in which participants suggested that service-learning experiences may support the development of resilience in university students. Table 3 presents these overarching themes as well as sample “child” codes and the frequency of their occurrence in the data set; the Appendix illustrates each of these findings with sample quotes from faculty and student focus group participants, with additional description provided in the thematic narrative overviews below.

The first theme from faculty and student focus group participants indicated that service-learning supported student resil-

**Table 3. Themes and Representative Codes From Focus Groups**

Key themes	Representative codes (frequency of occurrence)
Models of resilience: Service-learning provided exposure to peer, instructor, or community models of resilience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community as model of resilience (13)</li> <li>• Self as model of resilience (10)</li> <li>• Peer as model of resilience (7)</li> <li>• Instructor as model of resilience (3)</li> </ul>
Authentic relationships: Service-learning helped foster more authentic classroom relationships between participants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student-to-student relationships (28)</li> <li>• Decreased classroom hierarchy (26)</li> <li>• Personal sharing between student and instructor (15)</li> <li>• Student-instructor relationships (11)</li> <li>• Professor vulnerability (7)</li> </ul>
Opportunities for challenge: Service-learning provided opportunities for overcoming challenges inherent in community-based activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Course structure creates challenge (32)</li> <li>• Rebounding/overcoming challenges (28)</li> <li>• Instructor does not explicitly provide answers (21)</li> <li>• Community partner-based challenges (14)</li> <li>• Initial fears of community-based work (13)</li> <li>• Small failures built into course (7)</li> </ul>
Real-world consequences: Service-learning enhanced student motivation to persevere to meet the community's needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Motivation due to real-world consequences (27)</li> <li>• Awareness of benefit to community (19)</li> <li>• Positive feedback from community partner (12)</li> <li>• Motivation due to service-learning structure (8)</li> </ul>
Reflection: Service-learning incorporated reflection to further help students perceive mastery and resilience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reflection activities and examples (20)</li> <li>• Explicitly discussing resilience in class (9)</li> </ul>

ience through providing students access to models of resilience. These models could be found in community members from their service-learning experience, their peers, or even their instructor. For instance, one faculty participant (J6.1) commented:

To some extent exposure to resilience is part of the design of law school clinics. We are putting students in touch with clients who are in need: veterans who are disabled and facing financial pressure, veterans who are facing end-of-life issues [. . . and] we're bringing students in contact with and asking them to help people who, themselves, are having to demonstrate resilience and figure out how to deal with challenges.

Second, participants felt that, compared to traditional lecture courses, service-learning's structure and experiences often led to less hierarchical student-faculty relationships and provided opportunities for participants to get to know each other in more

authentic ways. These deeper relationships were particularly apparent in situations where the instructor was on site with students during service experiences, leading to greater trust and sharing. As one instructor (J6.5) stated,

It's really the trust-building that comes along with that vulnerability that both instructor and student is having in that relationship . . . and I think that is the place where students then feel safe to reach out for support in the context of these kinds of courses.

The third theme related to the substantive, authentic opportunities for overcoming challenge through service-learning. Participants noted that the complexities and difficulties inherent in community-based activities and projects, a hallmark of service-learning, naturally created challenges and setbacks (or even "failures") that students were faced with overcoming, allowing for the development of resilience. These experiences were

directly related to the fourth theme, the way that service-learning activities' "real-world" impacts and implications created accountability to external stakeholders, which further motivated students to persevere. This enhanced accountability provided a natural reason for students to show resilience in the face of challenges. For example, the following student (S12.1) comment highlights both these themes:

There were problems with me for my [community] participant, where she wouldn't come in. . . . So just being able to get through all of that, and still just like push through . . . still trying to be motivated to come in and [run] the workouts.

The final theme suggested that participants felt that engagement in reflection activities helped students understand that they were developing resilience. In particular, when reflection prompts explicitly focused on overcoming obstacles and demonstrating mastery, participants felt that it helped students recognize and identify their progress and growing resilience. One instructor (J6.5) characterized reflection's benefits as follows:

Having a chance for students to come together and talk about their experience early on and do it kind of throughout . . . talk about their struggle, how they overcome the challenges that they have . . . this way they can build on that experience and learn about how other people are doing it.

## Discussion

Some prior research (e.g., Daniels et al., 2015; Mercer, 2010) had hypothesized that service-learning might support student development of resilience, and our campus surveys of students in such courses found that they overwhelmingly identified this outcome as present from their own experiences. The current study used in-depth focus groups to begin to investigate the perspectives and opinions of university students and faculty with service-learning experience in order to help explain this outcome. The key findings from this study suggested five interrelated features of effective service-learning courses that may support student resilience.

## Theme Summaries

### *Models of Resilience*

Students seem to benefit and learn from others who demonstrate resilience in their course-based experiences. In Ang et al.'s (2021) study of resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic, students described drawing resilience from learning about and interacting with resilient community members as well as their instructors. Ginsburg (n.d.) described one of the "essential building blocks of resilience" in youth as "contribution," which includes not only "opportunity to contribute to the community" but also looking at role modeling and how "recovery serves as a model." Courses with service-learning can be especially effective at providing students with clear models of resilience—from their peers, instructors, and the community. Instructors described ways in which students learned from community members who had experienced and overcome challenges, helping students place their own course-based struggles in perspective. They also shared their own vulnerabilities and challenges (including those inside and outside the service-learning context), and when on site with community projects, helped demonstrate and reflect on how they responded to difficult situations. Service-learning instructors also designed reflections, student work groups, and in-and-out-of-class experiences in ways that allowed students to share challenges and accomplishments and learn from each other.

### *Authentic Relationships*

Similarly, service-learning is positioned to foster more authentic relationships among participants, with benefits to student resilience. Participants in the current study clearly identified ways in which the service-learning course features changed the nature of the student-faculty relationship away from the more traditional, expert/novice dynamic, to a less hierarchical partnership approach as they worked together to address community needs. At its core, demonstrating resilience includes using resources to adapt and respond effectively to adversity and challenge (Brewer et al., 2019). Student relationships with their instructors, and with their peers, functioned as key resources that could be drawn upon; as Felten and Lambert (2020) noted, "a web of student-student, student-faculty, and student-staff relationships creates a more resilient resource for a student to draw upon



when the going gets tough” (p. 15). The current study’s participants pointed out ways in which these more personal relationships then allowed students to approach these instructors even for non–course–related concerns and problems, using them as a relational resource and enhancing Ginsburg’s (n.d.) notion of “connection.” Past research has likewise shown the benefits of student–faculty relationships in enhancing student outcomes (e.g., Eyler & Giles, 1999; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991), and students have reported that supportive interactions with faculty enhanced their resilience (Ang et al., 2021). In their study of first–generation students in service–learning, McKay and Estrella (2008) found that the relationships between students and faculty were often developed through communication outside the classroom, and that these relationships with faculty and with peers motivated and supported student perseverance. Such relationships allow “establishing a caring, supportive environment that enables students to learn, make mistakes, and pick themselves back up to try again” (Felten & Lambert, 2020, p. 84). Another study of academic resilience, although not focused on service–learning, found that “peer connectedness was significantly and positively associated with academic resilience and student hope when faced with an academic challenge” (Frisby et al., 2020, p. 289).

### *Opportunities for Challenge*

Demonstrating resilience happens in the context of responding to a setback, challenge, or failure. Because of the uncertainties and challenges inherent in community–based activities, service–learning courses often provide nonmanufactured (i.e., real), externally generated opportunities for students to hone and practice resilient behaviors, further developing more of Ginsburg’s (n.d.) 7 Cs such as competence (i.e., building skills, making and correcting their own mistakes), coping, and confidence. Although this perspective was sometimes frustrating to students who may feel they are not receiving sufficient faculty support, instructors in the current study specifically identified their belief in the importance of allowing students to struggle, and even to fail in low–stakes ways, as they responded to the vagaries, misunderstandings, or divergent priorities of their partners and organizations. Faculty participants also noted the advantages of having these challenges arise from the community, rather than being imposed by the instructor.

### *Real–World Consequences: Motivation to Persevere*

Relatedly, because the service–learning activities and the students’ assignments had clear, real–world consequences and benefits to the community, students demonstrated enhanced motivation to persevere in the face of these obstacles. Both student and faculty participants in the current study indicated that this community–facing feature of service–learning led students to demonstrate motivation and grit in completing assignments beyond what they might demonstrate in a traditional academic course, similar to what other service–learning research has noted (e.g., Darby et al., 2013; Yorio & Ye, 2012). In persevering, students make contributions to the community, develop character, and build confidence (three of Ginsburg’s, n.d., key competencies for resilience). When students take ownership and see themselves as capable of effecting change and helping their community, these greater feelings of autonomy and agency can also help boost resilience (e.g., Reeve et al., 2020; Ryan & Deci, 2020).

### *Reflection*

Finally, service–learning regularly incorporates reflection activities, which can further help students recognize that they are developing mastery and resilience. Reflection, a sine qua non of academic service–learning (Bingle & Hatcher, 1995; Eyler, 2002; Hatcher et al., 2004), has likewise been identified by other researchers as important in helping students develop resilience in service–learning and non–service–learning experiences (e.g., Brewer, 2023; Daniels et al., 2015; Ginsburg & Jablow, 2020; Goertzen & Whitaker, 2015; Mercer, 2010). Participants described ways in which reflection activities (including in–class guided discussions as well as written assignments) helped students contextualize the challenges and progress in their community–based work, reducing their overall stress as they realized they were not the only ones in that situation. Additionally, when instructors explicitly point out student progress and resilient behaviors, including naming them as resilience, they help students recognize that these same skills can be applied in future courses.

### *Limitations*

Several limitations to the present study are salient. As participants all came from the same U.S. university, their perspectives may not represent the breadth of experience for

service-learning programs in different institutional settings, geographic areas, or university types. Student and faculty participants were not randomly chosen, and they represented a small proportion of overall eligible participants and disciplines. Although thematic saturation was present in the faculty group responses, it is possible that additional focus groups—especially among students—could reveal other perspectives on the research questions. Additionally, data collection began relatively soon after resumption of regular academic activities following the global pandemic, so student and faculty experiences and perspectives may not be fully applicable to future cohorts.

Although data were reported on some participant demographic categories, this information was not exhaustive in terms of potential demographic differences, nor was it used to investigate any potential differences among experiences based on identity categories. Similarly, although past research on resilience in university students has frequently considered the experiences of those from underrepresented or historically marginalized backgrounds, this study's focus group questions and discussions did not provide intentional opportunities to explore issues of student demographics or identity.

### **Directions for Future Research**

Directions for future research include extending and testing this study's findings. For instance, in our campus's end-of-semester surveys that provided the initial impetus for our investigation, some students did not agree that their service-learning experiences enhanced their resilience; thus, a deeper look into student survey responses at this and other universities could help investigate potential differences in why some students did not perceive a benefit, based perhaps on features of interest such as student demographics, types of service-learning activity, or course characteristics. Additionally, future studies could more fully apply or test the findings from this study on a broader sample of students and faculty and could look at explanatory factors for supporting resilience from a more theoretical lens, such as self-determination theory (e.g., Reeve et al., 2020; Ryan & Deci, 2020). Finally, this exploratory study resulted in themes based on student and faculty perceptions but did not investigate causality, so designing and testing the overall and relative influences of the features identified in this study's thematic outcomes would

provide stronger evidence for these elements' actual impacts on student resilience.

### **Recommendations and Conclusion**

This study's findings suggest several implications for practice for instructors or campuses interested in enhancing service-learning courses to more intentionally facilitate student resilience. Although service-learning courses likely already incorporate student reflection activities, instructors might consider explicitly including resilience-oriented topics in class discussions or written reflection. For instance, because students appear to benefit from seeing models of resilience, reflection activities might ask directly about evidence of resilience they see in the community; class discussions in which common challenges and solutions are shared among peers also appear likely to support student resilience. Similarly, reflection prompts can explicitly encourage students to reflect on how they have addressed challenges (especially looking at the overall arc of their experience at the end of the course) and demonstrated resilience, and to identify effective strategies and behaviors that they can apply in future coursework.

To maximize student engagement, motivation, and perseverance, instructors should ensure that their course service-learning experience clearly does provide community benefit, and they should help students recognize the importance and value of the service assignments, perhaps through direct feedback from partners. Additionally, faculty should communicate to students that although community-based work can be (and often is) challenging, growth and learning are inherent in facing and overcoming these challenges. Intentionally designing courses to foster student autonomy and leadership, such as by allowing some student choice in roles and service activities, may also enhance students' motivation and perseverance.

Instructors should also continue to prioritize authentic relationship-building with their students. Possible methods include sharing their own vulnerabilities and challenges, as well as modeling strategies to productively address issues with areas such as community partner communications. Participants in the current study noted that when faculty are on site or actively taking part in the service experience with their students, the relationship is perceived as more collaborative and less hierarchical; if the course structure does not allow for being on site

with students, faculty might consider creating other in-class activities with direct collaboration with students. Additionally, instructors can consider how to structure in-class and service activities for effective peer-to-peer relationship building.

Finally, because resilience entails effective use of resources to overcome challenges, instructors should ensure that students are aware of both institutional supports (mental health services, tutoring, disability resource centers, etc.) and course-specific resources (e.g., peers, community experts, office hours). Direct discussion and reflection on resource use may be more helpful than pro

forma inclusion of syllabus statements in terms of encouraging students to feel comfortable seeking this assistance.

In conclusion, the structure and features of high-quality service-learning courses seem likely to provide an effective stepping stone for supporting university student resilience. Through additional consideration of key elements, service-learning instructors and students can further design and leverage activities to help students develop, access, recognize, and apply resources and strategies that allow students to surmount challenges, persevere, and thrive in their current courses and beyond.



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## Appendix. Participant Quotes From Focus Groups Illustrating Key Themes

Theme	Participant	Quote
Models of resilience	Faculty (J5.2)	“The group that we’ve chosen [for service-learning] is . . . people with disabilities with spectacular resilience themselves. . . . Our students see people who are working or doing their lives with a significant disability and they’re not complaining and they’re just plugging away and having a good time in life, and I think, again, that helps our students see a different world. . . . They’re seeing people who are demonstrating resilience.”
	Faculty (J5.3)	“When we do these discussions where all the groups talk about their problems, suddenly they realize . . . they’re not as bad as they think. They’re like, ‘everyone’s going through the same thing’ . . . and all of a sudden, the problem becomes smaller. Because it isn’t just them, and then they will talk about it and typically in a session, they will kind of work out an answer. . . .”
	Student (S14.3)	“We were working with the . . . coalition of farm workers in Florida, and I guess the way that it was described is they were ordinary people and doing extraordinary things. Some of them didn’t have a lot of high-status titles like when you think of changemakers. Some people might think of politicians and lawyers, but they were literally farm workers who were organizing on the community level, spreading the word and advocating for change. And so they took things in their own hands going up against corporations and legislation that were against them . . . they’ve been successful at it.”
Authentic relationships	Faculty (J6.5)	“It gives me the opportunity to get to know them as a student and they get to know me as a person . . . we shared that experience together, and you get to talk about other things, and I think that getting to know that personal level, they will tell me things that they would not normally share in the classroom.”
	Faculty (J6.1)	“My relationship with students is a lot more of a partnership approach. I’m sort of the more-experienced partner in a law practice, where the students are the less experienced partners.”
	Student (S13.2)	“I think my relationships with [service-learning faculty] were also a lot deeper. They saw me as more than just a student, but they saw me as like a human in their classes with dreams and ambitions, and also needs. And so we would meet up for coffee or for lunch or whatever and talk outside of class.”
Opportunities for challenge	Faculty (J11.3)	“Students have to problem-solve on the spot and deal with difficulties, changes in plans, changes in what the community partner needs or can do, or being lower down on the community partner’s priority list, and this builds capacity and resilience.”
	Faculty (J6.3)	“The other part of it was just the [students’] absolute fear of three- and four-year-olds [in the service placement], when they think they’re going to be a high school band director or choir teacher, so . . . they don’t know what to expect.”
	Student (S13.3)	“My professor was definitely a little like, ‘Do it on your own’ once we finished the first two weeks. We had like two intros, basically, and she explained a lot of the objectives of the course and what the point of doing this work was, kind of along those lines, and then afterwards we were free to work in our experiences, and then we had guided activities along the way. But she wasn’t really like strictly over our shoulder, or anything like that which I really genuinely appreciated, because it was more of like a learning curve on my own to really experience what [the service activity] was like.”

Theme	Participant	Quote
Real-world consequences	Faculty (J5.3)	"Students will come in sometimes, and say like 'We've got this problem, I don't know how to fix it' and I'm like, 'Well, do some research.' And, once they figure it out, and then they have a final product, and they go back to the client [who] says, 'we can use this.'"
	Faculty (J6.1)	"[With] a successful outcome for a client . . . you can see the student swell up and get bigger, grow a little bit, right? It affects their motivation to work as a lawyer and affects their motivation to engage with the world and solve someone else's problem. . . . The students can see that their work actually had a huge impact on that person's life."
	Student (S14.2)	"In service-learning classes . . . you're working with real people who really do need something from you, and really do expect something from you. So, for example, in my construction class, where I was just turning an assignment in, it was a lot easier for me to just be like, 'Hey, I'm going to be late on this assignment,' or 'I can't complete it' and not worry about it because it's just a grade I'm sacrificing. But for a service-learning class, there are people relying on you, and you're doing something real which is really unique for us . . . this is our first semester working on really real sites, that had the potential of actually being implemented. And so, it's not something you want to let people down, or it's not something you necessarily, you can feel you can just give up."
Reflection	Faculty (J6.5)	"We actually talked about resilience in the class I teach, too, so we talk about like how to deal with setback[s] and stuff like that, so it's very—we are very explicit about . . . you know, telling them that, 'If you can make it through this you can get through the hopefully the next semester too, because this is really intense.'"
	Faculty (J5.3)	"The students will often say at the end, they go back and look at those reflections, and it's very meaningful to them to realize, you know, 'this was a concern for me, now at the end of the semester it's no longer a concern.'"
	Student (S14.1)	"[We] discussed in class the problem I faced . . . how to handle a conflict within teams. [Through that discussion], I'm seeing the source of conflict."

