

## ABSTRACT

Numerous studies emphasize the impact of community service on college students by pointing out its positive correlations to establishing a sense of belonging among 1st-year students. However, despite many colleges' best efforts, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 disrupted the normal college experience.

In this study, we utilized a post-positivist worldview and employed a cross-sectional survey research study to explore how undergraduate students' attitudes, behaviors, and intended skill development through community service changed during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

We found a statistically significant decrease in all community service attitudes and behaviors and no change in intended skill development during and post-COVID.

Our findings have implications for service-learning faculty and higher education professionals working in community engagement functional areas.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted college students and affected their learning and social interactions. This research aimed to understand, from student-reported data, how attitudes, behaviors, and intended skill development related to community service have evolved.

The objectives for this research study are explained through two research questions:

**1. How did undergraduate students' attitudes and behaviors toward community service change during and after the COVID-19 pandemic?**

**2. Has the intended skill development through community service altered during and after the pandemic?**

## METHOD

We utilized a post-positivist worldview (Creswell, 2013) and employed a cross-sectional survey research study (Fraenkel et al., 1993; Singleton & Straits, 2009). Post-positivism emphasizes empirical evidence and the scientific method, thereby making it suitable for collecting and analyzing quantifiable data on students' attitudes and expectations. The Institutional Review Board at the research site approved the study protocol.

The key variables in this study were measured by survey data obtained via *Qualtrics*. This study used data from the pretest before participants began participation with the university's place-based community engagement program. Data were collected between October 2020 and May 2024.

Dependent variables were individual survey items or subscales formed using valid and reliable instruments previously used to assess college student learning while engaged in community service. We utilized the four subscales posited by J. E. Weber et al. (2010) in *Measuring Service Learning Outcomes: Test-retest Reliability of Four Scales*.

**Table 1**  
*Population and Sample*

	During		Post-		Total Sample	
	n = 616	65%	n = 327	35%	N = 943	100%
Sex						
Male	222	36%	133	41%	355	38%
Female	396	64%	193	59%	589	62%
Race & Ethnicity						
American Indian/Alaska Native	2	0.3%	0	0%	2	0.01%
Asian	74	12%	40	12%	114	12%
Black or African American	44	7%	32	10%	76	8%
Hispanic of Any Race	117	19%	67	20%	184	20%
Native Hawaii/Other Pacislander	0	0%	1	0.01%	1	0.01%
Non-Resident Alien (Any Race)	21	3%	14	4%	35	4%
Race & Ethnicity Unknown	7	1%	8	2%	15	2%
Two or More Races	32	5%	16	5%	48	5%
White	321	52%	148	45%	469	50%
First-Generation	72	11%	47	14%	119	13%
Transfer	73	11%	40	12%	113	12%
Pell-Eligible	112	18%	78	23%	190	20%

## RESULTS

### Attitudes and Behaviors

Our first research question was to determine how undergraduate students' attitudes and behaviors toward community service changed during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Table 2 displays results from an independent t-test comparing how often participants were encouraged to participate in opportunities outside the classroom during and after the COVID-19 pandemic and who encouraged their participation.

**Table 2**  
*Comparing Encouragement for Co-Curricular Engagement During and Post-COVID-19*

	During		Post-		t(650)	p
	M	SD	M	SD		
Faculty	3.53	1.22	3.49	1.21	0.33	.740
Staff	3.30	1.25	3.49	1.16	-1.87	.062
Peers	3.50	1.17	3.31	1.19	1.90	.058

**Table 3**  
*During and Post-COVID-19 T-Test of Student Expectations and Attitudes Toward Service*

	During		Post-		t(941)	p	Cohen's d
	M	SD	M	SD			
Civic participation	4.32	0.57	4.21	0.59	2.87	.004	0.57
Self-efficacy toward service	4.26	0.62	4.14	0.65	2.79	.005	0.63
Attitude toward helping others	4.26	0.66	4.17	0.62	2.17	.030	0.62
College education's role in addressing social issues	4.19	0.66	4.10	0.67	1.96	.050	0.67



### Intended Skill Development

Our second research question was to see if the intended skill development through community service altered during and after the pandemic. Table 4 presents the crosstabs of self-reported skill development during and post-COVID-19.

**Table 4**  
*Self-Reported Intended Skill Development During and Post-COVID-19*

	During		Post-		Sample	
	n	%	n	%	N	%
Effective communication	61	10%	42	13%	103	11%
Critical thinking and analytical skills	27	4%	18	6%	45	5%
Citizenship and community building	122	20%	70	21%	192	20%
Self-confidence	47	8%	25	8%	72	8%
Awareness of multicultural issues	81	13%	43	13%	124	13%
Teamwork	41	7%	31	10%	72	8%
Understanding of leadership and management styles	42	7%	22	7%	64	7%
Authenticity and acting consistent with your values	32	5%	8	2%	40	4%
Ability to plan and implement programs and activities	41	7%	11	3%	52	6%
People skills	58	9%	35	11%	93	10%
Business of technical skills	14	2%	5	2%	19	2%
Healthy living skills	50	8%	17	5%	67	7%

## DISCUSSION

### Attitudes and Behaviors

More civic participation & self efficacy for students engaging in community service during the pandemic than after the pandemic

Attitudes toward helping others were greater for students engaging in community service during the pandemic than afterwards

### Intended Skill Development

More student participants desired to develop (via a community service program) effective communication and people skills post COVID-19 more than during COVID-19.

More student participants desired to develop (via a community service program) event planning skills and healthy living skills during COVID-19 more than post COVID-19.

### Attitudes and Behaviors

#### Civic Participation Attitude:

- Largest decrease: "I want to work toward equal opportunity for all" (0.13 decrease, pre- to post-COVID).

#### Helping Others:

- Two items decreased by 0.10:
  - "People should be willing to help others who are disadvantaged."
  - "Helping people with their challenges is very important to me."

#### Self-Efficacy:

- Largest decrease: "I can have a positive impact on social problems" (0.15 decrease).
- Two tied items decreased by 0.11:
  - "College education should encourage students to help disadvantaged communities."
  - "College should offer opportunities to understand community issues."

#### Higher Education Implications:

- Embed service learning in curricula and focus on social responsibility.
- Co-taught courses with community leaders can deepen engagement.

### Intended Skill Development

#### Key Findings:

- No change in skill development expectations.
- Top skills: citizenship (20%), multicultural awareness (13%), communication (11%).

#### Recommendations:

- Continue current service-learning practices.
- Use pre-reflection and reflection to guide skill growth.

## CONCLUSIONS

Our research explored the ways that undergraduate students' attitudes, behaviors, and intended skill development through community service changed during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

**The data showed that students' attitudes and behaviors toward community service decreased in all assessed categories post-COVID.**

**There was no statistically significant change in the intended skill development of undergraduate students during and post-COVID-19.**

We hope that this research offers insight and sparks discussion among community engagement practitioners in higher education and faculty who teach service-learning courses

## REFERENCES

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