

## Opinion

## Current environment of service learning within the school of pharmacy

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**Abstract**

Service learning (SL) is an alternative to the traditional teaching model and offers valuable benefits to pharmacy students, including the opportunity to expand their community engagement and develop as active citizens. Despite numerous advantages, the current role of SL within our institution is largely unknown. The primary goal of this study was to evaluate the current presence of SL among faculty and preceptors within our pharmacy school. The secondary objectives were to identify factors that may impact faculty offering SL and to identify needs or barriers of faculty members and preceptors so that those needs may be met to promote more SL. A survey was conducted of faculty and preceptors to assess the current environment of SL within our pharmacy curriculum. Statistical analysis was utilized to investigate predictive factors for faculty and preceptor interest in SL and to identify prominent barriers to initiating SL opportunities for students. A total of 193 participants completed the survey. Among them, 79 (42%) participants currently offer SL opportunities to their students. Furthermore, many participants indicated positive attitudes towards SL overall, including the beliefs that SL can positively impact the health of a patient (85%), can teach students valuable skills (90%), and can provide additional benefit beyond those gained from extracurricular activities (61%). Time (71%) was the largest barrier to implementations of SL. The survey results were used as a basis for developing resources to facilitate curricular change and further promote SL efforts at the school.

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**Keywords:** Service learning; Survey; Preceptors; Faculty; Volunteerism

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**Introduction**

In the traditional teaching model, large amounts of relevant information are offered to a large group of students,

and learning is primarily an individual responsibility. In contrast, the service learning (SL) model was constructed instead to promote a “social responsibility” that encourages collaboration and a commitment to meeting community needs.<sup>1</sup> SL courses require community service hours with an established community partner, and SL utilizes reflective activities in order to challenge students to integrate the knowledge learned both in the classroom and in the community settings.<sup>1</sup>

SL offers the opportunity to learn in the academic setting and the community (or experiential) setting. In the academic

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setting, students have the opportunity to continue to learn deductively; however, in the community setting, they have the opportunity to learn inductively and utilize their observations to develop a greater understanding of the community.<sup>1</sup> Offering students the opportunity to engage in inductive reasoning prepares them to facilitate their own learning. SL also can excite students about a particular topic and encourage their learning, which can prepare students for lifelong learning.<sup>2</sup>

An increasing number of pharmacy schools have demonstrated an interest in SL.<sup>3</sup> The current framework for pharmacy education allows students to be taught a substantial amount of pharmaceutical knowledge. SL is thought to be advantageous by helping to formulate a context for that knowledge. By developing a student's receptiveness to patient needs and encouraging an understanding of how to apply their knowledge base selectively to pharmacist-led interventions that will provide the most benefit to patients, SL helps train students to be successful pharmacists. SL further encourages a valuable skill set that is often hard to teach within the pharmaceutical curriculum: communication skills, esthetic sensitivity, professionalism, contextual competence, social interaction and citizenship, and adaptive competence.<sup>1,3–6</sup> Students directly involved with SL within a pharmacy curriculum have self-reported improvements in oral communication skills, written communication skills, analytical thinking, leadership, an increased awareness of those in need, and enhanced confidence in interacting with others that extends even beyond that seen in students that engage in extracurricular volunteering.<sup>1,3–7</sup> SL also offers an opportunity for the university to form lasting relationships with the surrounding communities.<sup>1</sup> Due to the many beneficial attributes of SL, there has even been encouragement for schools of pharmacy to consider offering SL opportunities that are incorporated into a student's IPPE experiences.<sup>7</sup>

Despite its many advantages and the evident growth of SL throughout the profession, understanding the current environment and barriers to implementation are important. Recognizing the characteristics of faculty and preceptors that readily participate in SL may help to identify individuals that may successfully promote SL within the pharmacy curriculum. Previously, student interest in SL at our school was captured.<sup>8</sup> It was found that 85% of our students were interested in having SL experiences because they felt like this type of activity was critical to their professional development. To date, there is no knowledge about faculty interest in SL, characteristics of practitioners' that favor an interest in SL, and barriers to implementing SL.

The primary endpoint was to assess the current status of SL among school faculty and preceptors. Secondary endpoints include assessing the current needs and limitations to designing SL experiences. Lastly, predictive factors that may be affiliated with faculty or preceptors interested in SL were analyzed to determine if certain individuals are more likely to support the development of SL opportunities at the school. At the end, we hope to develop a resource to assist them in implementing SL.

## Methods

Faculty and preceptors affiliated with the University of North Carolina Eshelman School of Pharmacy were invited to participate via e-mails to a listserv; this listserv contained 1200 preceptors that have been or are currently used to varying degrees within the school. The e-mail invited them to complete a survey to assess the current environment of SL within our pharmacy curriculum. For the purpose of the study, SL was defined as "a course that requires community service hours with an established community partner, is specifically designed to challenge students to learn both in the classroom and in the community setting, and utilizes reflective activities that serve to integrate concepts learned in both settings."<sup>1,9</sup> A 35-question survey was designed to gather information from the participants about demographics, interest in SL, current involvement in SL or with community partners, and perceived limitations to implementing SL. The survey was released electronically using Qualtrics software. Reminder e-mails were sent at eight and 12 weeks after the initial release. This project was approved by the university's Institutional Review Board.

Descriptive statistics were reported for information gathered about the current status of SL and barriers to implementing SL opportunities for students. Statistical analysis was utilized to investigate predictive factors for faculty and preceptor interest in SL. A factorial analysis was conducted to capture which values accurately predict an interest in SL; these predictive factors were analyzed using *t*-test analysis and chi square analysis, depending on the sample size and level of measurement for the independent variables (SAS, Cary, NC). Chi square and *t*-test analysis were also used to assess select demographic variables as predictive factors for an interest in SL. For statistical comparisons, the *p*-value was set at 0.05.

## Results

### *Response rate*

A total of 193 individuals responded to the survey (response rate of 16%, assuming all individuals on the listserv received the invite). The demographic information of the participants is summarized in [Table 1](#).

### *Current involvement and understanding of SL*

Overall, more than half of the respondents (57%) did not feel comfortable defining service learning on their own ([Table 2](#)). Similarly, 42% reported that they currently offer SL to their students. Participants that offered SL opportunities were asked how many years they had offered SL activities and in what setting those activities are performed ([Table 2](#)). Additional questions were asked to gauge participants' involvement with various community service activities ([Table 2](#)). For non-SL activities, the specific community activities are displayed in [Figures 1 and 2](#). Overall participants engaged in more non-pharmacy-related community service than service related to pharmacy activities, with the most commonly reported

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