

Fostering Service-Learning and Leadership Development through First-Year Seminar Courses

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First-year seminar (FYS) courses are a high-impact practice that has received considerable attention from higher education scholars and practitioners. Extensive research has already demonstrated their potency for promoting student success across different institutional types, mainly with respect to students' academic performance, retention, and graduation (Cambridge-Williams 2013; Garza & Bowden, 2014; Karp et al., 2017; Swanson et al., 2017; Vaughan et al., 2014). However, most studies in this domain focused solely on the seminar effects, while less attention has been devoted to its intersection with other high-impact practices or other student success initiatives. In 2006, George Kuh and American Association of University Professors (AAUP) identified 10 high impact practices (HIP) and defined them as teaching and learning practices that have been proven to advance academic success of college students of all demographic backgrounds, thus helping educators to not only improve their retention rates but also narrow the achievement gap. Highlighting individual and collective benefits of these practices, Kuh (2006) particularly recommended that colleges and universities ensure that students participate in at least two HIPs simultaneously as that would significantly improve their persistence and heightened achievement on learning outcomes. Still, despite the extensive research on the benefits of individual high-impact practices, there remains a paucity of empirical evidence regarding the ways in which universities can combine two or more HIPs for heightened outcomes.

ABSTRACT

This research presents a model for implementing and assessing a service-learning first-year seminar course and living community. The study investigated students' attitudes and perceived benefits of the three aspects of their first-year program experience - community service participation, servant-leadership development, and living community participation. The results report on the four cohorts of program participants (n=233) identifying the differences in their attitudes and perceptions and investigating the correlation between the three program areas. This study bridges the rich but isolated knowledge on first-year seminars and service learning by examining the opportunities for students to participate in both high-impact practices simultaneously.

At the same time, contemporary literature has demonstrated a growing interest in service-learning as one of the 10 HIPs and has increasingly been focusing on its role in improving student success and retention. The synthesis of recent work in this domain shows rich evidence of the effects of service-learning on undergraduate students' cognitive, behavioral, emotional, and social engagement outcomes (Simonet, 2008). Specifically, participation in service-learning has been linked with students' improved ability to (a) apply the learning content in real-life and problem-solving situations (cognitive outcomes), (b) participate in other types of community engagement or collaborate with their peers (behavioral outcomes), (c) take active control of their learning process and improve their attitudes and motivation for learning (emotional outcomes), and (d) develop interpersonal relationships in and out of the classroom (social outcomes). Still, comparable to the critique of the research on FYS courses, very few studies have sought to assess the potential models for combining service-learning with other high-impact practices. The scarce interest in this domain has mainly been devoted to exploring the benefits of combining service-learning with internships, study abroad, and undergraduate research (Bringle, 2017).

To overcome these limitations and to provide novel insights into combining and maximizing the effects of two HIPs – first-year seminars and service-learning, this study examined a service-learning FYS program and the living community at a large public research university in the south. Specifically, this research investigated students' attitudes and perceived benefits of the three aspects of their first-year program experience: (a) service-learning, (b) leadership development, and (c) living community participation. The following research questions guided this study:

1. Is there a difference in students' attitudes and perceived benefits of the three aspects of their program experience based on gender, first-generation status, and academic level?
2. Is there a relationship between the three aspects of students' program experience?
3. What recommendations emerge for improving students' experiences and increasing student engagement in the three program areas?

Literature Review

Efforts in supporting first-year students' transition, progression, and retention have been growing both nationally and internationally. In defining the term "first-year experience", Koch and Gardner (2006) emphasized the urgency of moving beyond a single program or initiative and coordinating curricular and co-curricular efforts in supporting students in achieving a holistic first-year experience. In applying this recommendation, colleges and universities are continuously piloting and merging innovative orientation, transition, and academic programs to retain this vulnerable student group and secure their uninterrupted progress to the second year. Among these efforts, first-year academic advising, orientation programs, and first-year seminars remain the most prominent. According to the 2017 national survey of first-year experience, 80% of institutions reported relying on first year advising, 79% on early alert systems, 75% on pre-term orientation, and 73% on first-year seminar courses (National

Resource Center for First-Year Experience and Students in Transition [NRCFYEST], 2017).

On the other hand, non-academic programs, such as leadership development and community engagement seem to be among the less common first-year experience initiatives. Specifically, leadership programs for first-year students were offered by 35% of institutions, service-learning by 32%, and experiential learning by 31%. This supremacy of first-year seminars over community engagement and leadership programs may partially be justified by the fact that nearly 50% of all FYS offered nationally solely focus on the development of students' academic and study skills, thus directly supporting the institutional retention goals (NRCFYEST, 2017). Still, the under-utilization of service-learning and community-based learning as a high-impact practice during the students' first year of college raises critical concerns when considering its research-proven effects on promoting student retention and other academic outcomes.

First-Year Seminars

As a high-impact practice, first-year seminars have been defined as courses that place a strong focus on critical inquiry, information literacy and writing, collaborative learning, and development of academic skills (Kuh, 2006). As one of the most prominent HIPs in higher education, first-year seminars are represented in wide range of formats (size, credit value), curricula (academic, transitional, thematic), and requirements (general education courses, electives). A considerable amount of literature has been published on the potency of first-year seminars to improve students' GPA, retention, and graduation rates. With respect to retention, this high-impact practice has been positively associated with students' progression to the second semester (Karp et al., 2017; Vaughan et al., 2014) and second year (Cambridge-Williams 2013; Garza & Bowden, 2014). Positive correlation has also been noted for students' first-semester GPA (Garza & Bowden, 2014; Karp et al., 2017; Swanson et al., 2017; Vaughan et al., 2014) and improved graduation rates (Cambridge-Williams 2013).

Other academic benefits of FYS courses include facilitating student centered, contextualized, and applied learning (Karp et al., 2017), higher academic self-efficacy and self-regulated learning (Cambridge-Williams, 2013), and improved metacognition and self-regulation skills (Steiner et al., 2019). The reported non-academic outcomes of FYS are equally wide and diverse, including personal, social, and professional. Among the most notable findings, FYS courses were found to help students develop grit, tenacity, and perseverance (Olson, 2017), collaborative and group-work skills (Stebleton & Jehangir, 2016), and time management skills, motivation, and willingness to seek help or resources (Hoops & Artrip, 2016). Still, despite these promising results, much more work is needed to explore the possible models and structures for integrating first-year seminars with other HIPs to maximize student outcomes.

Service-Learning

Colleges and universities foster student community engagement through varied curricular and co-curricular programs and activities. The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (n.d.) defines community engagement as "the collaboration between higher education institutions and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a

context of partnership and reciprocity". This collaboration can be implemented through many different programs and initiatives, such as service-learning, volunteering, community-based learning, and other community partnerships. In describing the 10 high-impact practices, Kuh (2006) defined service-learning and community-based learning as a form of field-based, experiential learning that combines partnerships with community and instruction and is most often situated within a course. The main objective of this HIP is for students to apply the course content in a real world setting and to reflect on their service experience through class assignments and activities.

The outcomes of service-learning on student success have long been a question of great interest among higher education scholars and the extensive body of literature has already recognized its benefits for students' academic and personal development. However, only a limited number of studies have explored and documented service-learning outcomes for first-year college students. With respect to student retention, Bringle et al. (2010) found that first-year students in service-learning courses were more likely to report the intentions to come back to the second year than their peers in non-service-learning sections. These results indicate that students' community engagement experiences during the first year can positively influence their attitudes toward college and satisfaction with their academic experience. In terms of academic outcomes, participation in service-learning has also been linked to students' increased confidence in pursuing their selected career. Specifically, first-year engineering students who completed service-learning courses indicated that this experience allowed them to gain valuable professional skills that are hard to obtain in a class setting, such as project management, client relationship management, and specialized engineering techniques (Scherrer et al., 2020).

Regarding non-academic outcomes for first-year students, service-learning participation has also been linked with effective and professional communication, cultural competence, and increased awareness of service-providing agencies in the community (Kearney, 2013). Still, comparable to the research on FYS courses, the effects of combining service-learning with another high-impact practice in the same setting and for the same group of students remain understudied. Bringle (2017) was among the few authors to examine the so-called "hybrid high-impact pedagogies" or intentional integration of two or more high-impact practices. Synthesizing the research on the integration of service-learning with one of the three HIPs – study abroad, undergraduate research, and internships, Bringle hypothesized its potential to produce stronger, broader, more enduring, and deeper learning outcomes. However, the potential benefits of embedding service-learning within one of the most widely utilized high-impact practices – first-year seminars, still warrants an adequate scholarly focus.

Leadership Development

Investigating how students develop leadership skills while in college has been the subject of many studies in the field of higher education. However, a search of the literature in this realm revealed only a few studies that examined how first-year college students grow as leaders. Portraying the perceptions of 4,292 students from 22 institutions, Wielkiewicz et al. (2012) discovered that while first-year students think very highly of their leadership abilities, such beliefs are quite unsophisticated and demonstrate limited understanding about the nature of leadership. This finding was

corroborated by Shehane et al. (2012) who confirmed the complex nature of first-year students' leadership perceptions. While Wielkiewicz et al. (2012) correlated students' self-ratings of their leadership abilities with the number of activities in which they engaged, Shehane et al. (2012) noted several internal and external factors that influenced students' perceptions of leadership. These included positional versus non-positional leadership roles within organizations and the impact of external role models, such as teachers and family members on their understanding of leadership.

In advancing this line of inquiry, some scholars specifically examined the relationship between first-year students' leadership development and off-campus work. In a national study of 2,931 first-year students from 19 institutions, Salisbury et al. (2012) demonstrated that, after accounting for students' precollege characteristics and college engagement, off campus work had a significant positive effect on leadership development of working students compared to their non-working peers, while on campus work had almost no impact. This finding is of particular importance for the current study which aimed to examine the self-perceived effects of off-campus work (in the form of mandatory service) on students' servant leadership development. Lastly, with respect to servant leadership, no studies were found that examined the development of this leadership style among first-year college students but a recent study by Ji and Yoon (2021) shed light on the positive effects that servant-leadership can have on students' self-efficacy. Specifically, leading students through service and dedication allowed them to fulfill their potential and accept responsibility for their actions, thus positively affecting their self-efficacy. In the attempt to advance the literature in the domains of first-year seminars, service-learning, and leadership development, this study investigated the attitudes and experiences of students who participated in a unique service-learning FYS course. Housed within a living-community and guided by the leadership development curriculum, this first-year seminar program offered a distinctive opportunity to examine students' perceptions about multiple program aspects simultaneously (and about multiple high-impact practices students participated in).

Methods

This study was designed as non-experimental descriptive research which aims to "make careful descriptions of educational phenomena" in the real-life setting (Gall et al., 2006, p. 290). In the context of this study, the educational phenomenon was defined as students' experience in the first-year seminar and service-learning program. Specifically, this descriptive study utilized survey research design due to its suitability to solicit participants' opinions, attitudes, and practices (Gall et al., 2006). Conducted at one point of time, this study aimed to capture and compare the attitudes among student participants of different academic levels and in different stages of the program participation.

Research Setting

This study was conducted at a large, research-intensive, public university in the south and assesses the model of its first-year seminar program that incorporates a service-learning component. Each year, the program funds 80 four-year scholarships for high-school seniors in the state who demonstrate leadership skills, who are exemplary students, who are involved in their communities, and who need financial assistance to pursue higher education at the university. The program consists of three components.

First, all students are required to take 3-credit hour first-year seminar course in the fall of their freshman year. The course is a continuation of their introduction to the university, orients students to faculty and staff from around campus, and provides opportunities for practicing effective study, writing, and discussion skills, and helps students form peer connections. The major curricular focus of the seminar is servant leadership. Utilizing Robert Greenleaf's (1970) framework, students learn and practice 10 servant leadership characteristics: listening, awareness, empathy, healing, persuasion, foresight, building community, conceptualization, stewardship, and commitment to the growth of people.

The second program component is service-learning which requires all students to volunteer in the local community for at least 10 hours per semester, over the course of four years. This element allows students to practice servant leadership content learned in class in their service sites. The third component, living-community, requires that all students in the program live in the same residence hall during their first year. This unique living-learning community allows students to get to know others and helps with the transition away from home and into college.

Data Sources and Sample

The data used for this study are a part of the larger dataset gathered in 2020 by the program staff. Only the portion of the dataset relevant to the research questions was utilized and reported in this study. The dataset was collected on the sample of four cohorts or 233 undergraduate students who participated in the program between 2016 and 2019. The survey was distributed in January 2020 via email to 323 students for a 72% response rate. Data analysis included only the responses of students who completed 90% or more of the questionnaire and missing data were excluded from the analysis. The survey included demographic questions about students' academic level, gender, and first-generation status and multiple sets of Likert scale questions of which three assessed experiences related to service-learning participation, servant-leadership development, and living community participation. Additionally, for each set of Likert-scale questions, students were asked to share open-response comments about their program experience, as well as recommendations for improvement.

Results

Qualitative Findings

The demographic profile of students who participated in this study is presented in Table 1 to illustrate their academic level, gender, and first-generation student status. As

noted, there was a higher representation of freshman students, female students, and non-first generation students among the survey respondents.

Table 1
Participants' Demographics (n=233)

		n	%
Academic Level	Freshman	73	31.3
	Sophomore	57	24.5
	Junior	50	21.5
	Senior	53	22.7
Gender	Male	52	22.3
	Female	181	77.7
	Other	0	0
Fist-generation	No	157	67.4
	Yes	74	31.8
	Uncertain	2	0.8

A descriptive analysis was conducted to depict students' attitudes and behaviors toward the three program areas – service-learning participation, servant-leadership development, and living community participation. For each program area, students completed a series of eight questions asking them to evaluate its impact on their academic coursework, connectedness to the university, improved self-confidence, development of leadership skills, development of social networks, understanding of other people, and overall college experience. Table 2 presents means and standard deviations for each program area which were calculated using a cumulative sum variable for each area. As illustrated, the program area students perceived as most beneficial was servant-leadership development, followed by service-learning, and living community participation.

Table 2
Students' Overall Ratings of The Program

Program Aspect	N	M	SD
Service-learning	230	2.70	.345
Servant-leadership development	231	2.87	.270
Living community participation	228	2.69	.432

To test for the differences in students' attitudes about the three aspects of the program experience based on their gender and first-generation status, independent samples t-tests were conducted. The dependent variable was students' attitudes toward the program experience rated on a scale 1–5, with 1 having the lowest impact and 5

being the highest. Independent variables were students' first-generation status ("yes" or "no") and students' gender (all recorded responses were either "male" or "female", no students selected "other"). The analysis revealed no statistically significant differences between the attitudes of first-generation students toward their experience with service-learning participation ($t=.539$, $p>0.5$), servant leadership development ($t=1.634$, $p>0.5$), and living-community participation ($t=-.574$, $p>0.5$) compared to their non-first-generation peers. Similarly, there were no statistically significant differences between male students' rankings of their service-learning participation ($t=-1.066$, $p>0.5$), servant leadership development ($t=-.025$, $p>0.5$), and living-community participation ($t=.1.675$, $p>0.5$) compared to female program participants.

To test for the differences in students' attitudes toward the three aspects of the program based on their academic level (freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior), Welch test was conducted as an alternative to one-way analysis of variance ANOVA as the assumption of the homogeneity of variance was violated (Field, 2013). Welch test revealed statistically significant differences in students' ratings of all three aspects of the program experience based on their academic level – service-learning ($F_{3, 112.63} = 5.514$, $p<0.005$), servant-leadership development ($F_{3, 106.17} = 2.991$, $p<0.05$), and living-community participation ($F_{3, 113.87} = 4.772$, $p<0.005$).

Due to unequal sample sizes of students from the four academic levels, Games-Howell post hoc test was conducted (Field, 2013) to uncover specific differences between the four groups – freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior. Games-Howell test revealed that first-year students' ratings of the perceived benefits of service-learning ($M=2.81$, $SD=.235$) were significantly higher than the ratings of both sophomores ($M=2.59$, $SD=.415$, $p<.005$) and juniors ($M=2.62$, $SD=.409$, $p<.05$) but not seniors ($M=2.73$, $SD=.275$, $p>.05$). Next, first-year students' ratings the perceived benefits of servant leadership development ($M=2.93$, $SD=.139$) were significantly higher than those of sophomores ($M=2.79$, $SD=.373$, $p<.05$), but not juniors ($M=2.85$, $SD=.294$, $p>.05$) and seniors ($M=2.89$, $SD=.234$, $p>.05$). Lastly, first year students rated the benefits of the living-community participation ($M=2.82$, $SD=.330$) significantly higher than sophomores ($M=2.56$, $SD=.491$, $p<.005$), but not juniors ($M=2.67$, $SD=.447$, $p>.05$) and seniors ($M=2.67$, $SD=.437$, $p>.05$).

Lastly, Kendall's tau analysis was conducted to test for the relationship between the three program areas. As presented in Table 3, the results revealed positive correlation between students' community service participation, living community participation, and servant-leadership development.

Table 3
The Relationship Between Program Elements

Variable	Kendal τ Coefficient		
	1	2	3
1 Service-learning participation	1	.453**	.442**
2 Servant leadership development		1	.377**
3 Living community participation			1

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Qualitative Findings

For each program area, students were asked to share open-response comments about their experience, specific benefits or challenges they encountered, and recommendations for improvement. The open-response comments were analyzed using NVivo software and thematic data analysis.

With respect to service-learning participation, students identified several areas in which this experience helped them grow. These included increased awareness and understanding of others, building connections with peers and community members, applying the knowledge obtained in their academic programs, practical engagement in their areas of study, as well as major-exploration or professional preparation. Students' personal growth was mainly discussed through the lenses of growing as leaders, but also in terms of developing transferable and technical skills. The opportunity to select their research site emerged as an important and valuable aspect of their experience. Additionally, students identified the main challenges and barriers to community service participation as time management (balancing service-learning requirements with curricular and co-curricular responsibilities), transportation (some students did not own vehicles and had to rely on carpool), and feeling not needed at their service sites (when there was no work for them to do).

Regarding their leadership development, students overwhelmingly expressed increased understanding and appreciation for servant leadership. This theme included not only learning about the traits and characteristics of servant leadership and defining oneself as a servant leader, but also clarifying misconceptions about this leadership style and recognizing and appreciating others who lead by example. Closely related was the theme of students' increased appreciation for servant leadership and its long-term use in the community and beyond. In terms of the perceived benefits, students shared that, by growing as servant leaders, they grew as individuals, developed many transferable skills, and discovered opportunities for improving their personal, academic, and professional lives. Not surprisingly, many students reported their intent to continue practicing servant leadership beyond their academic careers, both in personal lives and professional careers. Among the three program areas, servant leadership development was the one for which students had least recommendations for improvement as they were, overall, very satisfied, and very grateful for this experience. Only three open-ended responses contained the critique of this program element highlighting the time-

consuming nature of the service-learning component, the additional 3-credit requirement that does not count toward one's major, and the reported loss of servant-leadership skills upon the course completion.

With connection to the third program area, living-community participation, students reported that this experience greatly aided their college transition by helping them establish sense of belonging and develop relationships. Additionally, many students reported academic benefits of participating in the living community which were reflected through being held accountable and encouraged by peers, being surrounded by academically successful peers who served as role models, and improving their study habits. The reported areas of personal growth due to being part of the living community included understanding different perspectives, appreciating diversity, developing empathy, social skills, and conflict resolution skills, and better relating to others. Or, as one student noted – becoming “a better student, a better friend, and a better person”. The recommendations for improving living community experience mainly focused on physical spaces such as cleanliness and maintenance of common areas by residents, busy laundry, and shared bathrooms. In terms of improving the impact of the living community experience, some students reported their floors to be “too social” or “too loud”, while others commented that their busy schedules and inability to attend floor events left them feeling isolated. One student reported that living in a resident hall negatively impacted their mental health and expressed the desire for this aspect of the program to be optional for students with proper documentation.

Overall, qualitative data confirmed quantitative findings illustrating high student satisfaction with the three program areas. Additionally, students' open-response narratives shed more light into the ways in which specific benefits of each area were manifested. As presented, each program element had multifold and long-term effects on students' academic, personal, and professional lives. While participants did not share much critique of the program or extensive recommendations for its improvement, they nonetheless provided valuable and actionable insights for how their service-learning, living community, and first-year seminar experience can be improved.

Discussion

This study was guided by three research questions that examined students' attitudes and perceived benefits of the three aspects of their first-year seminar program experience – service-learning, leadership development, and living community. Additionally, this research investigated the differences in students' attitudes toward their program experience based on gender, first-generation status, and academic level, as well as the relationship between the three program aspects and the areas for their improvement. Overall, the program area that students perceived as most beneficial for their college experience was servant-leadership development, followed by service-learning, and living community participation.

With respect to the first research question, the results revealed no significant differences in students' attitudes about the three aspects of their program experience based on gender or first-generation status. However, the data showed statistically significant differences in students' attitudes based on their academic level. First-year students more positively rated the benefits of service-learning participation than both

sophomores and juniors. Additionally, first-year students more positively rated the benefits of servant leadership development and living community participation than sophomores. Regarding the second research question, the results revealed a positive correlation between all three program areas. The third research question was answered by analyzing students' responses to open-ended survey questions and their recommendations for program improvement. The main barriers to service-learning participation were identified as time management, transportation, and lack of duties at students' service sites. The main critique of the service-learning component highlighted its time-consuming nature and the additional 3-credit requirement in students' programs of study. The recommendations for improving living community experience included resident floors being "too social" or "too loud" and the fact that students' busy schedules and inability to attend floor events left them feeling isolated.

The findings of this study are of particular interest to all first-year seminar and service-learning faculty and staff looking to initiate, improve, or assess their programs. While Kuh (2006) repeatedly recommended that campuses have every student participate in at least two high-impact educational experiences, contemporary research and practice have not yet exhausted the possibilities for integrating FYS courses with service learning. In that regard, this study presented a possible model for combining the advantages of both practices and documented program areas that students identified as most beneficial for their college transition. Additionally, utilizing the FYS model housed within a living community allowed for a holistic investigation of students' curricular, community, and social engagement. By demonstrating the correlation between the three program areas, this research provided implications for maximizing the impacts of service-learning FYSs and/or living communities.

This study also provided a possible model for implementing the recommendation of Koch and Gardner (2006) that first-year experience programs should consist of multiple elements, both curricular and co-curricular ones. As illustrated by the findings of this study, and specifically the positive correlation between students' attitudes toward the three program areas, first-year seminar courses can serve as particularly fruitful ground for promoting some of the less common first-year experience initiatives, such as leadership development and community engagement. With respect to leadership development, Wielkiewicz et al. (2012) already correlated first-year students' perceptions of their leadership abilities with the number of activities in which they engaged. The current study advanced that knowledge by correlating students' perceptions of their leadership development with their service-learning and residential experiences, indicating that positive experience with community engagement and peer connections formed in residence halls can both encourage students to grow as servant leaders and aspire this leadership style. The evidence presented in this study further helped address the limitation of the current literature on understanding the servant leadership development of first-year university students. Among the few studies that focused on this leadership style in a college setting, Ji and Yoon (2021) noted the positive effects that servant-leadership can have on students' self-efficacy, fulfilling their potential, and accepting responsibility for their actions. Similarly, rating the impact of each program area on their overall college experience, including the improved self-confidence, the participants in this study reported leadership development as the most

influential program element that enhanced their confidence, overall leadership skills, and better understanding of other people.

Of particular interest are the findings that there were no significant differences in students' attitudes about the three aspects of their program experience based on gender or first-generation status. This evidence is critical as it illustrates the program experience was perceived as equally beneficial by students of diverse identities. However, the current study did not answer why first-year students more positively rated the benefits of service-learning than both sophomores and juniors, and why they evaluated the benefits of servant leadership development more positively than sophomores. One possible explanation for this finding can be sought in some of the open-ended survey responses where students' described service-learning component as valuable but time-consuming. All students in the program continue their 10-hour service-learning requirement per semester over the course of four years. At the same time, junior and sophomore years are commonly filled with a plethora of co-curricular and extra-curricular activities which may have led to students perceiving service-learning as additional burden in their busy schedules.

As for the servant-leadership development, the possible explanation for the findings can be drawn from the fact that first-year students learn and practice this concept through the first-year seminar course and are offered structured guidance for applying the 10 characteristics of servant leadership in their service, residential, and academic sites. Once students complete the seminar, they no longer have such guidance and are expected to continue applying these concepts on their own. Overall, the differences in the perceived program benefits noted across different academic levels suggest not only the importance of establishing such programs early, but also identifying ways in which community engagement may be sustained as students' progress academically. Lastly, by identifying the areas of concern and recommendations for improving each program area, the findings of this research can be used by first-year experience staff or community engagement offices to propose new or redesign existing curricular models in a way that would lead to increased student participation and their improved experience.

Conclusion

Before applying the findings of this research, it is important to recognize its limitations. The major limitation of this study is the use of self-reported data which should be approached with caution when assessing the effectiveness of an educational practice (Gonyea, 2005). The data for this study were collected by soliciting students' self-perceived benefits of the program, as well as their recommendations for improvement. Therefore, future research should employ objective measures of student learning or development, such as estimating the impacts of the program on students' academic performance, retention, or graduation rates, as well as other behavioral and developmental outcomes.

Next, this study was conducted at a single research setting – a large research university in the South. Even though its findings captured the perceptions of four generations of program participants (2016–2019), the data were collected at one point in time and at one institution. As such, the findings of this research may not be

comparable to those generated at a different point in time and have limited generalizability to other institutional types or programs. To address this limitation, future studies should employ longitudinal research design. Specifically, this research should be replicated by soliciting students' perceptions about the program at different points in time to determine what changes may have occurred. Additionally, the program examined in this research is currently offered at three universities in the south so of particular importance would be to replicate this study at the remaining two institutions, as well as to engage in a comparative analysis and investigate possible differences in program effectiveness between these institutions.

Notwithstanding these limitations, this study illustrated the interdependence of three first-year experience programs – FYS course, service-learning, and residential experience – and confirmed their combined potency to improve students' transition, campus integration, and leadership development. This research concludes that service-learning can be used as an important mechanism for producing more civically engaged first-year students and, in doing so, promoting their academic and social engagement, and that first-year seminar courses can serve as particularly suitable ground for accomplishing this objective.

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