

# Perceptions of a Service-Learning Course to Increase Physical Activity in Rural Afterschool Programs



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## Abstract

Recently, an online service-learning course was developed where college students learned and applied techniques to promote physical activity in elementary students. The present study sought to explore students' and supervisors' perceptions of the course. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with students and supervisors from each afterschool site. Data were triangulated using students' written course reflections. Students reported positive experiences with the hybrid course format and perceived gains in knowledge regarding promotion of physical activity in children. They also reported learning about the logistical concerns of an afterschool program. Site supervisors reported mixed experiences with the undergraduate students, stating some were more engaged than others. Similarly, they reported elementary students had mixed responses in terms of engagement and enjoyment. Future research is needed to explore objective changes in physical activity from programs like this.

## Introduction

An effective method for promoting physical activity in children is by integrating physical activity into existing programming such as afterschool programs. However, afterschool programs in rural communities may not have access to the type of staff training needed to ensure optimal participation. Innovative methods are needed to train afterschool staff on how to best implement physical activity in rural settings. To address this issue, an online service-learning course was developed in a rural college for students involved in implementing physical activity in local afterschool programs. In this course, students learned methods to promote physical activity in children to maximize the amount of physical activity accumulated during physical activity time. Students then applied these methods when working in the local afterschool programs. **The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of undergraduate students and the afterschool program site supervisors after the completion of a service-learning course.**

## Methods

Interviews were conducted with undergraduate students in the service learning course (n=5) and with the site supervisors at the afterschool programs (n=2).

Additionally, students' written reflections from course assignments were used for data analysis (n=11).

Data were analyzed using the process of immersion and crystallization.

## Results

### UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS

Overall, students had a positive experience in the service-learning course. They enjoyed the online format and ability to serve as part of the course requirements.

*"It was the first actually hybrid class that I've had. I like that it was online, you didn't have to meet in class all the time. I think that our class discussions were also like, very constructive.." –Third year undergraduate student*

Additionally, students enjoyed learning about how to engage elementary students and the impact socioeconomic status (SES) has on children's health and academic outcomes.

*"Because of their situation (low SES) a lot of them haven't had a mentor to help them and support them. They don't have mentors or people that always display positive behaviors. I was able to mentor them and show them that stuff and also mentor them on physical activity and how important it is and how to do it." –Fourth year undergraduate student*

Finally, students were surprised with how much time was needed for the planning and logistical requirements of community interventions.

*"It's hard to run an afterschool program. I guess not hard, just takes a lot of time and planning. So we saw how they coordinate all of the planning, support, donors, and community members." –Fourth year undergraduate student*

## Results, cont.

### SITE SUPERVISORS

Site supervisors' perceptions of their experience with the students were mixed.

*"Yeah those students were great to have as extra help, as extra hands." –Site Supervisor*

*"A couple times where they just kind of sat and watched, just kind of sat in the background and watched. They didn't really engage or involved themselves. So while some of my staff were great, the others were not so great." –Site Supervisor*

Supervisors felt that most of their experiences with the undergraduate students were positive and they were appreciative of the students' involvement in the afterschool program; however, other students were not as engaged.

*"You know there's always a few students who always, just don't want to do what everyone else is doing. But for the most part the children enjoyed everything they offered and loved doing it." –Site Supervisor*

Supervisors also mentioned the children's responses to the activities were mixed and that children mostly preferred unstructured time.

## Conclusions

Based on our evaluation thus far we have found that the students felt positively about the format of the course. Students liked the online format of receiving information as well as the ability to put this information into action within the community. These findings align with previous research and are being used to make improvements in the course to enhance students' skills in offering engaging physical activity opportunities for children. Future research should explore the experience of the children within the program as well as to objectively determine their levels of physical activity.

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