

**COMMUNITY SERVICE IN HIGHER  
EDUCATION: EXAMINING SERVICE LEARNING  
WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF COMMUNITY-  
BASED SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE**

YÜKSEKÖĞRETİMDE TOPLUMA HİZMET:  
HİZMET ÖĞRENMEYİ TOPLUMLA  
SOSYAL HİZMET UYGULAMALARI  
BAĞLAMINDA DEĞERLENDİRMEK

Hatice ÖZTÜRK

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### ABSTRACT

The mission of the social work profession is to combat all forms of inequality and to ensure social justice when working with individuals, families, groups and society. For the realization of such a mission, the content and quality of the educational curriculum is important. In addition to a strong theoretical foundation, it is essential for social work education programs to adopt new learning models that foster global competence and professional capability, particularly those emphasizing practice-oriented learning. One such learning model is the service-learning model. In this review study, the service-learning model was evaluated in the context of social work practice with the community in order to prioritize community engagement in higher education. The study showed that the intersectionality of the service-learning model with community social work practice is important to strengthen students' knowledge, skills, and value base in the context of the field, institution, and target populations in which community service is prioritized. Understanding this intersectionality can contribute to a more integrated relationship between theory and practice, and foster internationalization, sustainability, and solidarity in higher education. Therefore, supporting the employment of social workers who are competent in these practices in universities may be an important starting point for community service in social work education.

### ÖZ

Sosyal hizmet mesleği birey, aile, grup ve toplumla çalışmada her türlü eşitsizlikle mücadeleyi ve sosyal adaletin sağlanmasını misyon edinir. Böyle bir misyonun hayata geçirilmesi için eğitim müfredatının içeriği ve kalitesi önemlidir. Teorik arka planın yanı sıra uygulamayı odağına alan sosyal hizmet eğitim müfredatlarında küresel yeterliliğin ve yetkinliğin geliştirilmesine yönelik yeni öğrenme modellerini takip etmek önemlidir. Bu öğrenme modellerinden biri de hizmet öğrenme modelidir. Bu derleme çalışmada yükseköğretimde topluma hizmeti öncelemek için "hizmet öğrenme modeli" toplumla sosyal hizmet uygulamaları bağlamında değerlendirilmiştir. Çalışma göstermiştir ki toplumla sosyal hizmet uygulamalarıyla hizmet öğrenme modelinin keşimselliği; topluma hizmetin öncelendiği alan, kurum ve hedef gruplar bağlamında öğrencilerin bilgi, beceri ve değer temelini güçlendirmek için önemlidir. Bu keşimselliği anlamak, teori ve uygulamanın bütüncül biçimde ele alınmasına katkı sağlayabilir ve yükseköğretimde uluslararasılaşma, sürdürülebilirlik ve dayanışmanın sağlanmasına öncülük edebilir. Dolayısıyla bu uygulamaları gerçekleştirme yetkinliğine sahip olan sosyal hizmet uzmanlarının üniversitelerde istihdamının desteklenmesi, topluma hizmet sağlama önemli bir başlangıç noktası olabilir.

## INTRODUCTION

The educational challenges of the 21st century for higher education institutions could be described as engagement and planning, admissions, government funding, changing curricula, reliance on technology, international students, and sustainability (Khahro & Javed, 2022). However, developing students' global competencies is crucial to ensure that no one is left behind in a rapidly changing world due to global and ecological crises (OECD, 2018; United Nations, 2023). Developing global competencies can both provide opportunities for professional development and mobilize individuals for community development. Therefore, there is an increasing need to include learning models in national education policies, and thus in educational curricula, that teach competencies such as resilience, critical thinking, collaboration, and team building to deal with global and ecological crises. Service-learning models are increasingly included in educational curricula (Choi et al., 2023; Luna Scott, 2015). Service learning, one of these learning models, consists of four components: reality, reflection, reciprocity, and responsibility (Godfrey et al., 2005). These components refer to the collaborative co-creation, design, production, and reflection experiences of students, academics, communities, and institutions (Chansema, 2023). Service learning, a pedagogical approach developed in collaboration with community organizations in social work education, enables students to develop projects aimed at ensuring human and environmental well-being (Eaton-Stull, 2024).

Service learning has been adopted by various academic disciplines, such as medicine and nursing, business and economics, computer science and information systems, social studies, teacher education, language, and environmental disciplines. This model is essential for all stakeholders such as students and academics who provide services, as well as community members and organizational staff who receive services (Salam et al., 2019). A few studies have demonstrated that service learning plays a significant role in promoting students' personal growth, civic engagement, and reflective critical thinking (Cohen & Shenaar-Golan, 2018; Hébert & Hauf, 2015; Moely & Ilustre, 2014; Salam et al., 2019; Thomas, 2019). Through

the service-learning model, students with diverse skills can experience contact with communities living in different cultures. Thus, they can develop empathy for the needs and problems of the communities. Service-learning is known to contribute to the personal and professional skills of students, as well as to the development of social skills and cultural competencies to increase social services in society and thus ensure social justice (Salam et al., 2019). Therefore, the service-learning model furnishes students of social work education with practical experience in addition to a pedagogical foundation that fosters advocacy for rights and social justice, as well as social participation (Hong et al., 2024; John, 2024). In accordance with this pedagogical foundation, students are provided with a reflective learning environment in which they interact with various groups (the elderly, children, women, people with disabilities, etc.) and their families and serve them (Hewson et al., 2024; Long & Gummelt, 2020). For instance, the findings of research undertaken in China demonstrate that the incorporation of service learning into social work education has resulted in the development of students' professional knowledge and skills, as well as positive psychological characteristics such as social responsibility, self-discipline, hope, and social relationships (Gao et al., 2025). Shanti and colleagues (2022) conducted a mosaic mural activity with social work students as part of a critical service-learning course. This activity contributed to students gaining production experience with the community, developing their collaboration and facilitation skills, and analyzing the problems faced by communities from a critical perspective (Shanti et al., 2022). In a separate study, the service-learning approach was integrated into a research course in a master's program in social work. As part of the course, students conducted interviews with individuals who had been imprisoned for drug-related crimes in rural areas. The findings of the study indicated that service-learning facilitated students' acquisition of experiential learning in working with vulnerable groups, and furthermore, enabled the development of critical thinking skills regarding the intersection of substance use and criminal justice. Furthermore, an increase in students' awareness of the intersection of research, practice, and policy was observed (Keesler & Presnell, 2022). The Supporting Older Adults

& Caregivers: Integrative Service Learning (SOCIAL) initiative was designed to promote social inclusion and address the needs of underserved communities. As part of this partnership, undergraduate social work students provided practical home-based support services for older adults with chronic illness and their family caregivers. Participation in the SOCIAL initiative not only expanded students' exposure to community health service learning but also strengthened their understanding of public health systems and their role in promoting equitable access to care (Chan et al., 2023). One such pedagogical approach in social work education is experiential philanthropy, otherwise termed student philanthropy, which is facilitated by the "learning by giving" approach. It has been demonstrated that students gain experience in needs analysis, fund distribution and resource management through roles such as "active learners, community members, and social activists" (Olberding & Kim, 2023). Through these experiences, they address community problems and develop their active learning skills. In this respect, service learning emphasizes active citizenship and social responsibility in social work education, thereby strengthening the theoretical and ethical foundations of curricula.

Service to people, and therefore to society, is an important value in the social work profession. Social work education is open to the use of current methods and techniques to meet the needs of society. Social work practice with the community, which includes interventions at the individual, family, group, and community levels, can provide an opportunity to implement the service-learning approach at the point of service to the community (Lemieux & Allen, 2007). The service-learning approach is an important model that should be used in social work practice in terms of contributing to the knowledge, skills, and value base of students and creating the opportunity to serve the community.

The service-learning approach in social work practice with community is based on collaboration between students, communities, and institutions (Campbell, 2012). In this context, higher education institutions are committed to sustaining community and institutional collaboration at global and local levels. Service-learning is important for

the realization of these commitments (Heffernan, 2001). On the other hand, the service-learning model is an effective tool for integrating sustainability into the curriculum and promoting sustainable development in higher education programs, and ensuring internationalization (Aramburuzabala & Cerrillo, 2023; Chan et al., 2021). In considering the objectives of higher education, the implementation of service-learning at an international level becomes a matter of significant importance. International service-learning in higher education institutions can be effective in exploring various practical examples, especially in the field of social work, while providing a holistic approach in economic, political, cultural, and academic terms. However, a limited number of studies (Chan et al., 2021; Crabtree, 2013; Jones & Steinberg, 2011) on the international service-learning model are available in literature. In the context, service-learning allows students to understand themselves and societies from different cultures, develop both personal and professional skills, improve the quality of education in higher education, and engage in macro practices that promote social justice and sustainability.

The present review aims to explore the importance of community service in higher education and social work practices with the community in terms of service-learning. Specifically, it examines the role of service-learning in enhancing students' professional competencies, its implications for social work practice with communities, and its influence on higher education policy. It will discuss community practice, the contributions of service learning, and its impact on higher education policy, and provides recommendations.

### **Social Work Practice with Community**

The social work profession is based on the dynamics of society, with an approach that focuses on the relationship between people and the social environment (Opačić, 2021). Understanding these dynamics is essential for identifying potential needs and problems, and therefore for planning interventions to address them (Teater, 2015). In a needs-based approach, social work focuses on addressing community members' difficulties (Healy, 2011). Social workers learn interventions at the individual, group, family, and community levels during their undergraduate education

(Thomas, 2019). Through community work, social workers can prioritize addressing structural and social inequalities that affect communities locally and globally. Therefore, they can put alliance building and community development on the agenda (Das et al., 2016).

Achieving community development as a process follows the planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of policies for the well-being of community members. For such a phase to be successful, the active participation of community members is essential. This is because community participation implies access to resources and a voice in civic governance, thereby strengthening institutions (Vareed, 2021). In this context, social workers promote participation and inclusion in the fight against inequalities due to the nature of the profession. In social work, macro practice is effective in transforming economic, political, and social structures and reducing inequalities (Payne, 2020, p. 295). Macro practice can also be expressed as a collective and collaborative social work method that aims for purposeful and planned change (Reisch, 2016). The growing discourse on community development in the international arena and the need for sustainability highlight the importance of working with communities in social work education (IASSW, 2020; Lynch, 2020). In this context, changing social, economic, and political conditions highlight the need for new pedagogical approaches in social work education (Forde et al., 2021). Therefore, social work education is a method of practice that focuses on the well-being of individuals, families, and communities and includes interventions at many levels. These practices support community-based work by prioritizing service to the community.

The practice of social work with communities enables the identification of community needs in line with goals such as equality of opportunity, justice, participation, and community development, as well as the multidimensional analysis of social problems (Buz & Uslu, 2019; Keçeci, 2017). Such an analysis requires historical and cultural background information about communities, as well as a knowledge base about community dynamics and structure. Therefore, the knowledge base in social work education is very important for social work practice in communities (George, 2016). The knowledge base that students have

in these practices requires them to be more sensitive to the clients they are obligated to serve and to be able to competently create solutions to their problems (Maccio & Voorhies, 2012). Additionally, through these practices, students are able to advocate for clients and engage in social action and community organizing (Keçeci, 2017).

Social work practice with community is a macro practice that includes skills related to community organizing and development, social planning, social action, and community management (Hardcastle et al., 2004). As a learning experience, community social work practice can provide education and training activities for students while providing service to the community through outreach activities (Jennings, 2001). In social work education, the goal is to create an experiential learning environment where students can transform their knowledge levels into practice-based skills through social work practice with the community. In this way, it is important to integrate the knowledge, skills, and values at the foundation of social work education in theory and practice (Robinson et al., 2020). Some studies show that with community social work practices, students have the opportunity to transfer the theoretical knowledge they have learned to experience, gain reflective critical thinking skills, and thus have a more comprehensive perspective (Cohen & Shenaar-Golan, 2018; Thomas, 2019). In addition, these practices provide important benefits in civic engagement, building relationships based on collaboration and equality, collective empowerment, and social change in fulfilling the profession's mission to achieve social justice (Knight & Gitterman, 2018).

### **Service Learning and Social Work Practice with the Community: Knowledge, Skills and Value Base**

The knowledge base in social work practice is informed by various approaches such as systems theory and organizations, social learning theory, reality construction, social exchange theory and power, interorganizational theory, conflict theory, social capital, motivation theory, ecology theory, critical theory, feminist social theory, and chaos theory (Hardcastle et al., 2004). Within this knowledge base, skills such as “relationship building and partnership work, pre-assessment, research and evaluation, group work, negotiation, communication, mentoring,

organizing, sourcing, record keeping, and report writing” are used in practice (Teater, 2015). In terms of values, students are expected to put into practice values such as “cultural diversity, social justice, equality, critical consciousness, mutual learning, and self-determination” (Hardina, 2002, p. 39). There are also some principles to consider when working with the community. These principles can be expressed as “interdependence, empowerment, reciprocity, partnership and mutuality in work, civic and community participation, human rights, and social justice” (Gamble & Weil, 2010).

Theoretical education and practice/field education in undergraduate education play an important role in the acquisition of both traditional and emancipatory values, such as service, social justice, dignity and worth of the individual, importance of human relationships, honesty and reliability, and competence in the discipline of social work. Practicum/field education and service learning are usually confused with each other (Maccio & Voorhies, 2012). Service learning in social work focuses on the needs and problems of society (Lemieux & Allen, 2007). Practicum/field education is an important stage of the student’s undergraduate education and refers to the process by which knowledge is transformed into skills and supported by values. This process is designed to help students achieve specific learning goals. Service learning can be defined as a pedagogical approach that is applied to course content and involves self-reflection.

Social work practice with the community for service learning can be described as a model in which students transform their knowledge, skills, and value base into service to the community (Petracchi et al., 2016). The service-learning model is known to contribute to students’ personal and academic development through community engagement, quantitative reasoning, and citizenship (Regina & Ferrara, 2017). Furthermore, service learning facilitates the development of students’ awareness of others’ needs and their understanding of diversity (Hébert & Hauf, 2015). On the other hand, service learning allows universities and communities to work together. In this regard, the service-learning model can be expressed as an added value based on mutual trust and cooperation (Campbell, 2012) and an approach to teaching and learning

experienced through such service (Singleton, 2007; Maccio & Voorhies, 2012).

There are very few studies that address social work practice in terms of service learning (Campbell, 2012; Maccio, 2011; Maccio & Voorhies, 2012; Mulroy, 2009; Scott, 2008; Singleton, 2007). Campbell (2012) showed that the service-learning approach can be examined in seven stages: “defining civic engagement for the setting, establishing the community partnership, planning course assignments, implementing the project, ongoing monitoring, evaluation and reflection, and feedback from the community partner” (Campbell, 2012). Service learning helps students recognize the community in which they live, identify community needs, and connect resources and services to the community (Aramburuzabala & Cerrillo, 2023). Mobilizing resources and building relationships between institutions develops students’ practical skills.

The service-learning model can also be used in the field of gerontological social work. Singleton (2007) determined that students learned networking and community participation through the service-learning model, leading to an increase in students’ knowledge and experience regarding organizational structures in the field of gerontology. The service-learning model, which is open to diversity and inclusion, especially for institutions that provide services to vulnerable groups in society, can fill an important gap in this context. In addition to providing students with gains at the personal, social and institutional levels, service learning can also enable them to have a broad knowledge of the context of the target audience and local and global problems (Maccio & Voorhies, 2012). Students participating in service learning may have the opportunity to develop practical skills such as creativity and team-work to help oppressed groups. Therefore, this model has proven to be important in working with disadvantaged groups and ensuring community participation (Maccio, 2011). In the study of Folgueiras et al. (2020), who used this model, it was found that skills such as “teamwork, ethical commitment, adapting to new situations and problem-solving” gained by students; students’ community service activities have been found to promote solidarity, social justice, and inclusive citizenship (Folgueiras et al., 2020).

The service-learning model can also contribute to the development of students' research skills in the practice of social work with the community. In a study conducted by Postlethwait (2012), a service-learning approach was used in a research seminar course at the undergraduate level in social work. In the study, the service-learning approach increased students' awareness of the importance of research in social work as they worked with community organizations. In addition, students' motivation towards the course content and research skills increased (Postlethwait, 2012). Scientific research is important for social workers' evidence-based practice for effective interventions (Social Work Policy Institute, 2010). In this regard, it is an important requirement for social workers to be able to conduct research on the field of service as a good researcher and to have the skills to evaluate the field in which they work and the institutions where services related to this field are provided.

### **Social Work Practice with the Community for Community Service in Higher Education Policy**

Efforts are currently underway in many countries to expand the service-learning model in higher education institutions, focusing on the needs of students, institutions, and society. This is because the service-learning model not only fulfills curricular objectives but also supports community service and thus community development (Khiatani et al., 20, 23; Regina & Ferrara, 2017; Rosing et al., 2010). As a tool for community development, education has a mission to unlock the potential of individuals (Öz & Karabay, 2022). By focusing on this mission, the policies and goals of higher education prioritize students' self-knowledge, gaining control over their own lives and thus gaining self-esteem, and completing the developmental processes expected of them at the professional level (Delors, 2013). Therefore, in social, cultural, economic, and political contexts, university students can have knowledge about the strengths and weaknesses of the society in which they live. Students who know themselves and society can learn the importance of the culture of coexistence in society by becoming aware of the diversity and inequalities in different societies. Such awareness can only be achieved if students serve the community as active citizens, taking a leading role in community development.

For community development, there is a need to improve knowledge and skills in higher education, increase participation and thus strengthen local capacity (Sugawara, 2022; Sugawara et al., 2023). In community development as a component of social work, issues such as increasing literacy levels in societies, creating employment opportunities, gender equality and supporting the well-being of vulnerable groups come to the fore. Throughout the social work education process, academics and practitioners in the field utilize various learning methods and practices to develop students' skills in working with the community by focusing on the needs of local communities (Dhavaleshwar, 2016). Social work practices with community and service-learning approach can be mentioned as some of them. The practices provide students with the opportunity to make field observations to become aware of inequalities and diversity. Students can be part of the solution of local, regional and global problems thanks to the knowledge, skills and value base they acquire during their community social work practices throughout higher education.

Social work practices with community are important for responding to the changing needs of individuals, groups and communities in various contexts and for building more just communities (Naasko, 2022). In addition to professional gains, these practices focus on the needs and problems of communities and are important for creating macro-scale intervention plans. The service-learning model provides students with perspectives on various issues (diversity, social responsibility, intercultural competence, leadership, problem solving) during practice. Therefore, it can be utilized to enhance the efficacy of intervention plans (Chan et al., 2021; Eyler et al., 2001; Folgueiras et al., 2020; Geller et al., 2016; Gross & Maloney, 2012; Hébert & Hauf, 2015; Olberding & Hacker, 2016; Salam et al., 2019; Wiersma-Mosley & Garrison, 2022). Such a perspective contributes to students' personal, social and professional development. In addition, students can develop awareness about community service (Regina & Ferrara, 2017).

The use of the service-learning model in social work practices with the community enables students working with vulnerable groups from different cultures to have a

vision, dream and drive for change in terms of coexistence, social change, solidarity and community development (Regina & Ferrara, 2017). A practice in which students can integrate their knowledge, skills and value base undoubtedly enables effective interventions to be realized. Therefore, it is important that social workers employed in higher education institutions adopt such an approach in their interventions.

Social workers working in higher education institutions can provide individual psychosocial support to students as well as lead social change by focusing on social problems. At this point, social workers can use the role of “educator” in researching, planning and developing knowledge on a particular subject, and “counselor” in encouraging critical thinking, creativity and practice. They can also take the role of “facilitator” in discussions, “advocate” in working with vulnerable groups and embracing cultural diversity, and “case manager” in assessing emotional and psychosocial problems that students may face and establishing connections with individuals and institutions. In addition to these roles, they can also perform professional roles such as community manager and administrator. Social workers also have professional roles such as human services management, social welfare policy analysis, community organizing and development, and social research (Dhavaleshwar, 2016; National Association of Social Workers, 2011). As part of these professional roles, social workers improve the socioeconomic conditions of societies, increase their quality of life, and thus contribute to community development (Dhavaleshwar, 2016). The service-learning approach gives social workers the advantage of having cultural competence, diversity, and a critical perspective in addressing cases and community needs. It also aims to provide global competencies that can reduce inequalities, establish social justice, and enable advocacy in the provision of services to vulnerable groups in society.

Social workers can develop intervention plans in micro, mezzo, and macro dimensions by focusing on community service at all levels, including individual, group, and family. In developing these intervention plans, they also focus on understanding communities and interact with communities by analyzing the power structures in society

(Vareed, 2021). Implementation is an important component of higher education policy development. Social workers who have a foundation in practice can create agendas that are in line with current needs and issues, and participate in policy development processes. Therefore, with a service-learning perspective, social workers can lead universities in achieving higher education policies and goals as well as providing service to society.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The requirements of the changing and transforming digital age have had a significant impact on the field of education and, thus, on learning models. Qualification requirements in higher education institutions have brought opportunities and challenges for countries in terms of community development and sustainability. More than ever before, working with the community has emphasized the need for collective well-being and solidarity. In this respect, social work practice with individuals, families, groups, and communities has played a critical role in social justice, ecosocial perspectives, and the fight against inequalities. These practices contribute not only to the personal and professional development of students in higher education, but also to community development. In this context, the knowledge, skills, and value base provided by social work practices with the community can support service learning. In addition, service learning allows for a holistic assessment and intervention plan by prioritizing self-reflection in social work practice with community. By incorporating the service-learning approach into education, practice, and research in various social work specializations, students can be encouraged to put their knowledge, skills, and values into practice and to advocate for the development of local and global communities by developing their global competencies. Therefore, it may be advisable for social work academics to integrate the service-learning model into their undergraduate and graduate education curricula. Moreover, given the roles and functions of social workers, it is vital that they are employed in higher education institutions. Social workers employed at institutions of higher education have the capacity to raise awareness among students regarding available services. This can be achieved by facilitating the practical experience of students in human

services organizations that cater to various disadvantaged populations through a service-learning approach.

Future research requires the measurement of the impact of national or international service-learning models. A potential avenue for exploration could involve the examination of the impact of service-learning models on concepts such as solidarity, sustainable living, internationalization, and social development. In addition, within the broader context of internationalization, a significant component of the higher education agenda, the potential impact of the international service-learning model on students warrants exploration.

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