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Evaluating Experiential Teaching Methods in a Policy Practice Course: The Case for Service Learning to Increase Political Participation

[Cynthia J. Rocha](#)

This study compares the effects of experiential learning on policy-related values, competency, and activity levels of two groups of recent MSW graduates from one university. The study group received experiential service learning in the MSW program, primarily in an advanced policy course, while the comparison group did not. The author explains experiential teaching and service learning methods, as well the activities included in the policy course. Results indicate that both groups placed a high value on political skills. However, the experiential group was significantly more likely to perceive themselves as competent policy practitioners and to perform policy-related activities after graduation.

Communicating the goal of social justice as part of both the social work code of ethics and the profession's person-in-environment perspective has been a challenge for social work educators in the classroom. As Gordon (1994) points out, by not taking a leadership role in the formulation and implementation of policies that affect our clients, social work's person-in-environment perspective is largely missing from social welfare programs and services. Teaching students policy practice methods and skills is thus a "necessary means to the implementation of the neglected goal of social justice" (Figueira-McDonough, 1993, p. 180).

Although many in the profession have disagreed about what constitutes policy practice, there is general agreement that social workers must begin to assume policy roles and learn to perceive policy practice as among the skills of a practicing social worker and not simply the purview of a policy expert (Gordon, 1994; Jansson, 1999; Wyers, 1991). As Gordon notes, "students generally see policy skills and policy

courses as peripheral to their interests" (p. 165). In an attempt to provide a working definition of policy practice that integrates several of the models in the literature, Wyers (1991) states that "requisite to policy practice behavior is the requirement that direct service practitioners understand and analyze the effect of extant social policy on clients and participate in the modification of social policy that is harmful to clients and in the elimination of policy deficits by working for new policy" (p. 246). Although social workers have been ambivalent about their role in the political process, their political involvement increased after the Reagan years (Ezell, 1993). Even so, most students do not enter programs of social work interested in politics or policy (Wolk, Pray, Weismiller, & Dempsey, 1996). In response to these issues, several textbooks describing the role of social workers in policy practice and the integration of practice and policy in the classroom have been published (Haynes & Mickelson, 1991; Jansson, 1994; McInnis-Dittrich, 1994; Specht & Courtney, 1994). This has also prompted educators to move beyond simply discussing policy practice in the classroom to moving students out into the community to participate in aspects of policy practice as part of their educational experience.

Service Learning as a Method to Increase Democratic Participation

Service learning, a specific type of experiential learning, requires students to participate in a service activity that meets community needs and allows students to reflect on their service to gain further understanding of course content. Service learning also enhances a sense of civic responsibility and increases citizen participation in a democratic society (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996). Although democratic citizenship requires that individuals work to create, evaluate, criticize, and change public policy, public apathy and distrust and contempt toward government have reached unprecedented proportions (Astin, 1997; Kahne & Westheimer, 1996). Given these issues, a growing body of literature regarding service learning as a method to increase democratic participation is developing in a variety of disciplines, including departments of English, psychology, and political science, schools of medicine, and social work programs (Barber & Battistoni, 1993; Eckenfels, 1997; Leeds, 1996; Novak & Goodman, 1997).

Increasing citizen participation through service learning is a natural fit for social work education. Social work's use of field placements, code of ethics, and Council on Social Work Education accreditation standards requiring course content on policy all reflect the profession's commitment to students developing an understanding of one's place in the environment and the political and structural aspects of how that environment affects clients. Becoming involved in political activity, however, is not a requirement in most field practicum experience—even if anecdotal evidence exists that students are more likely to become involved in political activity if they have had

some sort of active participation while in school (Wolk et al., 1996).

Evidence on service learning's effectiveness is scarce, especially with regard to its effect on political participation after students graduate. The exploratory study reported here presents data on how service learning affect political participation. Using information from a service learning-based policy practice course in one MSW program between spring 1995 and summer 1996, the author asked the following questions: Do political activities of social work students increase after community-based service learning methods are implemented compared to students in traditional classes? Furthermore, are students who take an experientially-based class more likely than other students to get involved in policy practice activities after graduation?

Research on the Effectiveness of Experiential Teaching Techniques

Social work programs are now developing educational techniques that use active learning methods to teach policy practice, social action, and community practice. However, evaluation of these attempts is still in its infancy. Most publications outlining experiential policy practice teaching methods and courses either have no evaluation component, or use student evaluations as a first step in analysis. For example, Johnson (1994) used policy practice methods to teach students the task force approach. Johnson's review identifies a task force approach as a time-limited, action-oriented group doing policy development work. While most of the work took place in the classroom, students were required to visit service organizations and interview key stakeholders during the information gathering phase. Evaluation consisted of papers in which students critiqued their experience and discussed what they learned. Rocha and Johnson (1997) designed a major assignment in their advanced policy course requiring students to implement a policy change intervention strategy at the community or state level. They used both course evaluations and a "critical reflection" component in their final project report to evaluate the quality of the experience for the students—how time consuming students felt the project was, and what students had learned from the experience. Powell and Causby (1994) took the evaluation approach a step further with their "Legislative Advocacy Day" project. Students wrote position papers and visited legislators. Some students testified before select committees. At the end of the course students filled out a seven-page, open-ended questionnaire exploring their feelings about the project and assessing their learning. Students reported feeling empowered and that they had made a difference. Students also reported that the experience helped bridge the gap between policy and practice.

Other more systematic attempts to assess service learning outcomes include pre- and post-test evaluations of students' attitudes and their stated commitment to future service. Giles and Eyler (1994) found that students who participated in their community service laboratory changed their views on social service clients and

endorsed the importance of working in the community more after their experience. Forte (1997) found that students in their community service project significantly increased their scores on a self-report altruism scale and increased their commitment to volunteerism after the course was over. Likewise, Batchelder and Root (1994) found that students in their service learning course increased their resolve to act in uncertain situations and had a greater awareness of the complexity of social problems, compared to a control group.

These studies suggest that service learning changes attitudes of college students. Whether these attitudes translate into action and carry on after graduation are important outcomes to assess. Butler and Coleman (1997) probably have the most comprehensive evaluation of a policy practice course in social work over a seven-year period. They taught a macro practice course that introduced important advocacy skills focusing on media campaigns, political advocacy, social action campaigns, coalition building, resource mobilization, and community and economic development. Butler and Coleman designed a mail survey and analyzed 48 questionnaires from graduates who had taken the policy course between 1985 and 1992. The graduates were asked to recall their macro practice activities before and after taking the class. The responses were compared with *t* tests. Twenty respondents were not used in the analysis because they were still in school and their activity levels were very low. The other 28 respondents had increased activity levels in case advocacy, lobbying, community education, media campaigns, participating in a direct social action, and working in community economic development.

This is an important first step in a systematic evaluation of these types of experiential courses. Without a comparison group, however, there is no way of knowing if students who had not had the community experience would have been just as likely to increase their political activity. Butler and Coleman also reported that in their sample of 28, there were not enough men and racial minorities to look at variations by race and gender. The present exploratory study builds on this research by comparing race and gender within a multivariate model; it also includes a comparison group of graduates who had not taken the course.

About the Course

An advanced policy course that focused on experiential learning of policy practice concepts in the field of child and family policy was offered five times from spring 1995 through summer 1996 at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Both clinical and administration and planning students were required to take advanced policy content. Students had the option of taking this course or two other advanced policy courses in another substantive area which used a more traditional lecture format. All of the students had previous policy practice content in their foundation policy class.

No other experientially based courses were offered during this time, although students could obtain the experience through independent study, working with professors on projects, or potentially through their field experience if they were administration and planning students.

The course focused on developing persuasion skills, building task groups and coalitions, using the media, testifying before committees, organizing letter-writing and phone campaigns, and developing computer skills for policy practice. Class writing assignments included commentaries, letters to the editor of newspapers, or testimony for a legislative or planning committee. Students were also required to create brochures and fact sheets on the computer and be able to use the Internet for research and advocacy efforts, as well as perform a needs assessment of an issue of importance to them. Students were asked to design and implement a change effort using some or all of these skills as part of their intervention. Student projects have been diverse, including planning change at the organizational, community, and state levels; policy development and implementation projects; and increasing public awareness of political issues. For an in-depth description and analysis of the specific components of the course, refer to Rocha and Johnson (1997).

Methods

This study assesses three issues related to policy practice: (1) how graduates value the importance of policy-related tasks; (2) perceptions of competency to perform selected policy-related tasks; and (3) actual political activity levels. Recent graduates who had community-based experiential learning opportunities are compared to those who were educated in more traditional classroom environments.

Sample

In the fall of 1996, mail surveys were sent to all 119 students who graduated from the program between May 1995 and August 1996. Seventy-two surveys were returned, a 60.5% response rate. Thirty-three students had not taken the course, 30 had taken the course, and 9 had not taken the course but indicated they had received experiential learning through other means, including independent studies with faculty, working on a political campaign in their field experience, and working on community projects through a community organization. These 9 respondents were included with the experiential group by virtue of their experiences for a total of 39.

Measurement and Analysis

Four levels of policy-related values and activities were measured: (1) the value placed on policy-related activities by the respondent, (2) self-reported competency levels in policy-related skills, (3) policy-related activity levels performed in respondents'

professional role and (4) policy-related activity levels performed in their personal lives. Eight indicators for each construct were developed and then summed into an overall scale. The comparison of mean scores for each indicators is represented in Figures 1 through 4.

The indicators for the construct of valuing policy-related activities are the importance of:

- Voting;
- Being a member of a professional organization;
- Keeping up with issues that affect clients;
- Keeping up with issues that affect neighborhoods;
- Keeping up with issues that affect school districts;
- Keeping up with issues that affect one's city;
- Keeping up with issues that affect one's state;
- Keeping up with issues that affect the nation.

The indicators were measured on a 5-point scale (1=very unimportant, 5=very important). The summed scale produced a Cronbach's alpha reliability score of .82.

The indicators for the construct of self-reported competency are the ability to:

- Interpret major federal legislation;
- Understand how social problems are addressed through social policy;
- Use the media to communicate ideas to the public;
- Create computer-generated media information;
- Plan and implement a change effort;
- Organize a task force;
- Use the Internet to find information about controversial issues;
- Understand the policy formulation process;

The indicators were measured on a 5-point scale (1=not competent, 5=very competent). The summated scale produced a Cronbach's alpha reliability score of .85.

In addition to assessing competency, the two activity scales also assessed the number of times graduates had actually performed policy related tasks since graduating from the program. The eight indicators used to measure professional and personal activities asked, "How many times since graduating have you...":

- Sent a letter to the editor or written an opinion/editorial piece;
- Called, e-mailed, or written a public official;
- Worked on a specific change effort;

- Met with public official(s);
- Participated as a member of a coalition or committee working on an issue;
- Been active in a coalition;
- Been instrumental in organizing an activity;
- Used the Internet to obtain policy-related information.

Mean scores were calculated from the responses. The professional activity scale and the personal activity scale both yielded a Cronbach's alpha score of .75.

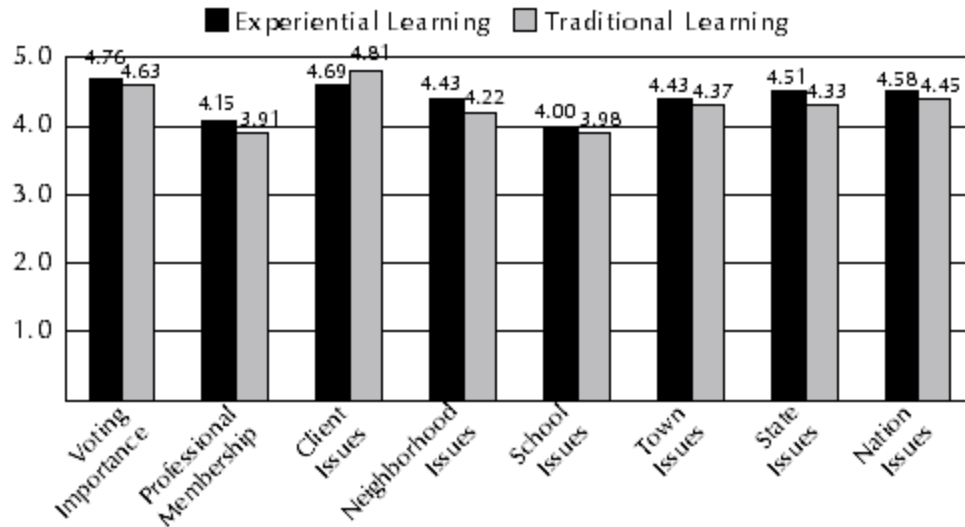
The individual scores were analyzed on a bivariate level, using *t* tests. The scores were then summed and the scales analyzed in multiple regression models, simultaneously controlling for other extraneous characteristics that may have contributed to the differences in scores. These included whether the student was in the administration and planning or the clinical concentration, the year graduated, age, gender, and race. The student's concentration was included as a control because there is a greater likelihood that students will perform policy-related tasks in their field placements if they are administration and planning students. Age is included to help control for previous years of experience, assuming that social workers with more experience are also more likely to have greater experience in political activity.

Results

The returned sample closely represented the overall population of graduates who were mailed surveys. The population was 80.7 % female and 84.9% white, with an average age of 35.2 years, ranging from 24 to 56 years. The respondents were 84.7% female, 86.1% white, with an average age of 34.7 years.

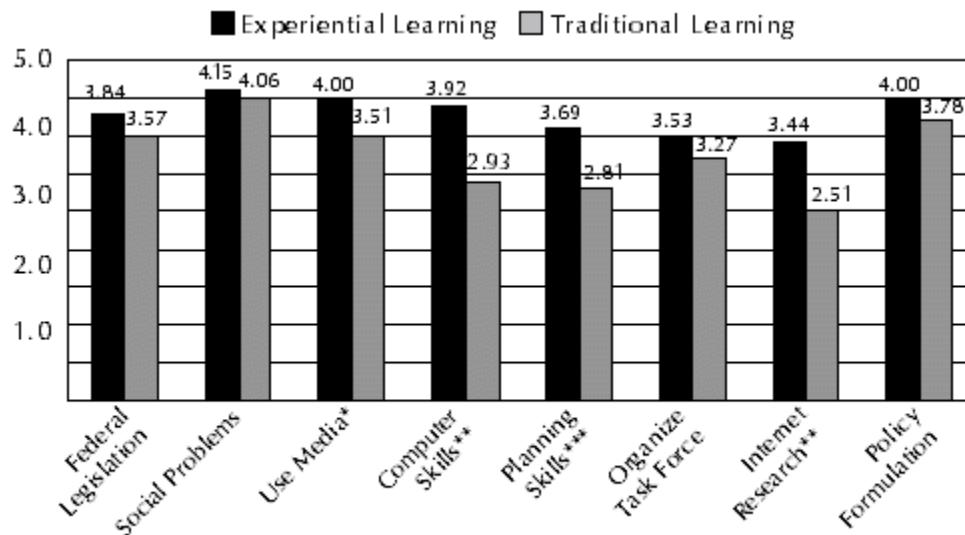
Respondents from both the study and comparison group did not differ significantly in how they valued policy-related activities on any of the eight indicators (see [Figure 1](#)). Regardless of whether they had experienced policy-related activities in their graduate education, they all thought that voting, being a member of an organization, and keeping abreast of developments in client issues through national issues were equally important. Interestingly, students on average thought that being a member of an organization (3.9 for traditional learning and 4.1 for experiential learning) and keeping up with issues affecting schools (3.9 for traditional learning and 4.0 for experiential learning) were the least important, averaging between neutral (3) and somewhat important (4).

Figure 1. Comparison of Experiential versus Traditional Learning on Values Policy Issues



There were four areas of perceived competence where respondents differed significantly by whether they had experienced policy-related activities in their graduate education (see [Figure 2](#)). Those with policy-related educational experiences were significantly more likely to feel competent using the media to communicate ideas to the public ($t=2.09, p<.05$), plan and implement a change effort ($t=3.61, p<.001$), use the Internet to find policy-related information ($t=2.68, p<.01$), and create computer-generated informational literature ($t=3.07, p<.01$).

Figure 2. Comparison of Experiential versus Traditional Learning on Policy Competency Issues



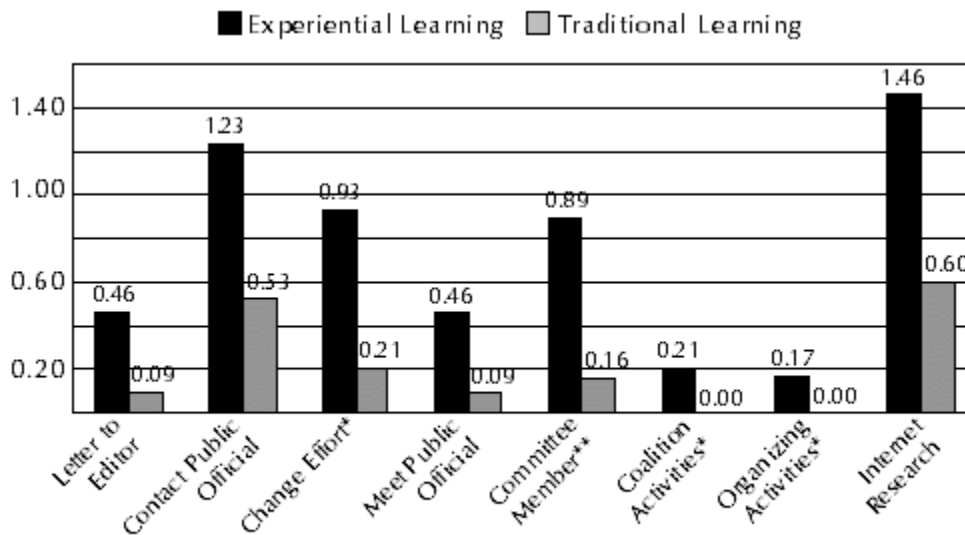
* $p<.05$, ** $p<.01$, *** $p<.001$

Although students with experiential learning felt more competent to do policy-related

activities, the real question is whether they actually do these activities. [Figures 3 and 4](#) deal with whether students have done specific policy-related activities both at work and on their own personal time since graduation. There were four variables that significantly differed between the two groups for personal policy-related activities ([Figure 3](#)). Students with experiential education were more likely to have worked on a specific change effort ($t=2.50, p<.05$), become a member of a committee or coalition ($t=3.69, p<.001$), been active in a committee or coalition ($t=2.45, p<.05$), and been instrumental in organizing an activity in a committee or coalition ($t=2.21, p<.05$).

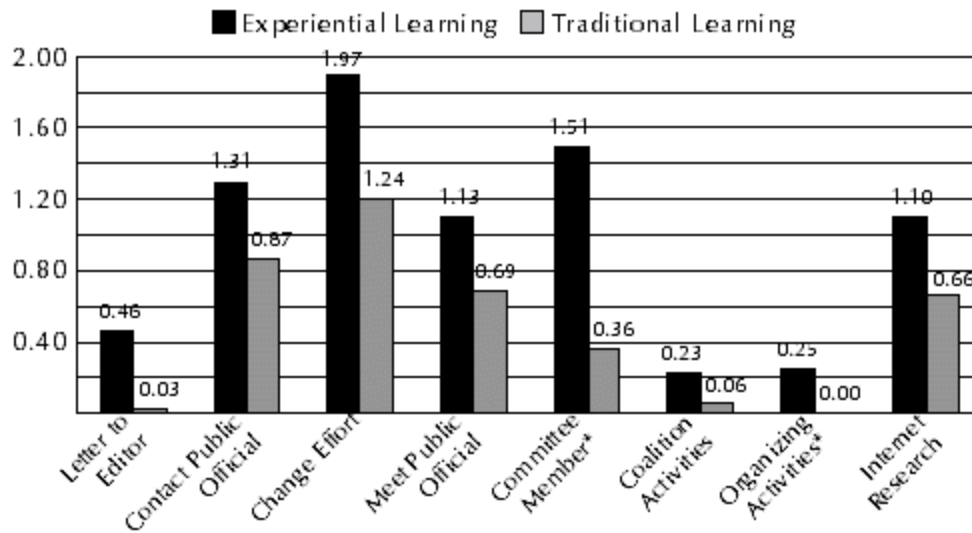
Professionally, students with experiential education were significantly more likely to be a member of a coalition ($t=3.07, p<.01$) and have been instrumental in organizing activities sponsored by the committee or coalition ($t=2.69, p<.01$, [Figure 4](#)). [Table 1](#) provides the means and standard deviations of competency and activity levels between traditional and experiential teaching methods for the significant variables at the bivariate level.

Figure 3. Comparison of Experiential versus Traditional Learning on Personal Activity Issues



* $p<.05$, ** $p<.001$

Figure 4. Comparison of Experiential versus Traditional Learning on Professional Activity Issues



* $p < .01$

Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations of Significantly Different Competency and Activity Levels between Traditional and Experiential Methods

Variable	Traditional (N=33)		Experiential (N=39)	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Competency				
Using media	3.51	1.09	4.00	0.83
Computer skills	2.93	1.41	3.92	1.28
Planning skills	2.81	1.10	3.69	0.95
Internet research	2.51	1.56	3.44	1.35
Personal Activity				
Change effort	0.21	0.65	0.93	1.62
Committee/coalition member	0.16	0.52	0.89	1.11
Active in committee/coalition	0.00	0.00	0.21	0.52
Organizing committee/coalition	0.00	0.00	0.17	0.51
Professional Activity				
Committee/coalition member	0.36	0.55	1.51	2.26
Organizing committee/coalition	0.00	0.00	0.25	0.59

To control for differences in the results that could be attributed to extraneous influences, the individual variables in each of the figures were summated into scales for the constructs of competency and activity levels and used as dependent variables in three multiple regression models. The scale for valuing the importance of policy issues was not included, since there were no significant relationships on the bivariate level.

[Table 2](#) shows the result of the experiential learning class on each dependent variable, competency, professional activity and personal activity, simultaneously controlling for

differences in experimental/control group, race, age, year of graduation, and concentration. Experiential learning was significantly associated with all three dependent variables—competency, professional activity, and personal activity—while controlling for other variables in the model. African Americans and administration and planning students were also more likely to perform policy-related activities in their professional roles, while older graduates and administration and planning students were more likely to perform policy-related activities in their personal lives.

Table 2. Summary of Simultaneous Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Dependent Variables

Variable	B	SE B	b	T
Competency ¹ (n=55)				
Concentration	3.36	2.34	.17	1.43
Year graduated	2.44	1.61	.18	1.51
Age	.15	.08	.22	1.81
Gender	-.73	2.26	-.04	-.33
Race	-4.50	-2.52	-.21	-1.78
Experiential learning	3.75	1.68	.28	2.23*
Professional Activity ² (n=66)				
Concentration	6.37	2.90	.26	2.19*
Year graduated	-1.45	1.92	-.09	-.76
Age	.19	.10	.20	1.81
Gender	-.42	2.67	-.01	-.16
Race	-6.96	3.02	-.25	-2.30*
Experiential learning	4.79	1.98	.28	2.41
Personal Activity ³ (n=66)				
Concentration	6.68	2.76	.28	2.41 *
Year graduated	-1.75	1.83	-.11	-.96
Age	.26	.10	.29	2.61 *
Gender	-.93	2.55	-.04	-.37
Race	-3.55	2.88	-.14	-1.23
Experiential learning	4.20	1.88	.26	2.23*

* p<.05

1 Adjusted R²=.24, overall model F=3.88, p<.01.

2 Adjusted R²=.26, overall model F=3.64, p<.01.

3 Adjusted R²=.19, overall model F=3.55, p<.01.

Discussion and Implications

The ability to carry out policy-related tasks is an important part of social work practice, and as educators we must find the most efficient and effective way to teach skills of advocacy and policy change to our students. It is important to know if

experientially based methods actually translate into increased skills and proficiencies in our students after graduation, because these methods are very labor intensive for students and instructors.

All of the students in the study valued policy-related activities similarly. Likewise, students were similar in their self-reported competency levels related to "understanding" or "interpreting" policy, pointing to the positive, albeit passive, attributes of the traditional curriculum focus. When it came to the specific action-oriented competencies, such as "organize," "implement change," or "create information," the responses varied by group. Because in experiential learning these tasks were first taught and then put into practice within the classroom environment, students felt more competent to do them. The research also provides evidence that perceptions of competence in policy-related skills translate into action for the group of students who had policy-related activities required in the classroom.

The fact that the community-based experience was significantly more likely to result in policy-related activity, even after controlling for older students and those whose concentration was administration and planning, is an important finding. Given the absence of policy-related activities by direct practice social workers in the past (Figueira-McDonough, 1993), the results point to a possible integration of teaching direct practice and policy practice by using experiential methods. This comes at a time when smaller, community-based organizations are likely to require the social worker to perform both direct and community practice activities in the workplace (Johnson, 1998).

Two findings in the study require further investigation. Older students were more likely to be active on a personal level, while African Americans were more likely to be active on a professional level. Further research is needed to investigate these issues and determine if this was an artifact of the sample, or if in fact replication would find similar results. Another issue for future research is the lack of pre-tests. Although the results are made more sound with a comparison group, and some extraneous influences were controlled through multiple regression analysis, the lack of pre-test information is clearly a limitation. The addition of baseline data are needed to further control the experiences and competencies that students have upon entering the program.

While all the policy courses and related curricula appear to instill positive values regarding the need to be active in policy practice, actual work in the community clearly makes a difference in how much policy-related activity students perform after graduation. The results provide encouraging support for the idea that community work in congruence with classroom activity produces social workers who are more likely to

engage in political activity and social change after graduation.

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