



2023

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Recommended Citation

Branson, Dana C. (2023) "Inspiring Macro Practice through Rural Social Work: Teaching Notes on Experiential Learning," *Contemporary Rural Social Work Journal*: Vol. 15: No. 1, Article 1.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.61611/2165-4611.1204>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.murraystate.edu/crsw/vol15/iss1/1>

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Cover Page Footnote

The author would like to acknowledge Mickey Heath for his priceless assistance and altruism, students from the Fall 2019-SW 323 course, Program Director Kathie Miller and Department Chair Christopher Bradley for their support on the project, and our community partners. There are no conflicts of interest or funding avenues to disclose

Inspiring Macro Practice through Rural Social Work: Teaching Notes on Experiential Learning

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Abstract. Experiential learning is the cornerstone of social work education and has been shown to be highly beneficial to students, especially with increased self-confidence in skills, interest in similar work post-graduation, cultural humility, application of theory to practice, problem solving skills, and critical thinking. Additionally, experiential learning opportunities support the nine competencies of social work education and provides students with an opportunity to try out their budding skills with the guidance and supervision of seasoned social workers. This paper discusses an innovative course project that allowed a group of social work students to engage in macro-level social work practice and grant writing with a rural Missouri county that struggles with high poverty rates, health disparities, and the digital divide. Additional topics discussed are the benefits to the community, students, and agency partners; increased interest in macro-level social work; dedication to rural practice; and the overall evaluation of the project.

Keywords: experiential learning, grant writing, macro-level social work, rural settings, student social workers

Experiential learning is the cornerstone of social work education (Blakemore & Howard, 2015; Jewell & Owens, 2017; Kirkendall & Krishen, 2015; Marlowe et al., 2015; Zegarac & Isakov, 2019). The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) assures that accredited social work programs provide field education for students, as well as skill-based courses to ensure that upon graduation, students have the knowledge, skills, values, and cognitive/affective processes to effectively practice social work (CSWE, 2015). Experiential learning has been shown to be highly beneficial to students, especially with increased self-confidence in skills, interest in similar work post-graduation, cultural humility, application of theory to practice, problem solving skills, and critical thinking (Ayasse & Stone, 2015; Banach et al., 2019; Gren et al., 2020; Mackert et al., 2017). Additionally, experiential learning supports the nine competencies of social work education and provides students with an opportunity to try out their budding skills with the guidance and supervision of seasoned social workers (Sanabria & DeLorenzi, 2019; Zegarac & Isakov, 2019). This paper discusses an innovative course project that allowed a group of social work students to engage in macro-level social work practice and grant writing with a rural Missouri county that struggles with high poverty rates, health disparities, and the digital divide. Additional topics discussed are the benefits to the community, students, and agency partners; increased interest in macro-level social work; dedication to rural practice; and the overall evaluation of the project.

Experiential Learning and Macro-Level Social Work

Experiential learning is a process by which students take previously obtained knowledge, and develop skills through application to real-world settings and situations (Bentley & Swan, 2018). While social work is certainly not the only discipline that uses experiential learning to adequately prepare students for the demands of their future careers, the dedication to academic

rigor, skill/practice-based curriculum, and field education is one of the facets that makes the social work discipline different from other human service preparatory programs (Zegarac & Isakov, 2019). Additionally, experiential learning also assists with authentic learning, which results from students developing personal meaning to concepts and social constructs being taught (Gren et al., 2020). For social workers, this connection often results in a lifelong dedication to vulnerable populations, advocacy, and social justice, above and beyond a job in social services (Sanabria & DeLorenzi, 2019).

Research reveals numerous benefits of experiential learning, including increased self-confidence in all social work level skills, retention of learned material, cultural humility, comfort with ambiguity, interest in specialized social work practice, dedication to advocacy efforts, appreciation for challenges of working in real social work settings, passion for the work, comfort with collaboration, and self-awareness (Bentley & Swan, 2018; Gren et al., 2020; Jewell & Owens, 2017; Marlow et al., 2015; Sanabria & DeLorenzi, 2019). Additionally, experiential learning assists students in recognizing the importance of social work in the world, the rewards of helping others, and the need to engage in self-care (Banach et al., 2019; Blakemore & Howard, 2015; Zegarac & Isakov, 2019). Providing experiential opportunities allows for deeper processing of social work concepts that students have been discussing in course work. Additional benefits are critical reflections and teachable moments that arise in real-time situations that increase competence (Zegarac & Isakov, 2019). Social work programs are steeped in nine core competencies that students must master through course work and field practice: (a) demonstrate ethical and professional behavior; (b) engage diversity and difference in practice; (c) advance human rights and social, economic, and environmental justice; (d) engage in practice-informed research and research-informed practice; (e) engage in policy practice; (f) engage with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities; (g) assess individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities; (h) intervene with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities; and (i) evaluate practice with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities. Social work educators are dedicated to helping students to develop these competencies on four levels: knowledge, skills, values, and cognitive/affective processes (CSWE, 2015). Experiential learning projects can provide students with an opportunity to engage in all nine competencies on all four levels, creating a highly effective and personalized learning environment (Pyles & Adams, 2016).

As experiential learning increases appreciation for the discipline of social work, it also has the added benefit of amplifying interest in macro-level social work. Social work programs provide specific instruction in the three levels of social work: micro, mezzo, and macro. Unfortunately, interest in macro-level social work has decreased in the past several years (Association of Community Organization and Social Administration [ACOSA], 2014). The lack of interest seems to emerge from the disconnect of the micro, mezzo, and macro levels (Rothman, 2013). Additionally, students report a lack of confidence in macro-level social work, as it is common for preparatory programs to provide minimal course work in macro-level social work and focus the greatest attention on micro- and mezzo-level skills (Jewell & Owens, 2017; Rothman, 2013). The CSWE (2016) found that 5.6% of bachelor level and 6.6% of master level students requested macro-level field education placements. Subsequently, social work programs have been urged to intentionally increase interest in macro-level social work to enlarge the number of practitioners in this arena (ACOSA, 2014). Preparatory programs have been

encouraged to find innovative methods to spark interest in macro-level social work, with experiential learning opportunities being one recommended method (Jewell & Owens, 2017).

Additional challenges with social work education could be addressed with creative opportunities through experiential learning projects. When students make an emotional connection with academic material being taught, their motivation for involvement with related social work opportunities in the future and commitment to advocacy increases (Roberts & Jumper-Black, 2016; Sanabria & DeLorenzi, 2019). Furthermore, students in the field demonstrate more independence and a willingness to take initiative (Kirkendall & Krishen, 2015). The majority of today's college students reported learning more from interactive and experiential learning opportunities than traditional lecture (Anstadt et al., 2013; Jewell & Owens, 2017). Massey et al., (2011) report that 81.4% of social work students found active learning opportunities to be some of the best methods for preparing them for real-world social work. Kolb's experimental learning theory underscores the importance of learning through pairing knowledge with engagement, emotions, guidance, and safety to make mistakes (Kolb, 2015). This allows learning to be an active process and allows students to have a meaningful connection to the material they are learning (Banach et al., 2019). As social work programs strive to produce effective social workers, the use of creative learning methods also grows (Bergart & Clements, 2015). Experiential learning has long been utilized by social work programs because of the correlation between hands-on experience, increased confidence in students' developing skills, and continued watershed of ideas to fill in the gaps of services for vulnerable populations (Banach et al., 2019; Kirkendall & Krishen, 2015).

Grant Writing in a Rural County—Development of the Project

Grant writing is a highly sought-after skill for social workers. Being able to find, write, and obtain grants creates avenues for new social service projects that can assist individuals, families, and communities. However, students and seasoned social workers alike are intimidated by the grant writing process (Bentley & Swan, 2018; Mackert et al., 2017). In the summer of 2019, the instructor was asked to conduct a training on secondary traumatic stress and vicarious trauma at a Missouri Children's Division (MCD) office that services two rural counties in southeast Missouri. The training was to help workers who were struggling with two child fatalities from two different families in the area in the span of 18 months. Both investigations found that the cause of death was neglect. After completing the training, one of the agency supervisors stated, "Thank you so much for coming down here and speaking to my staff. No one wants to come down here and invest in the community. We are 75 miles away [from a moderate size town], but it might as well be 1,000 miles when it comes to getting some interest in our community."

As a result of this statement, an undergraduate social work program housed in a Missouri public state university decided to focus the Practice III: Macro Social Work Practice course on a grant writing project to benefit the Missouri county that suffered the child fatalities. This provided students with an opportunity to learn about the grant writing process, pour into a community that could benefit from additional social service funds, and advocate for social issues of the community. It was a chance for students to experience the joys and challenges of working in rural social work settings. Lifestyles, income levels, education attainment, and health grades

vary considerably in Missouri. The county at the center of the project had the highest percent of persons in poverty (29.1%) per county in 2018 (Index Mundi, 2018). Additionally, this county is part of a region that has the lowest income and education levels and some of the worst health outcomes in Missouri (Yun et al., 2013). Additionally, of the 19 counties that make up the southeast Missouri region, the county of focus has the highest rates of smoking for persons over 18 years old, preventable hospitalizations for persons less than 65 years old, cases of gonorrhea and chlamydia, and drug arrests. The county of focus also has some of the highest rates of infant mortality, obesity, and depression (Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services, 2013). Due to high health disparities and demonstrated need, the idea of focusing a targeted student project to increase the county's resources was fully supported by the social work program and the university.

Before the beginning of the semester, the instructor coordinated with five social service agencies in the county seat of the focus county: MCD, County Health Department, Delta Area Opportunity Corporation (DAOC), Missouri Department of Economic Development, and the local community and recreation center. Each agency quickly agreed to partner with a student group for the grant writing initiative. It was explained that the grant writing process can take considerable time, and a 17-week semester might not be enough time to complete a project from start to finish. Therefore, the following tiered goals were established. In tier 1, students would find a grant, conduct research, write and submit the proposal, and be awarded the grant within the semester timeframe. In tier 2, students would find a grant, conduct research, write a proposal, and submit the proposal, but status of award would not be known before the end of the semester. In tier 3, students would find a grant, conduct research, write the proposal, and provide all information and materials to the community partner so they could submit the information when the grant proposal window opened. Additionally, all community partners would be provided with research and related documents to be used for future grant writing endeavors. This allowed student groups to be able to assist with grant writing, even if an appropriate grant could not be found during the limited timeframe of the semester.

When the Fall 2019 semester started, students were apprehensive concerning the grant writing process and being involved in such a meaningful and real project. In order to increase confidence in grant writing skills, the first two weeks of the semester focused exclusively on foundations of grant writing and learning about the history of the county of focus. Learning about the current struggles of the rural community and the history of its county seat and other small towns close by increased students' interest in the project. Because of the value and mission of the university, its commitment to experiential learning for students, and dedication to local community development, the university provided funding to permit the class to take a daytrip to the county of focus. Students were able to meet the five county partners and hear from each agency what services they provide for the community, their current needs, and the strengths of the community. Students were surprised at how well the five community partners worked together to try and fill in the gaps for their clients. Students were also impressed with the dedication of the workers to the rural area and why they were passionate about strengthening and enriching the lives of their community members.

The community partners shared that their county was struggling with a number of issues common to rural poverty, specifically high unemployment, obesity, tobacco use, substance use

disorders, domestic abuse, child abuse and neglect, lack of quality housing that was affordable, and lack of commitment to education. Additionally, students were surprised to learn that in the past 10 years, the community has experienced flooding, drought, two devastating tornados, and an ice storm, all which created significant crop and structural damage to the area. Some of the damage has been repaired, however, other damage is still evident, especially the need for home repair. Although the area has been through several natural disasters, which created setbacks for individuals, families, farms, and businesses, students were able to see the resiliency and dedication of the community to rebuild.

In addition to meeting with the community partners, a county tour was arranged to visually show the students the diversity and vastness of the rural county. The class comprised 21 students, with most students being from St. Louis, Missouri and surrounding areas. Only one student was from the county of focus. Several students had never been to the area or intimately acquainted with such a rural setting. The students were taken through a cotton gin, farmland where there was no cell phone reception, off-the-beaten path spots of natural beauty, and several small towns where the line between rich and poor was literally a street. Students got to experience the friendliness of the community, with warm welcomes, “downhome” hospitality during lunch, and waves from strangers. Students also got to witness extremely rural poverty by touring areas of dilapidated housing. Several students became noticeably emotional when they learned that not only did people live in these structures that looked like they should be condemned, but that they were paying rent to landlords who were in no hurry to fix the structural problems.

While the tour highlighted some of the significant challenges of the community, it also allowed the students to see some of the strengths of the community and what a well-written grant can do for a target population. DAOC recently built a new Head Start building that is state of the art and esthetically beautiful. Students were able to tour the building and see the classrooms, creativity islands, educational centers, playground with the newest and safest outdoor equipment, and meet with the director who discussed how funding was obtained for the new building. The director explained how Head Start allows parents time to work without having to pay for daycare or simply have time away from their children. Additionally, when these children start school, they are more likely to be educationally, cognitively, socially, and emotionally ready to learn, which empirically equates to success in school (Chor, 2018). Children who participate in Head Start are more likely to enjoy school, excel academically, finish high school, and go on to advanced training or degrees, which allows students more opportunities for financial security and enriched lives (Woodburn-Cavadel & Frye, 2017). The expanded Head Start program allowed DAOC to serve more families and children, employ more people, generate tax dollars, and help the community in other ways. Students were able to see how one targeted change in social services can enrich a community over time. Students agreed unanimously that the daytrip and tour of the county was the biggest component to buy-in for the class project. Students reported being highly motivated to work together in their groups to do a good job and help their community partners get a grant to assist with their target populations.

Progression of Assignments and Project

At the beginning of the semester, the instructor placed the 21 students into five groups, working to place different personalities and academic skills together to have balanced groups. The class was provided with numerous resources on the course learning platform concerning grant writing, how to find grants, links to Missouri and nation-wide grants, and links to research information concerning poverty rates, social issues, and health disparities in Missouri, with specific highlights of information concerning the county of focus. The first two weeks of the semester focused on grant writing basics, effective group practices, leadership styles, and the importance of social workers knowing their strengths and challenges, especially when working in groups. To facilitate students creating effective group dynamics by playing off each other's strengths, students completed a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) analysis of themselves. The SWOT analysis is a tool commonly used by business and strategic management domains to quickly and succinctly create a visual display of resources, allocations, potential problems, and prospects to achieve a specific goal. When used correctly, the SWOT assists with planning, increases organization and efficiency of a project, and results in faster accomplishment of tasks (Gurel & Tat, 2017). Social work education likes to emulate applications from other disciplines that can be used to enhance self-reflection and learning of social work students. Students also processed the importance of playing to one's strengths as a means of high work performance and ensuring longevity in the field. Engaging one's strengths produces a higher caliber of work, results in positive accolades from others, and reduces job-related stress (Rothman et al., 2008). Too many times, social workers find that they spend an inordinate amount of time trying to improve areas that are challenges, rather than experiencing career-affirming accomplishments in their strengths (Netting et al., 2017). Discovering one's strengths and challenges allows students to pursue jobs in social work areas that are most suited to them. Additionally, using the strengths perspective allowed students to divide work duties in a manner that increased the quality of individual contributions to the overall process. This enhanced the group work experiences for the team. Finally, the use of the SWOT analysis allowed students to experience the importance of teamwork and embracing different strengths and challenges together to approach difficult tasks strategically for positive outcomes (Gurel & Tat, 2017; Netting et al., 2017).

To assist student groups with the work division of the grant writing process, the instructor provided checkpoints throughout the semester. Student groups had to meet the following five checkpoints (in order) at prescribed times during the semester: (a) Checkpoint 1—Pick a group name, group communication methods established, and schedule group meeting times, (b) Checkpoint 2—Agency partner identified, notified, and communication preferences of agency partner determined, (c) Checkpoint 3—Research for literature review started, as evidenced by two scholarly journal articles per student, (d) Checkpoint 4—Grant selected, and (e) Checkpoint 5—Letter of intent and/or grant proposal started. At the end of the semester, the final product was provided to the instructor and the community partner once the group presented their grant writing journey in a presentation to the class. Each checkpoint was assigned a point total and served as half of the total point value of the group presentation. This helped to structure the activities of the grant writing project and prevented groups from waiting until the last minute to hurriedly complete the project.

Along with the SWOT and checkpoints, each student wrote three process papers based on the grant writing project. The first paper focused on the evaluation and assessment portion of the project. The second paper focused on the intervention and actual writing of the grant, and the last

paper gave the students an opportunity to reflect on and evaluate the process, both systemically and personally. The final paper also explored students' personal insights and increased interest in macro-level social work and/or rural social work as a result of the experiential learning project. Additionally, the three papers provided students with an opportunity to engage in all nine of the social work competencies for a full and well-rounded semester experience.

Outcomes and Student Comments

As a result of the experiential learning project, a rural county in Missouri that struggles with considerable issues of poverty and health disparities received interest and attention from a group of social work students, a state university, local media, and dedication to repeat the project in the coming Fall 2020 semester. Additionally, one group was able to complete the grant writing process start to finish and the agency was awarded ongoing services for as long as needed. The county's Children's Division was chosen to receive duffle bags filled with age-appropriate toys, games, and hygiene supplies for children that are taken into custody from the Together We Rise initiative. This organization recognizes that foster children often must pack up and leave in the middle of the night, transitioning from place to place with their belongings in a trash bag. This program provides children with a comfort item and a bag for their possessions. These services were well received by the county's Children's Division. The other four groups were able to find grants, prepare the grant application and/or letter of intent, and supply the partnering agency with all the needed items and research to submit the grant when the next application process opened. The grants were for the following items: (a) funds to repair homes damaged by natural disasters; (b) funds to purchase "Pack and Plays" to distribute to families in need to decrease infant/parent co-sleeping, which caused one of the recent child fatalities in the community; (c) funds to purchase a sex education curriculum that could be presented to age-appropriate audiences and decrease the county's sexually transmitted infection rates; and (d) funds to purchase updated sports equipment at the local community center so that existing funds could be transferred into scholarships for local youth to obtain free memberships to the center's services.

Students' comments in the final paper revealed a number of important themes, including enjoyment of the opportunity to engage with a rural community, feeling that their work was significant and meaningful, increased confidence in their social work skills, and fostered an interest in working in macro-level social work positions and in rural settings. The following are comments from students:

"It is inevitable that I will work alongside or in conjunction with someone with a different leadership style. This process taught me my own leadership style, as well as styles I mesh with and the styles I clash with...it also taught me that I need other people to balance out my weaknesses."

"I would like to see more change occurring within America and I find the only way that will occur is by being directly involved with it. I am passionate with my beliefs, and do not find it hard to voice my stance when it comes to advocating for others. I believe this would make for good qualities in regard to becoming a Macro-level social worker in the future."

“Throughout our classes we have learned that we need to be an advocate and make people aware of the social issues throughout the world. Having this real-world experience really helped me understand how important macro-level social work is and how it can affect whole populations for sustained change, which is what social work is all about.”

“I think it is awesome to be able to do something that effects a large group of people for the better. I was all set for micro level social work before this class, but now, if the opportunity comes along in macro-level practice, I could definitely see myself doing it.”

“I would like to work in the macro-level because it is a great opportunity to work with people you normally would not, and you get to work with a lot of different people. It seems to be very rewarding.”

“I could see myself working in a macro-level placement... I would rather help people in communities on a larger scale, than just helping people on a smaller scale. I love to see communities making changes and growing and bringing happiness to vulnerable populations. I want to create ongoing changes to improve the quality of others’ lives.”

“In the field of substance use there will absolutely be macro-level work. This field requires advocating for policy change, speaking with legislators, writing grants, and working with several community resources. After working with _____ County, I see that macro is where it is at for real change my clients will need.”

“I feel that having this experience has helped me to truly see how an individual’s system as a whole is so important. In fact, I often wonder when working on a micro level if I am benefiting my client at all... Being involved at a macro-level can really make huge differences, verses small individual ones.”

“Working at the macro-level has given me more insight on people in a community working together. The different agencies in _____ County work together showed me strengths I did not initially see. Working together with a macro focus is how to improve the lives of those who live in rural communities. “

“Before this project I had not had any experience with this kind of social work or activism at a community level. It was incredibly valuable for me to experience what it is like to do a needs assessment for a community and to work with a member or members of the community to try and meet those needs.”

“I never thought I could see myself as a macro-level social worker because of all the laws, terms, and guidelines. However, after this class I feel more comfortable and “macro” definitely does not seem as scary to me anymore. I could see myself in whatever agency that I am placed at to be involved in advocating for the population that I serve on a macro-level about various issues that my agency may face.”

Students overwhelmingly agreed that the experiential learning project was a meaningful way to engage with a community of need, enhanced the learning of grant writing and macro-level social

work concepts, and increased their confidence in overall social work skills. One student posted a comment on Rate My Professor.com concerning the experience:

“Our class wrote grants for the poorest county in MO and some were actually awarded. We took the information that Dr. _____ was teaching us and we actually did it! Now I can honestly say that I have grant writing experience and it makes my grad school application more competitive.”

Due to the success of the experiential learning project, the investment in a county of need, the positive outcomes for county social service agencies, the affirming experiences of the students, and the support of the department and university, there are plans to continue to involve students in grant writing opportunities in rural counties that struggle with poverty issues and health disparities in coming fall semesters.

Lessons Learned

One area where students were able to engage and improve was professionalism. Soft skills were developed, as students learned that when working with multiple moving parts, it is important to learn each person’s preferred communication method. Our students were surprised to find that some of the community partners wanted to communicate by phone calls. This created some anxiety, as some students were more comfortable with email and texting, rarely using their phones to verbally contact others. This provided the class opportunities to discuss professional communication skills. Students engaged in role playing exercises in the classroom concerning how to conduct an appropriate phone call with collaborators. Additional soft skill development centered on how to write delicately worded emails to indicate the need for expedient information, the importance of electing one person to make electronic communication to avoid bombarding community partners, how to properly address community partners, the need for formalities until told otherwise, and how to engage in culturally appropriate communication with professionals, group members, and the instructor. Students were able to learn the art of “catching more flies with honey than with vinegar” in a real-world application.

A second lesson students learned is what a day in the life of a rural social worker is really like. Once student groups had selected their agency partner and began working to find appropriate grants, several groups struggled with receiving replies for information as quickly as they had hoped. The instructor discovered that some of the students believed that because it was a rural setting, the agency partners were not busy, that is to say, rural social work is easier because there are not as many people or as many issues to address. As the semester progressed, students were able to see the unique challenges of rural social work vicariously through the agencies and community partners. Students came to recognize the lack of resources that rural social workers have at their disposal, the problem of transportation for both clients and workers, and the dearth of technology that can be utilized due to a lack of access, equipment, personal preference of clients, and competence. Students also learned that rural social may have a caseload of clients across multiple counties yet still have expectations to contact all of them face to face. Students started to comprehend that rural social work can be more challenging than social work in an urban setting, and why it was so difficult to contact their community partners. This also reinforced the need to plan ahead to accomplish group tasks and appreciate the time constraints of others. Students also had insight into how much this project meant to these

community partners, as they were willing to give students their time and resources. Students were inspired by how proud their community partners were to serve as rural social service workers.

A third lesson students learned was the importance of cultural humility. While the members of the county of focus were all part of a rural setting, there were multiple cultural ideas represented. The county contained varying socioeconomic levels, ethnicities, education levels, religious beliefs, and life experiences. Students were able to demystify their ideas of rural settings and dissolve stereotypes they held. Students were able to witness the outward appearance of rural poverty in a community, while contrasting it with the vast wealth found in the same area. Although students heard stories of human atrocities related to substance use disorders, mental health issues, difficult life situations, and generational apathy, the students also saw how the community was committed to taking care of their own. Businesses made financial contributions to assist community youth programs, educators dedicated time and space to provide parenting classes, community members raised funds to support families with sick loved ones, and medical personnel took a reduction in salary and benefits so the only hospital in a tri-county area could continue to see patients. The final and perhaps most important lesson that the students learned is that even though they were working with the poorest county in Missouri, the social service agencies worked well together to create a safety net for the residents, demonstrating its greatest strength to combating the community's social problems.

Evaluation and Implications for Future Projects

Traditionally, the macro practice class completes a community-level project in the fall semesters and a legislative-level project in the spring semesters. When evaluating the experiential learning project, the consensus of students was that this highly positive experience should be continued in years to come. In the spirit of the KSS (keep, stop, and start) evaluation tool (Rothman et al., 2008), students provided the following feedback. *Keep* doing experimental learning projects and writing grants for counties in need. *Keep* picking one county of focus in the southeast Missouri area because it makes the overall project more meaningful. *Keep* the daytrip that involves meeting the community partners and learning about their agencies. *Keep* the county tour, as this really motivated students to want to write a grant and help the community. *Keep* students working in groups because writing a grant is an overwhelming project and unrealistic for one student. *Stop* picking student groups and allow students to create their own. *Stop* students looking for a grant at a prescribed point—one student group struggled to find a grant and fell behind the rest of the class. One suggestion was to put a time limit on finding a grant, and if a group was unsuccessful, the instructor should assist with the process. *Start* from the beginning knowing the communication preferences of community partners. *Start* the project sooner—students felt that four months was not a long enough time to find, write, and wait to see if the grant was awarded. *Start* the agency partners thinking of specific grants they would like for students to write to decrease the amount of time needed to find a grant. *Start* a fund to accumulate resources needed to ensure that future experimental projects can continue, including rental vans to transport students to the county of focus to meet with community partners and take the county tour.

Conclusion

The opportunity to engage in macro-level social work through an experiential learning project yielded positive results. Students were able to engage in a level of social work that currently has the smallest following and increased their interest in macro-level social work for their field education placement, graduate school concentration, and/or future career setting. Additionally, students were able to increase their interest in working in rural social work settings, having gained an appreciation for the work and the need of rural communities. Students also noted a considerable increase in confidence in their social work skills at the micro, mezzo, and macro-levels, which was reassuring, as they were on the eve of starting their block field education semester. Additional benefits noted were an increase in professionalism, cultural humility, self-efficacy for real-world practice, and skills that could be listed on one's graduate school applications and/or resumes. The community was also able to reap positive benefits, such as genuine interest in the community, increase in physical resources, the ability to be the expert, validation for social service agencies and their importance to the community, and a reminder of the strengths the community possesses to deal with difficult problems. Community partners were reminded of their significance to the population they serve and the good that they help to make happen.

The summer before the fall semester, social service workers in the county of focus were struggling with secondary traumatic stress and discouragement due to two child fatalities in an 18-month period. A semester of focus by a group of novice social work students provided much-needed regeneration of resiliency. The project also renewed their commitment to continue to serve their community through quality social service practice. This served as a role model for students concerning the importance of macro-level social work, giving back to rural social work settings, staying the course during difficult times, and looking for strengths in all situations and settings.

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