

**Developing Rural Scholars for Conducting Research and Service in Rural Communities:
The Effects of a High-Impact Learning Opportunity**

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Students need high-impact learning (HIL) opportunities that expand their thinking and allow them to apply what they have learned in the classroom (Kuh, 2008). Such opportunities are especially needed in rural communities where positive change is critical to improving a community's resilience and vitality (Hastings et al., 2011; Mohamed & Wheeler, 2001). Modeled after a program of the University of Nebraska's Rural Futures Institute, the Rural Scholars program at Oklahoma State University is a research and community service experience, which combines concepts of academic service learning and internships (Rural Futures Institute, n.d.) for college students interested in rural people and places. The Rural Scholars Program allows undergraduate and graduate students to learn about the issues and challenges impacting rural communities by enrolling in a 16-week Rural Scholars course followed by a 10-week lived, research- and service-based experience in a rural community. Students receive firsthand experience working in communities to conduct research and provide service to improve the livelihoods of rural citizens. The course was designed and taught for the first time in Spring 2019 by faculty in the Rural Renewal Initiative. Students were then placed in one of two counties in rural Oklahoma where they partnered with scientists at Oklahoma State University to conduct research and assisted local civic leaders with service-related projects.

The Rural Scholars program aligns directly with Kuh's (2008) call for action on college campuses. HIL practices provide students with opportunities above and beyond what they might receive in a traditional plan of study (Kuh, 2008). Examples of HIL practices include learning communities, collaborative assignments and projects, undergraduate research, diversity and global learning, serviced and community-based learning, and internships, to name a few (Kuh & O'Donnell, 2013). When implemented intentionally by college faculty, HIL practices can have a positive and long-lasting impact on student engagement and success (Kuh, 2008).

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of the study was to assess the Rural Scholars program and its impact on the students who participated. The following research questions guided the study:

1. How did the 16-week course impact the Rural Scholars' 10-week research and community service experiences?
2. How did this immersive research experience influence students' interest in pursuing research in the future?

Methods

Eight semi-structured interviews were completed, via Zoom calls, during the Fall 2020 semester. A purposive sampling method was used. Each student ($N = 8$) who participated in the inaugural Rural Scholars program completed the interview. Questions were asked regarding program effectiveness, level of supervision, highlights of the experience, and level of preparedness for the program. At the end of each interview, the discussion was summarized, and participants confirmed its accuracy as a member check (Creswell, 2012). Each Zoom session was recorded for data collection purposes. Internal consistency was addressed by comparing the interviewer's field notes with participants' audio recorded responses. Names and identifying information were removed, and pseudonyms were assigned. Data were coded using Glaser's Constant Comparative method (1965). Codes were used to create themes, which encompass the major ideas that emerged in the data (Creswell 2012; Glaser, 1965).

Findings

To respond to research question one, students described the parallels they drew between course content and their experience, and the extent to which the course was helpful during their Rural Scholars experience. Of the eight Rural Scholar students, five were able to complete the 16-week course. The interview data yielded three major themes.

Theme 1: Theory to Practice. “I really enjoyed learning the background information [in the class] about the counties and organizations we would be working in,” said one Rural Scholar. Another student commented on the value of learning community-development theories prior to the experience by stating: “I felt like I could see the theories we learned about in action. As a graduate student, I really appreciate that.” Other scholars commented on the sense of belonging within the cohort during the 16-week course. “I really appreciated getting to know some of the people I’d be working with over the summer. I wish everyone could have been in the class and we would’ve continued meeting together more regularly throughout the summer.”

Theme 2: A Need for Additional Research Training. Although students were pleased with the course content overall, many felt they could have been better prepared to perform certain aspects of their research with additional training. “If we’re going to be dealing with human subjects, I think it is very beneficial to learn about the IRB process early and maybe have training on it offered one Rural Scholar. Another Rural Scholar mentioned her novice research status as very overwhelming, “I didn’t know anything about research going into the summer. If we could’ve talked about that more during the course, it would’ve been very helpful to me.”

Theme 3: Increased Desire for Research Experiences. Students desired to continue conducting research by pursuing graduate school or other undergraduate research opportunities. After the conclusion of the Rural Scholars experience, all eight students were interested in engaging in additional research projects. One Rural Scholar stated: “I was interested in graduate school before this experience, and I am still excited about it! I think I am more equipped than I was before.” Another Rural Scholar is now working in an on-campus research laboratory as a result of the 10-week experience. “I am working in a lab now. I just really want to find the answers to questions,” she stated. Another Rural Scholar admitted: “I have already talked to my advisor about doing my masters. This experience opened that door I had closed.”

Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations

The 16-week course prepared students for action in rural communities. However, not every Rural Scholar was enrolled in the course. Therefore, additional preparation is needed for those students with their expected research and service-based tasks. Additional research training is needed for students regardless of whether or not they participated in the class. Fortunately, the entire experience appeared to whet students’ appetite for participating in and conducting research.

The Rural Development course should be continued as a forum for building community and preparing scholars for their 10-week research and service experience. Students interested in becoming Rural Scholars should enroll in the course. Regarding course content, the syllabus should be amended to include a greater emphasis on human subjects, the IRB process, data collection, and analysis. A database of Rural Scholars should be established to facilitate longitudinal data collection related to participant’s involvement in their communities and likelihood to live in rural places.

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