Rooted in our truth: Fashion as social justice

Laura McAndrews, Lauren Copeland, Kendra Lapolla, Christa Boske, Robert Pettys-Baker, Lynda Xepoleas, Vince Quevedo
Kent State University, USA

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Volunteering has been shown to improve well-being (including self-efficacy, self-esteem, and reduced depression), strengthen physical health, and reduce mortality (Wilson & Musick, 1999; Worker et. al, 2020). Volunteering is typically understood as an unpaid activity (Bussell & Forbes, 2002; Hustinx, Handy, & Cnaan, 2012). At its core, volunteering is not driven by specific outcomes but rather emphasizes the experiences of the volunteers themselves (Kezar & Rhoads, 2001). Volunteering is also closely linked to the promotion of global values, such as global citizenship and active civic engagement, making it an appealing opportunity for students to enhance both their social and personal capital (Einfeld & Collins, 2008). In a study focusing on university undergraduates and cross-cultural volunteering, Handy et al. (2010) found that students were more likely to volunteer when volunteering was associated with altruistic motives, rather than any other motivation. Service learning is a type of experiential education in which students participate in community service and reflect on their involvement in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content and of the discipline and its relationship to social needs and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996).

Educators who design service-learning opportunities typically see the world through the lens of their discipline. They can easily conceptualize the connections between course content and the service experience. For students, however, the connection is not always as apparent.Unlike the predictability of a textbook and course schedule, a service experience can be both unpredictable and confusing. Thus, classes must be designed in such a way that students can meaningfully consider their service experience considering the curriculum (Hatcher & Bringle, 1997).

The purpose of this study was to (a) explore the dynamics of collaboration between college students and middle school students to develop leadership, mentorship, and communication skills and (b) gain insights on college students' perceptions of mentoring middle school students on an up-cycle design project for a social justice fashion show. Over the course of four trips held in Spring 2025, 72 sophomore level design students mentored 183 middle school students (grades 5th –8th) on an up-cycle design project to be showcased at a Social Justice Fashion Show entitled "Rooted in Our Truth" in May 2025. The middle school students came from two different schools in a mid-city urban area from marginalized communities. The university's fashion program was contacted by a professor in PreK-12 Educational Leadership to collaborate on a grant outcome of a social justice fashion show. Each middle school student selected a social justice issue that was personal to them, researched and wrote a statement on their issue, along with sketch garment designs to represent their issue. The middle schoolers then participated in a field trip to the university, where they were given a school tour and worked alongside a college student enrolled in a sophomore level design studio course for an hour and half. To understand the impact of this design mentorship experience on the college students and after IRB approval, 31 students responded to an open-ended Qualtrics survey asking the college students, from a northeast state university, to reflect on their experience. An example of questions was "can you

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describe a moment when a student's response or engagement surprised you?" and "did you learn anything about yourself through volunteering? If so, what?"

Through constant comparative analysis (Tesch, 1990), four themes emerged that included (a) overcoming fear of uncertainty and perfectionism (b) surprised of their knowledge, (c) learning was reciprocated, and (d) sewing brought so much joy. At first impression of this volunteer experience, 87 % of the college students' responses mentioned stress and apprehension. Many students were "unsure I could help with such little time" and "I didn't want to teach someone the wrong thing". As one student said, "when I was unsure what to do, I would ask for their (the middle school student's) input. I think their ideas and methods are just as valuable as mine". In addition, one student reflected how the experience "helped me learn to accept mistakes and go with them rather than to make it all be perfect." Once the college students got past the fear of uncertainty, disruption to their regular studio class time, and let go of making the design perfect, they were surprised by their own knowledge in design and construction, "I had to think back to a lot of the basics from freshman construction that I haven't really thought about or used in some time." One student noted how "helping them make a plan and showing them that creativity doesn't have to be overwhelming" made them feel proud of their own skills. Many of the college students mentioned how the middle school students were very apprehensive to use the sewing machines, but after teaching them how to thread and use the machines, "he wanted to try [sewing on the machine] and he was so excited that he liked it."

Beyond the volunteer objectives, 67% of the college students mentioned learning something unexpected as one student described after hearing her student was designing her garment to promote mental health awareness, "I didn't know a young girl I just met could suddenly change me for the better within a minute. As soon as I saw her autism bracelet, I started to cry. I'm so proud of this young woman with her words were so impactful." Many students expressing, "I am barely ever in a situation like this [volunteering] and I needed this to learn more about myself and how I handle situations." Finally, this design volunteer experience reminded the college students the joy of designing and sewing, as one student mentioned "my student was very passionate about fashion designing and I love to see someone so young full of so much to spread in the world" and "it was so meaningful watch how excited my student was making her outfit and using the [sewing] machines." Many students feeling that this experience left a positive impact on their middle school mentee as expressed by students saying, "I think this experience gave the [middle school] students more confidence in their own abilities" and "they felt proud of themselves for learning new skills."

The perspectives explored in this study provide several important implications for educators considering incorporating volunteer opportunities through service learning. First, the responses illustrate that although the college students' studio time and design projects were interrupted to volunteer for this project all 31 respondents said they would do it again. At the first introduction of this project, there was an initial push back from the college students and concern about working with middle school students. However, responses from the survey showed a far more positive impact when given an opportunity to reflect. Second, the findings highlight how the time spent working with the middle school students reinforced their own knowledge and skills in design and construction as many had to pull lessons from previous classes. Finally, beyond fashion education, the findings emphasize the importance for educators across any discipline to recognize and respond to their students' current anxieties, challenges, and needs, particularly when engaging in new experiences and interacting with people outside the university setting. These findings will be used to identify

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and embrace volunteer opportunities within our broader community, ensuring that future experiences are positive and less stressful for all participants.

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