
PERSPECTIVES OF DISTANCE EDUCATION STUDENTS ON COMMUNITY EXTENSION SERVICES

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Abstract

*This study investigated students' engagement and attitudes toward community extension services on a distance education platform, with the aim of developing a deeper understanding of how non-traditional learners perceive and participate in community-oriented programs. The study sought to identify emerging themes from students' lived experiences and quantify their engagement and attitudes toward community extension initiatives. Employing an **exploratory sequential mixed-methods design**. In the qualitative phase, **Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)** were conducted with selected students to capture insights regarding their experiences, motivations, and perceived barriers to participation in community extension activities. Thematic analysis revealed four major themes: **Self-Efficacy, Self-Esteem, Communal Responsibility, and Recognition of the Community**. These themes served as the conceptual basis for developing a 20-item inventory questionnaire used in the quantitative phase. The researcher-constructed instrument was administered to **92 student-participants** enrolled in distance education programs. Descriptive results indicated that the respondents were predominantly **part-time students (77%)**, with a large proportion of employed learners, and **62% were female**. The average age was **32.4 years**, reflecting a mature student population balancing academic, professional, and family responsibilities. Most respondents were enrolled in **Bachelor of Arts programs (72%)**, while **83% had previously participated in church-based, workplace-based, or school-based community activities**. Although **42% reported willingness to participate in planning community extension projects**, **58% indicated uncertainty regarding their time availability**, highlighting the practical constraints faced by adult distance learners. Quantitative findings demonstrated generally positive attitudes across all four dimensions. Further, among the emerging themes, **Communal Responsibility** obtained the highest composite mean, indicating that students strongly viewed community extension as a shared social obligation and source of collective accomplishment. This was followed by **Recognition of the Community**, suggesting that students perceived extension activities as a means of enhancing the image and branding of the communities they serve. **Self-Efficacy** and **Self-Esteem** also yielded favorable ratings, confirming that participation in extension initiatives reinforces learned skills, builds confidence, and strengthens students' sense of personal worth. The findings suggest that students in distance education possess strong pro-social orientations and positive attitudes toward community engagement despite significant time constraints. The study concludes that higher education institutions offering flexible and online learning should design community extension programs that are adaptable, technology-enabled, and sensitive to the realities of working adult learners. The study proposes a **Community Enabling Opportunities Program (CEOP)** to provide structured, accessible, and meaningful avenues for student participation in extension services as part of a holistic and quality-assured distance education experience.*

Keywords: community extension services, student engagement, distance education, exploratory sequential mixed methods, community enabling opportunities program

Introduction

The Commission on Higher Education (CHED) Monitoring and Evaluation Instrument, Part IV: Community Extension/Outreach, highlights community extension programs, community adoption, industry linkages, and their sustainability. Further, Republic Act (RA) 9418: Volunteerism Act of 2007, Phil. Dev. Plan (PDP) 2011-2016, Chapter 8 exemplified the sharing of information and resources, integration of volunteerism in basic and higher education curriculum for the delivery of social services, provisions of technical assistance through mobilization of talents, expertise, time, and energies from the academe, and the corporate sector. Students' holistic formation vis-a-vis the management of student affairs is embedded in the CHED Memorandum Order No. 29 Series of 2013: Enhanced Policies and Guidelines on Student Affairs and Services, Sec 4 and Sec 6, respectively, deliberate programs in support of academic instruction intended to facilitate holistic and well-rounded student development for active involvement as future responsible citizens and leaders.

This paper sought to profile the students' engagement and their attitude towards the community extension services under the Distance Education (DE) or Open University (OU) platform. Under RA No. 7722, otherwise known as the Higher Education Act of 1994, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) were commissioned to provide opportunities for students to heighten school-community linkages through the acquisition of life skills and deliberate student-centered mobility programs. The proposed study is designed to develop the "Community Enabling Opportunities Program under the Student Affairs and Services Department. The said endeavor focuses on transferring knowledge, technology, and resources to the selected community beneficiaries. This can be meaningful and sustainable when provided with data on the stakeholders' attitudes and engagement in the conduct of Community Services (CS) activities.

The study examined the demographic and participation profiles of students to better understand their engagement with community extension services and their capacity to utilize available resources, including human capital and digital technologies, in designing enabling programs for community beneficiaries. Recent studies emphasize that student profiling, when combined with an analysis of lived experiences and motivational intentions, provides a valuable basis for identifying strengths, barriers, and opportunities for expanding collective engagement in community-based initiatives. UNESCO has highlighted that learner-centered profiling and participatory assessment are essential for designing inclusive and responsive educational programs, particularly in flexible and distance learning environments. Likewise, Commission on Higher Education underscores in its extension and student development policies that understanding students' socio-demographic characteristics and circumstances is critical in crafting relevant community engagement strategies and quality assurance mechanisms.

Jacoby's Service-Learning Essentials seminal work emphasized that effective service-learning requires reciprocal partnerships, institutional commitment, and structured opportunities for reflection and stakeholder collaboration. Jacoby argued that universities must intentionally design programs that connect academic learning with authentic community needs, thereby creating enabling environments where students develop civic responsibility and communities benefit from university expertise. This aligns closely with the proposed **Community Enabling Opportunities Program (CEOP)**, which seeks to embed institutional values into organized opportunities for engagement and social contribution. A comprehensive systematic review by Mohd Salam and colleagues found that effective service-learning initiatives in higher education require structured collaboration, reciprocal relationships, and sustained institutional support to produce meaningful benefits for both students and communities. Their review concluded that when universities establish clear partnership mechanisms and integrate community engagement into academic and administrative systems, students demonstrate improved civic responsibility, practical competencies, and social awareness, while communities gain access to relevant knowledge and resources.

More recent scholarship likewise emphasizes that community engagement should be embedded within institutional governance and quality assurance frameworks rather than treated as an isolated outreach activity. UNESCO (2021) highlighted that higher education institutions should cultivate

partnerships that advance social responsibility, inclusion, and sustainable development. In the Philippine context, the Commission on Higher Education has consistently underscored the importance of extension programs as one of the core functions of higher education institutions, alongside instruction and research.

Methodology

This study employed an **exploratory sequential mixed-methods design**, beginning with a qualitative phase followed by a quantitative phase to examine students' engagement and attitudes toward community extension services within a distance education platform. In the first phase, **Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)** were conducted with purposively selected students enrolled in distance education programs to explore their experiences, perceptions, motivations, and constraints related to participation in community extension activities. The qualitative data were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis, which generated four major themes: **Self-Efficacy, Self-Esteem, Communal Responsibility, and Recognition of the Community**. These themes captured how students viewed the practical application of learned skills, the development of personal value, their sense of shared responsibility, and their appreciation of community image and identity.

In the second phase, the emergent themes from the FGDs were translated into a **researcher-developed inventory questionnaire** consisting of 20 Likert-scale statements designed to measure the four identified dimensions. The instrument was validated by experts in community extension and educational research and pilot-tested prior to administration. The final survey was distributed to ninety-two (92) **student-participants** enrolled in Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Science in Business Administration programs under a distance education platform. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation, while a **one-sample t-test** at the **0.05 level of significance** was used to determine whether the observed mean scores significantly differed from the neutral midpoint of the scale. The integration of qualitative and quantitative findings provided a comprehensive understanding of the psychosocial and community-oriented factors influencing student engagement in extension services and served as the basis for the proposed **Community Enabling Opportunities Program (CEOP)**.

Results and Discussion

The pilot study conducted with students offshore revealed that only 32% of the ninety-two student-participants were full-time students. The fifty-three (53) students in the 77% with part-time status were employed. Still, among the life-long learners are domestic helpers who want to earn a college diploma. Among the thirty-six percent (36%) self-employed, many were mothers residing in the region as dependents to their working husbands and opted to enroll for self-improvement.

Most of the participants were of legal age and enrolled in the liberal arts program. Though almost half had completed the National Service Training Program (NSTP), their involvement in community services (CS) was limited to church-based and employment-based outreach activities. The function of the school-based community engagement remained elusive. The attrition of commitment to school-based CS among students constrained with time, thus, thirty-nine out of the ninety-two can commit to the CS planning stage only.

Table 1: Profile of the Student-Participants

Category	Description
Enrolment Status	77% Part-Time students; 33% Full-Time students
Among Part-Time Students	74% Employed, 36% Self-Employed
Among Employed	42% Households, 38% Industry, 20% Government
Gender	62% Female, 38% Male
Age	32.4 average age (19 Minimum and 46 Maximum)
Civil Status	60% Single, 40% Married
Academic Program	72% in AB programs, 28% in BSBA programs
NSTP	45% finished the program
Participated in activity that serves the community	83% participated in church-based, employment-based, and school-based programs
Capacity to commit to community extension	42% can commit to planning
Availability of time for community extension	58% cannot promise time availability

Monitoring evaluations observed variations in the planned and implemented CS programs across academic institutions. Observed disparities revealed the need to revisit the conduct of CS extension. In practice, CS programs are tailored to the beneficiaries. Within the academe, the management corporation designed its own while student affairs forwards its development CS plans, too. The scheme often becomes inefficient and ineffective in resource maximization. Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) seemed particularly poignant in terms of the benefits derived and the direct participation of students. Students-initiated CS activities seemed limited to their whimsical idea of extension. The study at hand explored the understanding of those mechanisms in order to design engaging CS extension activities.

The sequential case analysis utilized a mixed-method approach. The exploratory phase, through multimedia interactive discussion, constituted the gathering of qualitative data. Responses were coded axially involving the researcher until emerging themes were produced. Common descriptions from the themes were formatted into descriptive statements used to gauge the attitudes of the student-participants towards community extension services in the quantitative phase.

In the FGD, student-participants were asked to describe their engagement in community activities in various capacities. Pseudonyms were given to participants as part of the standard protocol. Their profile suggests that their lived experiences vary from church-based, employment-based, and little from school-initiated CS activities. Below are the emerging themes with their underlying statements as to variations of benefits CS can contribute to the advancement of the self and the organization.

Table 2: Emerging Themes and Underlying Statements

Emerging Theme	Underlying Statements
Self- Efficacy	Reinforcing learned skills into practice
Self-Esteem	Valuing self for others and ability to respond
Communal Responsibility	Owning the CS activities becomes a communal merit
Recognition of the Community	Heightening positive image and branding for the community

Reinforcing learned skills into practice. Student-participants were unanimous in describing that CS activities augmented their abilities to master given tasks. Small successes in their involvement reinforced their judgment that they, too, can do greater things. Their involvement in literacy programs, skills enhancement, leadership tasks, and resource management continues to hone their knowledge and master it.

Cathy at 35 works as a domestic help, finishing an AB program described her experience, “I am grateful for the chance to be involved in CS project. The theoretical cognition I learned was tested through problem-solving skills plus it helped improve my social skills. The small things I contributed through transfer of knowledge

Valuing self for others and ability to respond. Student-participants have shown a high regard for volunteerism. The opportunities for community immersion heightened the student-participants' capacity to respect and think well of themselves, making them more agile in responding to the needs of others.

Eva, full-time student at 19 believed that CS activities teach students' awareness of the self and the community beneficiaries. The actual immersion not only helped the recipients but most likely helped the volunteers in their own personal growth. People can be inspired to do better and hoping someday the beneficiaries become givers themselves.

Owning the CS activities becomes a communal merit. Student-participants resolved that benefits are collective, as is the decision-making process, in any community service activity. Their meaningful engagement with CS cohorts from planning to implementing solidifies the teamwork while taking full responsibility of individual assertions on how to further progress planned CS programs.

Donna, works as transport supervisor, taking up BSBA program, described CS activities as collective effort. “The CS activities are not limited to helping neighbors but opportune time to strengthen ties with the community and broaden support network with people of the same advocacies.

Heightening the community's positive image and branding. Student-participants expressed that building a positive reputation worked best through CS activities. The intent is not limited to the transfer of skills, technology and people to the community but sustaining goodwill and fostering models of noble acts.

Perry, 37 years old works in public institution, part-time student vouched the benefits of CS activities: "Improves students' ability to work with the community and see real situations. Efforts to intervene will bring good image and reputation of the school to the community with social compassion. In return, community advocates recognize efforts through rewards and monetary support or funding. Making ordinary students' productive citizens of the country.:

Emerging themes were translated into statements anchored on the narratives of the student-respondents. Each theme consisted of five (5) descriptive statements. The Attitude Inventory on CS Program was formatted. Reliability ($r_{20} = 0.78$) indicated consistency of the instrument scale. Table 3 shows the descriptive statistics per item, five (5) from each emerging theme. In general, mean scores were above the midpoint, and student participants have high regard for pivotal facets of community extension services.

Table 3: Mean per Item Statement and Standard Deviations for Emerging Themes

Emerging Theme	Mean per Item Statement (Statement number per Theme)					Composite Mean	Standard Deviation
Self- Efficacy	4.2 (2)	3.52 (3)	3.8 (10)	3.36 (12)	3.52 (11)	3.68	0.73
Self-Esteem	3.52 (8)	3.24 (14)	3.64 (16)	4.28 (17)	3.68 (18)	3.67	0.75
Communal Responsibility	4.48 (6)	4.16 (7)	4.16 (9)	4.12 (15)	2.62 (19)	3.91	0.97
Recognition of the Community	3.88 (1)	3.56 (4)	4.24 (5)	3.44 (13)	3.92 (20)	3.80	0.76

Note: all scales used the 5-point responses scale, Midpoint 3.0

The theme of self-efficacy reflects students' confidence in applying academic competencies to community extension activities. The composite mean of 3.68 indicates that respondents generally agreed that participating in outreach activities strengthened their practical skills and enhanced their readiness to contribute to community-based initiatives. The relatively low standard deviation (0.73) suggests that the respondents shared a consistent perception regarding this dimension. The highest-rated statement under this theme was **Statement 2** (*Demonstrating good communication skills is enhanced while joining community activities*), with a weighted mean of **4.20**, indicating strong agreement that community engagement improves students' communication abilities.

Self-esteem pertains to students' sense of self-worth and confidence derived from their ability to contribute meaningfully to community needs. The composite mean of 3.67 indicates a favorable perception that involvement in extension activities enhances students' personal value and social

confidence. The SD of 0.75 denotes relatively consistent responses across participants. The strongest indicator was **Statement 16** (*I am capable of suggesting good programs to the school for community activities*), with a weighted mean of 4.28, indicating that students perceive themselves as capable contributors to institutional outreach planning.

Communal responsibility emerged as the highest-rated theme, reflecting students' strong belief that community extension is a shared duty and collective accomplishment. The composite mean of 3.91 demonstrates a high level of commitment to community welfare. However, the relatively larger SD of 0.97 suggests greater variability in responses, indicating differences in students' capacity and willingness to participate. The highest-rated statement was **Statement 6** (*There is no benefit the school can gain by conducting activities for the community*), with a reverse-scored mean of **4.48**, indicating overwhelming disagreement with the negative statement and strong recognition of the mutual benefits of outreach programs. In contrast, **Statement 15** (*School outreach projects and activities cannot help communities solve their problems*) obtained a mean of **2.62**, the only score below the midpoint, reflecting some skepticism regarding the actual effectiveness of outreach activities.

Recognition of the community refers to students' awareness that extension activities enhance both community identity and institutional reputation. The composite mean of 3.80 indicates that respondents generally agreed that outreach programs promote mutual recognition and strengthen community-school partnerships. The SD of 0.76 reflects relatively stable responses among participants. The highest mean was observed in **Statement 4** (*The school through my enrolled subjects gave me opportunities to interact with the community through programs and activities*) with **4.24**, suggesting that students clearly perceive curricular integration of community engagement. These findings reveal that students understand community extension as a strategic platform for enhancing the visibility, reputation, and positive identity of both the community and the educational institution.

Table 4: Hypothesis Testing for the Inventory Survey on the Emerging Themes

Emerging Theme	Composite Mean	Standard Deviation	t-value	p-value	Decision	Interpretation
Self-Efficacy	3.68	0.73	8.93	< 0.001	Reject H_0	Significantly higher than neutral
Self-Esteem	3.67	0.75	8.57	< 0.001	Reject H_0	Significantly higher than neutral
Communal Responsibility	3.91	0.97	8.99	< 0.001	Reject H_0	Significantly higher than neutral
Recognition of the Community	3.80	0.76	10.09	< 0.001	Reject H_0	Significantly higher than neutral

The one-sample t-test results indicate that all four emerging themes obtained mean scores significantly higher than the neutral midpoint of 3.00 on the Likert scale. This suggests that students generally reported positive perceptions of self-efficacy, self-esteem, communal responsibility, and community recognition. Among the themes, **Communal Responsibility** yielded the highest composite mean ($M = 3.91$, $SD = 0.97$), indicating that students strongly perceive a sense of responsibility toward their community. **Recognition of the Community** also demonstrated a relatively high mean ($M = 3.80$, $SD = 0.76$), suggesting that students value and acknowledge their role within the community.

Likewise, **Self-Efficacy** ($M = 3.68$, $SD = 0.73$) and **Self-Esteem** ($M = 3.67$, $SD = 0.75$) were significantly above average, implying that students possess confidence in their abilities and maintain a positive sense of self-worth. Because all p-values were less than 0.001, the null hypothesis of no significant difference was rejected for all themes. These findings confirm that the respondents exhibit strong psychosocial and community-oriented characteristics.

Active pedagogies are indispensable to engaging the school and community. Strategies must connect theory to practice. Desired civic values and ethical considerations are important to a more sustainable CS extension. Communities should not only be recipients of dole-out projects but also CS initiatives that improve the lives and conditions of those living in circumstances. Mohd Salam and colleagues (2020) concluded, in a comprehensive systematic review of service-learning in higher education, that structured community-based learning significantly enhances students' academic achievement, self-confidence, problem-solving skills, leadership abilities, and social commitment. Their findings indicate that community engagement serves as a dynamic pedagogical approach that bridges theory and practice and transforms learning into a socially relevant experience. Similarly, Andrew Furco and collaborators (2022) reported that students who participate in well-designed service-learning and extension programs demonstrate stronger self-efficacy, greater confidence in applying disciplinary knowledge, and deeper commitment to community service. Recent empirical studies also show that online and distance education learners can experience similar developmental benefits when technology-enabled community engagement opportunities are intentionally designed to connect academic content with real-world needs.

More recent scholarship also indicates that service-learning fosters collective ownership and a deeper appreciation of community service as a shared civic obligation rather than merely an academic requirement. Andrew Furco and KerryAnn O'Meara (2021–2023) observed that reciprocal partnerships with community stakeholders enrich the learning experience by promoting collaboration, mutual accountability, and democratic participation. In the same vein, UNESCO (2021) emphasized that higher education should cultivate social responsibility and active citizenship through meaningful community engagement. Significant findings emphasized that community partnership can improve the learning component of service-learning, although expectations must be managed. This supports the theme that community service can enhance the community's image when activities are visible, collaborative, and responsive. The community becomes recognized not as a passive recipient but as an active partner in development, learning, and social contribution. The related studies affirm that community service and service-learning produce both personal and social outcomes. In self-efficacy, students become more confident as they practice what they have learned in real settings. For **self-esteem**, students experience personal value when they recognize that their actions help others. For **communal responsibility**, students learn that community service is a shared obligation that benefits both learners and partner communities. Finally, for **community recognition, service activities help improve the community's public image by highlighting its needs, strengths, participation, and partnerships** with educational institutions.

Community Services (CS) school-based programs are often anchored in the institution's CSR themes, thereby enhancing community branding. Student-participants believed that CS *builds a good image of the school in the community (item 5, with a mean score of 4.24)*. Further, students have high attitudes on CS that give network opportunities for the community stakeholders in the process to alter perspectives of the societal issues and become agents of reforms. Recent studies continue to demonstrate that service-learning and community engagement contribute substantially to students' self-esteem, confidence, civic commitment, and sense of shared responsibility. Mohd Salam and colleagues (2020) concluded, in a systematic review of higher education service-learning studies, that participation in structured community-based activities enhances students' self-confidence, leadership skills, interpersonal competence, empathy, and social responsibility. The review emphasized that students develop a stronger sense of personal worth when they observe that their knowledge and efforts create tangible benefits for others.

Implications

With the advent of higher education institutions' extension of academic program offerings via distance learning, student affairs and services are faced with the challenge of keeping pace with their administrative operational responsibilities and management structure. Traditional and Open Distance Learning platforms follow the same core; learners report to instruction regardless of whether the setting is a classroom or a virtual classroom. Students are clothed with the prescribed duties and responsibilities. In the same manner, students are also entitled to adequate academic support and services.

With respect to the study's findings, there is a positive attitude among student-participants toward CS activities, but their motivation to engage remains elusive. The demographics of students in the DE revealed variations, to wit, part-time status, life-long learners, and working individuals. They have had exposure to CS activities but are constrained by time to sustain engagement. Although they perceived that an active involvement enhances efficacy, communal responsibility, and partnership.

An appropriate enabling Community Extension is necessary to forge a relevant school-community relationship. Stakeholders expressed CS interventions that are enduring yet doable, comprehensive yet practical, and collaborative yet specific in outcomes. The CS Extension student-initiated activities propel resource maximization and community potentials. Students are enticed to engage when enjoined to plan and implement those programs. This aligns closely with the proposed **Community Enabling Opportunities Program (CEOP)**, which seeks to embed institutional values into organized opportunities for engagement and social contribution.

Higher education institutions can achieve holistic education and quality assurance by creating structured programs that empower stakeholders to participate actively in community engagement and institutional development. A **Community Enabling Opportunities Program** is therefore consistent with contemporary scholarship because it operationalizes institutional values, strengthens university-community partnerships, promotes civic responsibility, and generates measurable outcomes that demonstrate educational quality in both traditional and distance-learning environments.

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