

# Service Learning: Reaching Our Most Vulnerable Populations

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Children diagnosed with anxiety and depression increased in the United States by 29% and 27% respectively from 2016 to 2020, prompting childhood mental health needs to be a national priority. Globally, mental health disorder prevalence is estimated at 14%. Children with mental health challenges often miss activities essential for socialization and bonding due to internal stress, therefore, there is a critical need to find innovative methods to provide inclusive opportunities for children with mental health concerns that are essential for socialization, inclusivity, and bonding with friends and family.

Auburn University College of Nursing (AUCON) currently has programs to support families across campus and the surrounding community, providing service-learning opportunities for undergraduate students. We can create a campus-community partnership by combining textbook and classroom learning with community experiences. It is a natural fit for students attending Auburn University, a land grant university, to be involved with engagement and outreach.

The Tiger Babies breastfeeding support initiative across campus has promoted clean, comfortable, and private areas for mothers to nurse and pump since 2015. In addition, this outreach activity provided service-learning opportunities for undergraduate nursing students to work directly with breastfeeding mothers and their families. Students participate in this outreach activity as part of their community clinical rotations. They are supervised by a registered nurse who is also a certified lactation consultant. Students receive interactive learning opportunities with the nurse and many teachable moments with families.

Recently, AUCON chose to further expand outreach initiatives across campus and within the surrounding communities by developing sensory inclusion spaces so families facing mental health challenges may attend events essential for socialization. In turn, students to gain hands-on learning in acute sensory sensitivities. Globally, the prevalence of mental health disorders is rising, therefore the opportunity exists for faculty to train students to meet the needs of families in any community. A survey of 191 medical students (students ranging from 1-4th year med students or pediatric interns, residents, or fellows) reported a low understanding of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), including reports of an intense awareness of the sensory issues in children with ASD. A scoping review of the literature concerning baccalaureate nursing student experiences with the mental health population found a need for practical training in mental health.

This finding is important to note as undergraduate students transition into professional practice. School nurses, often the first professional in a school system to encounter children and adolescents with mental health challenges, report the need for additional training and resources aimed at mental health. Colleges and universities have opportunities to explore interprofessional movements to improve knowledge and skills.

SOUND, or Sensory Outreach Under Nursing Direction, provides service-learning opportunities for healthcare professional students. Marcilla-Toribio et al. found that nursing students who participated in service-learning projects had a chance to practice communication skills and teamwork. In addition, clinical experiences can increase students' confidence in a unique environment.

SOUND serves as an outreach program developed to expand the College of Nursing's mission "to advance health and healthcare for all..." and the Auburn Creed, "... I believe in a sound mind, in a sound body and a spirit that is not afraid...".

The purpose of SOUND is twofold. First, the program will allow the College of Nursing faculty at Auburn University to collaborate with others to further develop inclusive environments for families by teaching students to recognize signs of stress and assist families in a more sensory-friendly environment to be genuinely included rather than isolated.

Second, develop a teaching and learning proposal with measurable and attainable objectives to inform other universities when seeking methods to provide a more diverse, equitable and inclusive learning opportunity to de-stigmatize mental health globally.

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