

Research on the Social Service Competency Strategies for University Students in Yunnan Province

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Abstract

As universities are increasingly expected to demonstrate tangible social impact, social practice has become a key pathway for cultivating students' social service competency. However, many programs remain activity-driven rather than competency-driven, with fragmented frameworks and weak evaluation mechanisms. This study aims to (1) clarify the dimensional structure of university students' social service competency, (2) construct a competency-based strategy system for students in Yunnan Province, and (3) evaluate its feasibility and perceived effectiveness. An explanatory sequential mixed-methods design was employed. A stratified survey of 382 undergraduates from four universities in Yunnan examined a proposed 10-dimension competency model. Reliability analysis and confirmatory factor analysis were conducted using SPSS and AMOS. Subsequently, a focus group (n = 7) and semi-structured interviews with students (n = 20) and service recipients (n = 10) were used to refine and validate the strategy system.

Findings supported a stable 10-factor competency structure. Students demonstrated relatively stronger communication, teamwork, and social responsibility, but showed greater developmental gaps in innovation, leadership, cultural sensitivity, and practical execution. Based on these gaps, a three-level closed-loop strategy system (school-student-social ecosystem) was constructed and positively evaluated by stakeholders. The strategy system provides universities with an actionable framework linking competency diagnosis, targeted intervention, mentoring, and multi-source evaluation to improve both student development and service quality. Enhancing social service competency requires structured mentoring, role-based participation, and evidence-based

assessment. A competency-oriented and ecosystem-supported model can strengthen the sustainability and effectiveness of social practice education in Yunnan universities.

Keywords: Social Service Competency; Service-Learning; Mixed-Methods; University Students; Strategy System

Introduction

Social practice has become a core part of university education because it places students in real situations where knowledge must be used, not only remembered. Classroom learning often emphasizes concepts and principles, but social practice forces students to translate those ideas into action: communicating with service recipients, coordinating with peers, and responding to unpredictable constraints. These experiences are widely viewed as a practical bridge between academic preparation and social or professional entry, because students gradually build confidence and competence through repeated exposure to real tasks and real consequences (Kolb, 2014). In this sense, social practice is not an optional supplement to higher education; it is a developmental setting where students learn how to operate in complex environments.

The educational value of social practice is also systematic rather than one-dimensional. At the cognitive level, practice provides a context for applying theoretical knowledge and testing problem-solving strategies when conditions are messy and information is incomplete. At the developmental level, sustained practice supports clearer self-understanding: students learn what they can do well, where they struggle, and what types of roles they may fit, which can strengthen later career planning and professional adaptability. At the value level, social practice exposes students to public issues and community needs, helping them develop a more stable sense of social responsibility and civic mission. These outcomes—capability growth, identity development, and value formation—are tightly connected, and together they explain why social practice is increasingly treated as a key pathway to whole-person development in contemporary higher education (Tilak, 2022).

Meanwhile, universities are facing stronger expectations to perform their social service function in a more concrete and accountable manner. Social service is not only about providing occasional volunteer labor; it is also about transforming university knowledge and resources into social value through structured engagement. This shift raises an important practical challenge: if social practice is expected to cultivate social service competency, then the competency itself must be clearly defined and intentionally developed. Without a well-specified competency framework, it

becomes difficult for universities to design training paths, for students to understand what they are expected to improve, and for service partners to evaluate whether students are actually contributing.

In many institutions, however, social service competency training still suffers from three common bottlenecks. First, competency elements are often described in fragmented ways (e.g., communication, coordination, problem-solving), which makes it difficult to form an integrated framework that can guide curriculum design and practice arrangements. Second, training pathways are frequently “activity-driven” rather than “competency-driven,” meaning that students participate in service tasks but may not receive systematic scaffolding that links practice to capability growth. Third, evaluation is frequently reduced to easily logged metrics—such as service hours or headcounts—while offering limited evidence of whether students’ competencies actually improve in substantive and observable ways. As a consequence, this weakens the actionability of feedback, reduces learning benefits, and erodes the long-term effectiveness of social practice programs (Salam et al., 2019).

Against this background, the present study focuses on developing a systematic strategy for enhancing university students’ social service competency. By defining competencies clearly, connecting training to the actual practice cycle, and upgrading evaluation and feedback, the study aims to build a more consistent and sustainable social practice education model that serves students, universities, and local communities.

Research Objectives

This study focuses on the following objectives:

1. To study the dimensions of university students’ social service competency.
2. To build a strategy system for improving the social service competency of university students in Yunnan.
3. To evaluate the feasibility and effectiveness of the strategy system.

Literature Review

1. Social practice as competence formation

Social practice is widely positioned as a developmental setting where students convert academic knowledge into actionable capability through real tasks, stakeholder interaction, and situated problem solving. From a pragmatic education perspective, learning is strengthened when

students experience authentic social contexts and link reflection to action, rather than treating community engagement as an add-on to coursework. This logic is consistent with classic arguments that education should connect inquiry with social experience and civic purposes (Dearden, 2024). Building on experiential learning theory, competence growth is often modeled as a cycle of concrete experience, reflective observation, conceptualization, and active experimentation, suggesting that repeated practice with structured reflection is essential for sustainable capability development (Kolb, 2014).

2. Service-learning design and assessment: from hours to evidence

A major concern in higher education practice programs is that participation metrics (e.g., service hours) are often used as proxies for learning. Service-learning scholarship emphasizes that outcomes are more likely when practice is intentionally designed—through role clarity, mentoring, reflection routines, and assessment aligned with learning goals—so that competencies become “trainable” and observable (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996). Empirically, a meta-analysis indicates that service-learning can produce positive student outcomes, but effect sizes vary with program quality and instructional supports, reinforcing the need for competency-oriented design rather than activity-driven implementation (Celio et al., 2011).

3. Toward competency profiles and uneven development patterns

Studies also note that competency gains are not uniform: interaction-intensive skills (e.g., communication and teamwork) often develop faster than capacities requiring long-term coordination, leadership, and innovation. This aligns with the view that “where learning happens” depends on how community work is integrated with curriculum, feedback, and reflection depth (Ngai et al., 2025). For regions with diverse communities (e.g., Yunnan), these insights imply that universities should move toward evidence-based competency profiles and targeted scaffolding—especially for complex competencies that depend on sustained mentoring and cross-sector collaboration.

Research Methodology

1. Research Design

This study employed an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design to develop and verify a competency-based strategy system for enhancing university students’ social service competency in Yunnan Province. Quantitative data were first used to clarify the dimensional structure of social service competency and to provide an evidence base for strategy construction.

Qualitative data were then used to refine the strategy system through expert justification and to examine feasibility and perceived effectiveness from both student and service-recipient perspectives. Data collection was conducted between 30 June 2024 and 30 June 2026, following a “measurement → strategy refinement → verification” logic while keeping instruments and analytic criteria consistent across sites.

2. Population and Sample

The target population comprised undergraduate students who had participated in at least one social practice activity at four universities in Yunnan Province: Yunnan University, Kunming University of Science and Technology, Yunnan Normal University, and Kunming Medical University. Based on enrollment information, the overall population size was estimated at $N = 77,000$. A stratified approach was adopted with each university treated as one stratum, and sample sizes were allocated proportionally. The required survey sample size followed the Krejcie and Morgan sampling logic at the 95% confidence level and 0.05 precision:

$$n = \frac{X^2 NP(1 - P)}{d^2(N - 1) + X^2 P(1 - P)}$$

where $X^2 = 3.841$, $P = 0.50$, $d = 0.05$, and $N = 77,000$, yielding $n = 382$ valid student respondents. The final distribution was: Yunnan University (99), Kunming University of Science and Technology (149), Yunnan Normal University (75), and Kunming Medical University (59).

To support strategy justification and feasibility checking, purposive samples were also used. A focus group included $n = 7$ participants representing university administrators, practice guidance teachers, service recipients, and an interdisciplinary expert. In-depth interviews involved $n = 30$ participants, including 20 students with at least three social practice experiences and 10 service recipients who had directly received student services.

3. Research Instruments

A structured questionnaire was developed according to psychometric standards and organized into three parts: (1) demographic and participation background; (2) current level of social service competency; and (3) perceived needs and training expectations related to competency development. The core competency section reflected a multi-dimensional structure (e.g., communication, teamwork, problem-solving, social responsibility, cultural sensitivity, leadership, emotion regulation, practical execution, self-efficacy, and innovation/entrepreneurship) with items adapted from validated scales and contextualized for social practice settings. Items were rated on

a five-point Likert scale. For competency status items, response anchors reflected perceived current level (1 = lowest to 5 = highest). For expectation items, anchors reflected desired level (1 = minimal expectation to 5 = highest expectation).

To strengthen content validity, the questionnaire underwent expert review and Index of Objective–Consistency (IOC) evaluation. Ten experts in education administration and practical teaching rated item–dimension alignment using a three-point scheme (1, 0, –1). Items with IOC $\geq$ 0.60 were retained, items in the 0.40–0.60 range were revised and re-evaluated, and items below 0.40 were removed. A small pilot test ($n = 20$, Kunming University of Science and Technology) was conducted to check clarity and reliability prior to the formal survey.

Qualitative evidence was gathered using two semi-structured protocols: a focus-group guide that examined feasibility, real-world challenges, and any missing elements in the strategy; and interview guides for students and service beneficiaries that explored perceived value, ease of implementation, noticed changes, and suggestions for improvement.

4. Data Collection

Survey data were collected using a mixed administration approach (online and paper-based) to improve coverage and data quality. To ensure consistent distribution and sampling alignment across sites, the researcher liaised with the heads of social practice management units or academic affairs offices at each participating university. All returned questionnaires were checked for completeness and response consistency prior to inclusion.

The focus group was facilitated by the researcher and documented through meeting minutes and structured field notes to record both areas of agreement and points of divergence. Interviews were conducted either in person or online and typically lasted 30–45 minutes. Informed consent was obtained from all participants; audio recording was carried out with permission. Data were anonymized and securely stored.

5. Data Analysis

SPSS 24 and AMOS 26 were used for statistical analysis. SPSS was applied to compute descriptive statistics, evaluate reliability via Cronbach's alpha (using commonly accepted thresholds), and conduct t-tests/ANOVA to test whether competency scores differed across participant characteristics. Correlation analyses examined associations among key constructs. Common method bias was assessed, and the coefficient of variation was used as an extra filter to flag unusual or low-quality response patterns.

AMOS was used for confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to evaluate construct validity and model fit. Key fit indices included χ^2/df (< 3), CFI, GFI, and convergent validity indicators such as AVE and CR. These results were used to support a stable dimensional interpretation and to provide an evidence base for aligning strategy components to competency gaps.

Qualitative data from focus groups and interviews were analyzed using content analysis and thematic analysis with NVivo. For focus-group materials, an iterative coding process (open, axial, and selective coding) was applied to identify core feasibility issues and strategy optimization directions. Interview data were analyzed following Braun and Clarke's six-step thematic approach: familiarization, initial coding, theme searching, theme reviewing, theme defining/naming, and report production. Cross-role comparison (students vs. service recipients) was used to triangulate feasibility claims and to identify conditions that enable or constrain effective strategy implementation.

6. Research Framework

This study conceptualizes university students' social service competency as a 10-dimension capability set (communication, teamwork, problem-solving, social responsibility, cultural sensitivity, leadership, emotion regulation, practical execution, self-efficacy, and innovation). Students' current and expected ratings identify competency gaps that set improvement priorities. A three-level strategy system links these gaps to interventions at the school level (curriculum-service integration, platforms, mentoring, incentives), student level (role-based participation, reflection, team routines), and social level (demand matching, partner coordination, ecosystem support). Strategy feasibility and effectiveness are assessed through stakeholder feedback, with outcomes reflected in higher competency scores and better service quality and continuous improvement through iterative evaluation (Figure 1).

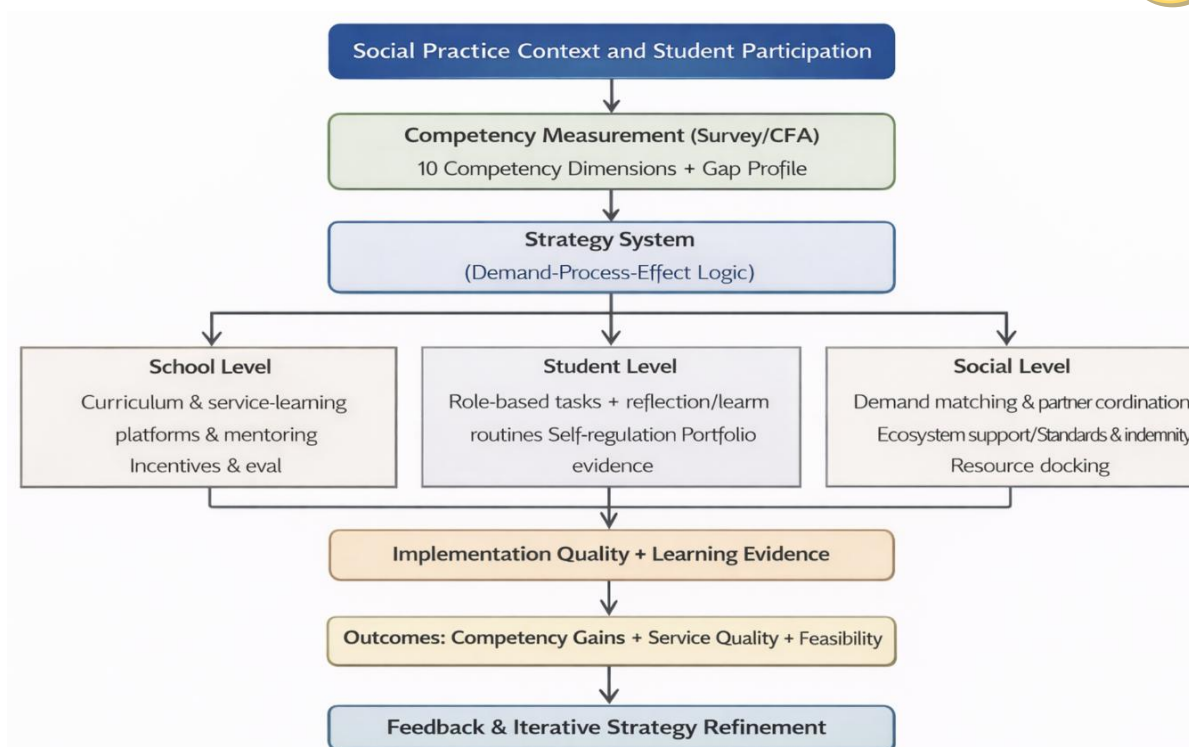


Figure 1 Research Framework (Source: Constructed by researchers)

Research Results

1. Competency dimensions of university students' social service competency

Based on the survey of 382 students across four universities in Yunnan Province, the measurement model supported a 10-dimension structure of social service competency. Descriptive results indicated a moderately high overall competency profile, with clearer strengths in interpersonal and teamwork-related skills and comparatively weaker performance in innovation-oriented and resource-mobilization capabilities. In parallel, perceived expectations were consistently higher than current self-ratings, indicating a meaningful “development gap” that justified strategy design.

1.1 Sample profile

The survey captured a balanced distribution of gender, grade levels, and major categories, with most participants reporting multiple exposures to social practice. Community service and education assistance were the most common activity types, while rural revitalization and public welfare promotion appeared frequently among experienced participants. Table 1 summarizes key characteristics.

Table 1 Sample characteristics (N = 382)

Characteristic	Category	n	%
University	Yunnan University	99	25.9
	Kunming University of Science and Technology	149	39.0
	Yunnan Normal University	75	19.6
	Kunming Medical University	59	15.4
Gender	Male	183	47.9
	Female	199	52.1
Grade	Freshman	90	23.6
	Sophomore	96	25.1
	Junior	102	26.7
	Senior	94	24.6
Participation frequency	1–3 times	168	44.0
	4–6 times	124	32.5
	7–10 times	64	16.8
	>10 times	26	6.8

1.2 Overall competency levels and gaps

As shown in Table 2, the ten dimensions display clear differences in average scores. Students reported stronger performance in communication, teamwork, and social responsibility, but weaker performance in innovation/entrepreneurship and leadership/resource coordination, indicating limited capacity to launch sustainable solutions or coordinate cross-sector support. This pattern was consistent with open-ended responses, where students often described difficulties in “turning ideas into workable plans,” “finding partners,” and “sustaining projects after a short service window.”

Table 2 Competency descriptive statistics and perceived expectations (1–5 scale)

Dimension	Current M (SD)	Expected M (SD)	Gap (Expected – Current)
Communication Skills	3.78 (0.62)	4.33 (0.51)	0.55
Teamwork Competency	3.81 (0.60)	4.35 (0.49)	0.54
Problem-Solving Skills	3.52 (0.66)	4.29 (0.52)	0.77
Social Responsibility	3.89 (0.58)	4.41 (0.46)	0.52
Cultural Sensitivity	3.41 (0.69)	4.28 (0.55)	0.87
Leadership Ability	3.33 (0.71)	4.22 (0.56)	0.89
Emotion Regulation	3.60 (0.64)	4.20 (0.53)	0.60
Practical Execution	3.47 (0.67)	4.27 (0.53)	0.80
Self-Efficacy	3.58 (0.63)	4.24 (0.52)	0.66
Innovation & Entrepreneurship	3.18 (0.74)	4.18 (0.60)	1.00

1.3 Reliability and construct validity.

As shown in Table 3, the reliability coefficients for the ten subscales met conventional standards. In addition, CFA results indicated a well-fitting model (Table 4), providing evidence for the intended factor configuration. Most standardized loadings were moderate to high (Table 5), suggesting that the items represented their corresponding competency constructs well. Evidence for convergent validity was provided by AVE values that approached or exceeded common benchmarks, and composite reliability further indicated robust measurement performance.

Table 3 Reliability and convergent validity indicators

Dimension	Items	Cronbach's α	CR	AVE
Communication	3	0.84	0.86	0.55
Teamwork	3	0.82	0.84	0.53
Problem-Solving	3	0.85	0.86	0.56
Social Responsibility	3	0.81	0.83	0.50
Cultural Sensitivity	3	0.86	0.87	0.57
Leadership	3	0.88	0.89	0.60
Emotion Regulation	3	0.80	0.82	0.49
Practical Execution	3	0.83	0.85	0.54
Self-Efficacy	3	0.85	0.86	0.55
Innovation	3	0.87	0.88	0.59

Table 4 CFA global fit indices (10-factor model)

Fit index	Criterion	Result
χ^2/df	< 3.00	2.18
CFI	≥ 0.90	0.93
TLI	≥ 0.90	0.92
GFI	≥ 0.90	0.90
RMSEA	≤ 0.08	0.056
SRMR	≤ 0.08	0.049

Table 5 Standardized factor loading summary

Dimension	Loading range	Median loading
Communication	0.67–0.82	0.74
Teamwork	0.65–0.80	0.72
Problem–Solving	0.68–0.84	0.76
Social Responsibility	0.62–0.79	0.70
Cultural Sensitivity	0.69–0.83	0.77
Leadership	0.70–0.85	0.78
Emotion Regulation	0.63–0.78	0.69
Practical Execution	0.66–0.82	0.73
Self–Efficacy	0.67–0.81	0.74
Innovation	0.71–0.86	0.79

1.4 Group patterns

Exploratory comparisons suggested that students with higher participation frequency (e.g., 7+ activities) reported higher problem–solving and practical execution scores than those with limited exposure (1–3 activities), while grade differences were more visible in leadership and resource–related dimensions. Although these differences were not interpreted as causal, they were useful for identifying where scaffolding and differentiated training might be most needed (e.g., leadership training earlier than senior year, and innovation support tied to project–based practice rather than one–off volunteering).

2. Strategy system for improving social service competency in Yunnan

Using the validated competency profile and the observed development gaps, the study constructed a competency–based strategy system organized around a three–level closed loop: school–level design, student–level agency, and social–level ecosystem support. The quantitative findings provided a clear rationale for prioritizing competencies with the largest gaps—particularly innovation/entrepreneurship, leadership, cultural sensitivity, and practical execution—while maintaining and deepening strengths such as social responsibility and teamwork. To translate these priorities into actionable design, the study developed a competency–to–strategy mapping that links each gap area to interventions and evidence outputs across the three levels (Table 6).

Table 6 Competency-to-strategy mapping (priority gaps to targeted interventions)

Priority competency gap	School-level actions	Student-level actions	Social-level actions	Evidence/Output
Innovation & Entrepreneurship	Project incubation hub; micro-grants; innovation studio	Design-thinking sprint; prototype testing	Enterprise mentors; resource docking	Prototype/pilot report; sustainability plan
Leadership & Resource Integration	Role-based training; dual-mentor system	Rotating leadership roles; coordination checklist	Cross-sector co-lead mechanism	Team performance rubric; partner feedback
Cultural Sensitivity	Pre-service cultural briefing; scenario casebank	Local etiquette learning; adaptive communication	Community co-training; local mediator	Recipient satisfaction; reflection memo
Practical Execution	Field methods workshop; timeline templates	Workplan + risk log; weekly debrief	Standard operating procedures with partners	On-time delivery; quality checklist
Problem-Solving	Case-based learning; after-action review templates	Needs assessment steps; alternative plan design	Joint diagnosis meetings	Problem-solution matrix; outcome notes

2.1 Logic of strategy construction

The system was built on a “demand–process–effect” logic: (a) identify competency demands and local service scenarios; (b) embed capability-building into practice processes through structured roles, training, and mentoring; and (c) evaluate effects with multi-source feedback and iterative refinement. Rather than treating social practice as a uniform volunteer model, the strategy system classifies projects by service scenario (e.g., rural revitalization, community service, health support, education assistance) and aligns each scenario with a targeted competency package.

2.2 School-level platform and institutional mechanisms

At the school level, the strategy focuses on curriculum integration, platform construction, and incentive/evaluation alignment. Curriculum integration includes a general module on social service theory and practice and a “course + service-learning” pathway that links professional courses to community projects. Platform construction includes school-local cooperation bases and an internal “service project incubation hub” to support continuity, resources, and supervision. Evaluation and incentives are designed to shift from time-based counting toward competency

evidence (rubrics, portfolios, peer feedback, service-recipient feedback), while also providing recognition mechanisms that signal institutional value.

2.3 Student-level agency and reflective practice

At the student level, the strategy emphasizes endogenous motivation, interdisciplinary team routines, and reflection-to-improvement cycles. Students are guided to move from passive participation to problem discovery by using service logs, structured debriefs, and micro-presentations of learning evidence. The system also recommends project-based roles (e.g., communication lead, field coordination, evaluation lead) so that students can practice leadership in small steps, rather than waiting for formal leadership titles.

2.4 Social-level ecosystem support

At the social level, the strategy relies on policy/resource support and a collaborative network among universities, communities, government units, and enterprises. A practical suggestion is a demand-matching mechanism (a regional service needs list and project database) and a set of shared operating rules to avoid duplicated service content. The intended outcome is a sustainable loop in which student growth and community value reinforce each other.

2.5 Expert justification and optimization

Focus group members endorsed the three-level structure but highlighted operational risks and alignment problems. Two changes were repeatedly emphasized: (1) evaluation should balance educational outcomes and service outcomes, because service partners often prioritize “problem solved” while universities emphasize “learning gained”; and (2) strategy implementation requires supervision capacity (mentors, risk management, and clear division of responsibility). Table 7 summarizes key expert themes and revisions incorporated into the final strategy.

Table 7 Focus group themes and resulting strategy revisions (n = 7)

Theme	Typical concern	Strategy revision
Divergent evaluation criteria	“Hours are not equal to impact.”	Add multi-source rubric: student portfolio + recipient feedback
Implementation feasibility	Credit and workload constraints	Embed service-learning into existing courses; modular design
Supervision and risk	Safety, responsibility boundaries	Add dual-mentor model and risk checklist
Scenario mismatch	“Projects don’t fit local needs.”	Add demand list + needs assessment step before project launch
Sustainability	Short-term projects fade	Add incubation hub + handover mechanism + follow-up check

3. Feasibility and effectiveness of the strategy system

Feasibility and perceived effectiveness were examined through semi-structured interviews with 20 students and 10 service recipients. Thematic analysis produced a set of convergent findings: participants generally regarded the strategy system as understandable and usable, especially when the university provided clear roles, mentoring, and evaluation criteria. At the same time, interviewees emphasized that feasibility depends on time allocation, partner coordination, and the availability of supervision resources. Key themes and their frequency across students and recipients are summarized in Table 8.

Table 8 Interview themes indicating feasibility and effectiveness (n = 30)

Theme	Meaning	Students (n=20)	Recipients (n=10)
Clarity of competency goals	"I know what to improve."	16	7
Role division improves teamwork	"Tasks are not duplicated."	15	6
Better communication quality	"Explains clearly; listens."	17	8
Stronger problem-solving	"Can adjust when issues occur."	14	5
Cultural sensitivity matters	"Respect local norms."	12	8
Need for continuity	"Follow-up is too weak."	11	9
Mentoring as a key condition	"Guidance makes it workable."	15	7
Resource/time constraints	"Hard to sustain projects."	13	8

3.1 Feasibility: clarity, usability, and fit.

Most students described the strategy system as "clearer than previous volunteering arrangements," especially the parts that specify role division, project planning steps, and reflection routines. Students noted that competency language helped them name what they were improving (e.g., "I realized I wasn't lacking passion, I lacked coordination steps"). Service recipients similarly valued clearer communication protocols and more predictable project delivery. However, feasibility concerns emerged around scheduling conflicts, uneven team engagement, and inconsistent partner readiness (e.g., some community units had limited staff to coordinate student teams).

3.2 Perceived effectiveness: where change was most visible.

Students most frequently reported growth in communication, problem-solving, and practical execution—skills that are immediately activated in field tasks. Several students described learning to "ask better questions" during needs assessment and to propose alternative plans when disruptions occurred. Service recipients most often noticed improvements in professionalism,

responsiveness, and respectfulness, which align closely with communication, cultural sensitivity, and emotion regulation. In contrast, innovation/entrepreneurship gains were perceived as slower and more dependent on institutional support (access to resources, time for iteration, and mentoring).

3.3 Conditions that enable effectiveness.

Three enabling conditions were repeatedly mentioned. First, a stable mentoring arrangement was needed, with guidance from both a university teacher and a partner mentor. Second, the work had to follow a clear project rhythm, moving from planning to delivery and then to reflection. Third, participants preferred evaluation that recognizes evidence of competency development rather than relying mainly on attendance. When these conditions were in place, students were more willing to take responsibility, and recipients were more willing to continue collaboration beyond one-time activities.

3.4 Constraints and improvement needs

Interviews also surfaced constraints that limit impact: short project cycles, uneven resource availability across communities, and the absence of standardized handover practices when student teams rotate. Both groups suggested that the system would work better with a shared project database, clearer partner roles, and a small budget for essential materials. Students asked for more scenario-based training (especially for minority-area services), while recipients requested better continuity and follow-up.

Discussions

By combining competency measurement with strategy building and stakeholder checks, this study provides a more comprehensive understanding of how social practice can strengthen students' social service competency. The survey results show a clear pattern: students rated themselves higher on competencies that rely on frequent interpersonal interaction, such as communication and teamwork, while larger gaps appeared in competencies that require longer development cycles and coordination across roles, including leadership, cultural sensitivity, and innovation-oriented tasks. This pattern is consistent with previous research suggesting that social practice promotes student development most effectively when learners participate in repeated real-world interactions supported by structured guidance rather than one-time participation activities (Celio et al., 2011).

The findings also suggest that simply increasing the number of participation hours is insufficient for improving competency development. Although students reported expectations higher than their current competency levels across all dimensions, the largest gaps appeared in areas that typically require systematic support, particularly extended problem solving, resource integration, and innovation-oriented planning. This observation echoes previous concerns that many social practice programs rely heavily on easily measurable indicators, such as service hours, while overlooking deeper learning outcomes, thereby weakening meaningful feedback and limiting long-term improvement (Santos Rego et al., 2021). When evaluation focuses mainly on attendance or time spent, students may prioritize participation rather than competency development, and service partners may experience inconsistent outcomes across different cohorts. The competency-based strategy system developed in this study attempts to address these challenges through a closed-loop structure linking school, student, and social levels. At the school level, curriculum integration and institutional platforms help transform social practice from an informal volunteer activity into a structured learning process supported by mentoring and evidence-based assessment. At the student level, role-based participation and reflective learning routines make competency development more explicit and trainable. At the social level, a collaborative ecosystem strengthens demand matching and operational coordination, helping to reduce the gap between educational goals and community expectations. This perspective is consistent with O'Grady (2014), who argue that sustainable social service initiatives require structured partnerships that align university resources with community needs rather than temporary campaign-style activities.

In the specific context of Yunnan Province, service recipients highlighted the importance of cultural sensitivity and adaptive communication, indicating that these competencies play a critical role in establishing trust and effective cooperation. In contrast, innovation and entrepreneurship competencies were perceived as more difficult to develop without sufficient institutional support, including mentoring, time investment, and resource availability. These findings suggest that effective social practice programs must be intentionally designed as competency-building processes supported by clear supervision, structured activities, and credible evaluation mechanisms.

New Knowledge from Research

This study contributes new empirical knowledge on how university social practice develops students' social service competency in a regional context. The findings reveal that competency development in social practice follows an uneven pattern: students show stronger abilities in interaction-based competencies such as communication, teamwork, and social responsibility, while competencies requiring strategic coordination and long-term capability building—particularly leadership, cultural sensitivity, innovation, and practical execution—display larger developmental gaps. The study further demonstrates that competency improvement is closely linked to structured mentoring, role-based participation, and ecosystem collaboration. These insights highlight that effective social practice programs must focus on competency-building mechanisms rather than simple participation or service hours.

Conclusion

This study developed a competency-oriented framework for improving university students' social service competency in Yunnan Province. Through competency measurement, strategy system construction, and stakeholder validation, the research identified a ten-dimension competency structure and proposed a three-level strategy system linking school, student, and social ecosystems. The findings highlight that competencies related to communication and teamwork are relatively well developed among students, while leadership, cultural sensitivity, and innovation-related competencies require more structured support.

The proposed strategy system provides universities with a practical approach to improving social practice education by connecting competency diagnosis, targeted training strategies, mentoring mechanisms, and multi-source evaluation. By shifting from participation-based activities to competency-oriented practice design, universities can enhance both student learning outcomes and the quality of social services delivered to communities. Overall, the study offers a practical pathway for strengthening the sustainability and effectiveness of social practice education in universities in Yunnan and potentially in similar regional contexts.

Suggestions

1. General Suggestions

Universities should shift social practice from participation-centered activities to a competency-based pathway. First, define clear competency targets for different service scenarios

(community service, education assistance, rural revitalization, medical support) and translate them into role-based task templates (e.g., needs assessment lead, coordination lead, evaluation lead). Second, embed service-learning into existing courses and credit systems so that practice is planned, mentored, and assessed rather than treated as an extra burden. Third, improve supervision capacity through a dual-mentor model (faculty + community/enterprise mentor) and provide simple tools (project timeline, risk checklist, reflection log, portfolio rubric) to stabilize quality across teams. Finally, adopt multi-source evaluation—student portfolios plus service-recipient feedback—to ensure that “impact and learning” are both visible and comparable across projects.

2. Further Research Suggestions

To build stronger evidence, future studies could move beyond cross-sectional designs and evaluate the strategy system through longitudinal follow-ups or quasi-experiments—for example, comparing student cohorts before and after adoption, or using matched samples across universities. Researchers may also test whether the measurement model remains stable across different majors, year levels, and service formats, especially when service takes place in culturally diverse communities. To reduce reliance on self-report data, studies can add more objective sources such as partner feedback, direct observation of practice behaviors, or performance tasks. In addition, richer qualitative work would be useful for explaining why changes occur—how mentoring, reflection, and assigned responsibilities translate into growth—and for identifying the baseline conditions (time, resources, partner readiness) needed to make implementation consistently effective.

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