

Preliminary exploration of the social practice education mechanism of "three rural areas" for summer graduate students

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Abstract: As an integral part of the higher education system's "Top Ten" student development framework, character education through practical experiences has consistently been a focus of exploration and attention for numerous ideological and political educators. The traditional form of social practice, the graduate summer program known as "Three Visits to the Countryside," plays an indispensable role in nurturing graduate students' patriotism, enhancing their abilities and skills, and honing their sense of responsibility. With the advent of new circumstances and changes, it is imperative to discuss how to innovate the mechanism for character education through social practice in the context of the university's summer "Three Visits to the Countryside" program, encompassing the content, format, and outcomes of practical experiences. This article takes the example of the "Most Beautiful Hunan Cultural Site Construction Practice Team" from the College of Landscape Architecture at Central South University of Forestry and Technology, offering several insights and references for better realizing the role of character education through social practice in the university's "Three Visits to the Countryside" program.

Graduate student social practice activities, as an effective vehicle and crucial approach for ideological and political education, have become an indispensable component of the "Top Ten" student development framework in higher education institutions. The graduate summer "Three Visits to the Countryside" program, initiated in 1996, has been widely promoted nationwide over the past 20-plus years, playing a significant role in promoting the comprehensive development of graduate students, fostering the spirit of young volunteers, and enhancing the effectiveness of higher education practical activities.[1] In light of the new era, new circumstances, and new changes, it is essential to develop a model that can address the shortcomings of traditional "Three Visits to the Countryside" social practice activities, truly aiding students in cultivating their patriotism, enhancing their skills and abilities, and strengthening their sense of mission through practical experiences. This is a matter of great significance for ideological and political educators within the broader context of ideological work.

1. Issues in Current University "Three Visits to the Countryside" Social Practice Activities:

1.1. Short Duration and Inadequate Planning

The graduate summer "Three Visits to the Countryside" social practice activities, in simple terms, encourage students and teachers to step out of the campus, engage with society, and conduct grassroots research. It is understood that most universities allocate a concentrated period of 5 to 10 days for these activities during the summer. However, due to a lack of comprehensive, systematic, and long-term planning for the overall content of the practical experiences, along with issues like limited field research time and insufficient preliminary preparations, the quality of graduate student social practice is compromised. As an important supplement to the classroom, social practice should undergo scientific and comprehensive planning. It should not involve last-minute topic selection and hasty team formation. From selecting focused topics and integrating solutions to process promotion, emphasis should be placed on policy interpretation and extensive mobilization. Training in research methods, long-term educational preparation, and the design of a comprehensive "Three Visits to the Countryside" practical advancement plan should be implemented.

1.2. Superficial and Insufficiently In-Depth Content

Some universities do not tightly integrate their social practice activities with contemporary themes, resulting in shallow and insufficiently deep content. The format tends to be outdated and one-dimensional, lacking innovation and timely relevance. Specifically, on one hand, there is a lack of in-depth exploration of content by guiding teachers, and insufficient control over team formation and member selection. It is essential to take into account national policies and societal needs, focusing on providing guidance for social practice research from the perspective of young students. On the other hand, there is an insufficient level of ideological awareness and commitment among the practice team members. Many students participate blindly, approaching the activities with a touristic mindset. To address this, universities should enhance scientific planning, improve guidance mechanisms, optimize team formation models, and conduct more meaningful and in-depth social practice activities. [2]

1.3. Few Tangible Outcomes and Limited Impact

The critical issue to consider in summer "Three Visits to the Countryside" social practice activities is how to ensure "the participation of a team that educates more students." According to surveys, the research outcomes and promotion of most universities' summer "Three Visits to the Countryside" social practice are confined to "practice reports submitted to meet the requirements." The educational impact of social practice is limited to the few team members involved, failing to achieve the initial educational purpose of social practice and not meeting the objectives of ideological and political work in the new era. It does not help more students receive education, develop skills, and contribute to society. Throughout the entire process, organizers and team members should focus on collecting and preserving textual, audio, and video materials. They should also prioritize promoting the achievements of the practical experiences, demonstrating practical outcomes, and organizing discussions and exchanges at different stages and through various formats to maximize the ideological and practical effectiveness of social practice activities.[3]

Exploration of the Character Education Mechanism in University "Three Visits to the Countryside" Social Practice Activities – A Case Study of the Most Beautiful Xiangxi Culture Site Construction Practice Team from the College of Landscape Architecture, Central South University of Forestry and Technology in Xiangyin County, Hunan Province

2. The Most Beautiful Xiangxi Culture Site Construction Practice

Team from the College of Landscape Architecture at Central South University of Forestry and Technology is a prominent practice team, which, every year, aligns its activities with contemporary themes to nurture patriotism and a sense of responsibility among young students. In this context, let's delve into the overall strategy and work plan of the Most Beautiful Xiangxi Culture Site Construction Practice Team in Xiangyin County, Hunan Province, and draw substantive insights and inspiration for the development of character education through graduate student summer social practice activities, known as the "Three Visits to the Countryside."

2.1. Align with Contemporary Themes and Determine Research Direction

The Most Beautiful Xiangxi Culture Site Construction Practice Team, in keeping with the theme of "Welcoming the 20th National Congress and Advancing into a New Journey," organized graduate students to engage in summer social practice activities in Xiangyin County, Hunan Province. The implementation of the rural revitalization strategy is a major decision and the overall focus of the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China. It is a significant historical task to build a moderately prosperous society in all respects and to construct a socialist modernization country. This strategy is the overarching approach to the work of "agriculture, rural areas, and farmers" in the new era. In the context of rural development, the landscape architecture profession can facilitate comprehensive environmental management and ecological civilization construction in rural areas. The integration of landscape architecture with the rural revitalization strategy maximizes the proximity of rural areas to nature and their simple and frugal characteristics, effectively improving the quality of the rural ecological environment, and showcasing the cultural spirit of the countryside. In addition, questions that the team members need to constantly ponder include how to use professional knowledge in landscape architecture to enhance the recognition of rural revitalization among villagers and how to delve into ecological, production, and livelihood issues in rural areas and effectively solve rural problems.[4] The Wanhekou community, with its rich historical development and abundant cultural resources, boasts a well-preserved natural ecological environment and well-established infrastructure. Leveraging these existing advantages and tapping into the wealth of cultural resources with a focus on cultural revitalization serves as an endless source of power for rural revitalization in the Wanhekou community. Team members conducted extensive literature research and created a practical approach of "looking back and looking forward," highlighting the role of social practice activities as a "walking ideological and political class" in the community.

2.2. Conduct Preliminary Research to Extend the Practice Duration

To expand the scope of character education through practice, the team organized a one-month preparatory phase and preliminary research work before officially commencing the "Three Visits to the Countryside" summer social practice activities. This extended the reach of character education and enriched the content of the practice activities. The team recruited members from the entire university, conducted group discussions to study relevant policies, and liaised with the community contact units prior to the research. They negotiated the fundamental content of the summer practice together to ensure smooth transportation, accommodation, and safety. The team also gathered essential supplies for the research and allocated tasks among team members, ensuring the smooth execution of the research. As a result, students who could not participate in the summer practice due to time constraints could choose to engage in the preliminary research activities, significantly increasing the participation rate.

2.3. Design Research Levels to Enrich Practice Content

To avoid superficial activities and mere visits during the practice, the team designed a progressive research structure that not only enriched the practice content but also fully utilized the initiative and professional advantages of the team members. After selecting the primary theme, the Most Beautiful Xiangxi Culture Site Construction Practice Team designed three main components.

(1) Combined with local characteristics, farming culture, opera culture, fishing culture and other aspects, the team organized and conducted popular science presentations, screened related cultural promotion documentaries, and, leveraging their professional expertise, created Xiangxi culture murals in specific areas of the village.

(2) Based on the current situation, questionnaires on rural revitalization and beautiful rural construction were made and distributed to understand the villagers' willingness for future rural development and their opinions on rural construction, so that the design of the practice team could be more consistent with the basic current situation of agriculture, rural areas and farmers.

(3) Search for relevant rural cooperation projects, through on-site guidance and resource integration, to connect universities and the countryside closer, so that our students learn and think useful. They provided guidance for ongoing village construction projects, categorized village buildings, optimized designs, and made improvement suggestions. By setting benchmarks for beautiful rural development, they encouraged villagers to spontaneously engage in creating beautiful courtyards.

2.4. Emphasize Results Orientation to Expand Publicity and Influence

The practice team prioritized strengthening publicity and reports, consistently producing daily WeChat posts and promotional videos. They published more than ten news articles on various social media platforms, including People's Daily, Study Times, and Rednet, with a cumulative reading audience of over 40,000. Upon returning to the university, the team visited student branches, held special report meetings, shared their practice stories, and guided young students in carrying forward the tradition. For instance, they wrote an article titled "A Walking Ideological and Political Class: An Interview on Rural Revitalization" and produced a short documentary titled "Our Vision of Rural Revitalization." Through these efforts, the practice team earned the title of "Outstanding Service Team in the University's Summer 'Three Visits to the Countryside' Social Practice Activities at Central South University of Forestry and Technology," truly achieving the goal of "one team participating in the activities, more students receiving education."

3. Recommendations for Enhancing the Quality and Effectiveness of Character Education in University "Three Visits to the Countryside" Summer Social Practice Activities

In the process of character education in universities during the new era, abstract theoretical knowledge related to the socialist core values concerning the nation, society, and the individual is externalized into practical behaviors that resonate with graduate students through forms like social practice activities. Building on the research experience of the Most Beautiful Xiangxi Culture Site Construction Practice Team from the College of Landscape Architecture at Central South University of Forestry and Technology, this study presents the following recommendations for improving the quality and effectiveness of character education in summer social practice activities.

Ensure the Subject is "Precise": The participants in social practice activities are primarily students, and the practice should not only be appealing to this student group but also contribute to their personal development. It should engage students and guide them to immerse themselves in the activities, fostering a sense of purpose and motivation. The Most Beautiful Xiangxi Culture Site Construction

Practice Team at Central South University of Forestry and Technology employed a method where the college provided a general direction, but students had the autonomy to choose specific research topics. During the research phase, supervising teachers conducted daily reviews and discussions with students to help them delve deeper into the research, promoting student engagement and enhancing educational outcomes.

Ensure the Process is "Real": Practice teams should conduct thorough and genuine research, accurately document the process, conduct investigations conscientiously, and ensure timely summaries to prevent superficial observations. It has been demonstrated that the more meticulous and solid the preparation and organization, the deeper the insights and richer the experiences students gain. The Most Beautiful Xiangxi Culture Site Construction Practice Team at Central South University of Forestry and Technology focused on the research question during the preparation phase and approached the community with a problem-solving mindset. They inquired, explored, and thoroughly investigated the issue, ensuring that they understood the problem and its underlying principles. They genuinely believed that reflection and learning occur continuously during the process.

Ensure the Understanding is "Profound": Practice teams should organize activities where team members share their experiences and personal growth, and record changes in students' cognitive perspectives before and after participating in social practice. This helps in evaluating the effectiveness of character education among graduate students. Students should engage in educational activities that enhance their understanding of national and rural revitalization policies and deepen their personal sense of mission. The Most Beautiful Xiangxi Culture Site Construction Practice Team at Central South University of Forestry and Technology focused on outcome-oriented practices, primarily through documentaries and interviews. They recorded students' understanding and perceptions of national rural revitalization policies before and after the practice, encouraging each member to share a significant practice story that elevates their individual values and aspirations.

Ensure the Results are "High-Quality": Showcasing the outcomes is an effective way to summarize the practice. Practice teams should emphasize consolidating and expanding the results, taking students' learning and experiences to a deeper and more extensive level. They can achieve this by producing research interview records, creating micro-documentary films, conducting special report meetings upon returning to the university, and engaging in extensive promotion through student organizations. These activities will widen the scope of education and enhance its effectiveness.

4. Building a Practice System for Innovative Ability with "Three Visits to the Countryside" Summer Social Practice as the Leader

4.1. Stimulating Graduate Students' Innovation Potential

Guided by the positive incentives in the university's scholarship management regulations, the subjective initiative of graduate students in the field of landscape architecture at our school has been continuously strengthened in terms of professional theoretical innovation. This is evident in the increasing enthusiasm for applying for graduate student research and innovation projects, leading to a significant rise in research output compared to previous years. From 2018 to 2023, the landscape architecture discipline collectively applied for 50 graduate student science and technology innovation funds, involving more than 150 participants. This resulted in the approval of six provincial-level graduate student research and innovation projects, including one key project. In addition, 15 university-level project approvals were granted, equivalent to the total number of approvals from the previous ten years. Graduate students from our discipline published five SCI papers as the first authors, accounting for 21% of high-level landscape architecture papers at our university. Furthermore, two individuals received awards for academic achievements in the graduate student category. By focusing on academic training and strengthening basic theoretical research, the academic

competence of graduate students in the landscape architecture discipline has significantly improved.

4.2. Active Participation in Various Academic Competitions

Currently, there are no specific competitions related to landscape architecture in the Chinese Graduate Student Innovation Practice Series or the Hunan Provincial Graduate Student Innovation Competition. However, due to the rich content of research and the thriving development of the field of landscape architecture, numerous themed events have been established by domestic and international professional organizations and industry associations. In recent years, our discipline has promoted innovation, creativity, and originality to expand academic horizons and enhance professional skills. We have enthusiastically supported the participation of graduate students and teachers in competitions such as the IFLA International Student Landscape Architecture Design Competition, the China-Japan-Korea University Student Landscape Architecture Design Competition, the LE:NOTRE Landscape Forum and International Student Design Competition, the Chinese Landscape Architecture Society (CHSLA) University Student Design Competition, the China Habitat Environment Design Annual Award, the Yuan Ye Cup International Landscape Architecture Competition (Student Division), and other competitions organized by domestic industries and businesses, achieving outstanding results. Through these competitions, the professional competence of graduate students has been significantly enhanced to varying degrees.

4.3. Facilitating Channels for Innovation and Entrepreneurship Education

Innovation and entrepreneurship education is one of the specific measures to deepen the reform of higher education. It is the primary form of stimulating creativity and nurturing the main force for "mass entrepreneurship and innovation." Building on a solid theoretical foundation and professional competence, our discipline actively responds to the call of the new era, encouraging graduate students to actively engage in innovation and entrepreneurship practice, with a focus on the conversion of productivity. For instance, Zhang Sheng, a graduate student in our school who graduated in 2018, led a team to apply for a project titled "Research and Production of Plant-Based Cosmetics Based on Traditional Plant Applications," which won the bronze medal in the first National Forestry Innovation and Entrepreneurship Competition and the first prize in the fourth Hunan Province "Internet+" College Student Innovation and Entrepreneurship Competition.

4.4. Implementing Character Education and Enhancing Students' Abilities

Our discipline actively implements the "Outline of the Quality Improvement Project for Ideological and Political Work in Higher Education" and proactively aligns with the national strategies for rural revitalization and targeted poverty alleviation. Over the past three years, we have organized more than 20 professional summer practice teams involving over 220 individuals who went to rural towns and countryside areas with beautiful natural landscapes to conduct summer professional practice activities. This has led to the development of a new model for character education that organically integrates disciplinary course practice teaching, social practice activities, innovation and entrepreneurship education, and science and technology-driven agriculture. In August 2020, our landscape architecture discipline conducted extensive research in Yutou Village, a poverty-stricken area that is part of the school's poverty alleviation efforts. Based on the research report, a planning design was awarded the gold prize in the 9th International Landscape Architecture Design Competition and was selected as an outstanding report in the "Technology Decorates Green Mountains and Waters and Innovation Supports Rural Revitalization" project, which was organized by the China Forestry Education Association. All ten participating doctoral and master's students

expressed that being able to apply their knowledge and contribute to poverty alleviation was the most valuable spiritual wealth they gained.

4.5. Establishment of the "Floral Landscape" Design Competition

As an effective complement to innovative ability development, our discipline established the "Floral Landscape" Design Competition. This competition is our university's first design competition that integrates preliminary design, tree seedling procurement, and on-site construction. It is evident that this competition effectively increases student participation and provides students with more practical opportunities for training. As a result, this activity holds practical significance. The "Floral Landscape" competition has been held at our university for three years. Guided by the concept of national ecological civilization construction, the competition appropriately organizes various stages, effectively enhancing students' hands-on abilities and practical skills. Simultaneously, it enriches campus activities and enhances student cohesion.

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