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Remote Community Engagement in the Time of COVID-19, a Surging Racial Justice Movement, Wildfires, and an Election Year

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Abstract

Due to wildfires in the fall of 2019 and the COVID-19 pandemic in the spring of 2020, Sonoma State University lost 50 service-learning courses and, as a result, almost 900 fewer students completed a service-learning course than in the previous year. During the summer of 2020, the Center for Community Engagement began developing service-learning projects that were designed to be done remotely and either address COVID-19 or engage students with involvement in the fall 2020 U.S. election. Later, opportunities to address racial injustice and the wildfires were integrated. The opportunities described require active but remote participation within the community; however, it is possible that students find it challenging to connect their remote experiences to real community need and academic and civic learning. The flexibility and creativity developed for remote service-learning projects are essential in the ongoing adjustment to the changing needs of students and community partners.

Introduction

According to the Carnegie Foundation (Brown University, n.d.), community engagement describes collaboration between higher education institutions and their larger local, regional/state, national, and/or global communities for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity. Community engagement can be curricular or co-curricular and be teaching and

learning, scholarship, and/or direct or indirect service centered. One form of community engagement is service-learning.

Service-learning is a pedagogy in which community service is integrated into academic courses. The service that students complete serves as a text for the course. Like all community engagement, reciprocity and partnership are important. Community partners play a crucial role in student academic and civic learning while getting much-needed work accomplished. While not all community engagement includes reflection, service-learning includes a process of critical reflection that helps students connect their activities to their learning. Even when in-person service-learning is completed, it requires flexibility and determination on the part of all involved, including students, faculty, and community partners.

According to the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP), service-learning is a high-impact practice that helps students achieve essential **learning outcomes "for individuals and for a nation dependent on economic creativity and democratic vitality"** (AAC&U Leadership Council, 2011, p.1). In addition, service learning is the only high-impact practice in which underrepresented students are more likely to participate than their peers (Kuh, 2008).

The quality of the faculty experience, student learning outcomes, and impact on community partners is greatly influenced by the crucial relationship between faculty members and community partners. Simply stated, that relationship is the crux of all community engagement. For example, one study shows that delegated partnerships—those with coordinators who focused exclusively on coordination and played no role in program participation—are likely to produce predefined outcomes, while undelegated partnerships are likely to produce codefined outcomes, which are outcomes defined by and tailored to the needs of both partners (Dorado et al., 2008). When faculty members are less engaged in the partnership, the quality of the experience tends to be lower for all involved. This highlights the role faculty members have in developing community partnerships for the purposes of service-learning.

Central to effective service-learning is a process called reflection, also called processing, critical analysis, and reflective critical analysis. Reflection helps students link their service experiences in the community with the academic and civic learning objectives of the course. Most effective is when the faculty member, often collaboratively with the community partner, intentionally designs the reflection to work with a variety of student learning styles and to happen throughout the course, not just at the end (Eyler & Giles, 1999).

Reflection is not only a means to integrate service and course content; it is also critical in challenging or reinforcing conclusions that grow out of the experience. Students may find their assumptions or philosophies challenged through service-learning and may need to hear other opinions to help understand their experience. Through discussions in an open forum, students can consider their own experience and conclusions in a broader context. Without thinking about the experience, the service may do more harm than good, especially if it reinforces inaccurate stereotypes (Eby, 1998).

Service-learning activities have traditionally included face-to-face efforts in which students provide community service to community partners. Activities such as tutoring, food distribution, and visiting with the elderly have been widespread. Environmental work, research, political activism, and indirect project-based work is also included in the umbrella of service-learning at many institutions; however, direct interpersonal work is still most common. The rise of COVID-19 put an end to almost all these activities as universities disallowed most in-person work. Many community partners were overwhelmed with making their own internal adjustments to working remotely, addressing the needs of the growing population of those who needed food and shelter, and even being a COVID-19 healthcare service provider. As a result, at the end of the spring 2019 semester, many community partners canceled even indirect projects that could easily have been continued online.

Sonoma State University (SSU) is one of 23 campuses in the California State University (CSU) system. Before COVID-19, approximately 484,300 students were enrolled, and nearly 120,000 undergraduate and graduate students earned degrees each year from the CSU (2018). It is the largest public 4-year system of higher education in the United States (CSU, 2017a). Almost all the students in the CSU come from California, either directly from California public schools or as transfers from California community colleges. More than 50% of all CSU students are students of color, and 33% are first-generation college students. Almost half of undergraduates are Pell grant recipients (CSU, 2018). On May 12, 2020, the CSU system was the first in the United States to announce that, with some exceptions for nursing and labs, most classes in the system would be remote in the fall of 2020 due to COVID-19 (Burke, 2020).

SSU had 9,200 undergraduate and graduate students in 2018–2019. Like most campuses in the CSU, SSU is recognized as a Hispanic-serving institution (CSU, 2017b). Further, SSU's strategic plan includes core values in Community Engagement and Diversity and Social Justice (Sonoma State University, n.d.). Service-learning is an important strategy at SSU for addressing these core values and, before COVID-19, the rise in the number of service-learning courses and the number of students who completed service-learning courses steadily rose each year. Faculty members expressed the belief that although teaching service-learning courses was more work for them, their students learned more; once faculty members tried it, they committed to the service-learning pedagogy. While the institutional commitment to service-learning at SSU was not as strong as at other institutions in which there are specific service-learning requirements for students or faculty, more than half of all SSU graduates had at least one service-learning course by graduation. Further, SSU leadership has invested significantly in the Center for Community Engagement (CCE) which, in turn, supports faculty and community partner service-learning efforts.

In 2018–2019, 3,680 SSU students participated in 198 service-learning class sections. However, due to wildfires in the fall of 2019 and the COVID-19 pandemic in the spring of 2020, SSU lost 50 service-learning courses, and, as a result, almost 900 fewer students completed a service-learning course than the previous year. To be clear, the courses still existed, and students still enrolled in them; however, the service-learning aspects of the courses were eliminated due to the disallowance of in-person activity and the changing needs of the community partners. This was a crisis for SSU, as the university relies on service-learning courses as a high-impact practice for its large population of underrepresented students and to address institutional core values.

Because there are so many people with often competing needs and interests involved, flexibility and creativity are always important with service-learning. Fall 2019 was the third year in a row of local wildfires that not only destroyed homes, businesses, and lives but also resulted in canceled classes and service-learning projects. As in past years, new needs were identified due to the fires. Most, but not all, classes designed as service-learning classes were able to engage with community partners and pivot to provide valuable learning experiences to students and much-needed service to community partners. Likewise, while the CCE supported service-learning in other election years, COVID-19 and the move to online instruction was a new challenge for the CCE.

During the summer of 2020, the CCE began developing service-learning projects that were designed to be completed remotely and either address COVID-19 or engage students with involvement in the fall 2020 U.S. election. With the murder of George Floyd and the surging racial justice movement, the CCE was assigned to take a leadership role in SSU's efforts to address racial injustice. The CCE responded to these new responsibilities by developing options for service-learning that were not only remote and engaged students with the election, but also addressed racial injustice. In the fall of 2020, Sonoma County suffered a series of devastating wildfires for the fourth year in a row. These fires impacted service-learning efforts as well. The CCE worked to facilitate the integration of the effects of the wildfires into service-learning efforts and, for the first time in the 4-year period, did not lose a single service-learning class due to wildfires.

Switching to Remote Service-Learning with Integration of Election Year, Racial Justice Movement, and Wildfires Efforts

SSU started by reaching out to community partners to identify opportunities that their students could complete remotely. The CCE emailed and followed up with phone calls to check in on the well-being of its partners and see how SSU could help. There was reason to suspect that simply asking, "What kind of remote help do you need?" might not be effective, as everyone was overwhelmed. Supporting SSU students was not and could not be the partner's priority. Thus, the CCE provided some ideas to the partners of work students could easily provide remotely and found that this helped the partners to be creative. Partners began requesting help with many activities that did not require students to be in person. Activities included helping with translation of written materials and interpretation of meetings over Zoom; writing informational materials including brochures, web pages, blogs, and manuals; making videos for public relations purposes, providing instruction on everything from exercise to civics in French for high school students, and interviewing volunteers and donors; writing grants; recording and identifying bird calls; supporting social media efforts; helping community organizations develop new funding strategies; helping community partners develop plans for merging or even shutting down; and much more. SSU has an established history of engaging in these types of project-based activities that do not require the physical presence of students. Several classes were able to pivot to this type of work at the end of the spring semester, and classes completed service-learning projects in these capacities in the fall.

This was an election year, so the CCE worked to develop remote service-learning opportunities that addressed civic engagement and political participation. As early as 2008, there was recognition that students were using social media for civic engagement activity (Donnelly-Smith, 2014). The CCE encouraged faculty members to take on remote project-based work focused on civics. Students used email and social media to encourage others to register to vote, write emails to elected officials, support racial justice movements, and participate in remote city council meetings as class assignments. While all service-learning uses reflection to help students connect their service to their academic and civic learning, reflection is even more important for civic engagement activities, as many students find this kind of involvement more overwhelming than participating in direct service (Farrah & O'Conner, 2008).

SSU also developed a partnership with the Sonoma County Library launching the Community Diary Project/Sonoma Responds. All the students' work is shared with the Sonoma County Library to be cataloged and preserved for future generations, with details to follow. This has since become SSU's largest effort, with more than 50 class sections across all academic schools participating in the fall 2020 semester. Faculty members assign questions or prompts that are related to the course material of their specific classes, and students develop responses in writing, video, or via visual art. While it is possible that the same student might be enrolled in more than one class participating in the project, the work they contribute is quite different in a chemistry class than in a business class or an English class. Involvement can be as simple as a guided personal reflection that connects to the course content once or throughout the semester. Students can also go beyond reflecting on their own experience and collect the stories of others, such as other leaders or people whose stories are not often collected, including the Latinx community, elderly people, people with disabilities, and children. Faculty members have been encouraged to include prompts not just related to COVID-19 but also to the racial justice movement, the impact of wildfires, and the election, when appropriate to the content of their course.

As a result, some classes did not write about their experiences with COVID-19 at all and instead focused exclusively on the election, the racial justice movement, or the fires. For example, one sociology section focused almost exclusively on the racial justice movement in their assignments for the Community Diary Project. The faculty member assigned "two diary entries with the intention of learning to: (1) apply understanding of course content to everyday life, (2) recognize how race shapes their own life, and (3) explain

one or two forms of racism of particular personal importance" (Walters, 2020). Through this process, "students recognized the ways their racial and class positionalities have affected their personal experiences during this pandemic" (Farris, 2020). Students also understood that they were contributing to the historical record and that SSU was in partnership with Sonoma County Library; students understood they were in a service-learning class (Walters, 2020).

Service-learners participated in story sharing, which has been shown to have beneficial effects on processing stress (Walters, 2020). The student artifacts will be donated to the Sonoma County Library for the historical record. Although there is some evidence that the lack of connection between the faculty members and the library is limiting the depth of the experience, learning, and impact, all involved recognize that under these extreme circumstances, this is much better than providing no opportunities for service-learning or community partnerships at all. In the future, the CCE will encourage faculty members to deepen their reflection activities to compensate for this weaker community partner connection.

While some faculty members with more experience in service-learning were concerned about the lack of connection to the community partner, many expressed appreciation for the simplicity and flexibility of this project. Some said that they had been challenged to connect their academic purposes to address community partner needs in the past, but this project allowed them to craft their assignments in any way they felt was appropriate and relevant. Others shared that they were able to pivot when the wildfires hit and again when the election results were slowly being reported and adjust their assignments accordingly.

Hollister et al. (2008) recommend encouraging students at different institutions to collaborate on civic engagement efforts. In recognition of this, SSU developed a partnership with another CSU, Northridge, to launch the Freshmen Civic Engagement Letter Writing Exchange. This service-learning project engaged classes of first-year students at SSU with another class of first-year students at another CSU Northridge. The students in the two classes paired up and exchanged letters throughout the semester about the importance of civic engagement and their own civic involvement. Some topics included how to vote and how to participate in the political sphere. All letter exchanges were conducted digitally. Faculty members used reflection strategies not only to help students connect their letter writing to course learning outcomes but also to critique if peer education is service. Two SSU classes of first-generation college students participated in the fall 2020 semester. Of course, working with other institutions necessitates remote collaboration, so this project was not only appropriate because it was an election year, but also because it was designed to be conducted remotely.

SSU is also pursuing remote-friendly visiting with homebound elderly people as a service-learning project. The university is looking to partner with organizations that serve elderly people and match them with service-learners. Discussion topics that are relevant to course learning goals will be assigned by faculty members.

Conclusion

Service-learning is a crucial pedagogy for faculty members who want their students not only to learn academic and civic content but to provide support in the community as well. The move to a remote environment in the times of COVID-19, a surging racial justice movement, wildfires, and an election year provided unique challenges and opportunities. The most important lesson for practitioners and faculty members to understand is that remote rather than in-person service-learning requires even more flexibility and creativity for several reasons. First, while all the remote opportunities described require active participation within the community remotely, it may be that students are challenged to connect their remote experiences to real community need as well as academic and civic learning. Although research about the importance of reflection in a remote environment is not yet available, reflection is likely even more important to help students connect their work to their academic and civic learning. Second, in times of crises, universities cannot expect community partners to adjust to the needs of the university, so it falls to the university to boldly collaborate and adjust. Third, no

remote service-learning or, possibly, coursework is realistic without broad student access to reliable internet service and current software and hardware.

The flexibility and creativity developed for remote service-learning are essential in the ongoing adjustment to the changing needs of the students and community partners. Post-COVID-19, practitioners should plan to invest further in these partnerships developed during this time. It will also be important to encourage faculty members who have begun using service-learning pedagogy to work to deepen their partnerships, student learning, and community impact once in-person service-learning is again an option. Research opportunities include comparing the impact of in-person and remote service-learning in terms of academic learning, civic learning, community impact, and other outcomes.

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