

Critical, Interdisciplinary, and Collaborative Approaches to Virtual Community-Engaged Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic and Social Unrest in the Twin Cities

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Abstract

A women's university in Minnesota responding to the COVID-19 pandemic and social unrest in the Twin Cities provides a setting to explore ways in which critical, interdisciplinary, and collaborative campus approaches to virtual community-engaged courses and research bring focus to student learning and broaden the scope of collective university impact on urgent and emerging community issues. Three campus community engagement initiatives focusing on racial housing segregation, voting rights, and incarcerated women show the interplay and cumulative impact of curricular, cocurricular, and campuswide responses to systemic injustice. Drawing on interviews with faculty members, student evaluations, and community partner reflections, the author reflects on what can be learned from the adaptations represented in these three community-engaged initiatives during a time of crisis with critical and collective community and campus response.

Keywords: community-engaged learning, critical service-learning, virtual service-learning, community engagement professionals, campus-based initiatives, project-based service-learning



Like many community and civic engagement centers on university campuses across the country, the Center for Community Work and Learning at St. Catherine University (St. Kate) in St. Paul, Minnesota, was called to respond to and help students to reflect and make meaning of the growing social unrest sparked by systemic inequalities revealing themselves in the uneven community impacts of the pandemic; the same systemic inequalities, especially racial inequalities, that quite literally lit the Twin Cities on fire in the aftermath of the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis on May 25, 2020. St. Catherine University's mission is to value and integrate the liberal arts and professional education within the Catholic intellectual tradition, to center women's education, and to emphasize scholarly inquiry and social justice teaching as lived by our founders, the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet. The unrest amplified the uni-

versity's clarion call for critical social justice frameworks and a focus on systemic inequalities as a campus community and in the classroom.

Established in 2000, St. Catherine University's Center for Community Work and Learning houses student employment programs and service-learning course leadership; it is also the hub for the campus Civic Engagement Collective. The Center employs four staff members and on average six to eight student coordinators. The Center is unique in that it supports both curricular and cocurricular community engagement efforts. The three student employment programs include paid internships with local nonprofits, a tutoring program with area schools and afterschool programs, and an assistantship program that pairs students with a faculty or staff mentor to work on research or as a teaching assistant. The service-learning coursework supports on

average 100 community-engaged courses a year from undergraduate to graduate, across many disciplines.

St. Catherine University is the largest private women's college in the nation and has a diverse student population. The incoming undergraduate 2020 class is over 50% multicultural; 42% of St. Kate's students are Pell Grant eligible; and 31% are first-generation college students. Community-engaged learning that is embedded in courses at St. Catherine University is accessible to this community of students who have many work and family obligations outside the classroom that could prevent them from participating in unpaid cocurricular activities, or more traditional service-learning that has a set number of individual hours that students must document on site with a local community partner. In a March 2020 Annual Current Student Survey conducted by the university, 86% of graduating College for Women students indicated that they had participated in at least one community-engaged course. Students also indicated that their greatest level of connections and engagement at St. Kate's happened within classroom discussions and activities in the classroom. For all of these reasons, service-learning at St. Kate's, even before COVID, relied heavily on in-class time for community-engaged group projects, or one or two on-site experiences tied to larger reflection and sometimes civic or advocacy assignments connected to a community issue. The community-engaged courses that ran virtually during the pandemic built on what had been working for students before and allowed students to stay engaged, even when taking their classes from a thousand miles away from the university, or while supporting their younger siblings' virtual school day.

This reflective essay offers the opportunity to practice what we encourage our students to do every day—to reflect critically on lived experiences and what can be learned and applied in future work and learning. Some of the questions that the experiences during the pandemic raise for me, and for the field of community-engaged learning in the future, include

1. Can virtual service-learning projects increase the accessibility of service-learning for more students who may not otherwise be able to take time outside class and travel to on-site partner sites?

2. Does the coordination of multiple community-engaged courses within a larger multiyear project and social justice theme increase the ability of faculty to deepen aspects of critical service-learning in ways they would not otherwise be able to?
3. To what extent can multiple community-engaged courses aligned across semesters have a cumulative positive impact on a community-based or campuswide social justice project or effort?

Three Community Engagement Initiatives

Here I explore three community engagement initiatives at St. Catherine University during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic and how collaborative, interdisciplinary virtual projects impacted collective impact, student engagement, and attention to critical service-learning tenets of social justice and critical consciousness. I explore these initiatives as a way of unpacking the themes: (1) Mapping Prejudice/Welcoming the Dear Neighbor? collaboration, (2) the Women's Prison Book Project letter-writing campaign, and (3) the women's suffrage centennial. From these examples, the article will share what implications our learning holds for the field of community-engaged learning in higher education.

Mapping Prejudice/Welcoming the Dear Neighbor? Collaboration

The University of Minnesota's Mapping Prejudice (<https://mappingprejudice.umn.edu/>) builds on the work of others who have begun to create digital maps of historical housing inequities. Racial covenants were legal clauses embedded in property deeds that barred people who were not White from buying or occupying land and homes in specific areas. Although these covenants are now illegal, much of the residential segregation patterns and the structural inequalities that resulted persist today. Documentary filmmaker Daniel Bergin told the story of racialized housing discrimination in the Twin Cities in his Twin Cities Public Television (TPT) original documentary *Jim Crow of the North* (<https://www.tpt.org/minnesota-experience/video/jim-crow-of-the-north-stijws/>). For a number of years, the Center for Community Work and Learning connected students to the Mapping Prejudice efforts within Hennepin

County that included having students look at scanned housing deeds to identify and track the racial covenants within the deeds to build the map that was the first ever visual representation of racial covenants in an American city.

“Welcoming the Dear Neighbor?” (<https://welcomingthedeardneighbor.org/>) is the name of St. Catherine University’s work in Ramsey County in collaboration with Mapping Prejudice. The name is a nod to the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet, who claim the love of the dear neighbor without distinction as part of their mission. The project focus is to help community members gain a better understanding of housing segregation and subsequent racial inequalities in Ramsey County, where the capital city of St. Paul and the St. Catherine University campus reside. The project seeks to learn more about the stories of legal housing segregation in the past in order to better understand our present context and influence better policies in the future. Starting in 2019, History and Political Science professors worked with student researchers—employed through a cocurricular Community Work and Learning program—conducting archival research on how the St. Paul newspapers reported issues of housing and race in order to illuminate this hidden history and the stories alongside the map as well as research to scan and map racial housing deeds in the neighborhood surrounding the University’s St. Paul campus.

As COVID-19 cases began to spike in Minnesota over the summer of 2020, the Center for Community Work and Learning made the hard call that all service-learning would be performed in a virtual-only format for the foreseeable future. However, we quickly realized that the work of the Mapping Prejudice/Welcoming the Dear Neighbor? collaboration was well-situated to respond to the need for community-engaged learning when many of our local nonprofit partners were not in a place to support new virtual service-learning projects. This university-wide initiative offered the university community a tangible effort to work on together to address issues of systemic inequalities. It could include not only students, but also alumni, local neighborhood associations, and the broader public. After George Floyd was killed in Minneapolis and thousands took to the streets to protest police racial violence, community interest in contributing to

the Mapping Prejudice/Welcoming the Dear Neighbor? collaboration grew. The group set up weekly sessions throughout the spring, summer, and fall to introduce people to the effort and walk them through the process of looking through a digitized housing deed for a racial covenant.

The growing need for virtual service-learning work across many St. Catherine University courses, coupled with an interest in service-learning projects that help students to look at systems and power dynamics in meaningful and authentic ways, made this project a natural fit for the times. Staff with the Center for Community Work and Learning created a flexible Mapping Prejudice/Welcoming the Dear Neighbor? module for faculty to plug into their syllabi that helped to set the context for the history of racialized housing discrimination in the Twin Cities, led students through reflection and perspective-taking exercises, and then facilitated students through the deed transcription process so that they could contribute to building out the Ramsey County map. The early research by the faculty and students uncovered racial covenants in the neighborhood surrounding the university, making the project even more personal for participating students.

Between the summer and fall sessions of 2020, 10 service-learning courses and nearly 200 students participated in the Mapping Prejudice/Welcoming the Dear Neighbor? collaboration. Together they transcribed over 150 housing deeds, identifying racial covenants in houses that contributed to the early completion of a Ramsey County map visualizing the history and legacy of racial housing segregation in the area. This data was then overlaid with neighborhoods with high risks for COVID infections to demonstrate the public health impacts of systemic inequities, supporting calls for advocacy and change to close these gaps. The community-engaged courses participating in these efforts spanned the disciplines and schools at the university and included students from first-year seminars, graduate occupational therapy, physical therapy, sociology, data science, public health, digital storytelling, and economics courses. Faculty members interviewed commented that having a common project that addressed issues of systemic injustice was a critical component to their students’ engagement. In final student evaluations, 98% of students responded that they agreed or strongly

agreed that the service-learning project enhanced what they learned in the course. Students' responses from final evaluations in summer and fall 2020 indicate that the service-learning project contributed to their understanding of systemic racial inequities:

I learned so much!! I was skeptical about doing this course online but I really enjoyed it. The discussions my class had were some of the most insightful I have been a part of in a long time.

This partnership was a great experience as it was a crash course in building our advocacy skills which are very important to the profession, but something I don't have much experience with.

I think the service-learning really opened my eyes to the structural racism embedded in the community around us.

Mapping Prejudice project helped me better understand the how and why of our community's history

Women's Prison Book Project Letter-Writing Campaign

Like many universities, St. Catherine University has a tradition of a One Read; a book selected for the campus to read together and engage with over the course of a year. The 2020 One Read for Racial Justice selection for the year was *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, the powerful 2003 book by scholar and activist Angela Davis that explores the history of incarceration and makes a case for the abolition of prisons. St. Catherine University has a required first-year seminar, The Reflective Woman (TRW), that every College for Women and College for Adults student takes during their first year. Many TRW faculty members assigned the whole book or chapters of it as required reading to their students in the fall 2020 semester, and the St. Catherine University library staff had built out a resource page for faculty interested in incorporating the book into their classes.

The Reflective Woman course has three main course units: Composing a Life, Searching for Truth, and Working Towards Community and Justice. The third unit challenges students to understand social justice

and take action for the common good. Many of the faculty who teach TRW incorporate a service-learning component to accompany this last unit, as the experience brings alive issues of social justice and offers opportunities for students to gain hands-on experiences working directly with campus and community partners to address social justice issues, as well as the intentional classroom space for meaningful group reflection on that experience. Facing the possibility of disengaged first-year students in a virtual classroom, and the social unrest over the summer leading to contested discussions in the Twin Cities about police abolition, TRW faculty members were eager for service-learning projects within this unit that would allow their students to engage with the current issues in meaningful ways, even if it meant doing so in a virtual format.

The Center for Community Work and Learning has a long-standing relationship with the Women's Prison Book Project (<https://wpbp.org/>), a volunteer-run non-profit based in Minneapolis. Since 1994, the Women's Prison Book Project (WPBP) has provided women and transgender persons in prison free reading materials covering a wide range of topics from law and education to fiction, politics, history, and women's health. They seek to build connections with those behind the walls and to educate those on the outside about the realities of prison and the justice system. St. Catherine University service-learning students had worked over the years with the WPBP, packing books for incarcerated women and transgender individuals all over the United States who make requests through the WPBP network.

During the pandemic, the WPBP could no longer hold in-person volunteer book-packing sessions. The collective members were also keenly aware of the disproportionate impact that the COVID-19 pandemic was having on incarcerated individuals all over the country. They created a letter-writing campaign in place of their regular book delivery as a way of staying connected to their incarcerated members, letting them know they were not alone, and to solicit their responses to questions about the impacts of the COVID-19 lockdowns on their lived experiences in jails and prisons. This opportunity provided a way for St. Catherine University students to connect with, support, and learn from a unique community impacted during the pandemic. They were

also able to learn about the criminal justice system and the health and human rights impacts that policies responding to the virus were having on incarcerated women and transgender individuals. The Center for Community Work and Learning and the WPBP created a service-learning module for TRW faculty to incorporate into their classrooms as a class project. This module included readings and online resources for students to learn about incarceration and the criminal justice system, prereflection exercises to help students think about their own lived experiences and worldviews, and an introduction to the work of the WPBP and the goals of the letter-writing campaign.

Seven first-year TRW courses participated in the WPBP project, along with a graduate occupational therapy class and an undergraduate sociology class. Together, the students in these courses sent over 700 letters to incarcerated women and transgender individuals all over the United States. With the letters they also sent blank coloring pages created by local artist and activist Ricardo Levins Morales (<https://www.rlmartstudio.com/>) and a series of questions asking how the recipients' lives had been impacted in prison by the pandemic.

In response, hundreds of letters started to come from incarcerated individuals all over the country describing the living conditions during the pandemic and expressing words of hope and solidarity for others. The WPBP collective members transcribed dozens of these letters that a few St. Catherine University courses then reviewed and coded for themes that were emerging about the experiences and conditions in the prisons. This coding work was both useful to the WPBP members in the short term, and will be built upon in the months to come to identify potential points of advocacy efforts that the collective may choose to organize their members around. For the students, reading the letters after having sent their own brought the project full circle, deepened their understanding of the issues incarcerated individuals face, and raised their critical awareness of their own lived experiences as they related to the criminal justice system. Even though the process of assembling and sending letter-writing packets to each of the 100+ students participating in the project was a challenge, the tactile act of writing an "old-fashioned" letter proved to be very meaningful for many students. They were then able to re-

flect together as a learning community in their virtual classroom spaces. Students and faculty reflected that the shared experience brought feelings of connection at a time when they were physically distanced from campus and from each other.

Celebrating the 100th Anniversary of the Women's Suffrage Movement

The Civic Engagement Collective's work is a campuswide effort with student leadership and staff and faculty engagement from both academic and student affairs. The efforts of the collective during this last election cycle included voter education and engagement with students in virtual formats such as the Popcorn and Politics event and social media campaigns. St. Catherine University has long had a robustly engaged student body when it comes to voting. Although the results reflecting student participation in the 2020 elections are not yet available, the most recent National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE; <https://idhe.tufts.edu/nslve>) report indicated that St. Catherine University students have been voting at a much higher rate than college students across the nation. In 2018, St. Kate's students garnered a voting rate of 60.1%, compared to the 2018 voting rate of 39.1% for all institutions (Institute for Democracy & Higher Education, 2019).

The presidential election season of 2020 also marked the centennial anniversary of the women's suffrage movement. The university had plans to showcase the suffrage centennial and the stories often not told of local women of color in the movement through campuswide educational and engagement efforts. University partner and filmmaker Daniel Bergin's 2020 TPT documentary *Citizen* (<https://www.tpt.org/citizen/>) highlights the diverse group of Minnesota women's suffrage leaders as well as current voter engagement. Just before the pandemic, during the presidential primary in March, TPT's all-female film crew visited the St. Catherine University campus to film service-learning students in a classroom, voter education around campus, and the voter van with students to head out to the local polling location. This footage, along with interviews with St. Catherine University faculty members, became an integral part of the documentary. Due in part to the close connections between the film and the St. Catherine University student and faculty involvement, fall 2020 plans had originally

included hosting the premiere of the *Citizen* documentary at the O'Shaughnessy Theater located on the university campus. When the pandemic hit, the interdisciplinary campus planning team switched gears and worked with TPT to embed the film within the Integrated Learning Series (<https://www.stkate.edu/events/integrated-learning-series>). The Integrated Learning Series is a campuswide initiative that brings together scholars, community members, and the campus community to activate the liberal arts pedagogy. The series has included multimedia performances, speakers, events, and public dialogues on a range of social justice themes. The virtual Zoom events during October explored the challenges and tensions within the suffrage story, including the exclusion of women of color and Native women from gaining the right to vote with the 19th Amendment. The virtual showing of *Citizen* and Q&A with filmmaker Daniel Bergin in October engaged nearly 300 people within the campus community. It also showcased local artist Leslie Barlow's suffrage portraits, which St. Kate's was able to acquire on loan for our academic year and are displayed in our student center building as well as online (<http://gallery.stkate.edu/exhibitions/minnesota-suffragists>).

As with the other campuswide initiatives, the suffrage centennial became a focus point for multiple service-learning courses across disciplines. Laying the groundwork for this deeper effort was a fall semester 2019 honors class, *Nevertheless She Persisted*. Cotaught by Communication Studies and History faculty members, the course worked with the Minnesota History Center's senior exhibit developer on their suffrage centennial exhibit. Each student was assigned an individual or an organization in the suffrage movement in Minnesota to research at the Minnesota History Center (<https://www.mnhs.org/historycenter>). This course and their involvement with both the TPT *Citizen* documentary and with the suffrage centennial led to other service-learning courses building on the partnerships and incorporating service-learning projects appropriate to the course discipline. These courses continued their service-learning projects virtually in the fall 2020 and spring 2021 semesters, and they showcased the diversity of approaches to the virtual engagement.

A public relations writing course had students write essays about suffrage topics, which appeared on the TPT website in

support of the *Citizen* documentary. An art and technology class created digital content related to the suffrage movement. A fashion course had students create original designs inspired by the suffrage movement, ranging from historical and cultural interpretations to symbolic statements about current voter engagement struggles; their work was featured and aired online by TPT Originals (<https://www.tptoriginals.org/explore-the-fashion-choices-of-suffragists-who-fought-for-the-19th-amendment/>). Communications students added their written reflections on the suffrage movement past and present for a TPT collection titled "Then & Now: Reflections on Women's Suffrage" (<https://www.tptoriginals.org/projects/then-now-reflections-on-womens-suffrage/>). A Buyer Behavior Market Research class project surveyed first-year seminar students who watched the *Citizen* documentary as a part of their TRW class to document how watching the film increased their likelihood to vote in the presidential elections. Their research showed that St. Catherine University students surveyed before and after watching *Citizen* were more likely to vote in the presidential elections and to show an interest in further civic engagement activities after learning about the history of the women's suffrage movement in Minnesota.

Reflections and Areas for Future Learning

These three projects have a few things in common. They all involved more than one St. Catherine University course. In fact, all three included tie-ins to a campuswide initiative that involved the entire campus community in some way. All three projects addressed some larger issue of systemic injustice that inspired people to participate and connected to the social justice mission of the university. All three projects allowed for both curricular and cocurricular involvement and for various service-learning courses to connect to the broader work in ways that fit with their course learning objectives and frameworks. These three projects show the potential cumulative impact and increased access of service-learning courses when they are strategically aligned and connected to a common campus-based social justice issue or theme, or partner organization. What could be the impact of multiyear campuswide or departmental initiatives that involve not just one or

two courses, but dozens across many disciplines? Would faculty newer to service-learning be more likely to participate if they were building on an existing body of work, relationships, and resources? Do students feel more connected and engaged in virtual settings when they know their service-learning work is a part of a broader effort and collective impact? Figure 1 illustrates the cumulative impact of multiple points of community-engaged learning working collaboratively within a shared social justice issue.

A Critical Service-Learning Framework

The literature around community engagement in higher education has increasingly reflected the influence of critical pedagogy and the need for critical approaches to service-learning and community-engaged research. These include social justice and critical consciousness competencies such as attention to power dynamics, authentic relationships, and a systems-level analysis of social problems (Daigre, 2000; Mitchell, 2008). The Center for Community Work and Learning spent the greater part of the 2019–2020 academic year leading a series

of discussions and workshops that focused on critical service-learning pedagogy and approaches that some faculty had already been developing or deepening in their service-learning courses. Based on faculty and student evaluations, and on an initial analysis of the types of service-learning courses that could be maintained virtually during COVID, the service-learning courses connected to one of the three campuswide initiatives using one or more aspects of critical service-learning tenets were most successful in meeting their learning outcomes. I will reflect on the three examples above through the lens of these key elements of critical service-learning: attention to power dynamics, authentic relationships, and systems-level analysis of social problems.

Attention to Power Dynamics

With the service-learning courses participating in the Mapping Prejudice/Welcoming the Dear Neighbor? collaboration, the time spent preparing students for the context and the historical materials they would be working with was very important. It was also important to have some space



Figure 1. Cumulative Impact of Community Engagement

for students to reflect and think about their own lived experiences as they relate to racial housing discrimination and the impact of historical policies on current racial disparities. Connections to current racial disparities explored in this project included the ways in which the COVID-19 virus is impacting communities of color at a higher rate than White communities in the Twin Cities, current housing inequities and threats of further displacement of low-income Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) residents with rising housing costs and housing demand, and the lack of trust between police and BIPOC communities.

Courses that were able to integrate these discussions and reflections during virtual class sessions to support the students' engagement with the racial covenants in housing deeds and to connect how the project related to the course objectives allowed students to be open to thinking critically about their own positionality and experience with the subject matter and to explore issues of power and privilege. The CWL staff learned that, especially in a virtual format where participants cannot always see each other's faces or read body language, it is much harder for a facilitator to see how students are reacting to and processing the information. In some courses, the class reflection on the service-learning work of transcribing the racial covenants in housing deeds was limited to a single class session facilitated by a visiting CWL staff member. The potential power dynamics between a faculty member and visiting facilitator were at times exacerbated in a virtual space where many students did not have cameras turned on and where student expectations for the purpose of the class reflection had not been set by the faculty member. Also, dynamics of perceived race, class, age, and academic authority come into play when a visiting facilitator enters a virtual space to facilitate discussions. The ability for a faculty member to build trust and rapport in a classroom is diminished in a virtual setting, and this is even more pronounced for a visiting facilitator. In a few cases, students reported that they felt triggered by either the service-learning prereflection activity itself that asked them to think about their own lived experiences and worldviews, or by the ways the historical racialized terms in the housing deeds or historic maps were presented that led them to feel pained by the use of specific language used in the racial covenants.

There are many dynamics that can be unpacked and explored from these experiences. One potential learning is that community engagement staff facilitators should work closely with faculty members to prepare for such virtual classroom engagements with attention paid to the dynamics between students and teachers when discussing topics of race and racism. Another is that facilitators, especially White-appearing facilitators, cannot assume trust in a virtual classroom when discussing social justice issues, and must work with faculty members to lay the groundwork before the discussion. Facilitators also need to be intentional and transparent about their own relationship to the subject matter and take the time to develop rapport with students, even in a virtual one-time classroom. The time and intentionality that this kind of authentic engagement takes should be explored more fully as it applies to virtual classroom discussions.

Authentic Relationships

The ability of the three campus initiatives to continue and even strengthen during the COVID-19 pandemic and the social unrest in the Twin Cities rested on the length and depth of the existing partnerships and relationships with community colleagues and between Community Work and Learning staff and university faculty and leadership. The established trust between individuals was essential to the transition to virtual communication and the ongoing adjustments all partners needed to make throughout the year to continue the work. Service-learning courses that had relied on more generic relationships with volunteer programs at area nonprofit organizations connected to many local universities were often not as likely to adapt well to the changing needs of students and community partners. It was also more likely that the faculty members who could most effectively anticipate what would be needed to best support students in virtual service-learning projects were those who had the time to spend in relationships with community partners and CWL staff members to prepare for the virtual service-learning projects.

Systems-Level Analysis of Social Problems

A campuswide focus on tangible projects that illuminated the systemic roots to current racial inequalities became a valuable teaching tool for many different types of

engagement and discipline-specific learning. Racial housing discrimination and segregation, the impact of COVID-19 on incarcerated individuals, and voting rights all proved to be larger umbrellas under which many service-learning courses could explore social issues within larger systemic contexts. Aligning multiple courses under three broad issues also made it easier for the Center for Community Work and Learning to develop educational materials and assignment models that faculty could readily adapt to their own courses to better support and integrate the service-learning activities. The social justice focus of these three projects also aligned well with the university's social justice and inclusive excellence efforts. It offered tangible ways to connect students to the campus-based discussions about antiracism that began before 2020, but that were made even more proximate given the injustices revealed by the pandemic and police violence, and the resulting trauma experienced by many in the campus community and student body. Two responses from summer 2020 service-learning students reflect the effectiveness of this approach:

I'm so glad we're wrapping up our program with this service learning course! Learning about deep rooted systemic racism in our country and state will only help me be a better clinician for my future patients.

The service learning experience has created an eye-opening experience. You see the disparities that you may have been shielded from but should not be shielded from. It has helped create a greater understanding of the community that I reside in.

Virtual Project-Based Service-Learning

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, St. Catherine University's Center for Community Work and Learning was supporting an average of 45 courses a semester that included some form of community-engaged learning. These ranged from ongoing individual service-learning frameworks wherein students worked a set number of hours over the course of the semester with a local nonprofit organization to a series of small group experiences where students could contribute to a local organization or effort a few times over the semester to classroom projects created with a community partner

to meet a specific organizational need or research question. In these project-based models, students have a concrete deliverable by the end of the semester, and they present their work or findings to an organization as a team or as a whole class. With the exception of the project-based service-learning, the majority of these activities relied heavily on students being able to work directly with people at a community site. The Center for Community Work and Learning had already been feeling the strain on St. Catherine University students to achieve a set number of individual service-learning hours outside the classroom during a community-engaged course. The pressures of school, necessary paid work, lack of reliable transportation, and family commitments made the weekly in-person service-learning increasingly difficult to achieve for many students. The use of in-class time for project-based service-learning that did not require students to be physically present individually at a local community partner site for regular hours throughout the semester grew as a way to allow more students in more service-learning courses to participate in community-engaged learning and still meet articulated needs of community partners.

In March 2020, in response to increasing COVID-19 infections in Minnesota, the Center for Community Work and Learning decided that students would no longer engage in person with community-based work and projects. The Center transitioned service-learning courses and student employment programs from in-person to virtual-only opportunities. The decreased capacity of local nonprofit organizations in the Twin Cities to work with virtual service-learning courses and students further pushed the Center to deepen existing partnerships where ongoing work on longer term projects was already under way. These projects and initiatives lent themselves well to virtual engagement with a cohort of students in a service-learning course or with research projects that were building on existing partnerships and work.

Benefits of Virtual Project-Based Service-Learning

With the growth of both online learning and service-learning, it was natural for the field to see a growing interest in virtual service-learning coursework, even before the pandemic. In the foreword to the collection *eService-Learning: Creating Experiential*

Learning and Civic Engagement Through Online and Hybrid Courses, Andy Furco writes that “eService-Learning serves as a vehicle for extending the reach and impact of students’ service-learning experiences while ensuring that online learning activities are relevant, contextualized, and linked to civic responsibility” (Furco, 2015, p.ix). The truth is that without the opportunity for virtual service-learning projects during the COVID-19 pandemic, St. Catherine University students would not have had the opportunity to connect with real-life projects and critical current issues of social justice in such direct ways. These projects expanded students’ learning and their impact on community members and community-based initiatives. Further, the virtual service-learning projects offered benefits this year that were especially relevant to student engagement and morale within the online learning classroom community. Students benefited from having a common experience in the classroom where they could reflect together and talk about the very real social justice issues being exposed by the pandemic, and draw connections from the service-learning project to the larger class themes and to their own lived experiences with the issues. A summer 2020 service-learning faculty member commented, “All students had different lived experiences coming into the class and they were able to help each other see things more broadly. Coming together and having a shared experience helps them make deeper connections.”

During the pandemic and social unrest, the virtual service-learning projects helped to build connection and community for some students in the classroom and gave them a sense of purpose that kept them engaged in the virtual format. Students also seemed to benefit from the connection the projects gave them to people in the broader community, such as incarcerated individuals, staff members with local nonprofit organizations, and St. Catherine University community members who connected to or learned from the projects they worked on. A fall 2020 service-learning faculty member observed, “All three of my courses have a community engagement component that I am relying on to keep students motivated and connected.” And, in the words of a summer 2020 service-learning student, “Connecting with real people through the Women’s Prison Book Project was the highlight of this course.”

Students were more able to communicate with the community partners on a regular basis as staff members at the local nonprofits also transitioned and adapted to virtual meeting tools and were more accessible to student teams working on virtual projects with community partners. A service-learning faculty member commented, “Clients find it is easier to connect with students as all of their work is now online. They are better able to fit in the work of responding to students and can virtually meet with them more reliably.”

Limitations of Virtual Service-Learning

The courses that kept a service-learning component even as they had to transition the course to an online format due to the pandemic were often taught by instructors who had worked for years to deepen the integration of the service-learning into the course objectives and class assignments. One service-learning faculty member commented, “When community-engaged learning is an extra, it is the first thing to go—but when it is the thing they are doing in the class it is always more meaningful and offers lifelong learning, growth and transformation.”

Although the three examples from St. Catherine University show that a lot is possible with virtual service-learning projects given the right partnerships, curriculum integration, and faculty buy-in, we still mourn the loss of connection and cannot ignore the huge toll of the COVID-19 pandemic and limited in-person contact on our students and on our community partners. Many of our local nonprofit partners need in-person support to help them meet the immediate needs of the people they serve. The nonprofit sector in Minnesota has been hit hard by layoffs and staff turnover, and the relationships that were formed over years will have much rebuilding to do when we are able to meet with our partners and community members again in person. And despite many students in virtual service-learning courses doing great work and having positive things to say about what they learned, many responses in our fall service-learning evaluations point to students’ preference for being out in the community, working with individuals and issues face to face: “I truly forgot that I am taking a service-learning class because it just feels so disconnected from the work and sense of community.” “It was harder

to learn the course content and connect with the people in the community without being able to speak to them face to face.” “I still believe that CEL is a good opportunity for students, but because of Covid-19, I don't feel that we made as big of an impact as we could have if we were able to directly work with the community.”

Final Thoughts

The last 10 months of COVID-19 have shown me that the core attributes that draw me and many other community engagement professionals to the work, no matter what format, remain consistent. The types of service-learning that have the biggest impact on students, community partners, faculty, and campus morale focus on ways to build real connections, relationships, relevance, and a sense of civic purpose. Our experiences with virtual service-learning this year point to areas where we can work to strengthen virtual project-based service-learning for students and community partners. It is important to work ahead of the course with community partners and faculty to both plan for the integration of the projects into the core course themes and also to work within a critical service-learning framework that emphasizes power dynamics, authentic relationships, and a systems-level analysis of social problems. As we move cautiously back to in-person learning, what might we want to keep from the virtual platforms, tools, and methods of communication and engagement?

Community engagement professionals have a role to play in helping institutions of higher education achieve their goals for transformative change and deepening civic engagement (Hübler & Quan, 2017, p. 101). The examples highlighted here point to the possibilities that exist for campuswide ini-

tatives with a social justice focus that can work to connect curricular and cocurricular efforts and courses across semesters. They demonstrate how service-learning courses can build on each other using varied disciplines drawing on shared social contexts and civic engagement objectives. They also show how broader community engagement projects that have service-learning courses as an ongoing foundation and concrete space for student engagement can activate a broader campus community interested in issues of social justice and transformation. How can our evaluation of individual student learning outcomes and semester-by-semester community impacts build strategically to connect service-learning course projects and impact over time? Can community engagement offices play a role not only in coordinating the planning and alignment across multiple courses and disciplines, but also in the long-term assessment of their cumulative impact on local community initiatives, campus-based efforts, and student learning outcomes?

Another important area for our office to research is the role of established longer term collective campuswide efforts with a shared social justice focus in bringing faculty newer to aspects of critical service-learning into this kind of community engagement. As we work to formalize and institutionalize an engaged faculty development program, can collective community projects be the on ramp for faculty members new to critical service-learning frameworks? We hope to build on this collective and interdisciplinary work within a social justice framework to engage faculty members from different departments and schools together to reflect on their learning, thus fostering the kind of critical reflection as a campus community that we encourage in our students.



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