

# Parent First, Essential Worker Second, Student Third: Lessons Learned From an Underrepresented Student's Journey in a Service-Learning Course During COVID-19

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## Abstract

In this reflective essay, I share lessons learned when COVID-19 necessitated immediate changes to service-learning during the spring 2020 semester. The pandemic created an environment that heightened awareness about meeting underrepresented students' needs and the benefits of solidarity and reciprocity when collaborating with community partners. As the pandemic unfolded, my focus shifted from honoring commitments to community partners and course learning objectives to recognizing that the complex realities of students' lives made being responsive to their needs paramount. One nontraditional student serves as a case study; her story underscores the deep ways the pandemic affected a student's personal and professional life. I close the article with four generalizable lessons learned that faculty can employ in support of students' success in service-learning: exercising solidarity, reciprocity, and flexibility; providing guidance in project selection; serving as model learner; and embedding support for parenting and caregiving students.

*Keywords: underrepresented students, student success, service-learning, community partnership, COVID-19*



**T**he purpose of this reflective essay is to share lessons learned from what went right—and what did not—when COVID-19 necessitated immediate changes to service-learning projects and learning outcomes during the spring 2020 semester. Although all of my students were impacted by the global pandemic, one student in particular, Dawna, had experiences as a parent and essential worker that illustrate how COVID-19 exacerbated existing inequities. I present Dawna's story as a case study. The interconnected aspects of Dawna's personal and professional responsibilities highlight why it is imperative that educators committed to promoting social justice through community-based service-learning provide flexible options that support *all* students' participation. A relationship with our community partner that was grounded in notions of solidarity (Clifford, 2017) and reciprocity (Dostilio et al., 2012; Kimmerer, 2013, 2015)

proved to be an essential resource that contributed to student success and well-being when COVID-19 forced rapid changes upon higher education. Dawna's journey navigating the challenges as a parent, essential worker, and student provides insights about opportunities to strengthen approaches to supporting students who are traditionally underrepresented in higher education.

## Voice and Positionality

The essay is written in my voice—Sara, the first author. Dawna is the second author. The third author, Margaret, is a colleague whose critical insights about service-learning and social justice pushed Dawna and me to deeper levels of understanding about the implications of her journey. Margaret was not involved in the class and did not know Dawna prior to working on this case study; her distance allowed her to play the role of

debriefers as well. Debriefing is a credibility strategy from qualitative research (Bassey, 1999; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Although this case study is not the result of a qualitative inquiry, an external observer nonetheless proved relevant in that Margaret could ask critical questions that Dawna and I, so close to the experience, might overlook.

The choice to present the essay in my voice was based on two factors: First, the first-person voice promotes readability. Second, Dawna's multifaceted roles as a parent, essential worker, and student left her limited time for writing this article. She contributed to, commented on, refined, clarified, and approved all aspects of her case study, but she was unable to devote the time required for presenting extensive narrative in her voice. My approach to our collaboration was influenced by Cooney and Kleinsasser's (1997) insights about the necessity of establishing and *reestablishing* informed consent in qualitative research. Although Dawna is my coauthor and collaborator and not a research subject, I viewed my ethical obligations to her as being the same as if she were. In the spirit of being transparent about our methods (Smagorinsky, 2008), I offer the following as an example of how Dawna and I reaffirmed her consent in our collaboration.

The peer review feedback on an earlier version of this case study asked for more details about Dawna. I proceeded to share the reviewer's comment, and asked her, "Tell me your thoughts here, Dawna: What more would you like to share?" She responded:

I feel comfortable enough in my situation and self at this point to be fairly close to an open book. I was pregnant at 17 and delivered my son at 18, didn't finish high school but did complete my GED the year I would have graduated, and I am a first-generation student. Neither parent continued education beyond their GED/diploma.

In this affirmation of her willingness to include details about her life in this case study, Dawna shared multiple identities that characterize her as a student from populations traditionally underrepresented on college campuses: first generation, GED, and teen mother. Although first-generation students (Ives & Castillo-Montoya, 2020) and GED recipients (Forrest Cataldi et al.,

2018) face challenges and barriers to college completion, Dawna's identity as a teen mother is associated with even lower graduation rates. However, Dawna is on track to join the 3% of women who have a child when they are 18–19 years old who go on to earn a 4-year college degree before age 30 (Hoffman, 2006). An analysis of the reading and math achievement trajectories of children born to teen mothers compared to older mothers suggests that Dawna's educational achievements may also have a favorable impact on her children because maternal education translates to "positive achievement outcomes for the next generation, particularly for those children who may be most at risk for poor outcomes" (Tang et al., 2014, p. 190).

Four years before I met Dawna, another student, Hannah, who also became a mother as a teenager, led me to better understand how the responsibilities of parenting can impact academic performance. Hannah and I met in a required general education course that I teach; it focuses on diversity, ethics, and civics. The final project for the course is an action plan for addressing a human rights issue that the student cares about. In researching how to reduce teen pregnancy rates, Hannah "stumbled across Idaho's sex education law. It hadn't changed since it was written in 1970" (Manny, 2018, paras. 4–5). Hannah proposed revising the legislation to reflect medically accurate information, and her idea was so good that I encouraged her to try to make the change happen. I joined her in the attempt; our citizen lobbying initiative has not yet succeeded. However, our experiences led to my having the opportunity to teach the course about advocacy described in this article.

My connection to Hannah also had a deep impact by propelling me further along the journey of recognizing, processing, and releasing misperceptions and biases. When I began my career in higher education in 2001, I taught in ways that privileged full-time, traditional-aged, residential students. Although I professed commitment to diversity, I had layers of subconscious and implicit bias—and I did not yet even know those concepts existed. My own experiences as a White, cisgender, heterosexual woman who grew up in a middle-class family with two parents who attended college and showered me with opportunities provided me with advantages that I did not recognize. The more I learned about Hannah's

successes and challenges, the better I became at identifying the unintended consequences some of my pedagogical choices could have on students whose lives were unlike mine. By the time I met Dawna, I had implemented pedagogical practices to support parenting and caregiving students, which I described in an earlier publication about removing barriers to student success (Fry, 2020).

In the sections that follow, I explain the course setting, present literature that influences my approach to service-learning, describe the community partnerships, present Dawna's story, and share the supportive response of our community partners. I conclude with four lessons learned from Dawna's journey through the pandemic that are generalizable for higher education faculty seeking to strengthen their support for all students in service-learning courses: exercising solidarity, reciprocity, and flexibility; guiding students in project selection; serving as a model learner; and embedding support for parenting and caregiving students.

### **The Setting: A New Course About Advocacy**

In spring 2020, I taught the inaugural offering of a course called *Advocacy in Action*. The course was designed to engage students in human rights advocacy campaigns through service-learning. The goal was to enable students to develop relevant skills that are used in advocacy while exploring various relevant strategies, tactics, personal attributes, external factors, and local community elements. The course is part of the requirements to earn a certificate in human rights at Boise State University in Idaho. Other requirements for the certificate include courses about the history of human rights, collaboration and communication skills, and navigating power within systems and institutions.

I developed *Advocacy in Action* with input and insights from a myriad of resources. The course description reflected input from state legislators who have a history of advocating for human rights, including Idaho's first Black state senator, Cherie Buckner-Webb (see Buckner-Webb & Thompson, 2021). I sought input from leaders in local nonprofits that advance human rights and have experience navigating the challenges and opportunities posed by local and state

politics. While developing the course, I participated in a social action webinar series for faculty, which was organized by Scott Myers-Lipton, whose scholarship includes a guide to college student advocacy (see Myers-Lipton, 2017). Community organizing scholar and activist Marshall Ganz's (Ganz, 2009; Harvard Kennedy School Executive Education, 2019; *What Is a Public Narrative and How Can We Use It?*, 2013) work further influenced my approach and course design. Because the service-learning component was fundamental to the course, I present some of the literature that influenced my approach to service-learning in the separate section that follows.

### **A Citizenship Framework for Service-Learning**

My approach to service-learning is informed by my background in social studies education, the academic discipline intended to help students develop "the content knowledge, intellectual skills, and civic values necessary for fulfilling the duties of citizenship in a participatory democracy" (National Council for the Social Studies, 2020, para. 1). Over the last decade I have endeavored to create service-learning experiences that invite students to move beyond what Westheimer and Kahne (2004) described as personally responsible citizenship to participatory and justice-oriented citizenship. A personally responsible citizen is, for example, a law-abiding taxpayer who recycles and is inclined to volunteer in times of crisis. This framework for citizenship is what is most commonly taught in K-12 education, which may reinforce "a conservative and individualistic notion of citizenship. Yet . . . if citizenship also requires collective participation and critical analysis of social structures, then other lenses are needed as well" (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004, p. 264). The participatory orientation is framed by the assumption that to improve society, "citizens must actively participate and take leadership positions within established systems and community structures" (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004, p. 240). As an example, the personally responsible citizen donates food for the hungry, whereas the participatory citizen organizes a food drive.

The participatory citizen works within established systems, but those who have adopted a justice orientation "must question, debate, and change established systems and structures that reproduce patterns of injus-

tice over time” (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004, p. 240). Justice-oriented citizens seek to analyze and address the root cause of social issues and injustices, and would examine why community members are hungry and develop a long-lasting action plan. Being a justice-oriented citizen means seeking to dismantle inequities and thus requires long-term commitment, comprehensive strategies and tactics, and a far-reaching vision.

When I first applied Westheimer and Kahne’s (2004) ideas to my teaching, I shared a summary of their framework with my students. I presented one of their tables (p. 241) that identifies characteristics, example actions, and core assumptions about each kind of citizen. Personally responsible is on the left, participatory in the middle, and justice-oriented on the right. Although I intended to use the table as a conversation starter to help students reflect on the kinds of educational experiences that had helped them develop skills in the respective areas, the conversation quickly grew intense and heated. Students viewed the table as a rubric, and many felt insulted by the implication that if they were operating as personally responsible citizens, they were the equivalent of “C” citizens. More than half of the students in that class held identities that are underrepresented in college, and, at least at that moment in their lives, the contributions made by participatory (“B”) citizens and justice-oriented (“A”) citizens seemed beyond reach. Although I had envisioned a discussion that would lead us to explore how to enhance our participatory and justice-orientation skills, my approach created an environment where my students felt judged and closed off to discussion about citizenship.

Rodriguez and Janke’s (2016) insights are relevant here: They posited that because students and faculty may hold different perspectives about citizenship, we can end up “talking past” one another. These scholars pointed out that “one’s orientation to civic engagement may influence their perception of what is or is not civic engagement. Therefore, faculty members’ ability to make learning relevant for students” (p. 179) is challenged. They recommended that faculty “be proactive in understanding how students conceptualize civic engagement at the beginning of their courses and foster opportunities for students to expand their existing knowledge and application of those

concepts in relation to academic course content” (p. 188). Rodriguez and Janke also underscored the value of faculty explicitly sharing their notions of citizenship that guide course discussion and experiences.

I contend that Rodriguez and Janke’s (2016) insights are particularly important when teaching courses where students may actually be averse to the justice orientation (e.g., Fry & O’Brien, 2017). My unsuccessful first experience introducing students to Westheimer and Kahne (2004) likely resulted from my keeping my notions of citizenship implicit instead of making them explicit as Rodriguez and Janke recommended. In contrast, in the advocacy course that is the backdrop to Dawna’s case study, we begin the semester with shared notions about citizenship. That is not the case in other courses I teach. Students seeking to earn the human rights certificate are enrolled in the advocacy course *because* they want to engage in what Mitchell (2008) called critical service-learning. Mitchell emphasized the redistribution of power as an essential part of an approach to service-learning in higher education that contributes to change and supports social justice.

More recently, Barrera et al. (2017) pointed out that intentional course design is essential to providing students with the opportunity to unpack how power and privilege manifest in their service-learning experiences and pose barriers to social justice. Carnicelli and Boluk (2017) examined how deep reflection about service-learning helps to transform students’ understanding of social justice. One of their central recommendations was to use reflection and collaboration to upend the educational status quo where students are passive and teachers are in control.

Transformative educational experiences are essential to supporting students in developing the skills and dispositions (National Council for the Social Studies, 2020) that are foundational to Westheimer and Kahne’s (2004) justice-oriented citizen. The service-learning opportunity in the advocacy course I taught when COVID-19 emerged was designed to give students the opportunity to engage in collaborative justice-oriented projects.

Influenced by Galura (2017), Phelps (2012), and Sigmon (1997), I endeavored to create opportunities where service and learning would be of equal weight. Ideally, students



contribute to a community partner's work in a meaningful way *and* they develop skills and knowledge related to course goals. I appreciated the importance of this balance because early in my academic career I taught in a program that had an out-of-balance focus on students' learning, such that community partners seemed to provide all of the service by giving students a place to learn. Clifford (2017) offered insights that unpack that imbalance: The program was striving for a product-centered form of reciprocity instead of long-term connections built in solidarity. Too often, the former contributes to "an environment in which deliverables and checklists of outcomes define success" (Clifford, 2017, p. 13) for students.

Dostilio et al. (2012) offered relevant clarification about reciprocity in service-learning: It is a foundational concept that "is frequently referred to in the literature without precise conceptualization or critical examination" (p. 18). The plausibility of practitioners' using the term with different meaning seems to contribute to Clifford's (2017) concern that reciprocity may lead to the problematic notion of students "making a difference" by completing a set number of hours of service. Despite endeavoring to move away from charity, reciprocity can perpetuate inequity because completing an arbitrary number of hours "does not create structural change in society and is distanced from social justice" (p. 7). Meaningful alternatives to product-centered or exchange-based approaches to service-learning may emerge when faculty frame reciprocity as "interrelatedness of beings and the broader world around them as well as the potential synergies that emerge from their relationships" (Dostilio et al., 2012, p. 23). The description of interrelatedness draws from Indigenous ways of meaning making, which often place emphasis on community over the individual and "disrupt the traditionally linear, anthropocentric, and time-limited ways of approaching reciprocity" (Dostilio et al., 2012, p. 28). Kimmerer (2015), a botanist and enrolled member of the Citizen Band Potawatomi, noted that "reciprocity is a key to success" (p. 262). Kimmerer (2013) also described an Indigenous notion of interrelatedness:

For much of human's time on the planet, before the great delusion, we lived in cultures that understood the covenant of reciprocity, that for the Earth to stay in balance, for the

gifts to continue to flow, we must give back in equal measure for what we take.

In the teachings of my Potawatomi ancestors, responsibilities and gifts are understood as two sides of the same coin. The possession of a gift is coupled with a duty to use it for the benefit of all. (paras. 4–5)

Collectively, Kimmerer, Dostilio et al., and Clifford left me wondering: How can I create service-learning expectations that avoid the checklists and time measurements that students are used to being judged by, focus on meaningful contributions to our community partners' work, and collaboratively build a connection with our partners that may lead to meaningful, long-term relationships built in solidarity and reciprocity? In the section that follows, I provide a detailed description of the community partnership in which Dawna participated—in spring 2020, it was a brand new partnership that I hoped would develop in ways that honored best practices of reciprocity and solidarity.

### A New Community Partnership

A hands-on service-learning experience with a community partner is a central component of the advocacy course, so students could learn how one organization attempts to change social structures in order to promote human rights, while also being of service to the organization's efforts. I offered students the choice of two projects during the spring 2020 semester. Dawna participated in the project with the Idaho Access Project, a new local organization founded to "eliminate physical, attitudinal, and policy barriers to ensure people with disabilities can live, work, and play in our neighborhoods and communities" (Idaho Access Project, 2020, para. 1). The cofounders are a trio of forward-thinking individuals with disabilities who turned to Boise State University to build service-learning connections so students could contribute to their pursuit of more accessible communities. I met Idaho Access Project's founding board members, Dianna, Dana, and Jeremy, a mere 6 weeks before teaching the advocacy class for the first time. Our relationship was new, the organization was new, and the class was new!

My students were invited to help develop

a proposal for a mayor's advisory council on disabilities. Dianna, Dana, and Jeremy identified this as a need after conducting a neighborhood access review (Idaho Access Project, 2019) to systematically evaluate how livable and welcoming one specific neighborhood in Boise is for people using a mobility device, who have low vision or are blind, are deaf or hard of hearing, have a cognitive or intellectual disability, or have a mental health condition. Extensive barriers to livability were identified, and Idaho Access Project recommended that our city create a mayor's advisory council as a meaningful way to form a focused effort to increase accessibility.

When I presented my students with two social advocacy projects, I encouraged them to choose by considering their level of interest in each topic *and* by thinking about whether they would benefit from a more or less structured project. The second option was a health care legislative advocacy project with a local affiliate of a national organization; that project involved more than 5 hours of structured training for lobbying and participation in an all-day advocacy event at our state capitol building with mentoring from experienced advocates. In contrast, the approach to developing the proposal for a mayor's advisory council involved a blend of collaborative decision making and independent research.

Instead of focusing on their strengths and needs as learners, the majority of my students chose based on interest in the topic. Since half of my students had an immediate family member with a disability, the mayor's advisory council was popular because of the opportunity to contribute to something that could have a direct and positive impact on their families. This reliance on interest over consideration of learning styles and strengths led one student, a self-proclaimed procrastinator, to already be behind on their contributions to the project when COVID-19 transformed the second half of our semester. The highly structured lobbying project might have served this student better, and likewise, the single parent with demanding parenting responsibilities might have felt more successful with lobbying. In the Lessons Learned section of this article, I present the possibilities of more guidance for project selection. However, Dawna, whose story is featured in the case study that follows this section, did consider the merits of more or less structure as well as

her interests.

What neither Dawna nor I knew was how COVID-19 would upend her work, home, and school life. The last time we were together in person was March 12, 2020. Dawna, her classmates, and I spent the first half of our 75-minute class period talking about the emerging pandemic. We were all concerned about the health crisis many countries already faced and the growing numbers of cases in the United States. Our university had scheduled a test day for remote instruction on March 13, and students expressed concerns that it might be more than a test—it might be a transition to completing the semester online. I offered reassurance that we could still meaningfully continue our class remotely if necessary. Their concerns proved valid: Our university shifted to fully remote instruction on March 16, joining institutions across the country in the effort to help slow the spread of COVID-19.

Reflecting back, I realize I was naïve about the depth of the challenges ahead. Yes, I had thought through using remote technology for class discussions and writing consultations, and those aspects of the class did in fact translate to remote instruction. However, my use of technology during class time could not remove what proved to be insurmountable communication barriers to my students' completing their service-learning projects. The complexity of Dawna's situation as a parent and essential worker led to challenges I also had not anticipated when I assured my students that we would have no problem finishing the semester remotely.

### **Dawna's Case Study: Parent, Essential Worker, and Student**

Dawna is an impressive person who balances a myriad of responsibilities. In addition to being a student, she is mother of two school-aged children and an assistant manager at an essential business. The mayor's advisory council project appealed to her due to the nature of the topic as well as the opportunity to utilize her organizational skills. The lobbying project was of limited interest because, as a social work major, she had participated in lobbying events during our state's legislative session with other students, professors, and professional social workers. The advisory council offered the opportunity to develop new skills. She had been a leading contributor to the project

design when COVID-19 upended the balance she had created between the interconnected facets of her life as a parent, worker, and student.

COVID-19 led to a tremendous shift in Dawna's parental and employment responsibilities. Overnight, her children were learning remotely from home, as was Dawna when our university shifted to fully remote instruction. Her boss incorrectly assumed that because her university classes were now remote, she could work more hours. Dawna's children were 11 and 7 years old when the pandemic hit; while she was working extended hours, child care was essential but also challenging to secure. Dawna's usual place for child care ceased to be an option because the staff feared her children's coughing and runny noses were symptoms of COVID-19 and not their usual seasonal allergies. Supporting her children in the transition to a world transformed, working overtime, and trying to stay on top of her own classes was already a lot. The need for child care leads us to explore three additional, interconnected layers of complexity in Dawna's life: child care, internet access, and relationship dynamics.

First, Dawna's cousin offered to provide child care. This was a tremendous help; however, the cousin lived 40 minutes away from her home, which meant more time commuting. The second issue pertained to internet access; her cousin lived in a community that coincidentally experienced internet issues for approximately one month during our state's shelter-in-place directive. Much of Dawna's schoolwork required internet access, and she simply could not do her work from her cousin's house. She explored the possibility of accessing that community's public library WiFi; it had been shut down when the brick-and-mortar structure closed because of the pandemic. Third, Dawna and her husband were living apart at the start of the pandemic; it was a temporary separation to give them literal and figurative space for reflection while working through some relationship challenges. Her husband is supportive of her role as a student, and they tried to work as a team to handle all of the new complexities that emerged as the pandemic unfolded. Child care, relationship dynamics, and access to the internet to complete her own schoolwork would have been enough to navigate; however, Dawna's role as an essential worker led to more demands on

her increasingly scarce time.

I digress briefly from Dawna's story to note that she did not share the details of her separation with me during the spring 2020 semester. She shared that aspect of her personal life while we collaborated to write this article. I already held Dawna in high regard. She exemplified Drago's (2010) point that parenting is hard work and "to make a commitment to higher education at the same time is nothing short of heroic" (para. 1). That Dawna and her husband were also investing time and energy to build a stronger relationship added a layer of complexity to her life. They have succeeded in growing stronger and remain a couple. Dawna's husband even read drafts of this case study, adding his memories of the demanding time they faced together. That they were already working to strengthen and preserve their relationship is an important backdrop to Dawna's demanding schedule as an essential worker.

Dawna ended up working overtime when employees resigned due to fears of contracting COVID-19, leaving her with less time to devote to school despite possessing effective time-management skills. Our class met twice a week, and one of the meeting times overlapped with when delivery trucks came to her workplace. She was asked to work because there were not enough staff members to help unload the trucks. When she told me this I remember saying, "I can think of no better reason to miss class—there might be toilet paper on that truck!" Although my tone was lighthearted, the reality was that fear had led some people to stockpile resources, creating a scarcity of nonperishable items like hand sanitizer and toilet paper (Alford, 2020; Garbe et al., 2020; Murphy, 2020). People who had not been able to stockpile needed the goods Dawna helped to unload. Dawna's work situation made it clear that my previous expectations for attendance were irrelevant in a learning environment transformed by a global pandemic.

Giving Dawna's case study the name "Parent, Essential Worker, and Student" was intentional; that sequence reflects Dawna's de facto ranking of priorities. At times, the demands placed on her at work made it hard to keep parenting as Number 1. It would have been deeply inappropriate for me to try to pressure her to place her commitment as a student in my class higher on that list. Although she endeavored

to continue her contributions to the mayor's advisory council, she ran into barriers. Specifically, she had planned to research the history of disability advisory councils in multiple communities in our state. Her research plan included phone conversations with individuals who were involved with these councils, and she initiated her contact via email shortly before businesses and schools closed due to COVID-19. Her emails went unanswered, presumably because those she reached out to faced challenges as they adjusted to the demands of life in a global pandemic. In contrast, 6 months later, my fall 2020 students made similar outreach efforts and received prompt and enthusiastic responses. Although the specter of COVID-19 remained strong in fall 2020, by then many people had adapted and found ways to persevere in the midst of the tumult.

Although all of my students, even those in positions of relative privilege, were impacted by the pandemic in compelling ways, Dawna's story underscores how existing societal inequities played out. These inequities were apparent just a few weeks into the shutdown, as Scheiber et al. (2020) pointed out:

In some respects, the pandemic is an equalizer: It can afflict princes and paupers alike, and no one who hopes to stay healthy is exempt from the strictures of social distancing. But the American response to the virus is laying bare class divides that are often camouflaged—in access to health care, child care, education, living space, even internet bandwidth. (para. 4)

Dawna's story could easily have been featured as an example in the article about the pandemic's unequal impact:

the rich holed up in vacation properties; the middle class marooned at home with restless children; the working class on the front lines of the economy, stretched to the limit by the demands of work and parenting, if there is even work to be had. (para. 9)

Dawna's husband was also an essential worker and faced a demanding work schedule. They both were on the front lines, unlike those retreating to second homes

or figuring out the intricacies of working from home while navigating a pandemic. However, to make Dawna's story complete requires describing her incredible resilience, which includes advocacy for herself and others.

Dawna achieved a noteworthy accomplishment during this challenging time. She collaborated with two other staff members and persuaded the company she worked for to provide crisis pay for hourly workers at 17 stores. The salary increase was back-paid to mid-March and had a positive impact on her take-home salary as well. Dawna's collaborative efforts contributed to her coworkers' financial well-being and meant their increased exposure to COVID-19 was acknowledged by regional management. The latter provided a much-needed morale boost in a time of uncertainty and confusion about how to stay safe from the virus. Several months later I asked Dawna about her workplace advocacy: Was it something she learned from the course, felt more confidence taking on because of the course, or is it an example of her being extraordinary? She responded: "I personally feel it was a mix of all three. I felt (and do feel) more confident in advocacy because of the course and with the skills learned from the course, as well as, continued advocacy efforts." When she shared her advocacy efforts during a remote class meeting in April 2020, she mentioned that her mother's approach to navigating requests was an influence as well: "Hope for the best, expect the worst, and shoot for somewhere in the middle." Dawna's workplace advocacy also included asking for child care support; she was not the only parent essential worker facing challenges. Unfortunately, child care support from the company never came to fruition.

Although I initially was concerned about Dawna and my other students being able to meet course learning outcomes that were aligned with their social action projects, Dawna's advocacy at work allowed her to exceed two goals I included on the syllabus:

1. Develop communication and collaboration skills while deepening understanding of course material through an engagement project with a local organization that does social change work, and
2. Develop and apply written, oral, and visual skills necessary to communicate



and advance advocacy goals.

Dawna collaborated with coworkers to communicate a need. She even had an impressive victory in her advocacy effort. These experiences supplemented her class learning. However, without support from our community partners, the mayor's advisory council work would come to a halt.

### Supportive and Responsive Community Partners

Like Dawna, the other advocacy students participating in the mayor's advisory council project faced difficulty in their efforts to connect with the people they needed to speak to in order to complete their research. Our community partners exhibited understanding and compassion in their communication with the group, as indicated by a March 31, 2020, email:

We're just checking in to see: 1) how you're doing/coping with the COVID-19 related changes/challenges, 2) if you wanted to connected [*sic*] via Zoom in the next week or so, 3) how the project is or isn't moving forward (expectations on our end are that it will be difficult to connect with anyone in government with all that's going on). Mostly we want to just make sure you're all doing okay. The last time I experienced anything like this was on 911, and at least you could go outside. So I can't imagine how disruptive this is with families, work, AND school. Thanks for all you're doing.

Our community partners' first point was about how students were doing and coping, an ordering of items that reflects shared humanity and compassion about the collective demands of adjusting to life in a pandemic. Five months later, I asked them about the email. Jeremy noted that he, Dianna, and Dana were most "worried about the impact on students who were far away from home when things were falling apart." Their concern was appropriate; although the lasting impact of COVID-19 on students is not yet known, early research in response to the pandemic indicates the uncertainty and rapid change has had a negative impact on many students' mental health (Anderson, 2020; Son et al., 2020).

Our community partners made it easy for students to share challenges in their personal lives as well as barriers to completing their research. Dawna's response to Dianna, Dana, and Jeremy's email included

My work schedule has been crazy lately as well as finding childcare. Most of the contacts I had reached out to are not in office currently and I have not been able to get in touch with [them]. I am still trying to gather as much information as possible, though it is slow moving. Thank you for reaching out and being understanding of everything.

Within weeks of the pandemic shutting down schools and places of work in the United States, resources emerged about how to achieve a balance between life and work, especially when working from home (e.g., Minnesota Department of Health, 2020; Potkewitz, 2020; Ward & Feiereisen, 2020). The email conversation highlighted Dianna, Dana, and Jeremy's understanding that the students faced an unprecedented set of challenges in finding balance that was a struggle for many even before the pandemic. As Collins (2020) explained, "it's all too easy (and, more often than not, encouraged) for us to define our worth by the volume of work we're able to accomplish in any given day" (para. 1). Had we required students to strive for the kind of product-centered, exchange-based service-learning Clifford (2017) lamented, students would have been left with no way to succeed or be deemed "worthy" of a high grade. It became clear that I needed to redefine what success meant for our community engagement project as the contributions that seemed reasonable when my community partners and I designed the project were no longer feasible.

In early April, we suspended the project. The delay necessitated by the pandemic gave us the opportunity to embrace Clifford's (2017) recommendation that service-learning projects need to allow students "to see models of authentic relationships that support systemic change rather than . . . producing deliverables as measures of their level of engagement" (p. 11). When the envisioned outcomes became impossible, our community partners responded and worked with me and the students in a supportive way. Essentially, Dawna and her classmates saw—and benefited from—a demonstration

of the kind of strong, collaborative community relationship Clifford said was central to ensuring that service-learning is able to “foment our connections to social justice—and to reaffirm our collaboration *with*, not *for*, the community” (p. 15, emphasis original). Embracing *with* is particularly important since the Idaho Access Project promotes accessibility for people with disabilities. The slogan “Nothing about us without us” has been widely used in disability advocacy, and Garaghty (n.d.) explained how those words have been used

to demand inclusion in policy and decision-making processes that shaped their lives and environments. They used these words to forcefully condemn paternalism and the medical community’s deficit-based labelling of their minds and bodies. Wielded by people with disabilities, “Nothing about us without us” preceded a sea-change in the language and goals of disability policy. (para. 4)

Clifford wrote about collaborating *with* community partners and emphasized that social justice should be the focus of service-learning, whereas Garaghty provided an example of how moving away from action *without* community input was essential to overcoming the degrading legacy of decisions made *for* those with disabilities.

My students could not meaningfully complete the goal product unless they could talk *with* people connected to existing mayor’s advisory councils. The pandemic made that process temporarily unachievable. Instead of completing the envisioned final assignments, I asked students to write letters to my fall students inviting them to participate in the project and finish what the previous class had begun. Dawna’s letter explained how plans were halted, and

students participating in this project had completed some research, and others ran into troubles with getting in contact with people they were reaching out to. The documents containing the research have been shared with [our] professor and can be shared with you. I am hopeful that this next group of students during the Fall 2020 semester will be able to pick up where we had left off and make greater progress

than we were able to. I am excited to see that this project is going to continue on and won’t be left in the past and forgotten about, as it is an important topic and mission to work for.

Although Dawna’s journey in the course came to a close with her sharing resources and wisdom with my future students, her story of resilience in the pandemic continued. She completed the spring and fall 2020 semesters and is scheduled to graduate in 2021. We turn now to generalizable lessons learned through following Dawna’s experiences during COVID-19.

### **Lessons Learned in a Global Pandemic**

I offer four generalizable lessons learned from Dawna’s journey through the tumult of COVID-19.

#### **Lesson 1: Solidarity, Reciprocity, and Flexibility**

The service-learning project my community partners Dianna, Dana, and Jeremy and I designed for spring 2020 was shaped by notions of solidarity and reciprocity. As leaders of a new organization embarking on an ambitious set of goals to improve accessibility in Boise, they were excited to have students support the work and add new insights. However, as Clifford (2017) pointed out, many “students who have become habituated to the traditional or transactional” (p. 15) service-learning will be resistant to a model more centered on solidarity and its emphasis on relationship building. This proved true for some of my students who found it challenging to step away from checklists and time logs familiar in transactional models of service-learning. Before COVID-19 turned my living room into a remote classroom and made student contributions to the project difficult at best, I had fielded questions about how many hours they should “put in.” During the first half of the semester, students working on the mayor’s advisory project had in-person discussions with Dianna, Dana, and Jeremy about how to design the research. This bottom-up approach was meant to provide a collaborative design for the project. Aside from to-do lists and a calendar, the planning meetings did not yield any deliverables, nor did Dianna, Dana, and Jeremy expect

measurable products at this point. This was hard for many of the students in the project, who were used to what Dostilio et al. (2012) described as product-driven and transactional notions of service-learning.

In retrospect, the opportunity to help build the vision for a mayor's advisory council from the bottom up was too much of a stretch for my students, given the realities of their biographies of school. To be successful, they needed more support to move past entrenched patterns of thinking. Feiman-Nemser (2001) offered insights from K-12 teacher preparation that seem relevant here. Biography can shape and limit abilities to "form new ideas and new habits of thought and action" (p. 1016). Teacher education scholarship has identified how intentional experiences can help teachers consider, and potentially move past, their biographies. That my spring 2020 students had difficulty finding value in a bottom-up process that was not designed to produce measurable deliverables suggests the need to create experiences that help students move past their biographies of school. Additionally, offering more guidance in project selection emerged as a lesson learned.

### **Lesson 2: Provide Guidance in Project Selection**

Providing the opportunity for student choice in service-learning placements has merit. Choice supports Clifford's (2017) notions of solidarity and may have a favorable impact on student learning outcomes (Vaughan & Cunningham, 2016). At the same time, Dawna was unique among the students who participated in the mayor's advisory council project in that she chose that project by considering her level of interest *and* by thinking about whether she would benefit more from the highly structured project or the open-ended option. Most of the students on that project team were guided by interest. Although I asked students to consider both options, I did not offer direct guidance in *how* to do that. In retrospect, such guidance might have helped some students make different choices or make the same choice with more awareness of how the different structure for each project might impact them as learners.

Remote options for community engagement seem likely to remain essential until COVID-19 is contained. It is appropriate to offer remote possibilities beyond the pandemic because of the flexibility that students like

Dawna need. Guiding students through a thoughtful selection process seems all the more essential when service-learning is remote.

### **Lesson 3: Faculty Can Serve as Model Learners**

Although best practices for service-learning describe the importance of linking course learning outcomes and reflection assignments to the service (e.g., Pawlowski, 2018), another powerful approach is for faculty to serve as model learners. That idea is inspired by St. John's College (n.d.), a liberal arts college where faculty members have an opportunity that is unique in academia: Instead of lecturing or otherwise demonstrating scholarly expertise, faculty lead students in learning by facilitating discussion and guiding inquiry. Faculty serve as role models for how to engage in these processes; the approach is grounded in the idea that learning is a cooperative endeavor. Although I have never even visited the campus, I was inspired by the approach when I first read about it decades ago. I have long sought to present myself as a model learner. I am not always successful—the pressure to make it through learning goals in the rush of a 15-week semester often makes it feel more efficient to assume the conventional role of expert.

However, it was easy to embrace my role as a model learner when teaching the advocacy course Dawna took, perhaps because the course was brand new. Service-learning provides one of two foundational components of the course; the second is learning from human rights advocates who join our class as guest speakers. Guests share their various approaches to advocating for social change, including the tactics and strategies they use to work toward their goals. I take notes using the same guiding prompts I provide students so that I can learn along with them as our guests share their unique insights and experiences. I have found that this approach helps me make connections to their service-learning projects and strengthens my understanding of course readings. When the intersections between readings, guest advocates, and service-learning become clearer to me, I can better help students make connections. I believe I am a better teacher because I join my students as a learner.

Being a model learner means embracing a quality that Brown (2012) described as vul-

nerability. Brown maintained that authenticity and connections come from vulnerability. Authentic connections are essential to engage with students as the complete human beings they are—people with hearts and spirits as well as minds (Schoem et al., 2017). Schoem et al. remind us that teaching the whole student is central to the mission of higher education, connected to student success, and can help “students find meaning and purpose in their lives” (p. xi). The pandemic made their words seem more salient; however, these words of inspiration to attend to building caring connections with students were published more than 2 years before COVID-19 upended the educational landscape and expanded many students’ needs for support.

Paramount among students’ support needs are those specific to mental health. Schoem (2017) responded to earlier research indicating the widespread prevalence of mental health challenges like anxiety and depression among college students by pointing out that many

may be entering our classrooms with a high degree of intellectual curiosity and motivation to succeed, but for too many, their hearts and bodies are necessarily focused more on their emotional health. For some, just getting to class is a huge victory. (p. 3)

“Getting” to class in a pandemic means remote options for many, and preliminary research about COVID-19’s impact on students’ mental health indicates the problem has deepened (Anderson, 2020; Son et al., 2020). Responding to the needs of the whole student has a heightened level of importance.

Dawna’s case study unpacks one story of the whole student—she’s a parent and essential worker, and then a student. Her journey highlights the myriad of ways the pandemic created challenges. Supportive responses from me and her other professors helped Dawna succeed in the challenging spring 2020 semester, and she continued her studies into the fall 2020 semester. However, millions of other students have different stories to tell. For example, the pandemic led more than 16 million students to cancel plans to attend college in fall 2020. Among those 16 million, students from families with annual incomes of \$75,000 or less are disproportionately reflected compared to

those from families with incomes of more than \$100,000 (Long & Douglas-Gabriel, 2020).

Cruse, Mendez, and Holtzman (2020) pointed out that for students who are also parents or caregivers, “vulnerabilities are rising to new heights, threatening their ability to keep their families healthy and secure on top of maintaining their studies remotely” (p. 1). When faculty embrace the role of model learners in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, we acknowledge that we are in this crisis together—with our students. We cannot know all the answers for how to best support students in the midst of an unprecedented global crisis. From a place of authenticity, we can better build connections (Brown, 2012) that will help us support student success for as long as COVID-19 shapes our higher education experiences, and ideally continue supportive practices after the pandemic.

I hope authenticity will remain even after (or if) the pandemic ceases to be a factor because students have a myriad of life responsibilities that will continue to shape their experiences. For parenting students in particular, who represent 22% of undergraduates in the United States (Gault, Holtzman, & Cruse, 2020), our willingness to prioritize student success may have a positive multigenerational impact (Attewell & Lavin, 2007; Tang et al., 2014).

#### **Lesson 4. Embed Support for Parenting and Caregiving Students in All Courses**

Dawna’s journey pointedly reminds us that parents and caregiving students have life circumstances that necessitate flexible options and supportive relationships with their professors. I present a brief summary of data that describes parenting and caregiving undergraduates to demonstrate the social justice imperative to support this population.

Cruse, Holtzman, et al.’s (2019) review of data collected by the United States Department of Education revealed that 22% of the undergraduate population are parents or have a caregiving role for children under 18. Seventy percent of those parents are mothers, and the majority of those mothers are single: 62%. In contrast, 61% of students who are fathers are married. Comparing parents to nonparents reveals another concerning disparity: 53% of parents left school after 6 years without



a degree, whereas 31% of nonparents did so (Nelson & Gault, 2013). Although both sets of numbers indicate a need for universities to improve completion rates, the situation is particularly dire for one subset of parents: a mere 28% of single mothers who enroll in college earn a degree within 6 years (Kruvelis et al., 2017).

Single mothers are disproportionately women of color (Gault, Cruse, & Kruvelis, 2017), and Black students who are parents accrue more student loan debt than parenting and nonparenting students from other racial backgrounds (Cruse, Holtzman, et al., 2019). Cruse, Holtzman, et al.'s holistic analysis of student loan debt for all parents, single and married, is also grim: Data from 2015–2016 indicated that parents' median debt was more than double that of nonparents. In contrast to these discouraging statistics, Cruse, Holtzman, et al. also found that 33% of parents earn GPAs of 3.5 and higher. This is a positive contrast to the overall population of students: 29% earn 3.5 or higher. Only 26% of dependent students achieve this level of academic success.

The term “caregiving” is also used to describe a role held by many students who are not parents: One in four Millennials serve in a caregiving role for an adult family member. More than half of those young caregivers are African American/Black, Hispanic/Latinx, or Asian American/Pacific Islanders (National Alliance for Caregiving & AARP, 2020). Seven in 10 caregiving students reported that the emotional strain of their role impacted their academic performance (Horovitz, 2020).

The pandemic exacerbated existing challenges for students who are parents and caregivers. Israelsen–Hartley (2020) pointed out that in addition to facing the physical and psychological challenges of life in a pandemic, parenting students faced the loss of “many resources [they] rely on to be successful: on-campus child care centers, in-person study groups, internet access, and in-person K–12 education for their kids” (para. 10). In the midst of the spring 2020 shutdown, campus libraries, which can be a welcoming resource for parents (Keyes, 2017), also closed. Additionally, prior to the pandemic, more than 2/3 of parenting students lived at or near the poverty line (Cruse, Mendez, & Holtzman, 2020), leaving them more vulnerable to the economic impact of COVID-19.

If social justice is to be at the heart of service-learning (Clifford, 2017) and other forms of community engagement, faculty need to ensure that students with parenting and caregiving responsibilities can participate in this powerful form of learning. Traditional attend-in-person models of service-learning that students must fit in outside existing class and work schedules may be a particular barrier. As Lewis (2020) pointed out, it is common for faculty to

cling to an outdated view of who college students are—young people on the cusp of adulthood with few responsibilities. But that's no longer the case. Because of this outdated notion, very few colleges even keep data on whether their students are parents. (para. 4)

Dawna's case study and the statistical outcomes that describe parenting students make it clear that faculty have a powerful opportunity to contribute to student success by embedding support into their course design. Cheyney (2020) offered concrete examples of family-friendly language to include in syllabi and granted permission for faculty to use the text. I included it in my courses beginning in spring 2019. Before the pandemic closed in-person instruction, Dawna took me at my/Cheyney's word:

I understand that minor illnesses and unforeseen disruptions in childcare often put parents in the position of having to choose between missing class to stay home with a child and leaving him or her with someone you or the child does not feel comfortable with. While this is not meant to be a long-term childcare solution, occasionally bringing a child to class in order to cover gaps in care is perfectly acceptable. (para. 4)

Dawna brought her son and daughter to class in February. Later she told me that although she had other professors mention that bringing a child to class could be possible, this syllabus language was the first time she felt that she could do so without having to ask permission or negotiate. In other classes, she opted to miss class when child care fell through. Her feedback indicates that there is value in having direct language that empowers students to make the choices they need to succeed.

To be inclusive and use supportive language in our syllabi is to embrace Denial's (2019) pedagogy of kindness. At the heart of this pedagogy is "believing people, and believing *in* people" (para. 5). Denial's approach sends a message to students that they matter "exactly as they are and even because of the challenges they face" (para. 15). We cannot separate students from their other life roles. Embracing Schoem et al.'s (2017) whole student means supporting their success in community engagement by reducing barriers that affect specific populations like parents and caregivers.

### Conclusion

COVID-19 forced educators to adopt remote learning approaches at an unprecedented pace. We can turn to scholarship for insights about how to use technology to facilitate service-learning relationships at a distance (e.g., García-Gutierrez et al., 2017; Harris, 2017) and collaborative online reflection (Smit & Tremethick, 2017). Although faculty can say that the educational landscape that emerged with COVID-19 was forced upon us, it is more uplifting to focus on how the pandemic provided us with an opportunity to reflect on what matters most and implement more supportive pedagogy.

Wilhelm, Baker, and Dube (2001) offered a helpful process for educators to identify and emphasize what they call "bottom lines." Bottom lines are what we absolutely must achieve with our students during our time together in order to feel that our most important purpose and mission as teachers are fulfilled (Wilhelm, Douglas, & Fry, 2014).

Through reflection on my bottom lines, I realized that I want students to see themselves as agents of social change: people who can help develop and implement solutions to issues of injustice instead of people who hope someone else will address problems. By connecting with our bottom lines—our hearts and spirits—we become more aligned with our whole selves. From that space, we are better able to teach Schoem et al.'s (2017) whole student through Denial's (2019) pedagogy of kindness. As Dawna's story makes clear, students have complex lives. Creating flexible options for community-engaged service-learning invites underrepresented students with work and family responsibilities to participate more fully. COVID-19 unapologetically nudged us all into a place where we have the opportunity to enhance our approach to support success for all students.



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