

The Student Experience of a City-University-Community Service-Learning Classroom

Suchitra V. Gururaj, Brianna Davis Johnson, and Lakeya Omogun

Abstract

The Austin City Hall Fellows Program at The University of Texas at Austin was a student civic leadership program designed to build Austin City Hall's capacity to reach potential leaders in diverse new council districts. Undergraduate students in this program took a single-semester service-learning course that connected them with partners from the city, the community, and the university. Using Howard's (1998) framework, our study analyzed student assessments from five cohorts of the class to understand how students experienced a service-learning class based around a multipartner community-university-city partnership. Our findings revealed that students experienced a nonlinear path to engagement in a synergistic classroom. This study offers implications for adjusting service-learning classes and projects to integrate and sustain relationships with multiple partners, even as the context of the service landscape and learning context are evolving.

As the state's flagship institution, The University of Texas at Austin (UT) holds "responsibility" as a core value of its public service mission, with the expectation that its students will "serve as a catalyst for positive change in Texas and beyond" (UT, n.d.). In addition to offering over 100 service-learning courses that connect students with diverse nonprofits, the university also stewards a relationship with the municipal government of the city of Austin, which in 2014 adopted a single-member district system of representation for its city council. Prior to that time, Austin City Council had been composed of at-large members who hailed from historically affluent and racially homogeneous neighborhoods in Central Austin (Kanin & Pagano, 2013). With the change to 10 socioeconomically and ethnically diverse single-member districts, Austin faced the challenge of identifying the stated or putative leaders in districts that it had rarely interacted with previously. For this reason, city staff reached out to UT to ask that students serve as a link between UT and the city.

What resulted was the Center for Community Engagement–Austin City Hall Fellows Program (ACHF), designed to develop civic leadership among students while building the city's capacity to reach out to underserved local neighborhoods. Students in the program, which was administered and assessed from 2014 to 2019, were nominated and selected through a competitive process. They engaged in discussions with community residents and neighborhood associations and organized alongside residents to define community priorities for revitalization. Students supported residents

in addressing those defined priorities through activities such as grant writing, resource mapping, and outreach. The program enabled students to build skills in community building, group facilitation, and cultural proficiency, and it helped community residents and leaders access resources at the university and in city government.

As requirements of the program, students engaged in 30 hours of cocurricular training, attended community meetings and events, and took a 2-credit pass/fail College of Liberal Arts service-learning class called "Community Organizing and Leadership Development in Austin." This course was taught by an instructor and supported by a graduate student in the Center for Community Engagement (CCE), a unit of the university's Division of Diversity and Community Engagement (DDCE). This course scaffolded successful service-learning projects within a framework of a university-community-city partnership with a diverse group of stakeholders. This paper examines students' experiences in this fellowship-required service-learning course across 5 years of ACHF cohorts (2014–2019) to answer this research question: "How did five cohorts of undergraduate students experience the structure of a novel community-university-city partnership in a service-learning course from 2014 to 2019?"

The ACHF Course

The course functioned as the curricular component of the program and owed its structure to the foundational service-learning pedagogy that Bringle and Hatcher (1995) defined:

A course-based, credit-bearing educational experience in which students (a) participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs, and (b) reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of personal values and civic responsibility. (p. 112)

The ACHF program used this definition to underscore its commitment to reciprocity between the university and community partners as well as the importance of personal reflection in connecting values and theoretical texts from the course to experiences in the field.

The ACHF course, which comprised part of the overall program, met weekly during the spring semester of each academic year analyzed in our study. Over time, it was taught by the CCE lead (Gururaj), a graduate student assistant (including Johnson), and a peer mentor, who is an alum of the university. Over the time period evaluated, each cohort was composed of eight to 16 students. Intended student learning outcomes for the course were threefold. First, students from all represented disciplines worked as a group to understand their unique strengths and the strengths of their classmates. Second, students gained an understanding of the complexity involved with community planning, community organizing, and neighborhood needs assessments based on readings and experience in a service-learning project. And finally, students demonstrated collaborative community engagement by developing innovative and culturally grounded solutions in the context of an ethical, reciprocal service-learning project involving students in other disciplines, community members, and/or local organizations. This engagement was led by community partner representatives, including the local housing authority and community schools nonprofit, with instructors serving as mentors and advisers when students gave progress reports and sought advice about communication. To these ends, students read texts, engaged in online discussions, met with instructors, and talked with peer and city mentors while engaging in community outreach and asset and resource mapping in an Austin neighborhood.

As a service-learning offering at a research university, the course focused on cognitive and personal moral development; the course was also designed to enhance students' career development, especially in the public sector, and their

understanding of issues related to diversity within Austin's unique context. As such, the academic learning and guest speaking occasions in the course heavily emphasized Austin's complicated negative history of displacement of diverse Black and brown populations and its ongoing racial and economic segregation (Badger, 2015).

Texts for the service-learning course were diverse and included (a) theoretical readings about "community" as a construct, social capital and networking, and the history of community-university partnerships; (b) practical readings about community organizing, city demographics, and historical segregation; (c) guest lectures by Austin city officials, university professors, and experts in grantsmanship; (d) readings on ethical leadership; and (e) readings pertaining to individual strengths identification. Students completed four reflection assignments each semester in which they considered (a) their strengths and the ways they leveraged individual and team strengths in their community engagement work; (b) theoretical and practical interpretations of texts about organizing; (c) critical analyses of highly theoretical texts on community building; and (d) how the course texts informed their community engagement work. The final assessment was administered by the course assistant on the final exam date of the course and was not read by the instructor of record until after grades were submitted. A full catalog of the course activities is included in Appendix A.

Evolving Landscape Focus

We wish to underscore two aspects of this course related to its evolution over time. First, the ACHF course differed from the overall program in that the course offered two credits during a single long semester. During the (cocurricular) first long semester (fall), students bonded socially as part of a cohort and attended diverse community meetings to begin their exploration off campus. During the second long semester (spring), students engaged in readings and with guest speakers to better understand their engagement with the city. We wish to note that, as instructors came to better understand students' responses to readings and activities, we adjusted them over time.

Second, the course was offered over a 5-year period in which Austin's population grew at a rapid pace and populations began to shift (Austin Chamber of Commerce, n.d.). Specifically, Austin's population increased exponentially in the period from 2000 to 2010 as it experienced gentrification that displaced its Black community members,

making it the fastest growing city in the U.S. during that time period with a decreasing Black population (Tang & Ren, 2014). During the same period, Austin hosted burgeoning Asian/Asian American and Latinx populations. Thus, this study seeks to understand students' experiences in this course amid a shifting landscape in which both the partnerships and the learning contexts were evolving rapidly.

Diversity Focus

Given the ACHF program's focus on inequity, it is important to note that it was a signature offering in the CCE in the DDCE at UT. The application asked undergraduate students from across all 18 academic colleges to describe their previous community engagement experience and commitment to alleviating inequity; the question allowed for a broad range of answers and enabled students to discuss their own positionalities in their community-based work. As such, one of many considerations for inclusion in the program was first-generation college status or participation in other DDCE programs, including the federally funded TRIO programs and the Gateway Scholars program, one of the largest student success programs at UT (Longhorn Center for Academic Equity, n.d.). The ACHF program admitted first-generation students from underserved high schools, with first-generation students accounting for 20 to 30 percent of the total cohort. The ACHF program also sought to recruit a racially diverse and gender-balanced group of students.

Multifaceted Partnership Focus

Given that the program was designed as a partnership, instructors were aware of the community and city partners' goals. These included support for increased outreach to historically underserved communities in Austin, research or reporting by students that scaffolded the development of a community-initiated project or program, and, most importantly, the creation and maintenance of sustainable connections between the city and its communities, with UT students as bridge builders.

In these ways, the ACHF program was designed to provide mutual benefits for all stakeholders involved, including community members, the city of Austin, and UT students. It was also constructed in consideration of the idea that universities may serve as place-based anchor institutions that "rethink their range of resources to contribute more directly to the improvement

of their communities, cities and regions" (Netter Center for Community Partnerships, 2008). Thus, notably, this study assesses student learning in a city-university-community partnership that demonstrates that "the fate of the academy and the city are simply intertwined" (Netter Center for Community Partnerships, 2008). In the context of this partnership, some of the projects completed during the 5 years considered in the present study included a resource packet including maps of health care resources in a single neighborhood, an outline for the creation of a language access program to be provided to the Housing Authority of the City of Austin (HACA), a consulting report to address digital divide issues in HACA residences, and an outline for a possible youth engagement program in a single neighborhood.

Literature Review

The ACHF program included multiple partners; the relationship associated with this course was not between a single university and a single community partner. As such, this study seeks to fill a gap in the service-learning literature by analyzing the student experience within a service-learning course that complicated direct power dynamics between a university and its communities.

The primary domains of literature review that influenced this study were (a) the effects of service-learning on student development and (b) the creation of novel, including multipartner, service-learning programs that support that student development.

We know from copious existing research that students who engage in service-learning see gains in academic, cognitive, and moral development (Astin & Sax, 1998; Densmore, 2000; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Kezar, 2002; Markus et al., 1993). Increasingly, other literature cites the explicit social justice aims of service-learning initiatives and programs (Mitchell, 2008).

Another domain of service-learning and community engagement literature describes partnerships that posit a novel model that seeks to benefit more than two types of stakeholders, thus complicating the traditional student-community organization relationship. The literature tells us that partnerships that work toward democratizing missions for the benefit of the public good require intentional cultivation and assessment in order to avoid the inequitable institutional power dynamics that have harmed university-community relationships in the past (Brackmann, 2015; Goddard & Vallance,

2013). To this end, research supports the need to review the meaning of “partnerships” in university-community partnerships. In their qualitative study investigating the challenges of a university-school partnership, Luter, Lester, and Kronick (2013) interviewed both university and K–12 school staff engaged in the partnership activities. The authors discovered that differing staff perceptions regarding communication, problem-solving strategies, and decision-making latitude presented challenges to the partnership. They suggested that an intentionally designed and agreed upon “partnership infrastructure” (p. 180) could mitigate the administrative and personnel challenges of a university-school partnership, and they recommended that further research focus on universities gathering “diverse stakeholders in communities” as an essential starting point for engaging in community collaborations (p. 181). Also informing this study is the work of Bringle, Clayton, and Price (2009); their SOFAR model offers insight into how dyadic relationships among students, community organizations, faculty, administration, and community residents influence whether partnerships are exploitative, transactional, or transformational. The nature of these relationships impacts partnership outcomes.

Within the domain of higher education, innovative partnerships include the CommUniverCity collaborative at San José State University, which brought three equal partners to collaborate on issues around education, health, and neighborhood environment. Drawing on best practices of sustainability and centering community priorities, this collaborative sought to identify opportunities for community programming and mobilized classrooms of students to address them (Christensen & Jackson, 2009). In like manner, in the University-Community Engagement Model between Duke University and Durham, North Carolina, the university worked directly with community partners in the city to identify priorities for development and revitalization. Aligning with the philosophies of empowerment, quiet partnership, and evolution, Duke drew on its role as an anchor institution to mediate inclusive development in the area (Ehlenz, 2021). That said, analyses of these programs concentrate primarily on the role of university leaders (staff and faculty) in moving these initiatives forward and on the outcomes for the community partners and communities involved. While the impact on community partners is important in the context of ACHF, this particular study focuses on students’ experiences.

Thus, this study seeks to fill a gap in the service-learning literature by analyzing the student experience within a service-learning course that complicates traditional power dynamics between a university and its communities.

Theoretical Framework

This study’s theoretical framework is based on the seminal work of Howard (1998), which described academic service-learning as a “pedagogical model that intentionally integrates academic service-learning and relevant community service” (p. 22) such that service is truly connected with student learning. As a “counternormative pedagogy” (p. 21), service-learning challenges the traditional classroom in which learning is passively received by students, information transmission is fairly direct and thus learning outcomes are directly measured, and learning is perceived as objective. Howard’s “synergistic classroom” (p. 25) in which service-learning is fully integrated values active learning, acknowledges a broad spectrum of learning outcomes from community engagement, and scaffolds subjective ways of knowing.

Howard (1998) describes four stages in the transition from a traditional classroom to a synergistic classroom. In the “conform” stage, the instructor is directive and the students are passive. In the second stage, the instructor will “renorm” the students in the class by calling upon them to define the topics for class discussion. In the third stage, the “storm” stage, the instructor retreats further, observing as the students participate in their own discussion. The final stage, called the “perform” stage, represents the truly synergistic classroom in which students and instructors contribute in ways that further student learning. While the model posited is not linear, we understand it as a stage model through which students and instructors in a course might progress.

The ACHF course was developed to reflect the fully synergistic experience, which is facilitative and active rather than directive and passive and “integrates social and democratic responsibility” (Cornelius-White & Harbaugh, 2010) with academic content. A component of ACHF was a service-learning class; however, the course was designed to be a space outside of the university, the city, or community partnerships. As discussed above, the course differed from the program in that the course offered course credit during a long semester.

Thus, in the realm of higher education, we sought to explore the effects of classroom pedagogy within the context of a new relationship outside of

the traditional “campus-community partnership”—that is, within a truly “synergistic” service-learning classroom (Howard, 1998). The synergistic classroom eschews the sage-on-the-stage model of learning, promotes students and community partners in conversation as experts, and allows instructors and assistants to act as facilitators.

While relevant literature has reflected on trials, tribulations, and recommendations related to establishing successful community partnerships (Goddard and Vallance, 2013; Harkavy, 2006; Luter et al., 2013), models for assessing the student experience in university-community-city partnerships, particularly concerning community-based service-learning objectives, are included mainly in the general literature of service-learning around diverse relationships. Work undertaken by Bringle, Clayton, and Price (2009) in the development of their SOFAR structural model moved beyond the traditional “campus-community” partnership and presented a set of dyadic relationships among students, community organizations, faculty, administration, and community residents to shed light on the possibility of exploitative, transactional, or transformational interactions. Kniffin et al.’s (2020) innovative and iterative TRES model sought to assess the ways in which civic partnerships may be exploitative, transactional, or transformational and how multipartner projects may promote democratic engagement. While both models offer implications for practice that represent a 360-degree view of a multipartner relationship, this study seeks to contribute to this body of literature by understanding students’ experiences from within such a model.

Data, Methods, and Analytic Approach

At the end of the course each year, ACHF students completed a reflection-based assessment that focused on their experience of the course texts, the nature of their collaboration with their classmates, and their experience of the service-learning project and interactions with community partners and the city. While these assessments were collected in an effort to collect data that would encourage continuous improvement in the course, we also sought approval from UT’s institutional review board to analyze the data and publish it (approval was granted; study 2015-07-0044). Over the 5-year period reflected in this study, Gururaj collected 41 completed assessments.

To address our research question (“How did five cohorts of undergraduate students experience

the structure of a novel community-university-city partnership in a service-learning course from 2014 to 2019?”), we used content analysis to examine patterns across students’ reflection responses. We also applied complementary analytic methods such as inductive and deductive coding (Miles et al., 2014). For the first round of analysis, we developed three deductive codes: (a) positive, (b) negative, (c) needs (desired) change. Then, we all reviewed the same set of 10 student reflections from across all cohorts to identify preliminary codes. We evaluated and combined the codes that we developed independently into one preliminary codebook. To refine this codebook, we then used it to code another set of five reflections independently. After reviewing the first five reflections, we met to discuss the coding process and group the excerpts/preliminary codes into themes. During this meeting, we also decided against using the three deductive codes to focus more on the students’ experiences in the course.

Finally, we decided to create a new parent code, *outcomes and applications*. This code allowed us to capture student reflection responses that focused on things such as career preparation, willingness to serve as a future mentor, and outside applications of course content and knowledge. We ultimately produced a codebook with seven parent codes: (a) *enablers of content learning*, (b) *enablers of project progress*, (c) *connectors of project and content*, (d) *barriers to content learning*, (e) *barriers to project progress*, (f) *sources of disconnect between project and content*, and (g) *outcomes/applications*. These themes were selected to emphasize the students’ experiences in the course.

During the second round of coding, we used these codes to code the 10 initial student reflections as well as the remaining 31 student reflections.

Author Positionalities

Acknowledging that this program existed for 5 years, we as authors approach this study from diverse positionalities and perspectives of the course itself. One of us (Gururaj) served as the cocreator of the program and instructor of record throughout the 5 years. But with the addition of co-instructors, the course developed on its own. The instructor and co-instructor had direct contact with the students and jointly made decisions about curriculum. One author (Johnson) cotaught the course for one of the years as a graduate student in the CCE studying educational leadership and policy. This author conducted research on the program as a graduate student

and as a higher education professional in diversity, equity, and inclusion. Another author (Omogun) was also a graduate student in the CCE and studied curriculum and instruction. She analyzed the data set as extant data, having joined the research team after the collection of 5 years of data.

Our positionalities are important in this case for several reasons. First, we bring these positionalities to our coding process and our experience of the qualitative data. Second, we have different experiences with the data and with the individuals represented by the data. And finally, we understand this project to be an iterative project; as such, while Gururaj may have cocreated this project, we as a collective approached the data with the understanding that the data could be viewed dispassionately and that we did not want to demonstrate creator bias.

Findings

The findings of this analysis are captured by three themes that outline how students experienced the course. The first theme aligns with the first stage of Howard's (1998) framework and details how students experienced the traditional course elements as facilitators for learning and service. The second theme combines Howard's second and third stages and explains how some course structures hindered student learning in the course while the hands-on elements of the course facilitated learning. The final theme aligns with the fourth stage of Howard's model and details how students embodied and benefited from the community-based learning structure.

Theme 1: Traditional Course Elements as Facilitators for Learning and Service

Students described the traditional elements of the course in which the instructor directed the learning, such as lectures and assigned readings, as "comfortable" and important to facilitating their understanding of the goals of service-learning. Student Reflection 30 commented on how repetition from the instructor was helpful: "When it came to our specific goals/project it was helpful that we reiterated what we were doing almost every meeting. I think that's what is important. Just drilling it into our heads." Similarly, Student Reflection 27 described, "I thought the goals for the class were very clear especially because both [the instructor] and [the co-instructor] repeated them on multiple occasions and we also helped to set the goals ourselves." While the students took more of an active role in goal setting in the second example,

both examples show how students benefited from receiving information directly from the instructors in the traditional manner.

What students learned through lectures was supplemented by course readings and exercises assigned by the instructor. Student Reflection 16 described course readings like this: "They were always interesting and relevant readings on community work and not one time did I not learn something new. And the incorporation of the discussion was great for reflecting." Student Reflection 11 commented that certain readings "grabbed [their] attention" and "put familiar experiences and concepts into a new structure and language [they could] definitely see [themselves] using more in the future." Moreover, Student Reflection 17 reflected on how topics like "asset-mapping exercises instigated a fundamental shift in thinking that [would] help [them] in initiating more effective and community-based grassroots programs in the future." As these students and several others described, traditional, instructor-driven elements of the class were foundational to their understanding of community-based learning.

While Howard (1998) frames students as comfortable primarily with instructor-led learning, students in our study also expressed an affinity toward learning from peers and community members. Student Reflection 27 described benefiting from peer discussions in class: "I enjoyed our conversations in class the most. I felt that everyone came from very interesting and unique backgrounds and had a lot of valuable information and learning lessons." Student Reflection 28 added that the class environment was "comfortable" and described class discussions as "open and casual." They added that the environment and discussions helped students "learn from each other's experiences and [listen] to others voice their differing opinions on each topic at hand." In this way, students saw input from peers as valuable to their learning.

Students learned not only from peers but also from guest lecturers that visited the class. Student Reflection 35 shared the following:

Understanding the landscape of a community is a critical aspect of civic engagement. Through this class I was able to learn a considerable amount about the history of Austin, the identities . . . some of the residents hold, and how these aspects collectively make up the community. Most notable [sic] I learned this through

the [community event name], [the guest speaker's] lecture, and many of [the instructor's] lectures.

As this example suggests, students recognized the importance of being knowledgeable about their community and were able to grasp the material through a combination of instructor-led and peer- and community member-led directive approaches, readings, and goal setting.

Theme 2: Hands-on Learning and Team Projects Mitigated the Course Structure Barriers to Grasping Concepts

While some traditional course structures helped students learn the goals of service-learning, ambiguity around the course's goals, some topics, scheduling, lengthy guest presentations, and the quality of course credit served as barriers.

Several students expressed in their final assessments that the course expectations and assignments lacked clarity. Student Reflection 39 shared, "I would recommend giving students as much information about the class and its structure upfront (before the end of this semester, or even within the application) so they can make informed decisions about their commitments." From this reflection, we learn that course clarity is essential in helping students commit to this service-learning course. Similarly, Student Reflection 14 shared the following:

I think this class has great potential but something that I struggled with was the lack of direct outlines and expectations. Earlier in my reflection I talked about how it was a good thing that we didn't have any restrictions, however, I think that because there was [sic] no restrictions we didn't make as much of an impact on the community itself. This may change with the formatting of the class changing.

Both reflections affirm Howard's (1998) description of the traditional pedagogical model in which "each class and each assignment follow a familiar routine" (p. 23). That is, students expect to encounter course assignments that are similar to assignments they have had in other classes, and they tend to resist assignments of other formats, like the ones offered in the service-learning course. Further, they indicate that clear, specific, and in-depth knowledge supports students' service commitment decisions

as well as their feelings/perception of community impact. This idea was further supported in reflections that discussed the importance of being adequately prepared for service-learning projects by practical course readings about the specific neighborhoods in which students would serve rather than readings about local neighborhood shifts in general. While several course readings focused on broader service-learning concepts, these readings did not particularly align with the students' service projects. Here, Student Reflection 6 noted that they needed "more theoretical texts that provided context for the situations that the various neighborhoods were in." Student Reflection 9 shared:

I know that the course was intended to be theory-based, but I felt overwhelmed by the vagueness and intangibility of the concepts while sitting in class. I think it would be helpful to look at more case studies as we go along, tying each theory into a real-life example to keep it more down-to-earth.

These examples reflect the pedagogical challenges associated with bridging learning and service in academic service-learning (Howard, 1998), particularly in a context in which multiple partners (city, university, community) are working together to discover and define goals. They also reflect educational approaches that aim to transform both students and society (Kumashiro, 2001). In this case, the multiview nature of the service-learning project conflicted with the students' traditional academic expectations, which in turn created a form of "crisis" (Felman, 1995). Particularly, student comments illuminate the preparatory nature of academic service-learning as well as the intentional effort required to "utilize academic learning to inform the community service" (Howard, 1998, p. 22).

Additionally, while traditional courses often assign a letter grade to compensate for students' coursework, this course offered a nongraded pass/fail credit. This pedagogical requirement proved to be a motivational barrier. Here, according to Student Reflection 17, receiving a letter grade could have helped to "encourage more in-class participation and dedication to the project." While students slowly embraced the ambiguity of a service-learning format and multipartner community project, they expected a traditional measurement of their work.

Additional course structures that made it difficult for students to grasp service-learning concepts included lengthy guest presentations, a lack of speakers from the communities in which students ultimately worked on their service projects, and difficulty registering for this cohort-based elective that was scheduled around students' existing major schedules. Though this course was designed to foster elements of the synergistic classroom such as social responsibility and active student participation, the students' reflections highlight the importance of ensuring that this cohort-based class fell in line with a familiar, outcomes-oriented pedagogical model.

While students expressed their view of key barriers, the execution of the service projects in this novel classroom helped to mediate these barriers, as students collectively engaged in a teaching and learning process among themselves. The teamwork and hands-on nature of the projects helped students grasp service-learning concepts in authentic and collaborative contexts, which reflected the transformative and synergistic classroom. Student Reflection 6 shared, "I believe the group project does relate to service and civic engagement largely. This project forced us to interact with the community and help the members with their wants and needs." These structures also helped students mediate challenges that surfaced during the planning and execution phases of service-learning. Student Reflection 13 stated:

We went out into the community pretty frequently and learned a lot about how the city runs and interacts with its community members. We also realized how it's also important to work at a distance and not always within the community as it can be overwhelming to try and deal with everything at once.

This student's reflection reveals how students as a cohort learned about ways of engaging with communities in order to address circumstances of being overwhelmed. It also reveals the knowledge that they gained about the community through frequent visits.

In similar manner, when students faced challenges with the course structure, they took on more directive roles by utilizing creative strategies to overcome them. In doing so, they gained nuanced understandings of service-learning. Here,

Student Reflection 10 remarks on a challenge: "By embracing controversy during the service-learning project, we were able to reach more strategic and collaborative decisions. I plan to implement this idea in all future endeavors." The peer collaboration structure not only allowed students to work together strategically but also ensured the completion of their service-learning projects. Student Reflection 16 shared that "inclusiveness was vital" in that it helped students navigate the challenges of effective community engagement by empowering them to pursue projects and decisions that they envisioned would benefit the largest cross-section of their communities. Thus, we found that group structures mediated obstacles that surfaced while planning and implementing service-learning projects.

Diversity in the group was also perceived as an asset to the process of tackling challenges. Student Reflection 21 shared the following related to the diversity of their cohort:

I truly believe that diversity is one of the program's biggest strengths, and I think that the fellows come to deeply [appreciate] it as they learn from one another and create something through a process that requires a wide variety of strengths that no one individual will possess. I have never been a part of a program with such a diverse group of people during my 3 years at UT.

The nature of the service projects also allowed students to access acquired course knowledge that they found relevant and applicable to their learning about community engagement. Student Reflection 3 shared, "With all the knowledge that I have gained from the class and talking to people within the community, I can better apply my skills to help the Austin community and my own community back home." Students enjoyed the hands-on nature of the course because it was tangible and physical. Student Reflection 1 expressed, "Nothing can compare to real-life hands-on learning." Not only did the hands-on structure of the course prove to be a bridge from theory to practice, but it also supplemented course structures that prevented students from grasping service-learning concepts. This emphasizes the importance of including practical, hands-on, real-life experiences for students to grasp and actualize service-learning concepts.

*Theme 3: The Synergistic Classroom Experience
Solidified Students' Commitment to Future
Community Engagement*

Students' participation in this class led to a sense that they could be effective in future community engagement. These commitments were connected to their professional and personal lives and goals. For instance, several students expressed an interest in engaging in continued project work, mentorship, and careers focused on public service. Student Reflection 5 shared, "I'd like to stay pretty involved directly if possible. I'd also like to [continue] working on our project and others in [a particular Austin neighborhood] (including CCE's "The Project" [day of service])." Students committed to mentoring future cohorts of students as well. Student Reflection 21 remarked:

I would be happy to serve as a mentor via email with regular or occasional Skype-ins. I think I have some unique insight to the process from being a team lead this year, and I would definitely hope to help another group learn from my group's mistakes and triumphs.

Both students' quotes illustrate how the structure of course compelled them to access the expertise they developed as incipient community organizers. They both mention course structural terms: "project," "mentor," "team lead," and "group." Further, we see how students offer video conferencing platforms as a means to continue to demonstrate their expertise. Other examples illustrated the influence of the course structure on students' future career goals. Student Reflection 17 expressed how the course shaped this student's interest in working in the public sector:

Before taking this class, I had strongly considered working in the public sector with community health initiatives, and this class has increased this interest to a nearly certain career aspiration. I have learned how health is so interrelated with one's environment and that changes to environment often need the support of local government. From here on out, I want to make community service and engagement a part of my lifestyle and personal mission.

These examples illustrate how students integrated the learnings from the course. These learnings are reflected in the benefits that students

received from the course structure, specifically in the way that students' acquired community engagement knowledge and skills motivated continued community change.

Students' commitment to community engagement extended beyond the course; their reflections indicated an encompassing change in behavior and attitude about their community work. Student Reflection 8 stated, "I think that the growth that I've developed here will help me in moving forward as a social change leader because I know that congruence is vital for successful partnerships, networks, and positive change." Similarly, Student Reflection 19 remarked:

I can use [my strengths] to guide me in future community engagement endeavors. When I go out into the community in the future, I can use my individualization skill to identify how each person in the community can add value. With my achiever and competition skill, I can make sure that if I start an initiative, I follow through with the best of my ability. From this experience, I have learned to capitalize on my strengths and use them to benefit me and those around me.

While many students were moved to take leadership roles in their professional lives, some students experienced a sense of personal efficacy. For instance, Student Reflection 14 shared:

For me this class made more of an impact on my personal growth and understanding [than] I did for the community. I thought it would be reversed when I entered into the program. I really believe in the mission of this class and I am looking forward to seeing how it grows and progresses over time.

Following Howard's (1998) framework, these themes represent the ways in which students experienced the process of moving toward a synergistic classroom in which they created and led, rather than received, information.

Discussion

This study of the service-learning component of a university-city-community partnership at UT demonstrates the ways in which students experienced their classwork vis-à-vis their community involvement.

First and foremost, our findings led us to interrogate Howard's (1998) stage model as a structural reference for service-learning courses. Specifically, within this tripartner context, students' engagement with the course/model did not necessarily follow Howard's stages in their stated order. While in the "conform" stage the instructor-led components of the course facilitated student learning and were foundational to the students' understanding of community-based learning, peer and community members also served as key factors for learning, leading to coconstruction of knowledge from the outset of the class. This emphasizes the communal and co-learning nature of novel service-learning courses, which is not necessarily highlighted in Howard's model. It also presents a complication from the beginning of a course regarding the course's authority.

Further, students' responses to the course structural barriers (e.g., course goals, topics, schedule, lengthy guest presentations, etc.) caused us to reconsider the roles defined in the counternormative pedagogy model. For instance, the students enacted agency by creatively executing strategies to mediate the barriers. Nonetheless, the students expressed a need for the structure of a traditional classroom even as they were engaged in community work.

Critically important to students' mediation was the course's hands-on nature, as it positioned the students to rely on each other to overcome the barriers. While Howard's (1998) model suggests in the "renorm" and "storm" stages a quasi-transfer of instructional leadership to the students, the storming here was complicated by the fact that students sought out other authority through their partners (the city, community partners) instead of their instructors. This causes us to ask: How does students' agency complicate the model?

In fact, in this study we found that while the model was appropriate for the types of negotiations that students experienced in their learning as they progressed in the class, the model offered a progressive view of students' experience—from the traditional (conforming) classroom to the synergistic (performing) classroom—that was not reflected in this case. Rather, as the instructors retreated in the second stage (renorming), they did not return in any authoritative way during the third stage (storming). Thus, students found creative means, including relying on their teammates and later on their community partners, to mitigate the anxiety of ambiguity. Though extremely uncomfortable, disorienting, and emotionally

upsetting, Kumashiro (2001) argues that societal change cannot happen in predictable, controllable academic lessons; we observed this in the student reflections as well.

Indeed, the students in the ACHF program may have experienced a combined Stage 2 and Stage 3 of Howard's model in this instance because of the nature of this partnership. The students facilitated several relationships at once: instructor-student, student-student, student-community partners. These partnerships required students to communicate and manage these relationships in addition to mediating the course barriers. Given the complex nature of a three-partner partnership, this course also complicated what it meant to be an "instructor" and who was called upon to facilitate instruction and mitigate the ambiguity of goals.

This assessment also led us to reconsider how specific theoretical frameworks were included in community service courses. In this particular course, several students shared that some of the theoretical text choices, including some on democratic engagement and nationalism, made it difficult for them to grasp community service concepts. They preferred frameworks, including those about asset-based community engagement, that offered steps toward practice. Indeed, this specific cohort of students was learning about theories of community engagement while also being called on to learn about the neighborhoods being served by community partners or the city. To this end, they asked for nontheoretical, evidence-based texts about the communities in which they were engaged. This anxiety around context weighed on students in this course in a way that perhaps it may not have for students in a traditional two-partner course. Instructors' understanding that the chosen theoretical texts were perceived as out of context for the students proved to be significant.

Finally, this assessment caused us to question the nature of partnerships. As above, the students facilitated several relationships at once and mediated course barriers, all of which required the students to manage complex relationships with multiple "instructors." While the course was created as a true collaboration between a senior leader at the university and a senior official at City Hall, over the years in which it was offered, the level of hands-on commitment by partners waxed and waned. The community partners with which students worked were long-time partners of both the city and the university; however, in the absence of formal memoranda of understanding, community partners' responsiveness over time

was variable in line with their priorities, budgets, and staffing. While this study provided insight on students' perceptions of instruction in this complex format, it only scratched the surface regarding student ambiguity related to a wide breadth of instruction by diverse instructors.

Recommendations

The findings of this study explore the student experience of a multipartner service-learning course built around a city-community-university partnership. This single-semester course was part of a larger year-long program designed to connect UT students with the city of Austin toward building the city's capacity to understand the priorities of unique communities (and council districts). The course itself offered opportunities for students to understand best practices and principles of asset-based community engagement. Students received instruction and support from university instructors, community partners, and city officials. Our findings reveal not only the strengths of the program but also areas for growth. The course within the program enabled students to work alongside diverse students and community partners in the community; to meet mentors and advisers at the university, in communities, and at the city; and to practice practical skills of engagement, including teamwork, facilitation, and listening. Above all, however, the course itself enabled students to understand and reflect upon their own experiences with cocreated goals and processes that may be (understandably) ambiguous in their approach, outputs, or outcomes.

In addition, we offer these recommendations to other colleagues and institutions seeking to develop other such novel service-learning courses. For our colleagues developing other such partnerships, we recommend frequently reiterating the course goals to students, allowing students to draw on their experiences from previous classes and any community partners meetings they may have. Based on the outcomes of our analysis, we recommend that community service courses have clearly articulated goals. These goals should be clearly reiterated throughout the course, even if students wish to adjust or change those goals during the course. We understood from this study that synthesis of the wide breadth of content offered in our course required revisiting and restating the content.

For students who have most often been educated through the "sage-on-the-stage" model, these various forms and conduits of information

and data can be confusing and bewildering without a constant focus on a course goal. Therefore, we also recommend that conceptual and theoretical course content be scaffolded to support students' understanding of the course goals. This scaffolding can also support their transition into their various service projects. Finally, we recommend that instructors themselves do the prework of more intentionally integrating theory in the course, perhaps even integrating theory into data or articles reflecting the neighborhoods in which the students will work. Doing so would help students make connections to and prepare them for their service work.

Additionally, we recommend considering the ways in which Howard's (1998) seminal conceptual framework and others can be adapted to the evolving nature of the classroom and pedagogical methods, including flipped classrooms, community-university-city partnerships, internships and other experiential learning, and cocurricular partnerships in higher education. For instance, this study allowed us to reconsider the ways in which the traditional service-learning classroom might represent the starting point for a longer engagement in mutually beneficial community service. Service-learning instructors who have long felt constrained by the semester schedule of a service-learning project and the need to scaffold their students toward the completion of a deliverable may be freed from that model, choosing instead to posit the entire service-learning course as an exercise in the stages of enabling students to negotiate their own sense of agency. In undertaking this study, we confirm real value in the model put forth by Howard (1998); this study enabled us to apply it, interrogate it, and offer insights into how it might apply to a new generation of service-learning classes and their instructors and students.

Limitations

This course assessment does have limitations. First, limited demographic data was collected on the student participants. This did not allow us to fully capture how their identities, as they relate to race/ethnicity, gender, national origin, sexual orientation, and the like, may have factored into their experience of the course structure.

Second, this study draws on a sample of students over a 5-year period during which the course was taught as a component of the larger program. As stated above, the course was established during a specific time in the Austin

city council's history when at-large representation was replaced with district representation of councilmembers. During the latter years of this course, students' focus shifted from connecting the city of Austin with these diverse and newly formed districts to engaging in sustainable programming in districts they began to know well. As such, aspects of community engagement that may have been ambiguous for students in the first years of the program may have been addressed by the later years of the program.

In the same manner, the course evolved over time and was often adjusted to respond to students' feedback. While these changes may represent a limitation of the study, we also acknowledge that every cohort of students had its own personality and so was not always in agreement with the changes developed from the previous year. The content and readings in the course also changed over time to better accommodate the needs and questions of cohorts of students going through the course/class. For instance, many of the heaviest theoretical texts were removed to accommodate more practical texts explaining hands-on engagement. Thus, this study reflects the lived experiences of students over a period of time rather than at one time.

This program and class were developed at a specific point in Austin's civic history. Because the goal at the inception of the program was to elevate community voice and encourage community-student connections, the course was not designed to advance "justice oriented" students. In future, instructors should focus this established program as a tool of true democratic engagement, to encourage "personally responsible, participatory, and justice oriented" students (Westheimer & Kahne, 2002, p. 2). Finally, while a research team did publish a study of the city's perceptions of this program (Sikes et al., 2019), we have not yet undertaken a study of community partners' experiences. As is the case with all successful community-engaged programs, community voice will be important to capture in a future study.

References

- Astin, A.W., & Sax, L.J. (1998). How undergraduates are affected by service participation. *Journal of College Student Development*, 39(3), 251–263.
- Austin Chamber of Commerce. (n.d.). *Population overview*. <https://www.austinchamber.com/economic-development/austin-profile/population/overview>
- Badger, E. (2015, February 23). Study: Austin is most economically segregated metro area. *The Texas Tribune*. <https://www.texastribune.org/2015/02/23/austin-most-economically-segregated-metro-area/>
- Brackmann, S.M. (2015). Community engagement in a neoliberal paradigm. *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*, 19(4), 115–146. <https://openjournals.libs.uga.edu/jheoe/article/view/1235>
- Bingle, R.G., Clayton, P.H., & Price, M.F. (2009). Partnerships in service-learning and civic engagement. *Partnerships: A Journal of Service-Learning and Civic Engagement*, 1(1), 1–20.
- Bingle, R.G., & Hatcher, J.A. (1995). A service-learning curriculum for faculty. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, 2(1), 112–122. <https://hdl.handle.net/1805/4591>
- Christensen, T., & Jackson, M.J. (2009). CommUniverCity San José: Building a partnership for service and learning. In D.P. Redlawsk, T. Rice, & Associates (Eds.), *Civic service: Service-learning with state and local government partners* (pp. 42–69). Jossey-Bass.
- Cornelius-White, J.H.D., & Harbaugh, A. P. (2010). *Learner-centered instruction: Building relationships for student success*. SAGE Publications.
- Densmore, K. (2000). Service learning and multicultural education: Suspect or transformative? In C.R. O'Grady (Ed.), *Integrating service learning and multicultural education in colleges and universities* (pp. 45–58). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Ehlenz, M.M. (2021). "Can you imagine what's happened in Durham?" Duke University and a new university-community engagement model. *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 87(1), 45–61. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01944363.2020.1782766>
- Eyler, J., & Giles, D.E. (1999). *Where's the learning in service-learning?* Jossey-Bass.
- Felman, S. (1995). Education and crisis, or the vicissitudes of teaching. In C. Caruth (Ed.), *Trauma: Explorations in memory* (pp. 13–66). The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Goddard, J., & Vallance, P. (2013). *The university and the city*. Routledge.
- Harkavy, I. (2006). The role of universities in advancing citizenship and social justice in the 21st century. *Education, Citizenship, and Social Justice*, 1(1), 5–37. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1746197906060711>
- Howard, J.P.F. (1998). Academic service learning: A counternormative pedagogy. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, 1998(73), 21–29. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tl.7303>

- Kanin, M., & Pagano, E. (2013, February 1). The road to 10-1: The City Council districting destination is settled. Is anybody driving the bus? *The Austin Chronicle*. <https://www.austinchronicle.com/news/2013-02-01/the-road-to-10-1/>
- Kezar, A. (2002). Assessing community service learning: Are we identifying the right outcomes? *About Campus*, 7(2), 14–20. <https://doi.org/10.1177/108648220200700204>
- Kimball, M.J., & Thomas, D.F. (2012). Place-building theory: A framework for assessing and advancing community engagement in higher education. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, 18(2), 19–28. <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.3239521.0018.202>
- Kniffin, L., Camo-Biogradlija, J., Price, M.F., Kohl, E., Del Conte Dickovick, A., Williams, J., Goodwin, J., Johnson, K.V., Clayton, P.H., & Bringle, R.G. (2020). Relationships and partnerships in community-campus engagement: Evolving inquiry and practice. *International Journal of Research on Service-Learning and Community Engagement*, 8(1), Article 15. <https://doi.org/10.37333/001c.18586>
- Kumashiro, K.K. (2001). “Posts” perspectives on anti-oppressive education in social studies, English, mathematics, and science classrooms. *Educational Researcher*, 30(3), 3–12. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X030003003>
- Longhorn Center for Academic Equity. (n.d.). *Signature Programs*. <https://diversity.utexas.edu/academic-equity/signature-programs/>
- Luter, D.G., Lester, J.N., & Kronick, R.F. (2013). “Remember, it’s a pilot”: Exploring the experience of teachers/staff at a university-assisted community school. *School Community Journal*, 23(2), 161–184.
- Markus, G.B., Howard, J.P.F., & King, D.C. (1993). Notes: Integrating community service and classroom instruction enhances learning: Results from an experiment. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 15(4), 410–419. <https://doi.org/10.3102/01623737015004410>
- Miles, M.B., Huberman, A.M., & Saldaña, J. (2014). *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Mitchell, T.D. (2008). Traditional vs. critical service-learning: Engaging the literature to differentiate two models. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, 14(2), 50–65. <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.3239521.0014.205>
- Netter Center for Community Partnerships. (2008). *Anchor institutions toolkit: A guide for neighborhood revitalization*. The University of Pennsylvania.
- Sikes, C.L., Lowe, T., & Gururaj, S. (2019). Building community capacity through university-city collaborations. In T.T. York, A.S. Tinkler, & B.E. Tinkler (Eds.), *Service-learning to advance access and success* (pp. 31–52). Information Age Publishing.
- Tang, E., & Ren, C. (2014). *Outlier: The case of Austin’s declining African-American population*. The Institute for Urban Policy Research and Analysis at the University of Texas at Austin. https://www.ebony.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Austin20AA20pop20policy20brief_FINAL.pdf
- University of Texas at Austin. (n.d.). *Mission and values*. <https://www.utexas.edu/about/mission-and-values>
- Westheimer, J., & Kahne, J. (2002, August 29–September 1). *Educating the “good” citizen: The politics of school-based civic education programs*. [Paper presentation]. Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Boston, MA. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED474166.pdf>

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the reviewers of this article, who, in the spirit of multifaceted partnerships, were critical in the cocreation of this final article.

About the Authors

Suchitra V. Gururaj is Assistant Vice President for Community and Economic Engagement and a lecturer in the College of Liberal Arts at the University of Texas at Austin. Brianna Davis Johnson is the Director of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion and chief diversity officer at The Ohio State University at Newark and Central Ohio Technical College. Lakeya Omogun is an assistant professor of Teaching, Learning, and Curriculum at the University of Washington.

Appendix A

Activity	Description of Activity
Class facilitation/ mini-lesson	Students connected a personal interest (major, student organization activity, deep dive into a course topic) with course readings and topics.
Team meetings	Students met in team groups before, during, and after engaging in a chosen Austin community or with a chosen Austin community-based organization.
Fieldwork	Students went into the chosen communities to engage with stakeholders about community priorities.
Community meetings	Students attended at least two community meetings each semester of the fellowship to listen to community priorities, understand community assets, and observe power dynamics.
Weekly reflection exercises	<p>Students responded to a weekly writing prompt that urged them to reflect on the week's activities and make connections with their own lived experiences in terms of both the community engagement work and their personal development.</p> <p>Paraphrased reflection questions over the period (not including identifying information about the partners or the Austin neighborhoods) included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is your story of self? • How do you wish to develop as it relates to your ability to work with and on a team? • How might your team and individual strengths be mobilized to support the community partner priority? • Describe the community events you have attended as part of your project. Who is there? Who is speaking? Who is leading? • Are we connecting with community? Are we listening to community? • With whom do you need to connect and how will you and your team go about connecting?
StrengthsFinder© and paired discussion	All students participated in a self-assessment using the Clifton StrengthsFinder tool. Students considered the importance to them of their own personal strengths as well as the strengths of their team members.

Appendix A (continued)

Activity	Description of Activity
Lecture and overview by city demographer	Austin's city demographer presented a 30-year overview of the city's demographic changes, commenting on specific policies and trends that have made an impact on diverse communities.
Guest lectures: city staff, community engagement professionals, cultural preservation experts, director of local grantsmanship organization	Guest lectures from city experts offered insight into how a city manages infrastructure projects. Discussion with experts in cultural preservation and grantsmanship underscored ways that smaller organizations influence the landscape of community development.
SWOT analysis	As a continuation of asset mapping, the strengths-weaknesses-opportunities-threats exercise enabled students to evaluate the assets of the communities in which they were based.
Module on ethical leadership	As a UT course with an "Ethics and Leadership Flag" as determined by the UT System Board of Regents, this course spent a class session facilitating a discussion about what it means to be an ethical leader.
Near-peer conversations and advice giving	Near-peer graduated fellows talked about their experiences with the current cohort. Current cohort members were able to ask questions about the content and process of the work in the program.
Conversations with potential community partners	Discussions with nonprofit leaders enabled students to identify specific projects for which they might build capacity.
In-class work time	Student learning and group communication was scaffolded in the classroom.
In-class presentation rehearsal and formal presentation of projects at Austin City Hall	Students received feedback from peers and instructors on their final projects before presenting their project formally at Austin's City Hall to city employees, including the mayor of Austin and Austin's chief service officer.