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Service-Learning at a Hispanic-Serving Institution: A Preliminary Study

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ABSTRACT

An emerging body of literature seeks to design, implement, and analyze best practices in service-learning at undergraduate universities. What scholars have not examined as well as service-learning as applied to students at Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSI's). Given that students at such universities are in unique learning environments, there is a question of how well standard practices in service-learning apply to HSI students. This paper presents the analysis of two semesters' worth of service-learning requirements in an Introduction to American Politics course at an HSI in Texas. Using the feedback provided by the students on the final course evaluations, I conclude that the current pedagogy applies reasonably well to students at HSI's, but there are certain areas in which pedagogy should be adjusted to reflect the unique aspects of students at HSI's, such as accounting for the socioeconomic needs of HSI students.

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Introduction

Service-learning—defined herein as an active learning pedagogy in which students participate in community activities related to public or social policy—has become a topic of much interest in political science since at least the late 1990s. The decline in political participation among younger Americans (Putnam 2001; Barnett 2018), student disinterest in the political fate of the local community (Hepburn, Niemi, and Chapman 2000), and a greater push by universities to give students demonstrable post-graduate work skills (Stolley et al. 2017), and a desire by professors to compose teaching techniques beyond the traditional lecture have led to calls to intersect service-learning and traditional academic coursework. Scholars and practitioners have sought to provide guidance on the best practices and most effective ways to conduct service-learning in a college environment, focusing on defining the underlying pedagogy of service-learning and its impact (Kezar and Rhoads 2001), best practices in service-learning (Bowen 2010; Mayhew and Engberg 2011; etc.) and assessment of service impact among students (Eyler et al. 1997) and the community (Driscoll et al. 1996).

There is a key unit too often left out of the discussion about service-learning pedagogy: how can service-learning pedagogy be adapted to the unique experiences of

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historically marginalized students? To the extent this concern has been addressed in the literature, it is with regard to the possibility of service-learning enforcing unequal power structures between service "clients" and volunteers (Jones, LePeau, and Robbins 2013) and between professors and students (Mitchell, Donahue, and Young-Law 2012). However, most studies heretofore have examined pedagogy from the view of Predominantly White Institutions (PWI's) and their student bodies. To the extent that service-learning research has examined the Hispanic/Latinx communities, it is mostly to address increasing the enrollments of Hispanic/Latinx students in higher education (e.g. Sheil and Rivera 2016). Service-learning can improve community engagement and social agency (Nishishiba, Nelson, and Shinn 2005; Cuellar 2021; etc.) Most Hispanic/Latinx students are 1st-generation college students,[1] and 1st-generation college students are generally underdeveloped in terms of educational and social engagement in high school (Terenzini et al. 1996). Therefore, the failure to thoroughly examine service-learning's impact on these students prevents us from better understanding the role of service-learning in higher-education political science courses.

Because the study of service-learning pedagogy in the context of HSI's is underexplored, I wanted to establish a baseline study, not only to provide practical advice as to how professors at HSI's should structure their service-learning for this unique body of students but also to set the table for future research. Consequently, most of the practices I utilized (reflection questions, mandatory service, etc.) are not unique to students at HSI's. However, my service-learning research makes two adjustments for working with students at HSI's. One adjustment is a smaller number of required service hours for students, to adapt to the socioeconomic realities at HSI's. The other adjustment is providing students with a myriad of agencies from which to choose, as well as giving students agency in the service opportunities they took—of paramount concern in a university setting with a significant number of 1st-generation students—by spreading service opportunities across a wide geographic area. I provide concrete examples of service-learning in action at an HSI by presenting results from the implementation of a service-learning course component at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley (UTRGV) in the 2019–2020 academic year. After examining the existing literature and explaining why pedagogy at HSI's needs more examination, I outline the service-learning setup and implementation, how I adjusted the component between the Fall 2019 semester and the Spring 2020 semester, and the students' feedback on this component. I conclude that many of the existing pedagogical practices in the extant literature apply well to students at HSI's, but the research herein provides specific ways in which service-learning can be adapted to students at HSI's, as well as tangible evidence of the successfulness of these methods. I conclude by explaining where the research into service-learning pedagogy should go from here.

Service-learning in political science

The concept of community engagement through service is defined in a variety of ways. Some practitioners (Morgan and Streb 2001; Waldner et al. 2011; etc.) view service-learning and civic engagement as almost synonymous, with the goal of transitioning students from volunteer work to political activeness (voting, campaign volunteering, etc.)

and the cultivating of civic values and social equity. Other practitioners view service-learning as a tool to improve civic participation, regardless of whether political participation improves. Many scholars examining Hispanic/Latinx students at HSI's (González 2008; Cuellar 2021, etc.) have taken this approach, on the grounds that these students are more willing to engage in nontraditional forms of political participation and are more interested in developing social agency. Due to the literature's lack of focus on HSI students, and my own inexperience with service-learning design, I adopted the latter approach to service-learning.

One benefit of incorporating service-learning into a course is the development of skills that are transferable to life after college, such as cognitive skill improvement (Vogelgesang and Astin 2000), and the combatting of knowledge that cannot be applied to new situations (Eyler 2002). For example, Stolley et al. (2017) surveyed students who served at a university-run homeless shelter and found that students reported higher interpersonal skill development (i.e. a better understanding of appropriate interactions with others), better communication skills, and improved leadership and teamwork skills. The students also reported that these skills carried over into their work following graduation.

Another potential benefit of service-learning in political science is that it can decrease political polarization. Service-learning encourages students to encounter groups with whom students are less familiar (Stolley et al. 2017), including groups susceptible to "othering," such as immigrants and AIDS patients (Hepburn, Niemi, and Chapman 2000; Jones, LePeau, and Robbins 2013). When service-learning is integrated into classroom concepts, service can help students better connect power structures to social conditions and how these conditions can be changed (Stoecker 2016). Similarly, service-learning can improve student understanding of, and commitment to, social and racial justice (Vogelgesang and Astin 2000; Waldner et al. 2011) and higher-order cognition regarding complex social problems (Eyler 2002).

Another benefit that is somewhat implied by the literature is encouraging students to volunteer with services that reflect the unique needs of the area. Some social conditions (homelessness, literacy issues, etc.) are ubiquitous, but some are not, and the region in which this study takes place is a good example. As UTRGV is only a few miles from the US-Mexico border and close to popular crossing points for migrants and asylum-seekers, there are unique service opportunities for students (e.g., migrant shelters). These opportunities can improve student involvement in the community by focusing students on addressing issues germane to their homes.

Although there are numerous benefits to service-learning as part of the classroom experience, there are potential drawbacks that can emerge if service-learning is not designed with certain critical aspects in mind. One is the possibility of service-learning reinforcing asymmetry-of-power relationships and stereotypes students have about clients (Mitchell, Donahue, and Young-Law 2012; Jones, LePeau, and Robbins 2013; etc.). Although students—particularly HSI students—may come from deprived backgrounds, they are still in a privileged position compared to the clients they serve. If the pedagogical design of service (reflection questions, service expectations, etc.) do not account for this privilege, service-learning will not achieve its ideal of reducing asymmetry-of-power relationships and providing students with better knowledge of social problems.

Professors should also explore ways to actively merge classroom theory with service practice and to encourage students to reflect on problems they may not have encountered before their service (Eyler 2002). This ties into the broader criticism that American political science has focused less on preparing students for participation in civics and the negative impact this has had on American politics (Leonard 1999; Rogers 2017; etc.). If service-learning is active learning, and active learning is supposed to improve student comprehension of topics and critical thinking skills, then a failure to give students an opportunity for meaningful reflection will make service-learning far less useful than other active learning techniques (i.e. in-class debate). Even a reflection question as simple as "how did your service relate to the topics we've discussed in class" will do more to stimulate reflection and thought than simply having students log their hours or describe their service.

Importance of understanding service in the context of HSI students

Though the existing literature is invaluable, the extant research has spent little time examining students at HSI's specifically. This is problematic, for several reasons. One is the increase in the number of HSI's and the increase in the number of students these institutions serve. The number of HSI's have increased from 137 in 1990 to 569 in 2019, and 2.2 million of the 3.3 million Hispanics enrolled in college in 2019–2020 attend HSI's.[2] Additionally, Hispanics and Latinx are now the 2nd-largest category of students at US colleges and universities.[3] Despite this increase, the extant literature largely examines service-learning pedagogy from the standpoint of PWI's and their students. This does not mean that all practices at PWI's will not work with students at HSI's (as discussed below, I incorporate many of the practices heretofore applied to PWI's and their students). However, the research on pedagogical practices in service-learning is incomplete unless there is a focus on HSI students.

One important reason to examine students at HSI's is the correlation between these students and the communities in which many HSI's are centered. Students at HSI's—particularly regional universities—are often products of the surrounding community: most of the students at UTRGV, for example, come from the four counties of the Texas Lower Rio Grande Valley (Hidalgo, Starr, Cameron, and Willacy). Combined with the Hispanic/Latinx community's emphasis on family and caring for others (Shetgiri et al. 2009; Ryan and Ream 2016; etc.), the desire to build community relationships may already exist among these students. This is invaluable for understanding service-learning pedagogy because research incorporating this possibility can lead to an adjustment of practices to reflect the students at HSI's.

Another drawback to the exclusion of HSI students in the study of service-learning is the risk of a narrow pedagogy. HSI's generally consist of students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds,[4] students for whom time is a precious commodity. Service-learning projects require a time commitment. Without an understanding of best practices for those students who require full-time or multiple employment, scholars risk prescribing a set of best practices that apply only to a narrow crop of students. At worst, by not looking at students at HSI's as distinct from students at PWI's, practitioners risk ascribing a "pedagogy of whiteness" (Mitchell, Donahue, and Young-Law 2012) to a student

population that is historically "outside" the white Anglo learning environment. This marginalizes the unique experiences of Hispanic- and Latinx-Americans and may reduce the likelihood of a lifelong commitment to community service and civic engagement.

Service-learning at an HSI

Background of the HSI under study[5]

It is helpful to the reader to obtain background on the HSI in which service-learning was implemented. The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley is a 4-year, PhD-granting public university. The two main campuses are in Edinburg and Brownsville, 66 miles apart. In Fall 2019, almost 90% of the student body identified as Hispanic/Latinx (mostly Hispanic), and almost 58% of the students identify as women. Most students come from the counties surrounding the university's two campuses, and most of the students receive some need-based financial aid. This HSI also has a high number of first-generation college students. Typical for 1st-generation students (Terenzini et al. 1996; Pike and Kuh 2005), most students work at least one part-time, off-campus job, and most of the students receive at least some financial aid. In the Introduction to American Government and Politics course in which this service-learning took place, the number of enrollees was 57 in Fall 2019 and 56 in Spring 2020.

This university is an interesting unit of analysis, for reasons beyond the convenience of the sample. Texas requires all undergraduates to complete an Introduction to American Government and Politics course to graduate. This allows me to incorporate Suarez's (2017) suggestion that general education courses can use service-learning to connect with stated learning objectives (i.e., the link between beach cleanup and environmental policy). This requirement also means that the students enrolled in Intro courses come from a variety of academic backgrounds and are less likely to drop the course, providing a stable sample of service-learning participants and the opportunity to receive feedback from both political science majors and non-majors. The large class size also provides the opportunity to gather many responses and provide volunteers to a wider variety of organizations. The demographics of the student body allow me to observe the relationship between Hispanic students and a Hispanic community, to determine whether there is a different student-community dynamic than those observed in the extant literature. There is also an existing service and engagement structure at the university which could serve as a model for universities seeking to develop their own service-learning programs.

Design of service

Given the lack of research on service-learning at HSI's, deciding which pedagogical practices would (not) work in the context of an HSI was an art, rather than a science. Mitchell (2008) defines service-learning pedagogy types as "traditional" and "critical," with "critical" service-learning containing a social justice component that integrates public policy and encourages students to question the "why" of community structure and policy approaches (e.g. poverty as a function of a lack of access to mental health infrastructure). Critics of "traditional" service-learning (that which does not contain this social justice approach) charge that a non-critical approach to service-learning will

make service-learning a "glorified welfare system" (Robinson 2000)[6] and encourage a superficial student engagement with the root causes of social issues (Ginwright and Cammarota 2002; Jones, LePeau, and Robbins 2013; etc.).

These critiques of "traditional" service-learning pedagogy are valid, and even as I defend my use of a (semi-)traditional approach to service-learning, future research and service-learning design will integrate a more critical approach, particularly regarding reflection assignments. However, there are several reasons I ultimately went with what is best considered a "traditional" approach to service-learning. One is the fact that, even if social justice is not explicitly integrated into a traditional model, students do get exposed to environments with which they may not be familiar, and—if professors adjust their lectures to provide a reflection on how students' community service relates to public policy issues—there are still opportunities to connect student service to debates over public policy. For example, in my course's learning unit on education policy I had students who did tutoring and after-school activities explain why they thought volunteering was (not) a sufficient substitute for more government resources for education, particularly in low-income communities. A traditional model also allows for easier management of student involvement (Wade 2001), and for a service-learning novice, such as me, the traditional approach is easier to design and implement.

From a research perspective, I wanted to establish a baseline pedagogical model for HSI's. Given the silence of the literature on service-learning for HSI students, I decided to use a traditional model to provide new insight into what practices (do not) work. Consequently, many of the pedagogical practices germane to the PWI literature (guided versus free reflection questions, incorporating classroom concepts into service papers, et al.) were used here. However, there were two areas of service-learning pedagogy that I believed had to be adjusted to the reality of students at an HSI: the number of required volunteer hours and the types of organizations at which students could volunteer. Because the following service components took place over the course of one full semester and one half-semester, more research must be done to conclude which pedagogical practices are best designed for service-learning at HSI's. The goal of this project is to provide preliminary, descriptive evidence as to which practices work well at an HSI, which do not, and where pedagogical research needs to go next. The design and implementation of service-learning are reflected below, followed by student feedback regarding service-learning, and a discussion of some pedagogical practices that should be introduced in future service-learning research.

Service-learning setup—Fall 2019

Entering the Fall 2019 semester, I decided that service participation should be mandatory for the students, given that voluntary service correlates with higher levels of parental education (Hepburn, Niemi, and Chapman 2000) and the fact that most of the students at this university are 1st-generation. There were two specific areas of service-learning pedagogy in which I believed the existing literature was not suited to an HSI: participating organizations and required service hours. The existing literature is agnostic on the "appropriate" number of hours students should be required to work. Some studies (Mitchell, Donahue, and Young-Law 2012) require weekly hour logs, while others require a minimum number of hours per month. While I was concerned that a "low"

number of hours might harm the effectiveness of the student's experience, too many hours would unduly burden working students and make it extraordinarily difficult to complete the service assignment. As previously mentioned, all service-learning pedagogy should be mindful of structural barriers to student participation, but this mindfulness is imperative when working with a less-advantaged student population and one traditionally lacking in social agency. Failure to do so may cause students to resent service, harming the likelihood that they will continue with community engagement after the course ends. Consequently, I required a minimum number of hours per month, and I made the required hours comparatively low: students worked 4 h per month in Fall 2019 and 5 h per month in Spring 2020.

Deciding on which organizations to utilize in service is also an art, not a science. Many previous studies have used one service site for the entire class (Jones, LePeau, and Robbins 2013; Barnett 2018; etc.), and it is implied (though not stated outright) that a single project will avoid the structural barriers to service that harm underprivileged students. I determined that this approach would not work with the students at UTRGV, for logistical and pedagogical reasons. The area in which these service projects took place lacks a robust public transportation infrastructure and, combined with the fact that many of the students at UTRGV work at least part-time, doing a single service project for the entire class was impractical. More importantly, I wanted students to have a sense that this was their service, not the professor's, in keeping with a body of research (e.g. Sturgill and Motley 2014) that indicates students learn best when they have a modicum of control over the assignment. While this concept of engagement is not unique to HSI students, the traditional lack of social agency in predominantly-Hispanic regions—and the time constraints faced by Hispanic/Latinx students at HSI's—make this method of organization selection crucial to fulfilling the goal of improving HSI student efficacy.

Despite this desire for student agency in organization selection, it is important that service-learning take students beyond the confines of a university campus, as the goal is to participate with organizations with at least some relationship to public policy and civic engagement. Consequently, I placed some restrictions on the types of organizations at which students could complete their hours. Students were allowed to volunteer with nonpartisan political organizations (e.g. League of Women Voters), and if they were already volunteering with an organization they could count those hours. However, the students could not volunteer for political campaigns or explicitly partisan political organizations. Students were also not allowed to volunteer with organizations operating solely on campus, and students could not volunteer with religious organizations which operated in a purely proselytizing role.

In a nod to the critical approach to service-learning, I maintained flexibility in student organizational assignments. Flexibility is important in many respects, but when addressing students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, flexibility is crucial, lest the professor subscribes to a pedagogical understanding that only accounts for "privileged" students (Mitchell, Donahue, and Young-Law 2012). For example, one student in my course was severely limited in their service opportunities because they were a high school student with dual enrollment and under the age of 18. Even though religious organizations with no social service function were forbidden, not making an exception

for this student would have imposed privilege on a student lacking that, so the student was allowed to volunteer with a purely religious organization. For similar reasons, I also maintained flexibility in hours worked. For example, students who had trouble meeting their hours for the month were allowed to make up the difference in the subsequent month.

The biggest nod to both the critical approach and logistical reality was in how organizations were approved by me. Because of the distance between university campuses, the size of the Texas Lower Rio Grande Valley, and the fact that most students are commuters with jobs, centering service in one metropolitan area—as (anecdotally) the existing literature seems to do—would have imposed a privilege on these HSI students that would undermine the goals of service-learning. Consequently, I made sure that students had organizations throughout the region at their disposal, Additionally, an understanding of the region was incorporated into my flexibility regarding where organizations operated: one student commuted to class from Mexico, because of the need to help their family's business in the afternoons, so I allowed the student to do their service there.

I developed a typology of four broad categories of service organizations with whom students participated. The Education and Advocacy category encompasses organizations focused on education needs, such as tutoring and school supply distribution, and organizations focused on advocacy on civic issues, such as violence against women and diabetes prevention. The Environmental category encompasses organizations responsible for community activities to improve ecosystems, such as beach maintenance and trail maintenance. The Community Services category encompasses organizations engaged in targeted charity services, such as pet rescues and community housing. All other organizations were classified as Other, such as a nonprofit community orchestra and city government. As shown in Supplementary Appendix A, the largest single category of participation was in the Community Services category: 45% of participants in Fall 2019 and 41% of participants in Spring 2020 participated in these organizations. Some of these organizations are branches of national groups, such as the Salvation Army and Special Olympics. However, many of these organizations are unique to the region: several students in each semester worked at the Catholic Charities' Humanitarian Respite Center, assisting migrants and asylum-seekers, while others worked at health care and addiction clinics.

Students had two reflection components of their grades. The first was the reflections that students had to write as they logged their hours for the month. In the Fall 2019 semester, I used a free reflection: students described what they did for their service, but otherwise, students were free to write what they wanted. The logic behind doing a free reflection was to increase student writing agency and provide varied perspectives on service (Sturgill and Motley 2014). The second reflection was a final, 3-page paper at the end of the semester. This longer reflection was more structured: students described their role in their organization, provided background about the organization, discussed the challenges facing the organization, and provided concrete examples of how their service impacted their community.

There were two key challenges to establishing service opportunities during the Fall 2019 semester. One was a lack of communication by local organizations: it was not

made clear to students before they tried to volunteer that some organizations required background checks or greater time commitments than students could do. Other organizations listed themselves as having volunteer opportunities available, only to inform students who attempted to volunteer that volunteer opportunities were unavailable. These problems should be addressed preemptively by the professor. For example, I noted which organizations students had the most difficulty in working for and excluded them from the list of approved organizations in the Spring 2020 semester.

Another challenge was the usability of the student engagement website in which students logged their hours and reflections. An engagement representative attended the second class of the semester to walk students through setting up an account, signing up with organizations, and logging hours. However, the representatives were student workers, rather than professional administrators. Consequently, the representatives struggled to explain important concepts to the students, such as how to access the liability forms and how to check on the hours the students worked. While these issues were resolved as the course continued, professors should familiarize themselves with an in-house engagement organization before the term begins, and engagement administrators should make sure their workers are well-trained before allowing them to perform walk-throughs with students.

Changes to service-learning setup—Spring 2020

I reviewed the student feedback and made several important changes. The most significant was allowing students to volunteer for multiple organizations. As discussed below, giving students the option to fulfill their hours with different groups gave the students greater agency, as the students had more freedom in discovering activities that they enjoyed. Because students could work with multiple organizations, I increased the required volunteer hours to five per month.

The results from the free reflection used in the previous semester were disappointing: student reflections most often consisted of describing their service, with little reflection on how their service related to class concepts or even how their service impacted the organization or community. Consequently, I shifted to a guided assignment for the reflections the students had to do to log their hours. The guided reflections for Spring 2020 asked students to provide concrete examples of how their service benefited an organization, such as feedback from clients or completing a project. I also asked students to include examples linking their service to a community issue, such as how their work in an after-school tutoring program connected to issues of literacy. The logic behind doing a guided reflection was to provide more structure for students, better connect service with the course's goals, and make it easier to compare student experiences and performances in service (Sturgill and Motley 2014). Comparing the Spring 2020 reflection essays to the Fall 2019 essays, the students included more information on how their service was beneficial to their community and included more concrete examples of the effectiveness of their service. For example, one student noted that they "(saw) that there are people who do care about you and the community," while another student described their work with domestic violence victims and how that work not only bettered the community but also affirmed to the student that they should major in social work, to advocate for more resources and laws for domestic violence victims.

For the final reflection, students were required to reflect on their volunteer opportunities and discuss how their service impacted their community, and why they believed they had an impact. Although students were encouraged to critique organizations' effectiveness, the focus of the final reflection paper was on the student's role in service. Doing this shifted the focus of the final paper from a focus on organizations to a focus on student participation in service. As with the mini reflections, this shift in focus provoked more positive feedback from students regarding their experiences, such as explaining how their service provided tangible improvements for the target population. Students were also strongly encouraged to relate their service to concepts discussed in class. To facilitate this discussion, I included more material on local governments and community organizations in my curriculum.

Student feedback on service-learning[7]

For both Fall 2019 and Spring 2020, students received two statements on the university-mandated course evaluations regarding service-learning. Students were asked to state their agreement with the statements, on a 1–5 scale. A score of "1" indicates that the student strongly disagreed with the statement, and a score of "5" indicates that the student strongly agreed with the statement. Admittedly, the questions posed are simple and do not provide a comprehensive assessment of the impact of student service on the community. However, the primary purpose of this research is to establish preliminary evidence as to whether the service-learning pedagogy used in this class led to a sense of efficacy on the part of students and connection to the community. Future research should more comprehensively assess the specific ways in which students believe that their service improved their sense of efficacy and secure evidence as to whether students positively impacted their community through their service (i.e., surveying volunteer sites to determine specific ways in which student service was (not) beneficial).

Statement 1: "The service-learning project improved my community engagement skills"

Statement 2: "I felt as though my participation in service-learning benefited my community"

Fall 2019 student feedback on service-learning

Supplementary Appendix B provides the quantitative results of the student evaluations. 38 of 57 students (67%) responded to both questions. The average student score for Statement 1 was 4.13 (standard deviation of .90), indicating that most students agreed or strongly agreed that the service component improved their community engagement skills. The average student score for Statement 2 was slightly lower — 4.08, with a standard deviation of .89—but this score still indicates that most students believed their participation in service-learning was an asset to their community.

Although the scores are good, I wanted to know about specific improvements that could be made, as well as what the effect of the service hours was on students' work-life balances. I provided an open-ended response question on how the service-learning component could be improved. Supplementary Appendix C provides the responses to this

question, to which 38 students responded,[8] grouped according to a broad set of categories. Most students (34.2%) indicated that the assignment did not need to change from its current format. The largest category for suggesting improvements was access to more organizations (16%), followed by communication and feedback from volunteer organizations (11%).[9] The required hours did not inconvenience most students: just 10% of students reported the hours being a significant barrier to completion of their service, and one student suggested significantly increasing the number of service hours required. Students most often suggested that they be allowed to volunteer with organizations not listed on the engagement website. The ability to go beyond the listed organizations is somewhat limited, for liability reasons, but one method would be to provide more information to local organizations regarding the university and community service so that more organizations will know that they can partner with the university for volunteer work. In future editions of this course, I will establish contact with additional community organizations, educating them on service-learning partnerships with the university and encouraging them to take advantage of those partnerships. It would then be easier to include those organizations as part of the service-learning component of my course.

Another important consideration manifested in the evaluations is the need for service opportunities to be geographically broad. Because of the lower socioeconomic statuses of students at HSI's, most HSI's have a large commuter population, which also means that HSI students are less likely to live on or immediately around their campus (Gasman, Baez, and Turner 2008; Nuñez, Sparks, and Hernández 2011). This is an area in which service-learning pedagogy should adjust itself to meet the needs of HSI's. For example, in the Spring 2020 semester, I recommended organizations beyond the geographic locations of the university, and future editions of this course will make more efforts to partner with organizations in rural areas.

Spring 2020 results

Before discussing the student evaluations for this semester, a caveat should be issued. As with the course itself, the service-learning component was truncated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the results in Supplementary Appendices B and C provide valuable information, only an uninterrupted semester can provide a complete picture as to whether service-learning changes improved the quality of student service and feedback.

Supplementary Appendix B provides the quantitative results of the student evaluations. 37 of 49 students (76%) responded to the questions. The average scores for these questions improved significantly. The average score for Statement 1 was 4.38 (standard deviation of .94), indicating that most students agreed or strongly agreed that the service component improved their community engagement skills. The average student score for Statement 2 was even higher—4.49, with a standard deviation of .79—indicating that most students believed their participation in service-learning was an asset to their community. Combined with the qualitative feedback reported below, I have preliminary evidence that the changes made for Spring 2020 improved both student agency and the effectiveness of service-learning for students.

I used the same two open-ended questions from Fall 2019 to assess how well the service-learning component did regarding the efficacy and a good work-life balance for students, grouped into several broad categories, and these results are reported in Supplementary Appendix C. Unfortunately, the number of students who responded to the open-ended questions was small: only 62% of the students who responded to the scaled questions (23) responded to the open-ended questions, and the responses were centered on four of the categories. Most students (57%) reported that no changes needed to be made to the service-learning component.

Of the critical responses, six students (23%) suggested a wider variety of organizations from which to choose, and in contrast to the fall semester, most of these students suggested that service activities should be on campus. This result is interesting, given that no students made this suggestion in the fall semester and given the commuter-centric nature of this university. Whether this is a one-off complaint or a consistent concern, will be examined in future editions of this course. However, there are two justifications for why I did not allow students to volunteer with campus-only organizations. One is my assumption that commuter campuses do not lend themselves to campus-centric activities, and I wanted these projects to be accessible to as many students as possible. More importantly, the point of service-learning is to gain experiences and interact with communities beyond the college campus. The paradox is that participation by underprivileged students in service-learning might be improved if service opportunities were campus-centric (e.g. Stolley et al. 2017). However, if the goal of service-learning is to foster community engagement and improve social agency between students and the off-campus community, then making service-learning campus-centric undercuts this goal.

Future research

The research herein provides a baseline measurement for specific changes to service-learning pedagogy that could benefit students at HSI's. However, the research is far from complete, and even as I defend my use of a more traditional approach to service-learning design, there are significant risks in not incorporating a critical approach to service-learning, as previously discussed. Furthermore, there is no comparison of a traditional versus critical approach to service-learning with HSI students. To have a better determinant of whether the traditional or critical approach is "best" for improving efficacy among HSI students, once I resume service-learning in the 2022–2023 academic year, the pedagogy will take on a more critical form. The biggest change will be to the reflection questions: there will be several reflection questions students must answer when submitting their monthly hours. These questions will explicitly encourage students to consider the relationships between their service, existing public policy, and whether nonprofit service alone sufficiently addresses a policy issue. I will also conduct entrance and exit surveys with students to assess the service-learning pedagogy, the student's understanding of the link between their service and social policy, and concrete examples of ways in which government can(not) affect changes in policy. The entrance surveys will also include questions regarding how students view their potential clients, and the exit surveys will assess whether the service design navigated students away from a "deficit" view of their relationship with clients.

One important area of improvement is for professors to be proactive in assisting students in obtaining materials needed for varieties of service activities. For the Fall 2022 semester, for example, I will utilize a grant from my university's Office of Service-Learning to purchase common supplies, such as cleaning materials and crayons. Doing this can alleviate the financial burdens on both students and organizations by equipping students with the requisite materials in advance, as well as (in the case of the safety materials) provide protection for students as they continue to navigate a world affected by COVID-19.

There is one final research note I wish to make regarding a future area of study: the impact of service-learning on undocumented students. 46% of undocumented students in the US are Hispanic/Latinx, with over half being eligible for Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA).[10] These students live in a precarious situation, with fewer resources and less access to financial aid than other students, and undocumented students are more likely to feel disconnected from their peers (Alif et al. 2020), in addition to the greater risk of depression and anxiety (Suárez-Orozco and López Hernández 2020; et al.) and an unwillingness to participate in political advocacy due to fears of negative immigration policy (McNeely, Kim, and Kim 2022). If service-learning can improve self-efficacy, then the impact of service-learning on undocumented students may be even more profound. Keeping in mind the sensitivity of surveying undocumented students, future research should examine the impact of service-learning on these students.

Conclusion

This paper has provided important insight into how service-learning at HSI's is similar to and different from, service-learning at PWI's. When service-learning components are structured to account for the unique experiences of Hispanic students at HSI's, service-learning improves student empowerment in their learning, creates a bond between students and the broader community, and enhances political efficacy and engagement among students. The most important thing is for educators to be cognizant of how they structure their service-learning reflections and requirements to meet the needs of HSI students. Without these structural adjustments, service-learning at HSI's will be "'pure futility and waste'" (Leonard 1999).

Notes

1. https://pnpi.org/first-generation-students/
2. https://hacuadvocates.net/hacu/abouthsis?1
3. https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2019/05/23/pew-study-finds-more-poor-students-attending-college
4. This is somewhat by design: per Title V of the Higher Education Act of 1965, an HSI must enroll a certain number of students who require need-based financial aid https://www2.ed.gov/programs/idueshsi/title5legislation.pdf.
5. All statistics in this section can be found at https://www.utrgv.edu/sair/_files/documents/fall-2019-student-profile.pdf.
6. As quoted in Mitchell (2008).
7. The student evaluations are completely anonymous, and all questions are approved by the university prior to the opening of the evaluations.

8. 1 student gave two different recommendations in the Fall 2019 feedback.
9. The category "Other" included responses suggesting that the service component should be made optional or should be dropped altogether.
10. https://www.presidentsimmigrationalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Undocumented-Students-in-Higher-Education-April-2020.pdf

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