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Civic Pedagogies: Teaching Civic Engagement in an Era of Divisive Politics

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Toward a Critical Theory of Service-Learning at Hispanic-Serving Institutions

Andrew Smith

Service-learning is an active learning pedagogy “whereby course learning outcomes are linked with community service in a way that enhances comprehension of course content while leading to transformative change in student awareness, critical thinking, personal values, and civic responsibility, as well as empowerment of and reciprocity with community partners” (Barnett, 2018, 152). Critical service-learning (CSL) takes this concept further by defining service-learning as “...a pedagogy immersed in the complexities and ambiguities of how we come to make sense of ourselves and the world around us” (Butin, 2005, 98), whose goal is to “deconstruct systems of power so the need for service and the inequalities that create and sustain are dismantled” (Mitchell, 2008, 50). In the context of political science and government, the goals of critical service-learning include providing students—particularly students from historically marginalized communities—with the social agency to affect political change, and the knowledge to pursue change effectively (Barnett, 2018; Cuellar, 2021). This is accomplished by providing students with

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Switzerland AG 2024

L. C. Bell et al. (eds.), *Civic Pedagogies: Teaching Civic Engagement
in an Era of Divisive Politics*, Political Pedagogies,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-55155-0_6

a multidimensional “image” of an issue that encompasses the socioeconomic and political aspects of a problem addressed through service (Jones et al., 2013), complicating students’ perspectives of equality and opportunity (Winans-Solis, 2014), and promoting a “critical consciousness” regarding the way society is organized (Freire, 2018). In turn, critical service-learning can promote democratic values by encouraging the use of civic engagement to change power structures to be responsive to citizens (e.g., Mendel-Reyes, 1998) and by encouraging students to work with others to make a positive change in government (e.g., Battistoni, 1997).

There is an important element of the existing critical service-learning pedagogy that is underexplored: its applicability to service-learning and civic engagement at Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs). Scholars recently have looked at service-learning pedagogy in the context of HSI students (Barnett, 2018; Geertz González, 2008; etc.). However, most studies still approach critical service-learning—and corresponding civic engagement—from the perspective of the best practices at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). Students at HSIs are more likely to come from communities historically shut out of the American public policy process (Cuellar, 2021) and are most likely to be pressured to correspond to White Anglo views on race, class, and other issues (Mitchell et al., 2012). Failing to account for these experiences risks sustaining Mills’ (1997) racial contract, in which the prevailing, race-based, and Anglo-centric structure of society is reinforced through a model of service-learning centered on White, Anglo experiences.

There is also a tendency in the literature to focus on accounting for the needs of the community, without also accounting for the needs of the students. Kubota (2004, 47) argues that the goal of critical service-learning should be to “dismantle the oppressive structure outside of the classroom walls.” Consequently, and because of the privilege of college students relative to the communities served (e.g., Mitchell et al., 2012), the literature primarily focuses on critical service as an effort to, among other things, reduce stereotypical perceptions of service clients (e.g., Schilmoeller, 2015) and improve student-community relations (e.g., Winans-Solis, 2014). However, students at HSIs are more likely to be first-generation college students (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2022) and are more likely to come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). While students are privileged relative to the served population (Mitchell, 2008), and this

privilege should not be ignored, students at HSIs are more likely to lack the means to engage effectively with the community, unless a pedagogy encompassing these factors is created. Without accounting for the experiences of HSI students in our design of critical service-learning pedagogy, we risk prescribing what Mitchell et al. (2012) call the “pedagogy of whiteness” that CSL is supposed to dismantle.

The goal of this chapter is to provide the first steps toward a critical pedagogy in service-learning and civic engagement that centers on the needs and experiences of HSIs and the students served. This pedagogy should combine the learning enhancements and community engagement promised by critical service-learning with the learning goals, unique experiences, and unique obstacles of students at HSIs. A critical approach to service-learning at HSIs should be envisioned as a type of culturally relevant teaching, in which students’ experiences in the classroom are bridged with their experiences in the community and in which the design of service works within the context of students’ cultural identities to empower them politically and intellectually (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Pak, 2018). I begin with a brief discussion of the link between service-learning and civic engagement, followed by explaining the importance of examining critical service pedagogy at HSIs. I then discuss ways in which critical pedagogy can be adjusted to promote the fusion of community service and civic engagement promised by CSL and to account for the experiences of HSI students. I conclude with a summary of some of the obstacles to critical service, as well as remarks about the role the COVID-19 pandemic plays in potentially adjusting the way in which service-learning is delivered.

CONNECTING SERVICE-LEARNING TO CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Whether civic engagement and service-learning are synonymous is subject to debate. Scholars such as Morgan and Streb (2001) and Waldner et al. (2012) view service-learning as a tool to transition students into political engagement from volunteer work. Other scholars, such as Geertz González (2008) and Cuellar (2021), view service-learning as more interested in improving certain kinds of civic participation (i.e., volunteering), but not necessarily political participation (i.e., voting). Additionally, civic engagement encompasses activities separate from community service, such as in-class discussions (Thomas & Brower, 2017) and social media engagement with politics (Woodall & Lennon, 2017).

However, Mayhew and Engberg (2011), Mitchell (2008), and Stoecker (2016) are among the scholars whose studies view civic engagement and service-learning as intrinsically linked because of the latter's ability to encourage students to question why social problems exist and how the existence of these problems is informed by social and political conditions. Service-learning, particularly critical service-learning, can also reduce political polarization by facilitating student interactions with "others," break down the artificial barriers between the (relatively) privileged students and the client population (Hepburn et al., 2000; Jones et al., 2013; etc.), and foster multiracial participation in democracy (e.g., Jay, 2008). Bringle and et al. (2006, 258) add that civic engagement "develops (community) partnerships that possess integrity and...emphasizes participatory, collaborative, and democratic processes...that provide benefit to all constituencies." If the goal of civic engagement is to use a combination of skills, knowledge, and values to improve communities (Erlich, 2000), critical service-learning is an essential component of civic engagement.

IMPORTANCE OF CRITICAL SERVICE-LEARNING IN CONTEXT OF HSI COMMUNITIES

There are myriad reasons why scholars should focus on the pedagogical application of critical service-learning to the Hispanic and Latino/a/x learning communities, but the most significant is the student population served by HSIs. HSI students are more likely to be first-generation students, and first-generation college students generally (Terenzini et al., 1996), and Hispanic students particularly (Geertz González, 2008; Verba et al., 1995), tend to be less developed on dimensions of civic and educational engagement. Critical service-learning can foster development by providing students with the knowledge of why problems exist, an outlet to effect short-term relief from social problems, and the agency to engage with these problems once the course ends. If critical service-learning is developed with a focus on the experiences of HSI students, and the cultural capital of the Hispanic and Latino/a/x communities surrounding these campuses, this agency might be enhanced.

In the context of students served by HSIs, there is an added dimension to this lack of engagement: the climate of immigration laws and public opinion on immigration. This context takes two dimensions: documented/citizen and undocumented. The effect of anti-immigrant policy

and political engagement among Hispanics and Latino/a/xs is well-tread in the research: multiple studies (e.g., Gutierrez et al., 2019; Perez, 2015) find that rising anti-immigrant sentiment in the US motivates Hispanic and Latino/a/x political engagement, and Geertz González (2008) and Cuellar (2021) are among the scholars that find that service-learning improves political participation among Hispanic and Latino/a/x college students. A critical approach, centered on both the Hispanic and Latino/a/x communities and HSI students, may improve the effectiveness of service-learning by fostering stronger ties between students and the communities served, by instilling in students a willingness to challenge existing power structures, and increasing the probabilities that students carry that willingness beyond their campus experience.

There is also the "outsiderdom" faced by Hispanic and Latino/a/x students, even at HSIs. The exploration of "outsiderdom," service-learning, and the impact on marginalized students is not novel: Boyle-Baise and Langford (2004) and Seider et al. (2013) are among the studies of students at PWIs which find that non-critical service-learning reinforced white Anglo students' negative perceptions of marginalized communities, causing marginalized students to feel more "at home" in those communities and undermining students' participation in the discussion of service encounters. However, it is important to remember that an HSI is one in which at least 25% of enrolled students are Hispanic or Latino/a/x; it does not mean that Hispanic and Latino/a/x students must be the majority. For every University of Texas El Paso (87.1% Hispanic) or University of Texas Rio Grande Valley (93%), there is a University of Central Florida (27.4%) or College of Southern Nevada (35.3%) (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). The negative service experiences faced by marginalized students at PWIs may also exist at HSIs, as the pressure to conform to outgroup belief systems (Cuellar, 2021), the mental health issues associated with the contemporary climate toward marginalized groups (e.g., Albright & Hurd, 2020), and a lack of a critical approach to service-learning may lead to "outsiderdom" that depresses engagement in political activity after the course. Using a critical pedagogical framework for service-learning at HSIs can counter these feelings, not only by critically examining power inequality but also by increasing interactions between marginalized students: Cuellar (2021) found that both negative and positive cross-racial interactions increased students' social agency.

Less studied, but vital to the development of a Hispanic- and Latino/a/x-centered critical approach to service-learning pedagogy, is the role of service-learning on the engagement of undocumented students. A significant number of Hispanic and Latino/a/x students are undocumented or eligible for Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) status (Higher Ed Immigration Portal, 2023). These groups are less likely to participate in political advocacy, due to fears of deportation or other negative actions by government officials (McNeely et al., 2022). This lack of public engagement should not be confused as complete disenfranchisement: a survey by Perez et al. (2010) found that—despite barriers to participation, such as family obligations and employment—85% of male undocumented students and 92% of female undocumented students participate in some form of civic engagement, such as volunteering. A critical approach to service-learning, centered on the needs and experiences of Hispanic and Latino/a/x people and including the needs of undocumented people, could make a substantial difference by applying the enhanced social agency that accrues from service-learning to a population that feels removed from public engagement.

TOWARD A CRITICAL THEORY OF SERVICE-LEARNING AT HISPANIC-SERVING INSTITUTIONS

One element of critical service-learning and its ties to civic engagement that should be examined in the context of HSIs is what Rodriguez (2010) frames as a pedagogical focus not only on social justice but also on remaking oppressive environments. Because Hispanic students at HSIs are more likely to be the children of immigrants, and because their social and educational beliefs are less formed by virtue of being first-generation students, there is greater pressure to conform to outgroup belief systems, even if doing so comes at the expense of the students' identities (Cuellar, 2021). Creating a critical pedagogy centered around the experiences of Hispanic and Latino/a/x students at HSIs can counter such pressures by providing an outlet for these students to connect to Hispanic and Latino/a/x culture. Providing students with service opportunities at Hispanic and Latino/a/x cultural centers and connecting this service to the legacy of Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* can be a way to encourage a "transformational impetus leading" to greater civic engagement post-college by connecting the politics and culture of the borderlands to US immigration policy.

A prime example to connect critical theory to practice involves HSIs and the conditions on the U.S.-Mexico border. Prevalent anti-immigrant attitudes, particularly on the basis of race (Abramowitz & McCoy, 2019); the surge in southern border crossings between 2021 and 2022 (U.S. Customs & Border Patrol, 2023); and the inability of most non-citizens to access COVID-19 relief (Garcini et al., 2020) have created significant challenges for organizations serving southern border communities, particularly those focused on immigrants. By centering service opportunities around immigrant services (e.g., migrant shelters) with a critical approach to connecting service to public policy, faculty can facilitate opportunities to benefit strained community services while at the same time illustrating to students the humanitarian consequences of US immigration policies and exploring potential policy solutions. This approach may also benefit non-Hispanic students at HSIs, as exposure to marginalized populations, if done properly, breaks down cultural barriers and improves the cultural understanding of "outsiders," in conjunction with greater cultural awareness among Hispanic and Latino/a/x students.

Critical theories of service-learning must move beyond the pedagogy of connecting issues of race, class, gender, and power; they must account for the realities students themselves face. Students at HSIs are more likely to come from low-income backgrounds and associated burdens. Reliable transportation, for instance, is an obstacle faced by most student communities (Darby et al., 2013). However, given that HSI students are less likely to live on or adjacent to campus (Gasman et al., 2008; Nuñez et al., 2011), structuring service opportunities to account for transportation issues is vital for HSI students. The socioeconomic status of many first-generation students also means a higher likelihood of working a full-time job or multiple jobs (Pike & Kuh, 2005). A pedagogy that does not account for these structural obstacles is one that ultimately reinforces differential power dynamics, rather than dismantling them.

Practitioners designing critical service courses also cannot confine their critical approaches to the curriculum. The required number of service hours, for instance, could be reduced significantly, to account for the economic barriers faced by HSI students. Practitioners of critical service-learning should also make greater allowances for service opportunities. Smith (2023), for example, not only allowed students to participate in a wide geographic range of activities but also provided flexible service options for students (i.e., individual exceptions to the rules about not

serving with organizations engaging primarily in service as a form of proselytizing). Beyond the practicality of such changes, professors are more likely to improve students' sense of agency and a willingness to engage in service upon completion of the course by providing students with a degree of self-empowerment. Additionally, obtaining anonymous feedback from students (e.g., pre- and post-course surveys) regarding their service experiences can inform faculty about how to improve and iterate on course design to be more responsive to student needs and experiences. Although unexplored in the literature, allowing students to design the service-learning experience—from choosing eligible organizations to topics covered in class—is another way to involve students in their own learning, adapt pedagogy to students' various experiences, and (particularly in the case of white Anglo professors at HSIs) avoid the "pedagogy of whiteness" in what underlies our understanding of "best practices" in service-learning.

Another way in which critical theories of service-learning can be adapted to the experiences of HSI students is connecting the service-related reflection essays to civic engagement. One possible way of designing critical service reflections is to take what Sturgill and Motley (2014) call a "dialogic" approach: students share their reflections with classmates and engage in a conversation regarding their experiences. Though dialogic reflection has a greater risk of self-censorship, this form of expression allows different kinds of self-expression and feedback from classmates. This approach can encourage greater understanding between Hispanic and Latino/a/x students and their Anglo counterparts (or among Hispanics and Latino/a/xs from different cultures). It also provides additional learning opportunities through in-class conversations, and further learning opportunities to connect service to civic engagement. For written projects, an additional way to enhance the reflection experience, and provide additional agency to students, is to allow students to write reflection essays in their native language, especially if they are not proficient in English. This allows students to communicate their experiences in a manner that is relevant to them. It can also overcome language barriers that may prevent students from expressing their experiences fully, thus providing English-as-a-second-language students and non-English speakers with greater agency in their writing.

One final note on a critical theory of service-learning relates to the place of students who have undocumented status and students who are part of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program.

These students also experience the harmful effects of punitive immigration policies and a sense of isolation due to the need to remain "in the shadows." They also do not have the ability to elect leaders to speak for them in the public policy arena. Furthermore, as shown above, while students with this status cannot vote, they are far from disengaged in American politics and community service. Critical service-learning that accounts for the unique experiences of these groups could enhance their civic participation by providing them with additional avenues of engagement, such as serving at migrant centers and organizing awareness campaigns to stop violence against immigrant communities. By providing outlets for students with undocumented status and for DACA recipients to engage with communities, and by accounting for the vulnerable status of these students, critical service-learning can provide an outlet for undocumented students to exercise their power to affect change and spread that power within the community.

DESIGNING SERVICE-LEARNING WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF BACKLASH

Another consideration in the design of service-learning at HSIs is the political climate. Many HSIs are in states in which there is simultaneously an anti-immigrant backlash and a backlash against higher education curricula. In states such as Texas and Florida, there is tremendous political and legal pressure on faculty and students to conform to a view of politics on race and ethnicity that does not mesh with the experiences of many Black and Brown students, including many students at HSIs. Such pressure puts service-learning practitioners in the impossible position of either disengaging from critical service-learning or risking political and legal consequences. I submit that there are service-learning activities (participating in after-school tutoring, volunteering at migrant shelters, and the like) in which students can have first-hand experiences with unequal power structures and public policy problems, without running afoul of new laws restricting how classroom concepts are taught. Future research, however, will need to identify other ways to navigate these environments, and to avoid taking the "critical" out of critical service-learning.

DESIGNING CRITICAL SERVICE-LEARNING PEDAGOGY IN A COVID-19 WORLD

Service-learning has generally involved direct client-server interaction. However, just as the COVID-19 pandemic has raised new issues related to teaching political science (e.g., Glazier & Strachan, 2023), there are questions about whether direct service-learning is sustainable and what it means in the context of critical service and engagement. The concern over how to sustain service-learning during a pandemic is not confined to HSIs, but exploring this aspect of service-learning is crucial for HSIs because of the students and communities served by these institutions. Historically marginalized people, including Hispanics and Latino/a/xs, have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic (Ndugga et al., 2022), and at the height of the pandemic majority-minority communities had the highest COVID-19 infection, hospitalization, and death rates (Solomon, 2020). For these communities, designing a pedagogy that incorporates the concerns students in these communities have about the chances of contracting and spreading a disease is paramount.

To address student and community concerns, faculty can shift service-learning to indirect methods, keeping the critical aspects of pedagogy but allowing students to perform their service remotely (running phone support for elderly, letter- and email-writing campaigns to policymakers regarding immigration reform, etc.). The benefit of remote service-learning is that students can serve a wider number of clients. It also allows those students in distance education or who face financial hardships with travel to participate (Lin & Shek, 2021; Waldner et al., 2012). One challenge to this approach is the lack of reliable Internet service in many Hispanic and Latino/a/x communities (Hinojosa, 2022). Practitioners who want to continue conducting service-learning in person can improve accessibility by encouraging students to serve organizations that are working to reduce barriers to Internet access (greater broadband available, low-cost or free Internet service to underprivileged areas, etc.). Faculty can also address accessibility by providing health and safety supplies, such as (K)N95 masks, hand sanitizer, and safety gloves to potentially reduce the spread of disease, like COVID-19. Providing safety equipment that may be scarce in the general community can also be an opportunity to introduce the connection between service, power, and public policy.

CONCLUSION

The nucleus of a critical theory of service-learning applicable to HSIs exists. However, faculty and practitioners should do more to implement critical approaches to service-learning and center the needs of HSI student populations, as well as the needs of the communities served by that student population. If we as political scientists do not design a critical service-learning pedagogy that reflects the unique experiences of students at HSIs and their communities, we risk reinforcing existing pedagogical power structures, neutralizing the goal of linking public policy issues to power structures, and reinforcing existing "pedagogies of whiteness."

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Civic Education for the Majority: Centering Women in Civic Education

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American electoral politics are male dominated, despite recent gains. Women hover between 25 and 30% of elected officials at all levels other than local school boards, where they are 40% of the officials (Ballotpedia, 2022; CAWP, 2023a). The United States has yet to elect a woman president and eighteen states have never elected a woman as governor (CAWP, 2023b). By contrast and as a result of the landmark Title IX enacted in 1972 that successfully opened myriad educational opportunities for women; young women today are more likely to graduate from high school; and women earn the majority of college degrees from the Associate to Ph.D. (NCES, 2021).

The structure of political science courses and gendered classroom dynamics have significant implications for the majority's political participation outside the classroom. This chapter articulates the gendered nature of politics, citizenship, and political engagement and explains how the experience of each varies based upon one's intersectional identities. In addition, it develops a theory of civic education for the majority that

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L. C. Bell et al. (eds.), *Civic Pedagogies: Teaching Civic Engagement in an Era of Divisive Politics*, Political Pedagogies, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-55155-0_7