

## Deep-learning practices in the Hispanic-serving and minority-serving context

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### Introduction and Rationale

In recent years, universities have embraced the impact of service-learning on student learning outcomes and have worked to build courses into the curriculum as a way of institutionalizing the practice (Bringle & Hatcher, 2000). Service-learning is a high impact educational practice that engages students in course material through experiential learning (Kuh & O'Donnell, 2013). Further, it is defined as a service activity—embedded into a course—in which credit is earned through student engagement with a community need, their role in addressing the community need, and personal reflection into how the experience contributed to their learning (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995).

A morass of literature details the benefits of service-learning courses on student learning such as material retention, opportunity for problem-based learning, (Brail, 2016; Bringle & Hatcher, 2000; Kuh & O'Donnell, 2013) as well as a self-reported improved sense of civic responsibility, interpersonal skills, and academic growth (Hebert & Hauf, 2015).

Service-learning courses provide additional benefits to students outside of the classroom. Kuh and O'Donnell (2013) found that engagement in service-learning has significant relationships with the following characteristics: deep learning,  $p < .001$ ; general gains,  $p < .001$ ; personal gains,  $p < .001$ ; and practical gains,  $p < .001$ . It is clear that a strong argument can be made for the overall benefits of service-learning courses with benefits for students inside and outside of the classroom. This also supports the argument for institutionalizing service-learning practices.

## Abstract

This paper details a semester-long service-learning project implemented at a Hispanic-serving and minority-serving university. This case study serves as a guide for future service-learning projects to be implemented in various disciplines at similar institutions. Over two semesters, students enrolled in two different service-learning courses in the communication studies discipline worked collaboratively across courses to present a healthy-eating event to the university community. The authors (re)designed courses to provide students with a learning experience that emphasized core lessons from the discipline of communication, while simultaneously employing the tenets of service-learning. Through this learning process, students engaged in deep learning constituted in the student-led activities of researching, planning, executing, and evaluating the event. The paper concludes with a section about future applications that discusses how similar projects can be implemented at similar institutions and in other disciplines.

This paper details a semester-long service-learning project, situated within the discipline of communication studies, conducted at a Hispanic-serving and minority-serving university. The purpose of this project was two-fold: (a) provide students with the opportunity to engage in the high-impact practice of service-learning where their schedule might otherwise preclude their participation, thus honoring work-life-school balance; and (b) bridge areas of study to showcase the variation as well as interconnectedness of areas of study. This case study serves as a guide for future service-learning projects to be implemented at similar institutions, in multiple disciplines, discussed in the Future Applications section.

### **University Context**

The university carries both Hispanic-serving institution (HSI) and minority-serving institution (MSI) classifications with 82% of the student population identifying as a member of a minority population. Additionally, the student population includes a high proportion of first-generation college students, adult learners, and U.S. veterans. At the institution, many students express not having time for extracurricular activities while balancing busy schedules, which might include taking a full course load, full-time or part-time jobs, and family and community commitments. Taking time constraints into consideration, this project was developed to provide students with an opportunity to serve their community and advance their course work, while maintaining their dedication to other areas of their life.

The location of the campus in Houston, Texas, provides opportunities for students to engage with the university community as well as with the greater community of Houston. Further, a variety of community organizations are within easy reach.

In a longitudinal study of Harris County and subsequently, Houston, Klineberg (2017) studied attitudes, beliefs, and experiences of the citizenship of Houston over the course of 36 years. This study indicated that Houston was representative of future trends in the United States. According to Klineberg (2017), the citizenship of Houston was the most ethnically diverse city in the United States, a major shift from the population of the 1980s. Through these changing demographics came one of the greatest issues facing the city: inequalities in education (Klineberg, 2017). These inequalities were seen in African-American and Hispanic communities, as these communities typically had overcrowded and underfunded educational systems (Klineberg, 2017). Through their analysis of high impact practices in underserved populations, Finley and McNair (2013) found that these practices positively impacted all student groups, but that students from traditionally underserved populations particularly benefitted from equity effects, which close gaps in perceived learning and outcomes. As an institution dedicated to addressing these educational inequities, engaging our student population in service-learning projects provides a robust learning environment with a student population that might not experience these projects at traditional universities.

The HSI/MSI university, like many others, emphasizes the importance of providing students with service-learning opportunities aimed at enhancing collegiate experiences. Leaders at the university understand the benefits associated with institutionalizing

service with learning and provide numerous university-sponsored initiatives to encourage service-learning projects—understanding that critical attention must be paid to student success and must provide students with deep learning experiences.

In an effort to increase the deep learning practice at the university, the Center for Community Engagement and Service-Learning (CCESL) was developed to guide faculty members and students through design, implementation, and evaluation of community projects. The center encourages and supports innovative ways to engage students in service-learning courses that extend beyond the classroom, with an emphasis on experiential learning, real-world application, and improving the communities in which our students reside.

This paper details the necessary steps in developing a service-learning project, exemplified through the case study. This moves through preparation, design, implementation, and debrief and evaluation. It concludes with a discussion of how similar projects can be implemented at similar institutions and in other disciplines.

## **Service-learning Activity**

### **Preparation**

Groundwork for the service-learning project should begin several months before the actual project implementation. In the case study, preparation took approximately six months; it included establishing a relationship with the partner organization as well as course and project design. The first step in any community collaboration is to secure and establish a relationship with the community partner.

***Partner organization.*** The present service-learning project was conducted in partnership with the Houston-based nonprofit organization, Recipe for Success. The organization approaches the issue of childhood obesity through educating youth and the community about proper nutrition and diet techniques. At their 10-year anniversary, Gracie Cavnar, the chief executive officer of Recipe for Success, estimated that a total of 30,000 children had been impacted by the organization (Recipe for Success, n.d.).

The partnership between the university and Recipe for Success was born out of the authors' desire to bridge, in a meaningful way, the studies of health communication and organizational communication. Additionally, the mission of Recipe for Success aligned with the authors' vision for the new service-learning project, and so the authors initiated the collaboration with the organization through a cold call that proposed the collaboration. Recipe for Success was responsive to the authors' proposal and expressed interest in engaging in practices that would expand its program to the collegiate level.

When replicating this type of work, it is best to collaborate with a local organization that aligns with the associated courses and faculty interests. There are a variety of ways that community partnerships can be developed. Two starting places are personal connections with community members or reaching out to a local nonprofit that aligns

with faculty interest, as was done in the present case. Various campus offices can also be useful resources to connect faculty with community organizations.

***Project design.*** This service-learning project should be implemented as a semester-long activity that culminates in a community-service event designed and managed by the students. While the students do most of the planning, the professors should guide students by providing various forms of project support. In the case study, the authors oversaw administrative tasks of the project, such as the budget, working with vendors, and communicating with the community partner.

Courses should be (re)designed to work collaboratively with one another as well as with the partner organization, finding times to bring together the learning communities through meetings that honor student schedules, such as in-class or at an agreed upon time in-person or virtually. Due to the nature of the project across courses, professors must clearly identify project benchmarks as well as tasks associated with each course. When (re)designing the courses, it is key that learning outcomes specific to the courses that students are enrolled in are evident in their activities and contributions to the community project.

With this project, student learning should be guided, monitored, and refined to help students identify the ways in which courses are different and the varying roles that each curriculum adds to this project. This should include regular student check-ins as well as check-ins between the professors. Through their involvement in the project, students will gain real-world experience in a variety of functional skills: interpersonal communication, teamwork, research, marketing, and public speaking, all of which should be built into project design. The case study below provides a model for executing this type of project.

### **VegOut Case Study**

In the case study, students enrolled in courses with the authors in the fall of 2015 and spring of 2016, and then researched, organized, publicized, and evaluated the event purposed to provide the university community with education on healthy-eating practices. The project came to be known as University VegOut.

Students enrolled in service-learning courses are required to contribute at least 10 hours of service inside and outside of the classroom as well as provide midsemester and end-of-semester evaluations to the CCESL. To accommodate busy student schedules, most of these hours were embedded in the syllabus, such as a presentation from a Recipe for Success ambassador, research and evaluation activities, event design, and the event itself. Additionally, students were required to provide service-learning evaluations to the CCESL and, in turn, to the authors. These evaluations asked students to reflect on their role within the project, their professor(s)' role, the community organization's role as well as what they learned through the process. Findings from evaluations are detailed later.

One of the most unique aspects of this project was the collaboration between students enrolled in different types of communication courses. While in this case study, participating students were enrolled in courses in the same discipline, this type of project can easily translate to interdisciplinary teams; this is discussed in more detail in the Future Applications section. The courses were built to work in tandem in order to highlight and connect different traditions of communication studies. This design exposed students to a more robust view of communication studies, providing students with a look at the complex ways that communication is evident and applied. The primary task was to integrate the areas of study, determining ways for the students to work with one another, while maintaining tasks unique to each course and its specific learning outcomes. This was done in different ways throughout the two semesters.

**Fall 2015.** During this semester, students from communication research and small-group communication were integrated into the project. The two courses were back-to-back, which led to some overlap between students. This added ease to the project because those students acted as a link between the classes. This also allowed for a constant flow of information between the two classes, yet put a burden on those students in both classes. Students were informed of this project on the first day of the semester and were instructed on their role in researching, planning, executing, and evaluating the program.

The event, University VegOut, was a festival aimed at educating and encouraging members of the university community about the benefits of incorporating vegetables into their diets. At the event, the university community members were encouraged to try new vegetables—participants noted that Brussel sprouts, asparagus, mushroom, eggplant, radish, and cauliflower were new to them. In addition to tastings, participants played games such as veggie roulette and name that veggie. Participants could also have their photo taken with a custom Instagram cutout. It is believed that least 150 individuals were reached with the healthy-eating message. Many university leaders, including the university president, provost, and directors of CCESL, stopped by the event and spoke about the importance of this message for the university community. In all, it was a success.

Research students were tasked with all of the research components. First, students designed a survey to gather a baseline of knowledge about RFS; health consciousness; and what aspects of an event might draw the target audience, the university community, to take part in the event. Students collected 191 responses, then entered and analyzed the data. In addition, students conducted ethnographic research in the event space prior to and during the event. Research students also conducted an evaluation focus group with the small-group students.

The small-group students were tasked with event design and promotion. They determined the activities featured at the event, aspects of event set-up and clean-up, as well as volunteer management. Additionally, teams worked on social media, the creation and distribution of flyers, and classroom visits to invite students personally to the event. All students were required to help run the event, which included environment

set-up, retrieving and preparing vegetables, running tables and games, acting as ambassadors of the message, and tear-down.

Students were also asked to evaluate the event using three approaches: (a) attendee event evaluation surveys, (b) ethnographic participant observation, (c) and a focus group. In addition, students provided research reports, reflections, and manuals for creation of the next event.

At the conclusion of the semester, the authors debriefed the service-learning activity and determined how the activity could be improved upon in the next semester. Two important changes were made. First, the authors decided to try working in smaller groups in order to focus on the individual student-learning process. Second, due to the success of the event, it was determined that the program would be expanded to include a cooking demonstration in addition to the festival.

**Spring 2016.** In the second semester, students worked in smaller, more focused groups with students enrolled in service-learning special projects to run a larger event. Courses in the second semester built upon the work completed by the students in the fall and allowed the authors to work with groups of two to four through service-learning independent studies. Building upon the work conducted in the fall semester, student coursework this semester focused on strategic messaging and organizational development. The organizational development group planned a large, two-part event based on feedback from the previous semester while the strategic messaging group worked on the development of one-strategic message and publicizing the event. These students learned processes and theories related to strategic messaging and applied it to the promotion of the event. In addition, they gained experience working with various media outlets' organizational processes of disseminating messages.

Again, students needed to participate in a minimum of 10 volunteer hours, including a visit to Recipe for Success for a meeting with their head chef and marketing coordinator. Students could choose other ways to volunteer. A menu of options was provided to the students that allowed them the flexibility to choose the opportunity that fit best with their schedule and interests; these ranged from office work to attending and volunteering at RFS events, such as a fashion show fundraiser.

This event had two components scheduled, a festival similar to the one that took place in the fall and a healthful-food cooking demonstration. This major task was on schedule until a serious storm hit the city of Houston on the day of festival. The festival was then canceled and rescheduled to coincide with the cooking demonstration scheduled for two days later. With the initiative of the students to reorganize, the students and professors collaborated on a new plan to hold the event. This provided a rich learning experience for the students about adjusting and planning.

Both semesters offered different learning experiences for the students situated within the study of communication, showcasing the breadth and depth of the field. Projects such as this allow for assessment and constant improvement through debrief and

evaluation. In the next section, we discuss the debriefing process and student learning outcomes.

### Debriefing

Students were debriefed and assessed through written and oral exams, journaling, and critical reflection. This revealed the impact of service-learning and the ways the project propelled beyond the classroom and into the real world. Both semesters offered different learning experiences for the students, showcasing the breadth and depth of the field. The various ways in which students were asked to debrief the process provides understanding of the impact of this project and direction for future projects. Student reflections were examined through a process of thematic analysis to determine the self-reported learning. Several themes of learning outcomes emerged out of the student reflections. These included research methods applications, small-group communication applications, general communication applications, interpersonal communication, with a subtheme of conflict management. Examples from each of these themes are represented in the table below:

<b>Learning Outcome</b>	<b>Student Quote</b>	
Research methods applications	“Learning about how to analyze quantitative data was confusing, but fun. Who knew that asking questions can yield such complex numerical results? ...The field work was enjoyable, both the survey, as well as the ethnography of watching people at lunch. Observing and taking notes on our observations, and particularly going over those notes in a group analysis was insanely useful. So many perspectives of the same viewing area gave valuable insight into researching.”	“What I like most about this service-learning project, is that it allowed me to really understand the concept of research. When I started taking this class I was a little lost, but after gather information, reaching out to students, and gathering important information to conduct this survey. Allowed me to dig deeper into my own personal research for this calls.”
Small-group applications	“Small group communication is more than communicating in a group of five to seven people, it is about creating a common goal and finding the possible ways to achieve the goal while developing, processing, leading, and	“After reviewing my first journal prompt of the semester, I found my exact words of my initial response to service-learning, which was sincerely positive. I’m proud to say that my initial response is still holds value to my true

	learning in the group, which is why this course is so vital to my knowledge”	feelings for service-learning. The amount of patience, caring, and understanding that is necessary for a service-learning project is something that I never thought I would have to experience.”
General gains	“The entire process and procedure of the VegOut event was quite a learning experience. Personally, my absolute favorite aspect of the service-learning project was being able to apply what I learned to a real-life event.”	“This project allows students to learn by doing and be a service to the community. I was able to use other communication skills that I have learned throughout this semester to hone my professional skills.”
Interpersonal communication	“Throughout the entire service-learning project, I loved every part of it, but honestly, I liked my station the most. I enjoyed the constant interaction of participants, between young and old and of all races/cultural backgrounds...We were constantly moving around, overlooking each station and acknowledging what was going on around us. It really was a fun learning project!”	“The more group members communicate with each other, the stronger their relationships become. Inevitably, members will discuss personal dilemmas that will ensure the development of interpersonal relationships amongst group members.”
Conflict management	“In some cases individuals who have different personalities can be challenging but in our case it was far from an uprising conflict. Throughout the project, we made sure to show respect and courteous for every members hard work and dedication.”	“I believe there are two traits [that] would be useful in our group, such as, surrounded in a positive environment and share responsibility. Be surrounded in a positive environment, this trait is important because even though there might be possible conflicts, a productive solution would be to resolve them in a respectful and open-minded manner.”



These reflections on learning outcomes help to further the argument that service-learning projects do indeed provide a deep learning experience. Further, it can be argued that these types of projects are well suited for experiential practices within communication studies because service-learning projects emphasize human interaction. Throughout class discussions, each professor was able to see discussion among peers evolve from surface-level understanding of course material to deeper understandings of content.

## **Evaluation**

Embarking on a project this size, it is impossible to anticipate all of the challenges and opportunities that will arise. Throughout the course of the year, professors repeated the mantra, “This is all part of the learning process.” When students were frustrated or struggling with an aspect of the project, this served as a reminder that we grow and learn when we feel uncomfortable, that feelings like this contribute to learning outcomes. For projects like this to be successful, it is first important to ensure university buy-in and collaboration on all ends. This project would not have been possible without university support and belief in service-learning projects. The event was also financially supported by administration and various university centers, which proved to be invaluable.

There also needs to be student buy-in and commitment. One of the key aspects of this project is that it was completely planned and run by students. This empowered the students and developed ownership and dedication to the project. Students were proud to be a part of the University VegOut project. One student said, “What I liked the most was to be a part of creating the very first VegOut event. I have been a student at [here] for almost four years, and I have never attended or been a part of a school event” similarly, another student reflected, “My feelings towards the project itself was that it was an amazing idea and opportunity to truly engage students in what is being taught in class. I am taking 18 hours of classes this semester, and can honestly say I learned more from this course as well as [research] than any of my other courses, because of this project.” These sentiments were echoed by students in various colloquial and formal forms. Further, this provides evidence for progress on the learning objective of balancing work, life, and school obligations with service-learning as well as evidence for the necessity of providing service-learning opportunities within the HSI/MSI context.

Moreover, this healthy-eating message was particularly salient presented to the university community, many of whom live within food deserts, the university itself being surrounded by food deserts. Considering our student population and our social location, this service-learning event proved to provide students and faculty with an opportunity to reflect and have critical conversations about the importance of giving back to one’s community but also bringing awareness to an unspoken issue impacting the university community.

With an emphasis on student needs, this project worked to create a service-learning experience that honored student school-work-life balance. This partnership should serve as a model for future collaborations at our university and other institutions. In an

effort develop a healthy-eating message tailored to the university community, the authors continue to explore ways to develop infrastructure within the university to provide the healthy-eating message that focuses on the factors that impact our students most, including limiting social economic factors and healthy behaviors.

### **Future Applications**

The context of the case study is a university setting, though this work could easily be conducted at the community-college level or potentially the high school level. This might require only some scaling in terms of student responsibility and placing more emphasis on the professor or instructor to design the event and guide students through milestones, while still ensuring this is an empowering process for the students because they work to fulfill a community need.

**Conceptualization** Though the present case study is situated within the field of communication studies, this work can easily translate to another discipline and/or into interdisciplinary work. For example, keeping with the theme of healthy eating, an interdisciplinary team might include courses in biology, kinesiology, or nutrition. After the service-learning faculty team has been established, the team members should work together to identify a community need to be addressed, while simultaneously seeking a community organization to partner with. It is key that this community need be of value and importance to the students and can even be evoked through their own experiences.

The community need should of course be within the scope of the disciplines and be broad enough that students can design and implement a community event around the topic. Examples of prevalent community needs might be homelessness, hunger, environmental safety, or financial literacy. The community partner may also have an influence on the community need addressed. As discussed, faculty can secure their community partner in several ways, such as taking advantage of university resources, through their networks, or through a cold-call to the organization. In the authors' experience, most nonprofit community organizations are eager to work in collaboration with students in higher education.

**Institutional Support** Two levels of institutional support made the present case possible: institutional buy-in through the support of the CCESL and in turn the administration, as well as financial support for the project provided by the CCESL and the Center for Critical Race studies. The faculty members applied for funding from both centers. The funds were used to buy materials for the festival, such as vegetables for tasting, decorations, and prizes to serve as reminders of the healthy-eating message. While this project can certainly be conducted without those levels of support, the support did make the project run smoother.

**Student Requirements** After faculty have established the basic outline of the project, it is important to define the student roles and responsibilities: first, to establish the tasks associated with the differing curriculums—often students may be drawn to certain aspects of the project that are not related to the course learning outcomes. While, students should not be discouraged to contribute in these ways, it is up to the

faculty members to establish the primary goal of the project as related to the class and to ensure that students are working toward that goal. For example, in the case study, students were provided with an outline of their duties at the outset of the class. One group designed the event, while another was responsible for the research or promotion.

In addition, to create structure for students, faculty should set a number of community service hours to be completed by each student, such as 10 hours. In an effort to honor work-life balance, students should be presented with a menu of options to complete their hours in a way that works best for their individual demands. Finally, activities and assignments should be built into the course that ask students to design and reflect on their experience. Some examples: goal-setting at the outset of the semester; a mid-semester evaluation of the project, such as a stop-start-continue; journal prompts that lead the student through thinking critically about the role of the project on their overall learning; final evaluations; and final reports instructing future students on developing a project such as this.

**Event/programming** With the project and student benchmarks in place, event planning and programming can begin. While this project is purposed to be student led, it is helpful for the students to have a clear idea of the authors' vision. In the case study, the professors established the culmination of semester activities in an event. The date and hours for the event were clear from Day 1 of the project. From there, students were responsible for researching their target audience, designing the event, and for setting up and running the event. In all, they were largely responsible for the successes and shortcomings of the event each that contributed to their learning experience.

**Evaluation** There are two suggested areas of evaluation that are formal and informal. First, it is critical for the faculty to discuss the project and to determine the ways in which the overall semester activity could be improved to enhance student-learning outcomes. In the case study, this was done between the two semesters. It was at this time that it was determined that the project might be more effective if carried out in smaller groups. Associated courses also helped to build upon work that was conducted in the preceding semester and also allowed the project to move into different types of coursework. Building upon the foundation set previously allows for a richer level of experience for the student and also allows the project to move through related courses/subject areas. For example, in the case study, during the first semester, research methods were incorporated into the project in order to conduct critical target audience research; the second semester built upon that research, which allowed the project to incorporate coursework specific to health messaging.

Second is student debrief and reflection. This should begin with a classroom discussion of the event to debrief and share opinions among the group in order to share in the learning outcome. From there, students should provide a written reflection of the service-learning project. The most reliable method of this reflection is through a final paper in which the students are asked to discuss the ways in which course materials were applied through the event project, what they gained through the experiential

learning process, and lessons learned that could be shared with others embarking on similar projects.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Designing projects like these at HSI/MSI universities that are purposed to involve students in service-learning directly impacts their learning as well as their community. Such projects also provide students with deep-learning experiences that are tangible and intangible. It is our hope that this piece will foster continued work that empowers students to take a lead in their own learning. In turn, greatly affecting student success at the university and in their careers. Further, creating a positive impact on the health and wellness of their communities, providing for positive change for years to come.

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