

Community Engagement on the Mexico–U.S. Border: Nепantla Identity as Justice–Oriented Citizenship

Naomi Fertman and Sarah De Los Santos Upton

Abstract

Previous research has highlighted best practices for community engagement, problematized server/served approaches to communities, and identified both barriers and benefits for students engaged in this coursework. What is lacking, however, is a deeper examination of students who participate in community engagement in their own home communities. The purpose of our study is to better understand the impact and outcomes of community-engaged coursework through the lens of our students' intersectional identities. We argue that their unique social positions as both students and community members on the Mexico–U.S. border offer a window into understanding how students may participate in community-engaged coursework differently when they are members of the communities they are engaging with.

Keywords: Mexico/U.S. border, nepantla identity, community engagement pedagogy, justice-oriented citizenship, Hispanic Serving Institution



Interdisciplinary scholarship has touted the benefits of community engagement, such as an improved understanding of course material, the development of skills, and the ability to apply course concepts to gain a deeper understanding of complex social issues (Novak et al., 2007). Much of the existing literature focuses on identifying and disseminating best practices (Evans, 2018; Núñez & Gonzalez, 2018). Critiques surrounding community engagement often center on the ethics of sending students from privileged backgrounds into underprivileged communities they are not a part of (Risch, 2012). Eby (1998) argued that the dark underbelly of community engagement is that the institution and the coursework are centralized in the experience, frequently at the expense of the community that is being served. This thinking and the harmful impacts it engenders are reinforced when students come from privileged communities to complete service experiences with people from marginalized identity groups, often creating a server/served binary that positions university students as privileged servers and community members as underprivileged recipients (Dacheux, 2005; Henry, 2005).

The critiques above demonstrate how community-engaged learning can be problematic for community partners if it is not approached with care, and the same can be said for the student experience. Previous studies indicate that barriers to successfully completing community-engaged coursework include time, money, family obligations, anxiety, fear of being unprepared, procrastination, and workload (Burke & Bush, 2012; Gillis & Mac Lellan, 2010). Butin (2006) argued that most approaches to community-engaged learning assume that students are enrolled full-time, single, free of debt, and childless, when the reality is that it “may be a luxury that many students cannot afford, whether in terms of time, finances, or job future” (p. 482).

If measures are taken to alleviate some of the barriers discussed above, community-engaged learning has many benefits, including the potential to impact students' lives in significant ways. In a 13-year longitudinal study, Bowman et al. (2010) found that community-engaged learning continued to have a positive impact on students' well-being after graduation and into adulthood in the form of personal growth, life purpose,

environmental mastery, and life satisfaction. Previous research has demonstrated that a student's intersectional identities impact the ways they may perceive said benefits and barriers to their community engagement experiences. Female students have been noted to be more highly impacted by community engagement and perceive fewer barriers to engagement than their male counterparts (Xavier & Jones, 2021). The development of empathy, as an outcome of community-engaged coursework, has been noted as one such benefit (Wilson, 2011). Our own practice as educators has laid the foundation of our understanding of the potential of community engagement for our students, and we have been guided by the idea that community engagement "provides a platform that will empower students to gain self-awareness, radical empathy, and compassion, and learn strategies to identify solutions to social injustice issues through critical reflection, advocacy, and action" (Reddix, 2020, p. 8). Community-engaged learning also has the power to be transformative in nature. Westheimer and Kahne (2004) explained that education programs have the potential to create three different types of citizens, (1) personally responsible, (2) participatory, and (3) justice-oriented. Weiner (2015) explained that from a community-engaged learning perspective, personally responsible citizens operate from a charity model that encourages students to take individual action and improve moral character through volunteerism without connecting their service to course content or engaging in reflection afterward. Participatory citizens participate within existing systems and community programs as part of coursework. Finally, justice-oriented citizens "attempt to address social inequalities through service-learning" (Weiner, 2015, p. 328), reflecting on power and privilege and questioning what they can do to change oppressive systems. Westheimer and Kahne (2004) offered the following example to contextualize these three types of citizens: "If participatory citizens are organizing the food drive and personally responsible citizens are donating food, justice-oriented citizens are asking why people are hungry and acting on what they discover" (p. 242)

Those students accessing community engagement in our study all had one key component in common: All were residents of El Paso, Texas and/or Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, cities located on the Mexico-

U.S. border. As Anzaldúa (2007) explained, borderlands are unique, in-between spaces, and there is much to be learned from living in the in-between and navigating these spaces on a daily basis. For example, people living in the borderlands often develop what Anzaldúa calls a "tolerance for ambiguity," which stems from their continual navigation and negotiation of borders, binaries, and boundaries. To make sense of this experience, she offered the concept of *nepantla*, a framework for understanding the borderlands where "identities are questioned, broken down, and rebuilt" (De Los Santos Upton, 2019, p. 136). Anzaldúa (2015) ultimately argued that *nepantleras*, or those who live in a state of *nepantla*, are uniquely positioned to engage in activism because of their abilities to think beyond binaries and build alliances across multiple, intersectional movements and identities. We therefore argue that *nepantleras* are uniquely positioned for community engagement.

Previous studies have highlighted best practices for community engagement, problematized server/served approaches to communities, and identified both barriers and benefits for students engaged in this coursework. In addition, much of the research in the field focuses on "real or imagined situations in which students are visitors to either the campus community or to the site where they offer service" (Risch, 2012, p. 210). We argue that there is a need for deeper examination of students who participate in community engagement in their own home communities. In her research on community engagement at UTEP, Risch (2012) explained that because students are most often members of the El Paso/Juárez region, they are using their "knowledge in order to make effective and long-lasting change in their families, neighborhoods, city, community, and region—regardless of whether the boundaries of those institutions match up with those of one nation state or culture" (p. 202).

The purpose of our study is to better understand the impact and outcomes of community-engaged coursework through the lens of our students' intersectional identities. Anderson and Cidro (2020) found that for Indigenous women performing community-based participatory health research, identity, emotional investment, and responsibility heavily influenced their research process, as well as a deep mutual love: "I think as researchers we engage in community-based

work both because we love our communities, and because they love us” (p. 3). What could this identification, emotional investment, responsibility, and mutual love look like for undergraduate students doing community-engaged coursework in their own home communities? As both students and community members on the Mexico–U.S. border, we argue that their unique social positions offer a window into understanding how students may participate in community-engaged coursework differently when they are members of the communities they are engaging with. By understanding the ways that different students are impacted, faculty will have the potential to develop more pedagogically sound community-engaged courses so that all students feel competent in registering for and completing courses utilizing this evidence-based best practice.

The University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) is an R1 institution (top-tier public research institution as classified by the Carnegie Foundation) located 1.5 miles from the U.S.–Mexico border in the city of El Paso, Texas, directly across the Rio Grande from Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua. El Paso has a population of 884,432 residents, 19.3% of whom live in poverty. The median household income in the city is \$55,919 (United States Census Bureau, n.d.). There are 23,880 students enrolled at UTEP (undergraduate through doctoral-level studies), 48% of whom self-identify as first-generation college students. UTEP is a commuter campus with limited on-campus housing and most students living at home with family. The university is classified as a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI), with 83% of the student body identifying as Hispanic, Latinx, or Chicana. UTEP is an open access institution, meaning that all students who apply as undergraduates are accepted into the university. UTEP has dedicated itself to practices of inclusive excellence, and prides itself on its open access policy within all undergraduate programs. This practice is a demonstration of the school’s clear commitment to social mobilization for its student population. In fact, UTEP has been ranked first in the United States for achieving both competitive research and student social mobility, and this focus on social mobility has helped graduates move from family incomes in the bottom 20% to the top 20% (University of Texas at El Paso, n.d.).

Community engagement at UTEP is supported university-wide by its Center for Community Engagement (CCE). The center has been pivotal in implementing best practices in community engagement across the university and has been recognized for its excellence by receiving the Carnegie Classification for Community Engagement in both 2010 and 2020. Only 368 campuses across the country have received this classification; of those campuses receiving the classification, 89 are minority serving institutions and 53 of those are classified as Hispanic Serving Institutions (American Council on Education, 2024). The center plays a pivotal role in uplifting and supporting students’ dual roles as both students and community members. The center uses the language of community engagement rather than service-learning to highlight the mutually beneficial outcomes of student involvement in community. The term “service-learning” implies that students will learn from the communities they are working in, whereas “community engagement” allows for mutually beneficial growth from all parties involved in working and learning together.

Both researchers in this project are faculty in the College of Liberal Arts. Naomi is a transplant to El Paso/Juárez and has been living and working in the community for 15 years, and Sarah is a third-generation Chicana who was born and raised in El Paso and attended UTEP as an undergraduate. Together, we have significant combined experience in implementing community engagement in our undergraduate courses and in performing community-engaged research at both the undergraduate and graduate level. We have witnessed student success and failure within community-engaged courses that we have taught. Both successes and failures can be attributed to class pedagogy (good and bad), student barriers (again both restrictive and inspiring), instructor errors and moments of ingenuity, and relationships with community partners. Over the years we have questioned why things are so wonderful when they are wonderful (when student learning far exceeds our original expectations) and why things are so challenging when course goals and student learning fall short. This project aims not only to gain a clearer understanding of the challenges of accessing community-engaged learning, but also to understand the impact of community-engaged learning with our unique student population with the inher-

ent interest in developing a framework for community-engaged learning implementation in future courses across our university and other HSIs.

The long-term goal of this study is to maximize the impact of community engagement for all students. We argue, along with Risch (2012) and Garcia-Guevara and Vivoni (2023), that structural adaptations are needed to make community engagement accessible for all students. To realize this goal, we sought to best understand students' expectations and experiences, students' hopes and fears, and the benefits and barriers that students face when entering into and completing our community-engaged courses. We also needed to understand how students' unique intersectional identities shaped those markers and subsequently shaped their overall experience with community engagement.

Methodology

Our initial research implementation was with the community-engaged face-to-face courses that we were teaching, which included two sections of Introduction to Women's Studies and one section of Chicana Identity Formation. These courses attract students majoring and minoring in Women's and Gender Studies, Chicano Studies, and Communication Studies. These courses also fulfill elective credits for students in other majors and minors, including some non-majors and minors. The data presented in this essay addresses our initial understanding of the impact of community engagement on students by helping us to distinguish between positive and negative outcomes and student learnings. As educators, both authors understand that listening to our students is key to understanding what has worked and what still needs refinement. We sought and received institutional review board approval so that we could safely engage with our students to best understand their experiences. We captured data about student experiences in two different ways, one being a survey we designed ourselves and the other a reflection activity that was designed and facilitated by the Center for Community Engagement. We developed a 19-question pre- and post-engagement survey tool. The survey tool specifically focused on capturing information in two unique areas. The survey captured demographic information specific to best understanding students' intersectional

identities, including their employment, roles as caretakers with their families, financial aid eligibility, and whether they were the first in their families to attend college. The second set of questions specifically asks about the student's barriers to accessing academic-based community engagement and perceived benefits from community engagement. The survey tools we created were intentionally designed with open-ended questions to maximize the opportunity for students to share their experience and knowledge.

The facilitated reflection session consisted of students responding to and discussing nine prompts that focused on students understanding the challenges they encountered, the ways that engagement expanded their academic understanding, and the ways that engagement helped them to develop empathy. During the first week of class, students completed the preengagement survey, over the next 14 weeks they completed their community engagement work, and during the final week of class they completed the postengagement survey and facilitated reflection. This pilot study occurred in fall 2022, with 77 undergraduate students participating.

Analysis

We used a grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006) framework to analyze the data generated from our pre and post survey tools and facilitated reflection session. We began with line-by-line coding to identify themes that emerged within and across the courses, then collapsed our codes into categories and subcategories, which we labeled with the words of our participants to ensure the data remained grounded in their lived experiences. Through our analysis, we identified four major themes: connecting to engagement, self-described benefits, ways of being, and process of engagement. Within the theme "connecting to engagement," students described the ways they connected to their community engagement sites, including their previous levels of experience and examples of the organizations and populations they collaborated with at their sites. Under the theme "self-described benefits," we identified three subthemes in student responses: developing professional skills, building connections, and expanding knowledge. The theme "ways of being" related to students' navigation of the self and their relationship to community. Subthemes

included intersectional identities and community embeddedness. Our final theme, “process of engagement,” highlighted individual growth, changes in perspective, and solidarity-building as described by our students; subthemes included personal growth and development, “gaining perspective changing as a person,” and “with community instead of for.” In the following section we describe these themes and subthemes in detail and offer examples of each from our student surveys and facilitated reflection.

Connecting to Engagement: Previous Experiences and Site Placements

Students entered their community engagement sites with varying levels of experience, ranging from no experience through brief experience to multiple previous experiences. Some 62% of our students reported no previous experience with community engagement at the onset of the courses. For those students with previous experiences, their community engagement was often facilitated by faith-based and/or educational institutions. Faith-based opportunities were facilitated by churches and included serving as youth pastors and participating in service through youth groups. Both high schools and universities were educational institutions that facilitated previous community engagement. High school groups that facilitated engagement opportunities included band, student council, and National Junior Honor Society. For students who had encountered community engagement in the university setting, many identified co-curricular activities such as sororities and student organizations as facilitating entities. A subset of these students had previously enrolled in college courses that included community engagement experiences. Other students began their community engagement as peer leaders at the university, or through internships with community organizations. One student indicated that they had previously connected to service experiences through Americorps programming. Although students came into their community-engaged courses with limited experience, gaining experience, in particular firsthand experience, was a driving force in what they hoped to gain from their community-engaged courses.

Two major social service themes emerged in students’ previous engagement experiences, food scarcity and children’s issues. Within these categories, students had worked with a variety of food banks and local food dis-

tribution sites. Students had also spent time at our local child crisis center, orphanages, and other organizations that respond to the emerging needs of youth. In addition to these two themes, students engaged with a number of advocacy organizations working on social justice issues such as voting rights, environmental justice, housing insecurity, gender violence, and LGBTQ rights. In students’ previous engagement experiences, they had completed a varied number of tasks and activities that directly connected with the sites they had worked with. Tasks ranged from simple low-skill activities such as cleaning, and sorting and organizing donated goods, to more complex tasks such as teaching, farmwork, and fixing computers. Students had also engaged in civic action through door knocking, outreach, and voter registration. Additionally, students had participated in both in-person engagement and virtual engagement through creating content for organizations’ social media platforms. Finally, students cited artistic endeavors such as performances of events as examples of their previous engagement.

Building from previous levels of experience, several students described their expectations for what they hoped community engagement would be like in our courses. Students with limited or no previous experience had no real expectations for what a community-engaged course would be like. Some students identified previous bad experiences that shaped their expectations for what might be to come in these courses. Overall, students were hopeful for a lot of engagement, to experience different environments with a variety of opportunities, and to try and to experience new things. One student expressed their hope to “live the college experience” through participating more fully.

Through the community-engaged courses, students had various opportunities to work in the community with different populations at different sites. Students partnered with organizations and populations connected to course content; some had the freedom to choose their sites, and some students were assigned to specific sites and projects. Students engaged with migrant shelters and border-specific education, a local LGBTQ resource center and advocacy program, a resource center for new and growing families, community development organizations, and organizations working toward improving access to healthy food in

the border region. They interacted with a variety of populations ranging from youth to elders. Students described learning new skills and building knowledge through their community engagement sites, both specific to their unique sites and connected to larger systemic issues. Students reported learning gardening skills, teaching children, learning about breastfeeding, and gaining an understanding of resources that organizations provide to the community. They also reported learning the privilege of voting, about motherhood, and furthering their understanding of in-class concepts.

Self-Described Benefits

Developing Professional Skills

Faculty and institutions traditionally focus on developing professional skills when highlighting why community engagement should be included as a high-impact practice of choice in higher education classrooms. Our students echoed some of this area of interest in their preengagement surveys. They highlighted an interest in gaining new experiences, making job connections, team building, unlocking and sharpening their hidden skills and talents, applying field knowledge, time management, leadership development, networking, and developing relationships for references as well as how community engagement could lead to jobs, internships, and other opportunities. They made direct connections in their responses to how community engagement could benefit their future careers through hands-on work. Students identified that community engagement gives them a direct view into understanding how organizations function and how nonprofits work. Students ultimately expressed their desire to develop professional skills by gaining firsthand experience and knowledge and applying what they were learning in their classrooms to real-world settings. In their post surveys, students described meeting the professional development goals they set in the pre survey by acquiring new leadership and communication skills. They also reported learning valuable lessons, some positive and some negative, about the inner workings of organizations and their communities. One student reported their significant learning was “how not to run a nonprofit”; another reported “help is needed” as their learning.

Building Connections

In addition to the professional development skills that students both sought and experienced at their sites, in their pre survey they also identified many potential benefits that moved beyond the realm of professional development. One student expressed just hoping to have fun while completing their engagement. Some of these benefits highlighted their interests in building connections, such as meeting new people and developing friendships. Some students saw their work in community engagement as outward and community focused, describing their potential benefits with phrases such as “helping others,” “cheering up,” and “supporting and improving community.” Ultimately, these benefits were steeped in social and emotional learning, and, as one student described, could potentially move beyond the tangible to more embodied feelings, such as the potential of community engagement to be “grounding.”

Expanding Knowledge

Students categorized “learning as a benefit” as an overarching category in their pre surveys. Learning is a complex topic that they understood in distinct and poignant ways. Many students identified expanding their knowledge about community needs and how society works as the foundational benefits. They described this experience as becoming more aware of what is happening, developing a nuanced understanding of issues and struggles the community faces, as well as learning about the work that needs to be done and the resources available in the community.

Students were able to understand that community engagement had the potential to be a tool in their learning process by encouraging them to learn. Multiple students identified community engagement as enabling a deeper way to learn.

As was said previously, some student responses moved from the direct and tangible to more embodied understanding of the ways that they individually exist in communities through their personal responsibility and a deeper understanding of how the “world is different.” Students also shared how community engagement gives them a pathway to contribute to society within their roles as students. Students saw community engagement as a tool for “enhancing their own different lenses.” Participants also expressed their desire to learn about

the impact that community engagement actually has on communities. One student expressed hope that community engagement would be a bridge to deeper understanding by helping them to conceptualize what inspires them.

Ways of Being

Intersectional Identities

Students involved in this study were enrolled in courses on identity, sexuality, women and gender studies, and borderlands, and based on the nature of these courses and the content studied, identities were front and center in the selection and experience of engagement sites. For example, when describing their previous experiences with engagement, many students relied on the identities of those present at their sites to contextualize the work they had performed, such as different age groups, or organizations centered on identity markers such as ethnicity, sexuality, ability, housing, or military status. When describing the engagement work that they hoped to accomplish throughout the semester, students again returned to identity to not only select the issues they hoped to focus on, but also to situate themselves within communities. Students centered the importance of identity, a topic they saw as being relatable to course materials, and expressed their desire to learn more about issues facing women, LGBTQ+ communities, and people who have been displaced, and some students specifically cited their desire to approach these topics from an intersectional perspective. They also hoped to become more comfortable with their own identities, and learn about the cultural backgrounds of others. For example, one student shared their desire to “find a sense of Chicano identity by connecting with my community at El Paso.” Ultimately, they sought to become involved in the creation of spaces where people with different identities could thrive. The combination of community engagement and classroom materials created a unique space where students were safe to reflect on their own identities and the ways those identities may shift over time. Some students began publicly using different identity markers by the close of the semester.

Community Embeddedness

Although community engagement was new to most students who participated in these classes, students entered the experience

with excitement. One explained, “I have never worked with a community based organization, yet, I feel excited to participate and engage with further communities.” Students also stressed the importance of entering their engagement with open minds: “To have an open mindset, learn more about how the community works”; “I am going in with no expectations and open mind.” Although they knew there would be some challenges, such as balancing work schedules, they expressed a general willingness to try. They also entered into their sites from a place of community-mindedness, or at least expressed their desire to arrive in this place.

Students who participated in these classes expressed a geographic connection to their cities El Paso and Ciudad Juárez and to the overarching borderlands community that connects the two sister cities. It was clear to us that “my community” meant different things to different students, and that personal understanding was one piece of their framework of understanding for community engagement: “I don’t know what to expect from the community engagement, but I want to learn more about my community.” Many students initially approached the community engagement assignment through a traditional lens of “community service,” which they defined as “helping people,” “giving back,” and “mak[ing] a change.”

Other students understood community engagement as a process in which both the community and the individual working “in community” grow and learn together. Students viewing community engagement through this lens identified “being in,” “engaging with,” “connecting with,” “appreciating,” “contributing to,” and “better shaping” community as clear outcomes of their engagement experiences. Students also identified wanting to understand their communities better, noting that identifying community concerns, seeing and understanding community problems, and understanding how communities work were goals of their engagement. Students also sought to build community, including their own social networks, aiming to “help others join” as part of their community engagement. Students were hopeful that their contributions would lead to positive outcomes, noting that they hoped to better shape community, “make others comfortable,” and actively participate in aid through their work. As part of their community-building goals, students centered relating to others through

intentional communication to “facilitate conversations,” honor “different perspectives,” and “respect others’ opinions,” and enter into their engagement opportunities by “listening” with the mindset that “everyone thinks differently.”

Process of Engagement

Personal Growth and Development

Students in their pre surveys shared the overarching goals of being involved and being of service during the upcoming semester. They saw this opportunity as a chance to either develop themselves or to develop in service to their communities. Students viewed this concept of “in service to community” through two different lenses. Some students expressed an understanding of a more surface-level view of change, as seen in one student’s hoping to “make a difference.” Other students saw that community engagement had the potential to create “lasting changes” and to allow for opportunities to “take up space” in the world in ways that traditional classrooms are not able to fulfill. Beyond making a surface-level difference, students described their hope that engagement could lead them to making changes in their own lives that led them to “become useful to my community.” They hoped to become more “well-rounded” and “to have a more humbled perspective on daily life, not materialistic.” One student described their desire to learn “how to take up space in a comfortable environment & get more engaged in events/things I care about.”

Even with the best intentions of faculty, students, and community partners, not all students in the classes were able to complete their engagement hours, sharing that personal issues impacted their ability to complete the work: for example, “due to health [did] not go to events.” Those students who were able to complete their service shared that they had varied experiences accessing their engagement experiences, ranging from “very easy” to “hard.” Students shared that their own commitment to and consistency at their sites impacted their overall learning from the experience.

The ways students entered their sites resulted in learning outcomes that expanded beyond what we would expect and highlighted the ways that positive educational experiences can be transformative for students. One student described their learning

as “very moving and useful information.” Many students had glowing reports of how their community engagement experiences transpired: “so cool,” “gratifying,” they had “amazing opportunities,” and “useful.” Beyond their initial excitement, many students emphasized their learning was “active” and led to learning more about the people around them. They explained that they learned more about “new people,” “new skills,” and “people from El Paso” and learned how to “relate with people” more deeply and “impact people’s lives.” Others shared their excitement about “learning new things” more generally, including “I want to learn more about everything. Today’s world is so different from back than [sic], things have changed.” Students reflected that as a result of their engagement experience they became “engaged and knowledgeable,” learning about problems they were previously unfamiliar with, what people “go through” and “how they affect them” and “learning what people need.” These learnings led to their desire to “continue engagement” and to become more involved once they realized that “getting involved isn’t as scary and complicated as I think it is.”

“Gaining Perspective Changing as a Person”

Students also reported that their community engagement impacted their personal development by “enhancing lenses,” challenging them to “care about” issues, and helping them to build “empathy” and to be “kind.” Community engagement was a tool in helping them to more deeply understand, engage with, and appreciate the communities and cultures they both live in and worked with over the semester. Ultimately, engagement was an opportunity “to understand others, and be touched by other stories.”

Students reflected that community engagement led to a process of self-discovery involving learning about the self through interactions with others and ultimately gaining perspective about the interconnectedness of people regardless of their intersectional identities and life experiences. One student explained that their engagement led them to “embrace and learn about [their] heritage,” and another described how they learned to “appreciate [their] own privilege.” Students recognized their personal growth, explaining that participation helped them feel “independent,” “outgoing,” and “outspoken,” and taught them to become “comfortable being uncomfortable.” This

process of self-discovery was intimately intertwined with their interactions and relationships with people at their sites. Many students reflected on the importance of holding space for “other people’s perspectives” and acknowledging that “people have influence on each other.” One student explained that their work with children “gives me faith in the following generations.” Another described their realization that by helping themselves they are better positioned to help others, a realization that places emphasis on collective growth rather than paternalistic approaches to community service. Along this line, another student described that rather than being positioned to advocate for others, they felt community engagement had instead taught them to help create spaces where others can advocate for themselves. Finally, several students described goodness as an overarching, big-picture takeaway, which one student put into words beautifully in their reflection, explaining they learned “how to be good to people no matter what. You never know what someone else is going through.”

Community engagement gave the students more in-depth perspectives into the worlds that they had been living in and exposed them to problems and difficulties that others in society encountered that some students had been otherwise unaware of. This exposure showed them that progress is needed and that there are concerns that others face that are “typically unheard.” These learnings, whether internal or external, helped the students to see the value in the work they had completed during the semester as well as the value of being engaged throughout their lives. They reflected on the importance of engagement because of the “impact engagement makes.” Although the act of being engaged may have seemed daunting 15 weeks previously, at the end of the semester they saw that “simple actions make an impact” and “small steps go a long way.” They also left their semesters seeing themselves as being capable of helping and understanding the importance of helping. Their responses captured how these experiences had marked the ways they would live their lives moving forward, sharing that they were “grateful” and needed to be more “mindful” and to take “time to slow down.”

“With Community Instead of For”

Being involved in community engagement fundamentally changed the ways that some students saw their roles in change making.

In pre surveys students self-categorized into two groups, fixers and learners. The fixers responded as outsiders stepping in with their help to solve a problem. They saw communities as being “in need” and wanted to “help people,” “help out,” “help make change,” and to “serve” the “underprivileged.” Their wording identified that they saw distance between themselves and the people they were serving and placed them as temporary one-dimensional outside “helpers” in these spaces.

The learners arrived at their community engagement classes with less of an outsider looking in mentality and already connected to facets of solidarity as the tenets of what they hoped to gain from their experiences. These students used language that placed community-building and connections as desired outcomes of community engagement. They emphasized their desire to “create connections”, and develop a “literal sense of community,” emphasizing that engagement could offer possibilities for community-building: “Community engagement in courses is giving back to a community, being in that community and helping others to join it.” They hoped to become more “familiar with [their] community” and gain “a deeper understanding of those around you and their cultures” and “an increased appreciation for the community around you.” Their roles were not to fix problems but to gain “knowledge about what and who your community is, and how you can best help improve it,” with some identifying specific issues facing the border community, such as “migration” and “human rights.”

Whether they came in as fixers or learners, moving through 15 weeks of community-engaged learning deepened their connection and commitment to community. As one student explained: “I think learning and understanding the importance of community engage[ment] is crucial.” Students left the semester believing that “knowing” and “learning from” community are critical. Their experiences showed them the “problems communities have” and “how underserved the community is.” These needs then became the jumping-off point for how students believed that responses should be constructed. Students identified that “needs of the community vary” and that subsequently the “volunteer work [should be done] depending on needs.” Students also learned that being in solidarity with communities empowers

them as changemakers, not only to change their communities but also to be open to self-change in the process. For example, one student explained that as they learned more about cultural backgrounds within their community, it led to an exploration of their own cultural backgrounds and increased self-knowledge. Another described how learning about their community allowed them to better understand their place in it: “I learned to not advocate for underrepresented communities instead, spaces must be created to allow these communities to advocate for themselves.” It also helped them to see themselves as allies and advocates, finding new spaces to use their voices: “It has taught me to go out and know your community also to be outspoken about issues.” Finding themselves deeply embedded in community, “with community instead of for” led to their positionalities as changemakers from within.

Our students ultimately demonstrated their understanding of the societal expectation that being “in need” is an individual deficit that stems from individual failure. They were able to articulate that this need comes from inequity in society that trickles down to individual experiences within communities. This learning involved a shift that places blame on structures of power and systemic inequality for creating the circumstances that lead to populations who are underserved.

Conclusion

Our study focused on the learning and experiences of UTEP undergraduate students. UTEP is a proud border institution, and its location on the Mexico–U.S. border informs its investment in the binational and bicultural identity of its student body. UTEP students, the majority of whom commute to school on a daily basis, live and work in their community and share a unique duality as both border community members and students. Students who participated in this study were entering into their community engagement coursework from a position that moves beyond traditional understandings of community engagement from the literature. Early stage data showed us that community engagement embedded in coursework was more transformational for our student population than we had imagined and that our student population was significantly more invested in

community engagement and transformational and systemic change than we had originally understood them to be.

Nepantla Identity as Justice-Oriented Citizenship

Although students with intersectional identities are often viewed as deficient in traditional university settings due to language, class status, family status, citizenship, and other factors, we argue that it is specifically these facets of our students’ identities that position them to excel in community-engaged coursework and move beyond existing community engagement literature. As two faculty members living and working on the Mexico–U.S. border, we are witness to the ways in which nepantlisma impacts our students and informs their learning and engagement. For these students,

Anzaldúa’s concepts are more than just words on a page. These Nepantleras enter classrooms and show up in our communities in ways that embody *conocimiento*, a transformative mode of thinking that draws on *la facultad*, a quick perception much like a sixth sense, and *mestiza consciousness*, a consciousness which emerges from navigating the in-betweenness of the Borderlands. (De Los Santos Upton, 2019, p. 136)

Although students’ nepantla identities often leave others to classify them as being successful “in spite of” those identity markers, our findings support the reality that it is “because of” their positionality and identities that they surpassed traditional expectations of community engagement. For example, Whitfield and Ball (2022) explained that students in their study in the mid-Atlantic developed an increased “intolerance of ambiguity” as a result of their community-engaged coursework. Our students entered their community-engaged coursework with a tolerance for ambiguity inherent to their nepantla identities, which we argue ultimately served not only them, but their community partners as well. Our students understood systemic problems in deeper ways from their embeddedness and lived experiences in border communities. As was noted by Anderson and Cidro (2020) in their research on Indigenous identities in community-based participatory research, embeddedness in community has the

power to deepen one’s relationship with community–engaged work (p. 13). Because they were members of their communities, rather than passive witnesses, community engagement created opportunities for our students to see themselves as changemakers from within. Students entered their coursework indicating that they wanted professional experience, and post survey responses indicated that this was achieved. Post surveys also clearly indicated that professional experience was just one piece of what they gained, and their experiences offered opportunities for transformational learning, with an emphasis on better understanding the systemic problems within their own communities. Students, regardless of their previous exposure to community engagement, experienced a shift from viewing community engagement as “fixing” problems to “learning” deeply about these problems, then engaging as changemakers to work in community with others toward solutions. This shift of focus into in–depth comprehension of systemic issues demonstrates their movement into the realm of justice–oriented citizenship as explained by Westheimer and Kahne (2004).

Next Steps

After analyzing our pilot data, we understand that increasing access to community–engaged coursework is of utmost importance. Looking into the future, we see two unique directions for how results from this study can benefit future students and research.

As a direct result of this research, Naomi garnered support to develop a place–based guide for implementing community engagement courses with students at UTEP with the support of the UTEP Center for Community Engagement. This course development guide, intended for faculty implementing community–engaged learning in their academic classes at all levels, or for faculty interested in making their community–engaged learning more accessible and equitable for all student participants, was built with the guidance of the findings collected in this initial study. This guide helps faculty to consider ways that students working in their own communities may benefit from project–based community engagement, with a focus on an accomplishable task rather than completing a certain number of hours that may be unattainable for some students

based on their out–of–school expectations (work and caregiving) and access to transportation. In addition, this guide includes an open access community–engaged library repository (created with the support of the open education resource librarian at UTEP), with resources on not only transformative educational pedagogies, but also including supplemental readings on justice–oriented citizenship and nephantla identity formation.

As is the case with much grounded theory research, “our work suggests pursuing more than one analytic direction” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 10), in addition to the development of a place–based guide that met our original research goal of maximizing the impact of community engagement for all students. Our focus on identity highlighted the experiences of some unique student populations who remain largely invisible on campus.

It was clear from pilot data that students who identify as parents or caregivers face challenges in accessing these transformational opportunities. Existing research on single mothers and higher education demonstrates that while balancing coursework, household duties, and child care, caregivers are often navigating obstacles such as rigid institutional expectations, financial strain, and a lack of career guidance (Freeman, 2020; Forste & Jacobsen, 2013). Beyond the individual barriers that caretakers face, they are also frequently overlooked and undervalued by institutional policies and instructors (Ajayi et al., 2022). We believe that more needs to be done to understand caregivers as a student population and to ensure that these students have access and support to participate in community–engaged coursework. In working toward this research and pedagogical goal, we plan to partner with Moms N’ Majors, an on–campus affinity group for student parents/caretakers. We are seeking funds to hire these students as research assistants, and the next steps of this research project will involve student research assistants completing in–depth interviews with other caretaking students to better capture the realized barriers and benefits of caretaking students that we may have otherwise overlooked or not understood. As this project continues to unfold, we will remain responsive to the needs of our students as they emerge to ensure access and equity in community–engaged learning.



About the Authors

Naomi Fertman is an assistant professor of instruction in the Women's and Gender Studies program and the community outreach specialist for the Center for Community Engagement at the University of Texas at El Paso. Her research interests include reproductive justice, community engagement, and education equity, with a focus on the ways that student parents access higher education. She received her master's in social work and her master's in public health from New Mexico State University.

Sarah De Los Santos Upton is an associate professor in the Department of Communication at the University of Texas at El Paso. Her research interests include Chicana feminism, border studies, community engagement, and reproductive justice. She received her PhD in communication from the University of New Mexico.

References

- Ajayi, K. V., Odonkor, G., Panjwani, S., Aremu, O., Garney, W., & McKyer, L. E. (2022). Socio-ecological barriers to student–parents academic success: A systematic review. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 46(9), 1257–1274. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2022.2065629>
- American Council on Education. (2024, April 8). *Charting the path forward: Insights from the Carnegie Staff on the Revised 2026 Carnegie Community Engagement Application* [PowerPoint presentation]. <https://carnegieclassifications.acenet.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Campus-Compact-2024.pdf>
- Anderson, K., & Cidro, J. (2020). Because we love our communities: Indigenous women talk about their experiences as community-based health researchers. *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*, 24(2), 3–17. <https://openjournals.libs.uga.edu/jheoe/article/view/2071>
- Anzaldúa, G. (2007). *Borderlands/La frontera: The new mestiza* (3rd ed.). Aunt Lute Books.
- Anzaldúa, G. (2015). *Light in the dark/Luz en lo oscuro: Rewriting identity, spirituality, reality* (A. Keating, Ed.). Duke University Press.
- Bowman, N., Brandenberger, J., Lapsley, D., Hill, P., & Quaranto, J. (2010). Serving in college, flourishing in adulthood: Does community engagement during the college years predict adult well-being? *Applied Psychology: Health and Well-Being*, 2(1), 14–34. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1758-0854.2009.01020.x>
- Burke, A. S., & Bush, M. D. (2012). Service learning and criminal justice: An exploratory study of student perceptions. *Educational Review*, 65(1), 56–69. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2011.638138>
- Butin, D. W. (2006). The limits of service-learning in higher education. *The Review of Higher Education*, 29(4), 473–498. <https://doi.org/10.1353/rhe.2006.0025>
- Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis*. Sage.
- Dacheux, T. (2005). Beyond a world of binaries: My views on service-learning. In D. Butin (Ed.), *Service-learning in higher education: Critical issues and directions* (pp. 67–70). Palgrave Macmillan US. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781403981042_4
- De Los Santos Upton, S. (2019). Nepantla activism and coalition building: Locating identity and resistance in the cracks between worlds. *Women’s Studies in Communication*, 42(2), 135–139. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.2019.1605232>
- Eby, J. (1998). *Why service-learning is bad*. Duke Service-Learning. <https://servicelearning.duke.edu/sites/servicelearning.duke.edu/files/documents/whyslbad.original.pdf>
- Evans, H. K. (Ed.). (2018). *Community engagement best practices across the disciplines*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Freeman, A. (2020). The winding path to degree: Obstacles to higher education for low-income single mothers. *Journal of Women and Gender in Higher Education*, 13(3), 268–287. <https://doi.org/10.1080/26379112.2020.1840384>
- Forste, R., & Jacobsen, W. C. (2013). Divorced mothers and higher education in Utah. *Marriage & Family Review*, 49(4), 330–348. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01494929.2012.762448>
- García-Guevara, A., & Vivoni, F. (2023). The class feels like it should be illegal: Latinx experiences and the promise of anti-racist pedagogies. In C. Santana, R. Risam, A. García-Guevara, J. Krupczynski, C. Lynch, J. Reiff, C. Vincent, & E. Ward (Eds.), *Anti-racist community engagement: Principles and practices*. Campus Compact.
- Gillis, A., & Mac Lellan, M. (2010). Service learning with vulnerable populations: Review of the literature. *International Journal of Nursing Education Scholarship*, 7(1), Article 41. <https://doi.org/10.2202/1548-923X.2041>
- Henry, S. E. (2005). “I can never turn my back on that”: Liminality and the impact of class on service-learning experience. In D. Butin (Ed.), *Service-learning in higher education: Critical issues and directions* (pp. 45–66). Palgrave Macmillan US. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781403981042_3

- Novak, J. M., Markey, V., & Allen, M. (2007). Evaluating cognitive outcomes of service learning in higher education: A meta-analysis. *Communication Research Reports*, 24(2), 149–157. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08824090701304881>
- Núñez M., G., & Gonzalez, A. L. (Eds.). (2018). *Community engagement and high impact practices in higher education*. Kendall Hunt.
- Reddix, R. (2020). A new era for social change and community engagement in higher education. *Journal of Community Engagement and Scholarship*, 12(3), 8–9. <https://doi.org/10.54656/IKTA8275>
- Risch, B. A. (2012). Fostering feminist civic engagement through borderlands theories. *Feminist Teacher*, 22(3), 197–213. <https://doi.org/10.5406/femteacher.22.3.0197>
- United States Census Bureau. (n.d.). *QuickFacts: El Paso city, Texas; El Paso County, Texas*. Retrieved April 1, 2023, from <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/elpasocitytexas,elpasocountytexas/BZA115221>
- University of Texas at El Paso. (n.d.). *UTEP at a glance*. <https://www.utep.edu/initiatives/at-a-glance/>
- Weiner, D. (2015). Across boundaries of privilege: Service-learning for social justice. In V. M. Jagla, A. Furco, & J. R. Strait (Eds.), *Service-learning pedagogy: How does it measure up?* (pp. 323–339). Information Age Publishing.
- Westheimer, J., & Kahne, J. (2004). What kind of citizen? The politics of educating for democracy. *American Educational Research Journal*, 41(2), 237–269. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00028312041002237>
- Wilson, J. C. (2011). Service-learning and the development of empathy in US college students. *Education + Training*, 53(2), 207–217. <https://doi.org/10.1108/00400911111115735>
- Whitfield, T. S., & Ball, T. C. (2022). Assessing tolerance of ambiguity and locus of control in a service-learning course. *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*, 26(3), 21–38. <https://openjournals.libs.uga.edu/jheoe/article/view/2626>
- Xavier, N. A., & Jones, P. A. (2021). Students' perceptions of the barriers to and benefits from service-learning. *Journal of Higher Education Theory and Practice*, 21(8), 195–205. <https://doi.org/10.33423/jhetp.v21i8.4514>