The International Service-Learning Network: A Community of Practice Designed for a Pandemic

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Abstract

The International Service-Learning Network is a group of university teaching faculty and staff in the United States and United Kingdom who formed a community of practice in 2020 around issues of service-learning and community engagement and to provide cross-institutional support during the COVID-19 pandemic. This reflective essay analyzes two sets of reflections written by Network members—the first set written in 2021 and the second set in 2023. The reflections describe many of the disruptions and impacts that affected community engagement for students, teaching staff, and community partners as well as the changes and innovations that emerged from the global crisis in both countries. We analyze these reflections, synthesizing noted observations that broadly affected our institutions, and offer suggestions and guidance for other community-engaged practitioners to consider.

Keywords: service-learning, community engagement, pandemic, students, partners

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I n spring 2020, colleges and universities worldwide were challenged to support campus and community needs in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic (Grenier et al., 2020). These efforts assumed added urgency in summer and fall 2020 as the effects of unrelenting racial injustice came into greater focus alongside the ramifications of the pandemic. These conditions motivated the teacher-scholars of the newly formed International Service-Learning Network (ISLN) to increase the use and recognition of service-learning methods to create additional capacity for the needs of local organizations while benefiting student learning. Through bimonthly online meetings that included academic staff participants from 14 institutions in the United Kingdom and the United States, we learned about our differing institutional, political, and societal contexts for service-learning education. (See Appendix for institutional descriptions of service-learning.) We present here our reflections on the comparative issues and lessons we've attempted to harness to save and advance service-learning education.

The first ISLN meetings convened in fall 2020 and entailed broad discussions as a community of practice. We shared problems and issues we were facing at our institutions due to the pandemic. We explored ways to keep service-learning programs running and enhance offerings to address the unique challenges presented by community and institutional lockdowns, heightened political uncertainty, and social unrest amidst Brexit, the 2020 U.S. elections, and increased focus on racial injustices. In spring 2021, we transitioned to a formal symposium structure, which included presentations of ongoing service-learning projects and programs at our respective institutions and collaborations for research dissemination. As the incorporation of service-learning and community engagement has been increasing globally (Bringle et al., 2011), the symposium format offered a productive platform for ISLN participants to sustain and enhance service-learning programming at member institutions, while also increasing the collective understanding of the challenges, benefits,

and best practices in place in the United States and United Kingdom.

In early 2021, members of the group produced 10 reflective essays that described the impacts, challenges, and innovations occurring on our different campuses that affected students, academic staff, and community partners. The essays helped us better understand what we had in common as we worked to maintain current practices and innovate during this challenging period. In spring 2023, we agreed to write follow-up essays; six were completed, allowing us to further examine the impacts of the changes that were forced upon us and the solutions that were created to address identified challenges. The ISLN reflections included here are collated by broad categories that emerged among them and are synthesized for lessons learned.

Relevant Literature

Service-learning, according to Bringle and Hatcher's (1995) definition, is

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

Service-learning is noted as a high-impact practice (Kuh, 2008) and a form of experiential learning (Kolb, 1984) that endeavors to provide students with authentic learning opportunities where they can implement course-based, disciplinary knowledge through hands-on applied experiences to address community needs (Whitney & Clayton, 2011). Service-learning helps students make meaning by connecting theoretical knowledge to direct experience with community partners (Brown, 2011; Hashemipour, 2006). In service-learning courses, students have opportunities to work in partnership with community members who may be different from themselves in a variety of ways (Clayton & Ash, 2004; Zoltowski et al., 2012). Learning outcomes for students participating in service-learning experiences include increased knowledge of community and civic issues, intercultural awareness and skills development, and a deeper understanding of issues of diversity, equity, privilege, and power (Chittum et al., 2022; Endres & Gould, 2009).

Despite the accolades that service-learning receives for being an identified high-impact practice (Kuh, 2008), it is not without its challenges. Questions persist about barriers that prevent minoritized students from participating in these experiences (Chittum et al., 2022) and how to account for the wide variety in quality and range of practices described as service-learning. Authentic engagement within and with communities requires extensive planning and can be time consuming, logistically demanding, and disruptive for participants (Jacoby, 2015). The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these challenges and manifested new ones (Grenier et al., 2020). Given that the pandemic was broadly disruptive for higher education institutions (UNESCO, 2024), service-learning offices, programs, faculty, staff, students, and community partners were also relatedly affected. In many cases, service-learning courses and programs were paused or halted altogether, partnerships were impacted, and participants in university–community relationships were anxious to engage. At the same time, innovative thinking led to numerous creative interventions and approaches to maintaining connections between the university and community (Gresh et al., 2021; Nayagam et al., 2021).

Due to social distancing requirements, digitally mediated approaches to service-learning often became necessary. The provision of service-learning via alternative methods such as online meeting platforms has been occurring for some time (Jacoby, 2015), but a full comparison of virtual versus in-person approaches is needed (Lin & Shek, 2021). Although shifting to virtual service provision presented many challenges to faculty, students, and community partners, this pivot provided benefits, as service-learning participants at all levels have had the opportunity to learn new ways of interacting (Tian & Noel, 2020; Reif-Stice & Smith-Frigerio, 2021). Furthermore, regardless of new delivery modalities, the impacts of service-learning for university students and their community partners remain significant and "can help students practice clinical skills, develop cultural humility and cross-cultural knowledge, gain an understanding of social inequities and health care disparities, and build positive relationships with their community" (Veyvoda & Van Cleave, 2020, p. 1542).

2021 Reflections

Managing Courses and Partnerships

A consistent theme across many of the 2021 essays centered on which parts of service-learning education we should strive to save and which parts would need to be put "on hold." Individually and as a community of practice, we explored various conceptions and dimensions of service-learning and how differences in basic terminology, structure, and administration coexisted with other challenges at our institutions (Minnesota Campus Compact, 2018). In the United Kingdom there is little recognition of the term "service-learning." The reflections of several ISLN members revealed practices in the U.K. similar to service-learning, but described using other terms. Many U.K. faculty members are more comfortable with the terms "community-based learning" and "community-engaged learning," leading to the question of whether a high number of teaching faculty in the U.K. have been involved with service-learning as a practice for some time but were simply unaware of specific terminology to classify their courses and other experiences as such.

De Montfort University (DMU), located in Leicester, England, and a long-standing civic anchor for the city, adopted an explicit focus on service-learning as a way to create additional capacity for the needs of local organizations while benefiting students and their learning experiences during the pandemic. In the United States, North Carolina's Elon University formalizes service-learning courses through an application process and the requirement for a minimum of 40 hours per semester of student service. During the pandemic, a proposal was made to officially recognize a wider range of pedagogic approaches to service-learning. Students enrolled in courses partnered with for-profit local businesses were historically not eligible for service-learning designation, which often excluded students in the university's schools of business and communications. Another challenge to understanding and carrying out service-learning activities was faced by Merrimack College, in North Andover, Massachusetts, which follows the Carnegie Classification Framework for community engagement (Carnegie Classification, n.d.), defined as "collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity." The college's relationships with community partners were tested early in the pandemic, but many survived. An unlikely benefit may have been the strengthening of the institution's understanding of partnership and reciprocity. In the spring 2020 semester, many Merrimack service-learning classes pivoted to substitute or alternative experiences so students could finish coursework without completing the experiential activity in person. At the same time, the college worked to redesign service-learning opportunities through direct collaboration with partner agencies. The process helped Merrimack learn that digitally mediated, online mechanisms can work and be beneficial but can also be more time intensive and burdensome for all involved. Nottingham Trent University (NTU) is located in the economically deprived city of Nottingham, England (Nottingham City Council, 2019). The university's Community Engagement and Volunteering (CE&V) team led efforts to reassess its work with voluntary sector partners (Clayton et al., 2010) and its approach to building relationships with local residents (Bringle et al., 2009) when deciding to transition service-learning modules to online modalities. Although NTU successfully transitioned many service-learning modules to online delivery for students working with several organizations, some were ultimately canceled by community partners because of the challenges and complexities presented.

Teaching and Program Innovations

Multiple reflections share how the pandemic delivered new challenges to service-learning practices as experienced by institutions in the United Kingdom and United States. A common impact was the need to fundamentally alter the delivery of university-to-community activities, including service-learning, for reasons including compliance with national, state, and institutional restrictions and to ensure the safety of staff, students, and members of the public. Traditional methods of teaching service-learning courses were pivoted to online modalities while simultaneously attempting to maintain long-standing relationships with external stakeholders, many of whom also faced significant impacts to their own operations. Questions arose for U.S. and U.K. institutions: What new protocols and procedures would need to be adopted? If the preferred direct interaction was not possible,

what approaches might work to continue the necessary interactions for informing learning and maintaining community impact? How to prevent instructors from abandoning service-learning practices in the short term, but perhaps for even longer?

The need to transition teaching approaches so radically—and abruptly—presented opportunities and challenges. For example, the reflections from NTU suggest that the situation presented chances to innovate on current methods: Partners didn't express much concern when service projects were moved online. However, partners were concerned about students' abilities to immediately grasp the current crisis and additional underlying contexts and then move with speed and competence on specific projects. Like NTU, many other ISLN institutions transitioned to online service-learning as a solution to the challenges presented by social distancing requirements. For example, the University of Wisconsin–Superior (UWS), in Superior, Wisconsin, acknowledged a complete move to virtual service-learning. Students studying Multicultural Education completed 20 hours of in-person service with community agencies. During the pandemic, this requirement changed to participation in a virtual cultural exchange program that paired UWS students with international students to learn about each other's cultures, practice English language skills, and develop academic friendships. In the U.K., NTU's Criminology program's compulsory service-learning module moved online. Teaching staff developed virtual community-engaged projects through their contacts and drew heavily on existing service-learning literature that focused on the need for "authentic relationships" (Mitchell, 2008) and "transformational partnerships" (Clayton et al., 2010). Using characteristics of successful faculty–student partnerships from Bovill and Bulley's (2011) adaptation of Arnstein's (1969) "ladder of citizen participation," NTU developed its own "matrix of participation" to explore levels of student participation in curriculum design. By inviting students as partners in the redesign process, NTU was able to demonstrate that their values hold true for service-learning experiences even when the format and modality shift.

Students' Experiences

In addition to innovations that saw many institutions transition in-person service-learning activities to online formats, several developments that specifically focused on students and their experiences with service stand out. For example, before the pandemic, University College London (UCL) brought together students, instructors, and community partners to create curriculum for its Community Engaged Learning Service (CELS) project, which mobilizes research to develop community-engaged programs. CELS was adapted during the pandemic to mitigate the impact of social distancing, which resulted in the development of a toolkit for shifting projects online. As stated above, NTU similarly used its "matrix of participation" tool (Bovill & Bulley, 2011) to involve students in curriculum design. Notable improvements resulting from the curriculum codesign process include minimization of logistical issues, ease of student and partner meetings and presentations, and the creation of digital spaces for collaboration and file sharing for students, instructors, and community partners.

Other partnership programs were threatened or constrained by the pandemic, including the long-standing Model United Nations program partnership between Maryland's Towson University (TU) and area public high schools. This 18-year partnership continued during the pandemic through the implementation of online orientation sessions for high school student participants, digital voting processes and assessment data collection, and online inclusion of Model U.N. alumni from around the world who otherwise might not have participated. Activating these alumni increased mentoring opportunities and created a new stream of alumni financial support for the program.

Development and Support

The pivot to online teaching and efforts to engage and support staff to continue the provision of service-learning activities in the face of the pandemic led to significant and demonstrable solutions, including the development of novel online assignments, student project cocreation, and the unlocking of campus-specific activities by promoting online activities to wider communities. Elon University modified an existing in-person "lunch and learn" speaker series to Zoom and made it available to participants beyond the campus in an effort to more successfully bridge communities. The net effect was a sizable increase in attendance of Elon participants and also new external audiences, demonstrably improving equity of participation. Historically, Elon

has provided a year-long, cohorted scholars program to initiate participating faculty members into community engagement practices. During 2020–2021, the university adopted two online communities of practice (Lee & Choy, 2020) as an alternative method of faculty development during the pandemic. DMU similarly adopted the community of practice model to train new staff in service-learning pedagogy. DMU also worked collaboratively with other U.K. institutions, such as NTU, UCL, and King's College London, to create a practitioner network for discussing best practices about service-learning, nationally. TU's Model United Nations program developed online training programs for student and alumni volunteers, which expanded the inclusion of participants and better facilitated the sharing of important information between volunteers and conference organizers.

Communities at Risk

The pandemic highlighted inequalities and injustices in higher education and beyond. To serve the most vulnerable local populations, some ISLN member institutions adapted existing programs; others created new programs. Virginia's James Madison University (JMU) launched new campus programs to provide services to unhoused individuals when health and safety concerns led to the shutdown of regional shelters, filling a gap in service that had previously been offered by several faith-based organizations. JMU also collaborated with the local school district, university educators, and a nonprofit agency to create a free educational "pod" for 20 local elementary grade students needing daytime supervision. The program was staffed by volunteers using COVID-safe protocols and provided free meals and transportation, plus support for online learning.

Refugee populations suffered similar challenges during the pandemic. Guilford College in Greensboro, North Carolina, worked to address refugee needs by partnering with its Every Campus A Refuge (ECAR; https://everycampusarefuge.net) program, which provides refugee families with housing and use of on-campus facilities. ECAR's impact was further strengthened when Guilford created a curricular component attached to two academic minors that require students to study global and local issues around forced migration and refugee resettlement. The

curriculum of both minors flips the traditional service-learning model where students are trained in authentic scenarios off-site by bringing the community and service-learning on-site. NTU reaffirmed critical approaches to service-learning in its sociology programs by requiring students to do, not just study, public sociology, for which "service-learning is the prototype" (Burawoy & Van Antwerpen, 2004, p. 9). For example, NTU sociology students worked with a local refugee charity to develop service user participation in organizational governance. Before the pandemic, students engaged with the charity by listening to members' views and participating broadly in the wider organization. This effort became more ambitious and focused during the pandemic. As partners met the NTU students and discussions shifted to participatory governance, the service became more complex, driven by a broad commitment to deeper and more genuine participation across the organization.

Strategic Planning

The onset of COVID-19 and the changes that were brought in at pace across the higher education sector encouraged some institutions to become more agile and develop strategic approaches to community engagement. DMU strategized how to support the city's pandemic recovery by offering extra capacity to local organizations through embedded service-learning. DMU's public engagement team was able to match the city's needs during the pandemic with courses that provided opportunities for students to volunteer, conduct research, or mobilize knowledge in support of local organizations. DMU also partnered with other U.K. universities and the European Association of Service-Learning in Higher Education (EASLHE, https://www.easlhe.eu) to apply the United Nations 17 Sustainable Development Goals (Division for Sustainable Development Goals, n.d.) as a framework for impact, recovery, and postpandemic service-learning provision. With a similar aim at meaningful community partnerships, Elon University worked with study abroad sites to create international service-learning (Hartman & Kiely, 2014; Motley & Sturgill, 2013; Warner & Esposito, 2008) as well as local service-learning opportunities that meet intercultural and global learning goals that are normally reached through study abroad (Hartman et al., 2020).

2023 Reflections

In 2023, ISLN members reflected again about the effects of the pandemic on the service-learning experiences of their faculty, staff, students, and community partners. Although the 2022–2023 academic year began a return to routine functioning of courses, programs, and other learning experiences, the continuing effects of the pandemic were clearly still evident.

Return to Normal?

The 2022–2023 academic year saw, perhaps, the most significant shift toward returning to normal programming across the higher education landscape, including many aspects directly related to community engagement. Many of the adaptations that ISLN member institutions had implemented to address COVID-19 challenges for community engagement activities were discontinued or reduced. However, the effects of the pandemic on students, instructional staff, and community partners continued to be evident. Several ISLN members described a new lag in student involvement with community engagement and name the overarching effects of the pandemic as the primary cause.

In spring 2020, the University of the Pacific, in Stockton, California, was selected to offer a state-based Americorps service-learning program (Americorps, n.d.). The program was structured for partnership with local organizations and was designed to accommodate 10 student Civic Action Fellows each year. Each Fellow would provide 500 hours of service to one of the organizations to earn full-time credit and a living allowance. Classes moved online as the pandemic struck, and yet the program was still able to recruit an inaugural cohort of Fellows who met their service goals online. By the second year of the program, students struggled to fulfill the required 500 service hours, and mental health challenges emerged for many. As a result, many students shifted from full-time to part-time Fellows, requiring the university to extend the allotted time for fulfilling service hours and to increase the overall number of students in the program. The program's faculty director also observed complications with partner organizations, as many students and nonprofit staff were drained by significant burdens from the pandemic. However, the university is now more aware of mental health struggles experienced by community engagement participants and has increased related support services. Similarly, NTU noted how fatigue affected students, instructional staff, and community partners; it slowed the return to normal functioning of community engagement activities, an effect that was complicated by some partner organizations having closed, reduced services, or severed ties to the university during the pandemic. At the same time, NTU noted a rise in new organizations that address specific issues related to the pandemic, bringing the potential for new service-learning partnership opportunities to the university.

Emergent Practices

Across higher education, the flexibility of holding meetings online has provided a measure of convenience and access that many institutions will be reluctant to relinquish. For example, TU's Model United Nations program continues to benefit from online training sessions where university students coach high school students about the program, thus alleviating scheduling and transportation concerns and allowing program alumni to participate as volunteers. TU is likely to maintain their use of online meetings, as this strategy has improved the access, reach, and impact of the program. Elon has decided to continue providing "lunch and learn" community engagement speaker meetings online, which has broadened the opportunity for attendance and participation to local community members. NTU is retaining pandemic-based solutions for service-learning practices, including the provision of online spaces for partner collaborations alongside the option to conduct activities in person. NTU students have commented on a change in their mental health, noting specifically that being able to participate in service-learning projects has created a greater sense of agency in their lives, something that was seriously eroded due to the pandemic. Similarly, many of NTU's community partners have welcomed the resources provided by students during the pandemic, and also the solidarity of purpose with the university.

Postpandemic, Elon noted a slowing of new service-learning course applications, which created concern about the sustainability of community engagement practices. The university therefore considered the range of professional developmental opportunities for service-learning faculty members and identified a need to better support mid- and advanced-level faculty members, not just beginner level. For example, Elon's

long-standing Service-Learning Scholars program, designed for faculty new to community engagement, was reinstated, but the university elected to continue with the community of practice model as an additional avenue for experienced service-learning faculty development.

Developing Strategies for Success

Developing and reinforcing bonds with service-learning community partners was a significant strategy during and after the pandemic at Hood College in Frederick, Maryland. The institution quickly defined a clear need to maintain and cultivate contacts with community partners for internships that are required for students enrolled in the college's nonprofit and civic engagement minor and the service-learning course required in the university's Honors Program. Subsequently, this recognition motivated the faculty director to join the planning committee for the off-campus Frederick Nonprofit Summit and to use the planning process to bring guest speakers to courses while placing students in nonprofit internships.

Finding ways to help students feel engaged and motivated after the pandemic has been an ongoing challenge, as noted by many ISLN members. JMU recently adopted the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (Division for Sustainable Development Goals, n.d.) as a structure for all community-based projects to motivate students feeling overwhelmed, hesitant, or otherwise affected by the pandemic to return to service-learning and to delineate a more deliberate connection from local projects to larger, global concerns. JMU notes that when students feel like they are part of something larger than themselves, it counters their sense that little can be done to change the seemingly intractable negative course of the planet.

NTU has been strategic about what it carries forward from pandemic-based solutions to current service-learning practices. In maintaining some of these practices, NTU adopted a blended approach, which involves keeping the use of online communication tools. For all community-engaged projects, students now set up a digital space they can use for online communication with partners and for document storage, which is accessible to all parties in the partnership.

Discussion and Recommendations

The return to prepandemic levels of functioning for ISLN member institutions is an ongoing effort. However, ISLN institutions note significant and potentially lasting adjustments to their service-learning courses, community engagement programs, and community partnerships. Three years of living in a continual pandemic-induced crisis had detrimental effects on all involved; however, positive outcomes have been noted, ones born of adaptation and change. In the midst of continued social, political, and economic uncertainty, widespread fatigue, and ongoing public health concerns, ISLN member campuses have innovated new approaches to support service-learning provision, sustain existing programs that engage communities most in need, and address student concerns and conditions related to community engagement.

Best Practices for Supporting Service-Learning

Even prior to the pandemic, supporting service-learning courses and other community-engaged programs could be challenging. On many campuses, the return to offering service-learning courses has been slow due to a loss of capable and interested instructors, students, or community partners, as well as a shifting set of regulations for how this work can be conducted. However, the pandemic provided an opportunity for all involved to explore ways this work can be performed remotely using digitally mediated platforms. We suggest that institutions consider developing protocols for how and when service-learning can be shifted online, including what criteria would dictate doing so. In addition to being prepared for a possible future pandemic or other crisis, institutions should work to establish best practices for online service-learning provision, as these alternative approaches may benefit the situational needs of a faculty member, student, or community partner.

At many institutions, digital communication platforms also benefited non-course-related community engagement experiences and programs. Digital technologies clearly aided the Model United Nations partnership between TU and the Baltimore County Public School System, which emphasizes equity of access. In contrast to most Model U.N. con-

ferences of its size, TU made attendance free for high school and college participants and then adapted to the pandemic's constraints by coordinating preconference college-student-led training sessions for high school participants by using virtual meeting platforms. The shift to digital tools also allowed for increased engagement of former conference participants, helping to build active support networks for current participants and increase the fund-raising goals of the annual event.

The pause in many of the routine higher education community engagement functions due to the pandemic allowed time and space for those involved to pause and reflect. For example, at Elon University, the slowdown provided time for deep conversations about language and terms, ultimately leading the university to discontinue use of the term "service-learning" in favor of "community-based learning." The events of the pandemic, combined with national and international social upheaval, contributed to this decision, one predicated on a desire to remove the word "service" from the defining term used for learning experiences that often involve marginalized populations. The additional decision to begin including local for-profit businesses as viable community partners was also an outcome of this reflection and allowed the university to address reports from the area health department, which stated economic development as one of the region's top three most pressing community needs. Another example is the decision that several institutions, including NTU, Merrimack, and UCL, made to provide space for students and community partners to collaborate with teaching faculty to determine how service-learning experiences are designed and provided.

Addressing and Managing Student Needs

The impacts of pandemic exhaustion remain with us, but we believe they are lessening and will continue to do so. However, the continued effects have crystalized a need to more clearly define reasons for student engagement in service-learning. Students now want to fully understand what's at stake in terms of outcomes, including how community engagement work can impact systems of oppression or benefit their career preparation. Strategies adopted by institutions like De Montfort University and James Madison University to center the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (Division for Sustainable Development Goals, n.d.)

as foundations for community engagement activities are clear attempts at doing just that. In fact, their work motivated the ISLN group to use the SDG framework to launch an online student community of practice as a joint project during 2022–2023. This three-part program included a guest speaker from the United Nations, introductions to service-learning concepts in the U.S. and U.K., critical deliberation about the SDGs, and student-led, cross-institutional collaborative projects designed to increase understanding of the global–local connections of the SDGs. We encourage institutions to explore similar ways of connecting service-learning experiences to broader issues and initiatives at the local, national, and international level. This approach may help students working with area community partners to connect their localized efforts to broader national and international concerns in ways that are motivating and capable of enhancing their sense of civic responsibility.

Intentionally connecting the high-impact practices (Kuh, 2008) of global engagement with service-learning may offer another approach to motivate students to reinvest in community engagement experiences. Students can benefit from intercultural learning experiences by adding a service-learning component to existing study abroad or study away programs. Providing students with the opportunity to work collaboratively in the authentic context of community partners' lived experiences may reinvigorate their appetite for community engagement. Similarly, with careful planning and partner selection, local service-learning projects can connect students with meaningful intercultural learning experiences. During the pandemic, when plane travel wasn't an option, Elon University worked to assign students enrolled in an international service-learning course to projects in the local community that met the same intercultural and global learning objectives.

Although the rise in mental health challenges for college students was already occurring (Salimi et al., 2023), the pandemic clearly exacerbated the situation in numerous ways. Diminished access to mental health services (particularly face-to-face), transitions to online learning environments (often away from campus), increased needs to care for family members, and struggles to maintain social connectedness all contributed to heightened feelings of anxiety and depression (Lee et al., 2021; Yarrington et al.,

2021). This effect has been especially pronounced among women (Prowse et al., 2021) and students of color (Saltzman et al., 2021), two demographic groups that comprise a large percentage of community engagement participants. However, opportunities to engage with service-learning appear to be acting as an antidote to some of these effects. At NTU, sociology students report that postpandemic participation in projects that support local community governance has been effective at increasing their general motivation, developing a heightened sense of civic agency, and creating a renewed investment in their work.

Sustaining Critical Community Engagement

As the immediate effects of the pandemic fade, there is the potential that the innovative and highly valued aid that was provided to communities in critical need of support could be reduced or eliminated. However, the Every Campus A Refuge program at Guilford College can serve as a model for others to emulate. ECAR was in place before the pandemic and has continued providing assistance to refugee families to this day. Acknowledging that not every institution has the same level of deep, holistic commitment to service as Guilford College, an institution founded by the Quakers in 1837 (Guilford College, n.d.), we suggest that universities use the pandemic to take stock of what resources can be regularly provided to members of communities that are most at risk at any given time or circumstance. For example, institutions might consider supporting food reallocation programs that transfer unused meals and other food products to communities in need, thereby addressing a defined community need while simultaneously reducing waste and environmental impact. The story of James Madison University's creative support of at-risk area elementary students during the pandemic is an excellent demonstration of how permanent university resources, both material and human, can be temporarily reallocated when most needed. Recognizing the possibility of future threat to higher education institutions, universities might consider in advance what resources they have at their disposal to provide during a crisis, bearing in mind that the community most in need could potentially be portions of their own student body. Furthermore,

finding ways to leverage academic courses, projects, or research to study the benefits of institutions acting as dependable community support anchors may offer additional incentives for institutions to provide this level of community assistance.

Institutions might also consider finding ways to involve student leaders in participatory governance conversations with partner organizations or civic agencies. As institutions like Nottingham Trent University have learned during the pandemic, giving students a measure of agency during discussions about difficulties faced by local communities has the potential to empower them to take an increased level of ownership over these challenges.

Takeaway Considerations

Based on our analysis of the 2021 and 2023 reflections, we offer the following summarized list of recommendations for postpandemic service-learning provision in higher education contexts:

- Managing courses and partnerships:
  - Take time to clearly define service-learning practices during both normal and crisis periods, and for when provision is in-person versus through online modalities.
  - Recognize how time intensive, burdensome, and stressful it is for teaching faculty, as well as community partners, to have to pivot and facilitate learning opportunities in the context of crisis and rapid change.
- Teaching innovations:
  - Plan for how to maintain partnerships in-person during crises and what to do if projects have to transition online.
  - Plan for potential impacts on teaching staff, students, and community partners during a crisis.
- Students' experiences:
  - Plan for how to maintain and facilitate continued student involvement in service-learning activities during a crisis.

- Plan for online training and partnership collaboration activities, and consider virtual inclusion of program alumni as mentors.

- Program and professional development:

  - Consider collaborating with students and community partners in course or program development discussions.

  - Consider forming communities of practice (COP) for service-learning practitioner development.

- Communities at risk:

  - During a crisis, consider creative ways to support at-risk K-12 and refugee student needs.

  - Consider involving student leaders in participatory governance conversations with partner organizations or civic agencies

- Strategic planning:

  - Consider embedding service-learning directly within partner organizations to better support their capacity.

  - Use the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals framework to implement service-learning and motivate student involvement.

  - Consider ways to intentionally connect service-learning with study abroad and global education courses and programs.

  - Be intentional about leveraging intercultural and global learning opportunities during local service-learning sites and experiences.

Conclusion

The themes collected here demonstrate that amidst the great challenges that COVID-19 brought to universities, including literally existential threats, the desire to maintain and further develop service-learning programs yielded significant opportunities for growth, innovation, and learning. Many of the changes and adaptations adopted in response to the pandemic have allowed institutions to develop creative new approaches to service-learning provision, thus benefiting student learning goals and enhancing outcomes for community partners. At the same time, many institutions are still struggling to reinvigorate community-engaged learning experiences for their students and to regain the myriad connections and footholds they had in their respective communities.

The ISLN reflective essays addressed the challenges of conducting service-learning throughout a pandemic and beyond, but were anecdotal and reflected the experiences of ISLN members and institutions, solely. There is much more to be said, done, and studied about the effects of the pandemic on higher education's place and role with community engagement. The reflections presented here highlight specific adjustments to service-learning practices that warrant further consideration, such as increasing accessibility through digital platforms, creating communities of support to nurture and motivate faculty and staff to promulgate engagement activities, or increasing awareness about ways that service-learning can address student mental health concerns. Although the pandemic was challenging for all, in many respects we have survived and grown stronger. The words of one ISLN member sum up the many positive observations collectively made through the reflections of our own community of practice: "In the most challenging of times we've seen our students and partners doing outstanding work—amazing to witness!"

Acknowledgments

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Appendix. Institutional Descriptions of Service–Learning and Community Engagement

Elon University

Elon University defines community-based learning as a fundamentally academic endeavor in which engagement in service activities takes place through reciprocal and mutually beneficial partnerships with the greater community designed to advance the public good. It is an experiential education approach involving collaborative relationships, guided by the expertise of professors and community practitioners, to integrate student learning with community needs. Community-based learning partnerships engage students with entities such as nonprofit organizations, schools, government agencies, or locally owned businesses.

Hood College

Hood College defines service-learning as a component of experiential learning. Students provide direct service to community organizations through the college's honors program. The program includes a required credit-bearing course in which students learn about critical service-learning topics and then carry out service projects with external community partner organizations.

Towson University

At Towson University, faculty are mentored in how to develop service-learning classes, including a dedicated fellows program. Courses receive a service-learning designation if they include at least 15 hours of required service activities with an instructor-approved community partner.

Nottingham Trent University

At Nottingham Trent University, the Community Engaged Learning program allows students to apply knowledge from their academic courses to real-life issues. The program offers a hands-on approach to help students develop practical skills and make a positive social impact while supporting the goals of our community partners.

De Montfort University

De Montfort University follows the definition of the European Observatory of Service Learning in Higher Education (2019):

> Service-learning is a pedagogical approach that integrates meaningful community service or engagement into the curriculum and offers students academic credit for the learning that derives from active engagement within the community and work on a real-world problem. Reflection and experiential learning strategies underpin the learning process and the service is linked to the academic discipline. (para. 5)

James Madison University

At James Madison University, the Community Engagement and Volunteer Center is charged with coordinating service-learning experiences. These range from supporting faculty who seek to integrate curricular community engagement, service-learning associated with student organizations, students involved in cocurricular experiences, and nonacademic departmental initiatives. JMU builds collaborative and mutually beneficial relationships with community organizations focused on addressing community concerns and supporting social justice.

University College London

Higher education institutions in the United Kingdom use various pedagogical frameworks to address engagement with community partners in teaching, including service-learning, community-engaged learning, community-based research, participatory action research, and public engagement. University College London uses the term "community-engaged learning" to emphasize the benefits for the community. At UCL, the service provided is direct but non-credit-bearing.

SOAS University of London

SOAS focuses on Africa, Asia, and the Middle East as lenses through which to interrogate planetary questions. SOAS emphasizes the development of international partnerships with universities in the Global South. Social justice and decolonization are central to university–community partnerships. Although some partnership modules involve direct service, they are generally non-credit-bearing and not mandatory.

University of the Pacific

Experiential learning at Pacific is mainly driven by academic units, though there are efforts under way to connect the many projects across the university's three campuses. Pacific is a comprehensive university that offers a variety of service opportunities, including direct and indirect; faculty, institution, and student-led; credit-bearing; and extracurricular. Currently there is no centralized office or department that runs service-related programs or classes.

Merrimack College

Merrimack College embraces civic and community engagement as a transformative partnership aligned with the college's mission to enlighten minds, engage hearts, and empower lives. Rooted in the Catholic faith and Augustinian values of truth-seeking, inquiry, and dialogue, Merrimack fosters mutually beneficial exchanges of knowledge and resources with communities at local, national, and global levels. Through online and in-person community engagement, these partnerships enrich scholarship, research, and creative activity; enhance curriculum, teaching, and learning; prepare educated, engaged citizens; and steward a lifelong commitment to civic responsibility.