

Exploring the Impact of a Community-Engagement Project on Students' Perceptions of Housing Justice and Insecurity and Their Intention for Continued Engagement

Jessica P. Hodge, Bernard Brady, and Teri Mueller Dorn

Abstract

This study employs a critical service-learning framework to examine how participation in a university-led service-learning initiative influences students' understanding of homelessness and housing justice. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach—including focus group discussions and analysis of students' written critical reflections—the research extends existing scholarship by exploring how community-based learning experiences reshape students' perceptions of individuals experiencing homelessness. Additionally, the study explores whether a program designed to foster sustained engagement encourages students' ongoing involvement even after the completion of an academic course, and whether the program deepens their understanding of advocacy and housing justice. Findings indicate that students highly valued their participation, and many expressed intentions to remain involved beyond the course. Students also offered feedback for improving the program to better equip them to be advocates. The study concludes with recommendations for future research to advance similar programs in fostering meaningful outcomes for both students and the local community.

Keywords: critical service-learning, university program, advocacy, homelessness, housing justice



Understanding how service-learning influences student engagement, awareness, and advocacy has become an important area of focus in higher education, especially within the framework of critical service-learning. Existing research highlights its transformative potential in shaping students' views of marginalized communities, promoting civic responsibility, and supporting long-term activism. This study builds upon that foundation by examining how structured, community-based learning experiences influence students' understanding of complex social issues such as homelessness and housing justice, thereby contributing valuable insights to the ongoing discourse.

The American Association of Colleges and Universities lists service-learning as a high-

impact practice within higher education and defines this type of learning as a way to “engage students in field-based applied learning with community partners” (Chittum et al., 2022, p. 4). The benefits and learning gained by students through service-learning have been well documented (Astin et al., 2000; Jacoby, 2015; Lake et al., 2021; Lim, 2018; Mobley, 2007; Solomon & Tan, 2021), and many assert that “service learning has become a standard of higher education” (Davis, 2015, p. 253). Research consistently shows how high-impact learning practices such as service-learning are beneficial for college students, particularly for students from historically underserved communities, as they often do not have the same access to high-impact learning experiences in other contexts (Kuh, 2008).

Service-learning experiences allow students to connect what they are learning in their academic studies to contexts beyond the classroom. These experiences provide an opportunity for students to link theory to practice and become active participants in their academic and professional growth (Davis, 2015; O'Keefe & Feinberg, 2013). Evidence has shown that service-learning increases critical thinking skills, promotes a deeper understanding of course concepts, enhances communication skills, and facilitates interpersonal development and career decision-making (Brand et al., 2019; Drinkard & Tontodonato, 2019). Moreover, Brand et al. (2019) found in their study that the service-learning component also transformed students into community advocates by showing them how they can be change agents within their communities. In fact, as Wade (2000) argued, "Service learning should be about social change, not just filling a gap in services. It should be about questioning the conditions in society that create the need for service in the first place and seeking to alter those conditions" (p. 6).

Going further, Mitchell (2008) advocated for a critical service-learning approach. A critical approach to service-learning requires intentional collaboration between the community partners and the academic community in which power and reciprocity are balanced among all involved. This balanced approach moves students away from *simply serving* communities to instead *working in collaboration with* community partners to dismantle systems of power and the inequalities that create and sustain them. Moreover, the critical service-learning framework requires a "justice-oriented" experience in which the work of service must make a positive impact within the community and the benefits must be truly beneficial for all involved (Shiller, 2022). As Mitchell (2007) explained,

The distinction between service-learning and critical service-learning can be summarized in its attention to social change, its questioning of the distribution of power in society, and its focus on developing authentic relationships between higher education institutions and the community served. (p. 101)

In this study, we build on existing knowledge of critical service-learning in important ways and explore not only how a univer-

sity service-learning program impacts students' understanding of a complex social issue, but also whether participation in the program impacts their understanding of advocacy and their continued engagement after the completion of the course project. First, this study explores how involvement in a university initiative—the Shelter Crew Program—impacts students' knowledge about housing insecurity and housing justice. The study builds on prior literature that has offered insights on how service-learning can change students' perceptions of housing insecurity and homelessness. Hocking and Lawrence (2000) found that students who had volunteered at a homeless shelter were more likely than students who had not volunteered to perceive the issue of homelessness as a serious social problem and less likely to place blame on individuals experiencing homelessness. Additional studies have found similar conclusions (see, e.g., Brown et al., 2006; Buch & Harden, 2011; Gardner & Emory, 2018), suggesting that these types of high-impact experiences are beneficial for reducing students' negative stereotypes about individuals experiencing homelessness and enhancing their understanding of issues related to housing insecurity.

The current study expands previous literature by broadening the reach beyond a specific academic program or discipline in which participating students often have similar academic orientations or backgrounds. For example, studies examining the impact of service-learning experiences often focus on one type of field or discipline (see, e.g., Davis, 2015; Gardner & Emory, 2018; McClam et al., 2008). We acknowledge the value of examining how these experiences impact students in a particular field; however, with this study, we have sought to expand current knowledge by exploring the impacts of a critical service-learning experience within a course involving students from varied academic backgrounds. The course used for the research setting in this study is a general education requirement in the university's core curriculum that is primarily for first-year students; therefore, students enrolled in the course are not yet fully engrossed within one specific major or one academic program. This method casts a wider net, which allows an examination of how involvement with the Shelter Crew Program impacts students with a multitude of academic perspectives.

The study also expands current knowledge by focusing on how a university program that encourages sustainable partnerships impacts students' intentions for continued participation in volunteerism and/or advocacy efforts beyond the course. A best practice of critical service-learning is moving beyond episodic engagement in which a student engages only once or twice with a community partner (Mitchell, 2008); episodic engagement fails to provide the in-depth experience required to thoroughly understand and effectively critique the structural issues creating the social problems that the organization is working to address in the community. Students should learn the importance of sustaining these partnerships and how they can be change agents who work to address issues within their communities; further, participation in such a program should serve as encouragement to continue their efforts even after the semester concludes.

In summary, this study contributes to the growing body of research on critical service-learning by examining not only the immediate educational outcomes of a university-led initiative but also its potential to inspire long-term civic engagement and drive systemic change. Specifically, it deepens our understanding of how participation in the Shelter Crew Program influences students' learning around complex social issues such as homelessness and housing justice, while also exploring how such involvement shapes their intentions for continued advocacy and meaningful community action beyond the classroom.

The Shelter Crew Program

Program Setting and Purpose

The Shelter Crew Program is facilitated through the Center for the Common Good at the University of St. Thomas. The University of St. Thomas is the largest private university in the state of Minnesota, with campuses in both St. Paul and Minneapolis. The university has eight schools and colleges, offering both undergraduate and graduate options; approximately 10,000 undergraduate and graduate students are enrolled each year. As a Catholic university, St. Thomas integrates Catholic teachings and values into its academic and campus life; however, the university welcomes students of all faiths and backgrounds.

The concept of the Center for the Common Good arose from the university's strategic

planning process; the center was created in 2017 to further support volunteerism, academic community-engaged learning, and changemaking initiatives on campus. The center is responsible for connecting students, staff, and faculty to volunteer opportunities within the local community, for fostering collaborative partnerships between faculty and community organizations for academic course projects, and for providing cocurricular programming efforts around various issues such as voter engagement, food justice, and housing insecurity.

To address housing justice within the local community, the University of St. Thomas has a long-standing partnership with Catholic Charities of St. Paul and Minneapolis and engages with the nonprofit organization in a variety of ways; one is through the Shelter Crew Program offered through the Center for the Common Good. The Shelter Crew Program is a cocurricular volunteer and advocacy program that offers opportunities for the university community to collaborate with Catholic Charities with the goal of furthering the organization's mission to serve those most in need and to advocate for housing justice in the community. Shelter Crew participants, in collaboration with Catholic Charities, learn what it means to walk in solidarity with individuals most often marginalized within our society, learn about the various issues related to homelessness, and learn how to engage in advocacy related to housing justice.

The Shelter Crew Program first began in September 2018 to provide structured volunteer opportunities for the university community. Initially, the program was offered only to individuals or groups (e.g., a student club) to engage within the community in a meaningful way and to complete volunteer hours. In 2021, the Shelter Crew Program was also offered to faculty as an option for community-engaging their courses if it was deemed an appropriate supplement to the course curriculum, and by the end of the 2023–2024 academic year, 33 academic courses included the Shelter Crew Program as a component of the course curriculum. Between September 2018 and May 2024, students, faculty, and staff who engaged with the Shelter Crew Program contributed to the university's 14,371 volunteer hours at Catholic Charities; the program has grown dramatically, with 461 students volunteering close to 3,500 hours at Catholic Charities during the 2023–2024 academic year alone.

Program Structure

Through the Shelter Crew Program, individuals regularly volunteer at one of Catholic Charities' service locations. Catholic Charities has over 20 programs with more than 20 sites throughout the Twin Cities Metro area; their programs provide direct service to approximately 23,000 people each year, including children, adults, and families. The organization also maintains an advocacy agenda that focuses on addressing systemic inequities in the local community (further described at <https://cctwincities.org>). Through the Shelter Crew Program, volunteers may assist guests at the start of the day, or in the evening as guests enter the shelter for the night, distributing hygiene kits and other supplies. Volunteers may also engage during meal service—preparing food, serving meals, and assisting with cleanup. Students often volunteer with the Shelter Crew Program as individuals, with a student club, or through a course as a service-learning component. If not participating through a course, students may learn about the program through on-campus recruitment efforts; for example, they may hear about the program during Welcome Days as students arrive on campus, through a Community Partner and Volunteer Fair held at the start of each semester, or through various marketing materials shared on university digital platforms (see Figure 1 for an example).

A faculty member may hear about the Shelter Crew Program through directed communications from the Center for the Common Good, or they may see the same marketing materials on university digital platforms. If a faculty member chooses to incorporate the Shelter Crew Program within a course, the faculty member first registers their course with the Center for the Common Good. Through course registration, the center can track which courses across the university include a service-learning component and can offer support services to the students and faculty members who are engaging with a community partner. Support services generally include transportation assistance to travel to the community site (e.g., mileage or rideshare reimbursements or rental of university car), reimbursements for costs associated with the community-engagement project (e.g., printing costs for a final report), scheduling campus rooms (e.g., if space is needed for an end-of-semester presentation to the community partner), and, where appropriate, a nominal honorarium for the community partner to recognize their time and efforts during the collaboration. These support services are offered to all faculty and students, regardless of the community partner, if the course is registered as a community-engaged course through the Center for the Common Good.

In addition to the aforementioned support

Figure 1. Example of Digital Marketing for the Shelter Crew Program

GET INVOLVED WITH SHELTER CREW!

shelter CREW

Join a crew making and serving meals to residents at Catholic Charities Shelters or building homes at Habitat for Humanity

[HTTPS://LINK.STTHOMAS.EDU/SC](https://link.stthomas.edu/sc)

APPLY TODAY!

services, the Shelter Crew Program offers further value-adds for faculty and students with the goal of offsetting any challenges that may arise as a result of the service-learning project. One such value-add is providing an orientation to the class at the start of the semester; during the orientation, a staff person or student crew leader (a student intern who is employed through the Center for the Common Good to assist with the facilitation of the Shelter Crew Program) introduces Catholic Charities and the organization's mission and work, provides a brief background of homelessness within the local community, discusses the Shelter Crew Program, and assists students with completing forms required by the university before engaging within the community (e.g., a liability and photo release form) and by Catholic Charities (e.g., a volunteer application).

Another value-add for students and faculty is the coordination of scheduling volunteer shifts, particularly for those students who sign up for group volunteer shifts. Once per week, students receive an email including a list of upcoming shifts that they can sign up for; these shifts are typically coordinated by the student crew leaders and offer students

the opportunity to volunteer with their peers (classmates and other students) and be provided with transportation to and from the shelter facility. If students are unable to participate in the group volunteer shifts throughout the semester, they can sign up for shifts through the organization's volunteer portal when it is most convenient for their schedules.

For students who must use their own transportation to travel to and from the shelter facilities, the Shelter Crew Program provides students with mileage reimbursements. Staff communicate with students directly about this process and ensure students receive reimbursements. And finally, another value-add for the faculty member is that the staff provide a midsemester and a final report detailing students' completion of volunteer shifts; these reports enable faculty to keep track of which students may not have completed the volunteer shifts, which is particularly important information if the service-learning component is part of the final course assessment.

Table 1 provides an overview of the Shelter Crew Program structure and general timeline of activities during a regular semester.

Table 1. Shelter Crew Program Structure and Timeline During a Semester

Before semester begins	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Faculty member submits a registration form to the Center for the Common Good documenting involvement with the Shelter Crew Program for the upcoming semester.
Beginning of semester (typically within first 2 weeks of classes)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Staff or student crew leaders provide the Shelter Crew Program orientation to the class. Staff coordinate the completion of required forms and follow up with students through email as needed. Staff ensure that students are registered with the Catholic Charities volunteer portal so they can sign up for shifts if volunteering on their own.
During semester	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Staff and student crew leaders email once per week about upcoming volunteer shifts that are organized as group opportunities. Staff and student crew leaders provide transportation for students to/from shelter sites for group volunteer opportunities. Staff provide a midsemester report to the faculty member detailing students' completed volunteer shifts. Staff inform students and the faculty member about optional housing-justice-related educational/advocacy events on campus and invite students to attend.
Toward end of semester	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Staff follow up with students and the faculty member to ensure that final mileage reimbursement requests are submitted by those who use their own transportation. Staff send an email to students requesting that they complete an end-of-semester survey to gather feedback about the program. Staff provide the faculty member a final report of students' completed volunteer shifts.

Measuring Program Impact

To move beyond anecdotal assumptions of the success of the Shelter Crew Program, the first two authors applied for a small research grant through Uniservitate, an international organization that promotes service-learning experiences at Catholic higher education institutions, to study the impacts of the program in an academic course. Specifically, we hoped to learn whether the Shelter Crew Program impacted students' learning about homelessness and housing justice and whether the program impacted students' continued engagement after the completion of the course. The first two authors applied for and received funding through Uniservitate for this study.

The first two authors are both faculty members at the University of St. Thomas; both regularly incorporate community-engaged learning within their respective courses and are well-versed in the best practices of service-learning pedagogy. One is a faculty member in the Department of Theology and was the instructor of record for the course used for the study. This faculty member has incorporated the Shelter Crew Program within his courses multiple times and has taught community-engaged courses for three decades. The non-instructor of record is a faculty member in the Department of Justice and Society Studies; this faculty member included the Shelter Crew Program in one of her past courses and served as the inaugural faculty director of the Center for the Common Good for 5 years, though she was no longer in the role at the time of this study.

The project was approved by the university's Institutional Review Board. The target population for the study were students at the University of St. Thomas who engaged with the Shelter Crew Program, and the research setting was an academic course that elected to incorporate the Shelter Crew Program within the course curriculum. The instructor deemed the Shelter Crew Program appropriate for the course, as the curriculum included a unit on theories of human dignity and human rights. Furthermore, this course was appropriate for the study because it typically fulfills a university core curriculum requirement, thus attracting enrollees from a variety of academic backgrounds, rather than from one major or disciplinary lens. The sample consisted of students enrolled in the lower level theology course during the Spring 2024 semester. A total

of 19 students were included within the sample; all students were first-year students who had not previously engaged with the Shelter Crew Program.

Students were informed of the study procedure at the start of the semester to ensure full consent prior to participation in the research project. All students participating in the study were required to sign an informed consent form. The non-instructor of record facilitated the consent process to ensure students did not feel pressure to participate in the study (the course instructor was not present during this process). Regardless of involvement in the study, students were required to participate in the Shelter Crew Program throughout the entire semester as part of the course, and each student was required to volunteer with Catholic Charities a minimum of three times during the semester.

To explore the impact of the Shelter Crew Program, the study sought to answer the following six research questions:

1. How might students perceive the Shelter Crew Program—a housing justice and housing insecurity program at the University of St. Thomas in collaboration with Catholic Charities?
2. How might students perceive participating in the Shelter Crew Program as a required community-engagement project within their course?
3. How might participating in the Shelter Crew Program impact students' conceptualization of housing justice in their local community?
4. How might participating in the Shelter Crew Program impact students' perceptions of individuals experiencing homelessness?
5. How might involvement in the Shelter Crew Program impact their intention to continue volunteering beyond the course project?
6. How might involvement in the Shelter Crew Program impact their intention to engage in advocacy efforts related to housing justice beyond the course project?

Data Sources

Data for this study were obtained through a mixed-methods approach using two techniques: students' written reflections and

students' participation in a focus group (see Table 2 for an overview of the assessment methods). Utilizing two different techniques allowed for a comparison of data to explore whether there were any noticeable discrepancies between what was shared in the individual written reflections and what was shared in the focus group discussion. Moreover, this approach allowed for individualized responses to key questions that may not have been obtained through the focus group approach and provided students an opportunity to offer more personal reflections than they may have offered during the group setting.

A best practice of the critical service-learning pedagogy is incorporating reflective practice within the community-engaged course. Critical reflection encourages students to draw connections between the community experience and the course content, provides an opportunity to challenge students' preconceived notions and negative stereotypes, and helps students make meaning of their experiences (Mitchell, 2007). Before engaging on site, students wrote a preengagement reflection on their understanding of homelessness and housing justice. Toward the end of the semester, students wrote a postengagement reflection about their experience and the knowledge gained from the semester. The written reflections were submitted to the instructor of the course as part of the course requirements; afterward, the reflections were dei-

identified by the noninstructor prior to data analysis. Nineteen students completed the preengagement written reflection, and 18 students completed the postengagement written reflection.

After completing the three volunteer shifts, students participated in a focus group where they reflected on their expectations in relation to their experiences. The noninstructor of the course conducted the focus group to ensure confidentiality of the students' responses during the discussion. Students were randomly separated by the noninstructor into two groups to allow for smaller group discussions, and a semistructured discussion guide was used to facilitate the conversation to provide consistency across the two groups. Students received a gift card for the campus bookstore after participating in the focus group. Seventeen students participated in the focus group discussion (i.e., two students did not show up for the focus group).

Data Analysis

This study utilized qualitative techniques to address the research questions. Qualitative techniques allow for an in-depth exploration of opinions, feelings, and perceptions of the research topic. All textual data derived from the focus group notes and the written reflections were entered into Atlas.ti, a data management program for the organization and analysis of textual data. The

Table 2. Assessment Methods of Student Perceptions and Experiences

Assessment	Purpose	Timing
Preengagement written reflection	The purpose of the preengagement written reflection was to encourage students to individually reflect on what they already know about homelessness and housing justice, and to reflect on how they feel about engaging with the Shelter Crew Program through the course.	Students submitted the preengagement written reflection by the third week of the course, prior to completing the first volunteer shift.
Focus group discussion	The purpose of the focus group discussion was to gain further insights from students about their experiences with the Shelter Crew Program, as focus groups allow students to hear about others' experiences and build on the comments of others.	Students participated in the focus group discussion toward the end of the semester after completion of the required volunteer shifts.
Postengagement written reflection	The purpose of the postengagement written reflection was to encourage students to individually reflect on their volunteer experiences, describing what they saw, how they felt, and what they learned through these experiences.	Students submitted the postengagement written reflection toward the end of the semester after completion of the required volunteer shifts.

data were analyzed using qualitative coding techniques; specifically, the data were coded using a constant comparative analytical technique and involved both deductive and inductive codes. The codes informed general themes, and themes were sought until data saturation was reached.

Findings

The findings are organized into two sections: (1) the preengagement reflections and (2) the postengagement reflections and focus group discussion.

Preengagement: Written Reflection Assignment

In the preengagement written reflection, the majority of students (16 out of 19) stated that they had not previously volunteered at a homeless shelter before their participation in the Shelter Crew Program. Of the three students who had previously volunteered at a homeless shelter, only one student said they had done it more than once, and it was with family because they knew “what it was like to be poor and not have much so [they] tried [their] best to give back to the community that [they] learned to thrive in.”

When prompted to reflect on what they were thinking about and/or how they felt about the upcoming volunteer shifts, many students (10 out of 19) explicitly expressed excitement about the opportunity to engage with the community in this capacity. Others discussed how they were looking forward to providing a service within their community.

“This is a new experience that I am venturing into. I feel a little excited to try out this new opportunity that will help others. I’m excited to gain this new experience as I may like this and want to volunteer at this more often in the future.”

“I am excited about the upcoming shift at Catholic Charities, I know it will be somewhat different than what I am used to but I am interested in the new experience. I know that I will feel good about myself for helping the community after the shift is over. Understanding that at the end of the day I might have impacted somebody’s day for the better is a huge success.”

“I honestly am kind of excited to have the opportunity to work and give to those who are less fortunate because life can be really challenging and we are all in this together so why not show some love and respect to those who deserve it.”

“I think it is an amazing way to connect and appreciate the small things in life, and others realize that you have more than others and to be grateful for what you have in life.”

“I am looking forward to growing stronger relationships with my peers and understanding them better, while also getting to help those in need.”

In the preengagement written reflections, many students (10 out of 19) stated that they had not heard of the term “housing justice” before. Some of the students (seven out of 19) who stated within their preengagement reflection that they had previously heard of the term “housing justice” discussed how they had learned of the term through previous educational experiences, and one student mentioned hearing about the topic through personal experiences.

“I personally have not heard the term housing justice prior to this class, which is quite astonishing to me.”

“I have heard this term before as I am a Political Science major and have heard it come up in a couple of classes before.”

“My journey into getting involved with unhoused people and shelters started within my own life.”

And finally, when students were prompted in the preengagement written reflection to share any questions and/or concerns about the upcoming volunteering experience, six of the 19 students expressed uncertainty about what to expect due to not having been at an emergency housing shelter before and/or because of common (mis)perceptions of individuals experiencing homelessness.

“If I am being truly honest my only concerns going into this is how the homeless might treat us and how the smell is going to be within the place. . . .”

“One concern I have about volunteering at the shelter is safety concerns and its surroundings. Would there be any type of security around the place?”

“My main concern is my safety, both mentally and physically. I have witnessed some people experiencing homelessness act violently and disrespectfully towards others. To some extent, I sympathize with them and justify their reactions with their terribly difficult circumstances. On the other hand though, I cannot seem to fully understand why they would behave this way if they are receiving at least some type of help in regards to their situations.”

With this same prompt, four students reflected early on how they recognized the importance of the upcoming volunteer experience for better understanding their role in addressing housing injustice within their local community and expressed interest in moving beyond a direct service role.

“As I prepare to volunteer at the homeless shelter for the first time, I find myself grappling with a few questions and concerns. I wonder how I can best support and engage with individuals' circumstances in a respectful manner, considering the sensitivity of the topic. What vocabulary should I be using to communicate to those individuals in order to avoid coming off condescending/'pitying' them? Additionally, I am curious about the resources and support systems available to these individuals. I want to understand how I can contribute to ensuring their long-term stability and well-being beyond just providing immediate assistance during my volunteer shift.”

“I am curious about the long-term effectiveness of the services provided by the shelter and how I can contribute to broader systemic changes that address the root causes of homelessness in our community.”

“A question I have for working at a homeless shelter is how will

I know I am making an impact? I want to show that I am there for a good reason, I do not want people to make me feel like or seem like I am there to make myself feel better, I want it to show that I am there for a good reason, and I genuinely want to help make a difference.”

“I don't necessarily have many questions or concerns, I'm more intrigued due to the fact that I've never been fully immersed in this kind of experience. But if I must have a question, I would ask what more could be done to help?”

Postengagement: Written Reflection Assignment and Focus Group Discussion

All 18 students who completed the postengagement written reflection stated that their involvement in the Shelter Crew Program was a valuable component of the course. They cited several reasons for thinking the Shelter Crew Program was a positive experience, reasons ranging from increased knowledge of issues related to homelessness to offering an opportunity for self-reflection and personal growth.

“Participating in the Shelter Crew program has completely changed my perspective on homelessness and the importance of ensuring everyone has a place to call home. Initially, I approached volunteering with uncertainty, unsure of how much of a difference I could make. However, as I continued with the program, my outlook shifted. I became more eager to contribute, not just by providing assistance, but also by actively listening to and learning from the individuals we served. This change in approach also altered my understanding of volunteering itself. Before, I saw it as merely offering help, but now I realize it's about addressing larger issues.”

“The main thing that this experience made me realize is just how grateful I am. Not to sound rude in any way but I see these people and look at people like myself and say at any moment in life this could have been me too.”

“This experience not only deepened my understanding of homelessness but also instilled in me a profound sense of gratitude for the privileges I often take for granted. It reinforced the importance of empathy and compassion.”

“After this program I could not have been steered any closer to solidifying my major in Social Work. It ignited a sentiment to becoming a person who focuses on bettering the lives of those who are oppressed and not receiving the help that they require.”

“Overall, I am grateful that I took part in this program and for the lessons that it has taught me throughout the experience. I plan to carry what I have learned forward and to use it for the common good.”

When prompted within the postengagement written reflection to reflect on how the program impacted their perceptions of individuals experiencing homelessness or what they had learned about homelessness through their involvement in the Shelter Crew Program, six of the 18 students explicitly mentioned how they developed a deeper sense of empathy because of what they had learned through the experience.

“Engaging with the Shelter Crew program significantly impacted how I view individuals experiencing homelessness. At first, I admit I held some stereotypes and misconceptions, thinking homelessness was solely due to personal failures. However, as I interacted directly with program participants, my perspective changed. I began to understand the complexity of their situations, seeing the systemic factors and personal circumstances at play. Each person I met had a unique story, and homelessness was just one part of it. This realization fostered a deeper sense of empathy and challenged me to confront my own biases.”

“Before joining the Shelter Crew program, my perceptions of homelessness were clouded by a plethora of misconceptions and unfounded

fears. In my mind, homeless individuals were not only to be avoided but also regarded with a sense of fear, as if their circumstances somehow rendered them fundamentally different from myself and others. These beliefs were not inherent but rather shaped and reinforced by societal stereotypes that painted a simplistic and often dehumanizing picture of homelessness. Limited interactions with homeless individuals further contributed to the perpetuation of these misconceptions, as I lacked firsthand experience to challenge or contextualize the narratives I had been exposed to. As a result, my understanding of homelessness was rooted more in assumptions and prejudices than in empathy and understanding.”

“To me, my perspective was just the feeling of empathy towards the homeless. The fact that people despite what they are going through still have a strive and willpower to push through is amazing.”

“When approaching my last two shifts, I found myself embracing a newfound sense of empathy and understanding. The initial nerves were replaced with a genuine desire to connect with those in need and contribute in any way possible. Rather than focusing on my own discomfort, I shifted my focus to the needs of others and the opportunity to make a positive difference in their lives. It was a shift in mindset that allowed me to fully immerse myself in the volunteering experience and embrace the challenges and opportunities it presented.”

Many students also reflected on how this experience demonstrated the resilience, kindness, and gratitude among the individuals they encountered through their volunteer shifts.

“Another thing to note is the kindness of a lot of these people despite their situation. Even though they are in a bad spot instead of lashing out on others or being rude, they are thankful for anything they can receive which encourages me to do the same and puts a smile on my face.”

“As we turned into the street where the shelter was located, the sight of numerous homeless individuals, some looking sick and others sleeping on the sidewalk, made me acutely aware of the harsh realities faced by those experiencing homelessness. Yet, amidst the challenges, there was a sense of resilience and community spirit. I participated in tasks like preparing lunch, from cutting onions and potatoes, to serving food, offered a firsthand glimpse into the daily operations of the shelter and the dedication of its volunteers. Despite the hardships they faced, the individuals we served exhibited gratitude and appreciation for a hot meal. This experience not only deepened my understanding of homelessness but also instilled in me a profound sense of gratitude for the privileges I often take for granted. It reinforced the importance of empathy and compassion.”

“Volunteering with the Shelter Crew has been a transformative experience that has made me understand more about homelessness, and the reason why we should advocate for housing justice. Through this experience, I have gained an appreciation for the resilience and strength of individuals experiencing homelessness.”

However, when prompted during the focus group discussions to discuss how involvement in the program specifically impacted their knowledge of housing justice and advocacy, not one of the students perceived the program to have had a direct impact on their understanding of the topic of housing justice nor on what it means to be an advocate within their community. In fact, many students during the focus group discussions expressed interest in having more in-depth learning opportunities to expand their knowledge about issues related to homelessness and to learn how to effectively be an advocate so they could extend their efforts beyond volunteering at the shelter.

“I feel like we volunteered . . . put on our hairnets and served food . . . but me personally, I didn't feel like I learned much . . . didn't learn how to be an advocate.”

“It was very surface-level . . . I wish we had more opportunities for advocacy and to learn what we could do besides serving food or preparing food. . . .”

“I wish it was more informational . . . I feel that if I wasn't asking the right questions, I wouldn't even know why I was doing this. I would've just done my [shift] and left.”

“In [other programs] they will give a presentation or give you materials about what the next steps are or where we go from here, but that's what I don't feel we got. . . .”

Finally, within the postengagement written reflection and during the focus group discussions, most of the students said that they would continue to participate in the Shelter Crew Program, even if it was not a required component of a course. For some, they appreciated how the program made volunteering accessible by providing transportation to and from facilities, and others appreciated how participating in the program offered opportunities to meet students within the university community that they may not have otherwise met. And for others, their involvement with the Shelter Crew Program provided a deeper understanding of the importance of volunteering within their community.

“Looking ahead, I'm committed to continuing my involvement with the Shelter Crew program beyond this course. It's not just about completing a requirement; it's about being part of something meaningful. Volunteering has become a way for me to contribute to positive change in my community. I'm grateful for the opportunity to learn, grow, and make a difference through my involvement with the Shelter Crew program.”

“I viewed volunteering as a way to fulfill a sense of obligation or duty, rather than as an opportunity for personal growth or understanding. However, as I immersed myself in the program and engaged in preparing food in my first shift, my approach and thoughts about volunteering underwent a significant

transformation, I began to recognize the profound impact that my actions could have.”

“Yes, I plan to continue volunteering with the Shelter Crew program after this course. The experience has been incredibly meaningful and rewarding, allowing me to directly contribute to helping people in need within the community. Volunteering with the program has provided me with a platform to make a tangible difference in the lives of individuals experiencing homelessness. The sense of fulfillment and purpose that comes from knowing I am helping to improve someone’s day, even in a small way, is very meaningful to me. I am eager to continue volunteering with the Shelter Crew program after this course, as it aligns with my values and allows me to contribute meaningfully to others.”

“Volunteering is not just about the task that we do; it’s about the relationship we built, the other side of stories that we will hear, and the people. By continuing volunteering, I can contribute to the ongoing efforts in addressing homelessness and hopefully I could help advocate for policies that promote housing equity. Additionally, volunteering offers personal growth opportunities and allows me to stay connected to a cause that will help many lives. Overall, I see it as a meaningful way to enact change and uphold the common good.”

“I plan on continuing to volunteer with the Shelter crew program based on my experience during these 3 shifts. In my opinion it came with a lot of benefits both for the community as well as personal ones. It was truly a learning experience. It taught me about perspective, about how much compassion we are missing as people, about the misunderstandings that create a division in our society, and lastly about how passionate I am about creating a difference in the community.”

The few students who stated either during the focus group discussions or within the

postengagement written reflection that they did not plan to engage with the Shelter Crew Program explained that it was primarily due to limited time or scheduling constraints. Even so, the few students who expressed not having the time to do so mentioned that they might participate again if required by another course or they could find other ways to engage with these issues.

“I don’t plan to continue to volunteer with the Shelter Crew unless I need a place to volunteer. I believe Catholic Charities is a perfect place to build your resume and help your community by making meals and serving them to individuals knowing they have a plate of food to eat. Trust me I love it, but I wouldn’t do it because I don’t have time for it, and scheduling is hard. Transportation could also be a problem. Finally, at the end of the day, I’m a student and education comes first for me.”

“Balancing academic duties, job responsibilities, and personal commitments is a huge issue, leaving me with limited time to volunteer. Though I may not be able to commit to regular volunteering at this time, I am still committed to advocating for housing justice and supporting efforts aimed at addressing homelessness in other ways, such as raising awareness, donating resources, or volunteering on occasion when time allows.”

Overall, the data demonstrated that the students perceived the Shelter Crew Program to be of considerable value, and many planned to continue their involvement in the program even after the completion of the course. Students also indicated areas in which the program could be improved to further enhance their learning about housing injustice and opportunities for advocacy.

Lessons Learned and Next Steps

This study offers meaningful programmatic insights for educators and institutions, demonstrating that service-learning initiatives—especially when integrated into core curriculum requirements—can effectively foster critical thinking, civic responsibility, and a lasting commitment to social justice. More specifically, by involving students in

the complexities of homelessness and housing instability, the study illustrates how critical service-learning opportunities can enhance students' understanding of structural inequality and inspire ongoing student advocacy.

We highlight the three most important lessons learned from this study:

1. students are willing to volunteer within the community and find value in the experience, even if their involvement is due to a requirement embedded within an academic course;
2. students are motivated to continue their volunteering efforts beyond the course project, particularly when provided coordinated opportunities and logistical support (e.g., scheduling and transportation assistance), as is provided through the Shelter Crew Program; and
3. students desire opportunities beyond direct service to further engage with these issues. Students recognize the importance of volunteering at shelters, as these efforts directly support individuals in need; however, they also want opportunities to expand their engagement by learning how to address complex systemic issues through advocacy.

For a program like the Shelter Crew Program to have the most impact on students' continued engagement beyond a course setting, the program must incorporate structured learning opportunities that offer students insights on how to further engage so they see a broader reach than what they can provide through volunteer shifts. Some faculty may build these learning opportunities into the course curriculum without prompting; however, to be most effective and consistent across all program participants, resources and activities beyond the volunteer shifts must also be included within the program's structure.

For example, the Shelter Crew Program could offer materials about homelessness and advocating for housing justice for inclusion within the course syllabi, such as readings, videos, and/or curated presentation slides. These materials could be provided through an online module within a course learning management system (e.g., the Blackboard or Canvas course site) and embedded within registered course sites prior to the start of the semester. The Shelter Crew Program staff or student crew leaders could also fa-

cilitate supplemental in-class discussions about housing justice and advocacy and/or coordinate guest speakers from the community. Although these additional learning opportunities could strengthen the program's impact, faculty might lack the willingness or the capacity to build these additional components into the course schedule. Moreover, program staffing resources to provide such components may not be available.

As with any study, there are limitations that could be addressed in future research to further our understanding of this program or other similar university programs. First, future research would benefit by expanding the study population to include more courses and, consequently, more students. In doing so, the results could be compared to this initial sample to explore whether students' experiences and perceptions show similarities or differences. A key reason this course was selected for the study is that it enrolled first-year students who had not yet officially declared a major and were taking the course to fulfill a university core curriculum requirement, thereby providing a diverse sample of students. Nevertheless, incorporating additional courses from other academic departments or programs—especially those that also fulfill general core requirements—would further enrich our understanding of these types of university initiatives, particularly by including students from a wider range of academic and personal backgrounds.

Second, future research would benefit by utilizing a quasi-experimental approach in which two groups engage with the program—one group receiving intentional learning opportunities about advocacy included within the program curriculum, and a control group that follows the same approach as in the current study (i.e., requires volunteer shifts only with no structured advocacy discussions). Such a study would allow a comparison between the two groups to see if engagement in the structured learning opportunities further impacted the students' perceptions and learning outcomes related to the topic of housing justice and advocacy efforts.

Finally, future research would benefit from incorporating individual interviews, pre- and postsurveys, or even an additional focus group discussion during the semester. Expanding the methodological approach would allow for a more nuanced understanding of students' perspectives,

particularly in exploring potential racial and gender differences. As race and gender were neither explicitly mentioned in students' written reflections nor recorded during focus group discussions, this dimension of analysis remains absent from the current study.

Conclusion

The data from this study support the continued utilization of the Shelter Crew Program and programs like it at the university level. Students perceived the program to be a valuable component of their academic studies; they appreciated having the opportunity to volunteer within their community, and they appreciated the supports the program provided by offering transportation and scheduling assistance. Many students even planned to continue their volunteering efforts with the Shelter Crew Program as the result of this experience.

The data, however, also demonstrate the need for the program's curriculum to incorporate intentional learning opportunities

into students' engagement experiences to expand their understanding of issues involving housing injustice and to promote advocacy efforts beyond the classroom. If the goal of a program like the Shelter Crew Program is to encourage student learning and engagement beyond direct service in the field, then these efforts need to also be included within the program's structure. Put simply, the program's curriculum needs to incorporate structured opportunities that explicitly teach students how to be advocates within their community and encourage these discussions within the course.

As emphasized by the critical service-learning framework and illustrated in this example, programs like the one discussed provide invaluable learning experiences for students. They promote engagement beyond the classroom and support a deeper understanding of complex social issues. These high-impact opportunities encourage students to collaborate with community organizations, offer meaningful service, and create positive change within their communities.



About the Authors

Jessica P. Hodge is an associate professor in the Department of Justice and Society Studies at the University of St. Thomas. Her research focuses on community-engaged learning as a critical pedagogical tool in higher education, and her research within the field of criminal justice focuses on gender and queer issues within the criminal legal system, particularly hate crimes and gender-motivated violence.

Bernard Brady is professor of theology at the University of St. Thomas. He is the author of Essential Catholic Social Thought and Be Good & Do Good, both published by Orbis Books, as well as Christian Love and The Moral Bond of Community, published by Georgetown University Press. He has had articles published in the Journal of Catholic Social Thought, the Journal of Catholic Higher Education, the Journal of Moral Theology, the Journal for Peace and Justice Studies, and The Thomist.

Teri Mueller Dorn is a senior program manager in the Center for the Common Good at the University of St. Thomas, where she works closely with the Tommies Together Volunteer Center and manages the university's housing, food access, and education focused volunteer programs. Mueller Dorn's professional experience focuses on community engagement, volunteer management, and career exploration within the context of higher education.

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