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The Pandemic Pivot: How Teachable Moments in a Service-Learning Course Provided an Opportunity for Student Growth

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ABSTRACT

Research shows students gain considerable experience working with peers and interacting with clients in the real-world settings that service-learning classes provide. But, what happens when well-planned and well-structured service-learning opportunities are interrupted by social distancing, nonprofit closures, and quarantines? Although upfront planning and structure are essential for effective service-learning experiences, all players – students, clients, and instructors – must prepare for the unexpected. This article assesses undergraduate student reflection essays to ascertain their perceptions of the spring 2020 mid-semester shift to online learning for a public relations service-learning course. These results help identify strategies instructors may employ when university teaching requires significant online activity.

Keywords: service learning, experiential learning, reflection

The most-recent Commission on Public Relations Education report (CPRE, 2018) continued the calls from the 1999 and 2006 reports for experiential learning, based in part on research showing potential employers identified the importance of hiring experienced practitioners. The report concluded that "supervised work experience or internship" is one of five core requirements "essential to an undergraduate program in public relations" (p. 60).

While CPRE identified internships as the most-crucial experiential learning opportunities, the report also acknowledges service-learning courses are beneficial for undergraduates "to gain career-related experience and establish professional contacts" (CPRE, 2018, p. 63). Researchers have found that students gain considerable experience working with peers and interacting with clients in the real-world settings that service-learning classes, such as public relations writing and campaigns, can provide (Cox, 2013; Farmer et al., 2016; Gleason & Violette, 2012; Harrison & Bak, 2017; Witmer et al., 2008).

While there is considerable focus on structure and planning service-learning initiatives (e.g., Gleason & Violette, 2012; Lundy, 2008; McCorkindale et al., 2018), Harrison and Bak (2017) also acknowledge the necessity of "having a back-up plan" (p. 84) when assumptions such as easy and ongoing access to client representatives don't play out as expected. Contingency planning may come into play because of day-to-day time management challenges. Nonprofit personnel often have to multitask, and some of these clients "simply ha[ve] too many other obligations to make us [service learning class] high on their priority list, resulting in communication breakdowns between the client and the team" (McCorkindale, et al., 2018, p. 85).

Such is the situation in the COVID-19 era. What happens when well-planned and well-structured service-learning opportunities are interrupted by social distancing, business closures, and quarantines?

The purpose of this research is two-fold: (1) to assess undergraduate students' perceptions of the mid-semester shift to online teaching and learning for a service-learning course in public relations writing, and (2) to help instructors teaching this service-learning course plan for subsequent semesters that may require significant online activity. One way to ascertain the service-learning effectiveness is to review reflection essays written by students and posted on their publicly accessible web portfolios as part of their final project.

Background

Public Relations Writing is an applied writing skills laboratory and service-learning course. Students create major communication tools of the public relations trade for multiple platforms, including news releases for print and broadcast, content for digital media, feature pitches, speeches, fact sheets, media advisories, public service announcements, direct mail campaigns, and more.

This course emphasizes that students learn professional writing skills best by doing, particularly through experiential, hands-on work in partnership with community nonprofit organizations. In addition to applying public relations strategies and proper techniques to written content, they also create personal online portfolios that showcase deliverables they develop for their nonprofit community partners.

Although the spring 2020 semester started off like any other, it quickly presented significant, unexpected challenges for faculty, students, and their community partners. The COVID-19 global pandemic resulted in sudden, stay-at-home orders by state and city governments; these initial announcements coincided with the university's spring break. Everyone, including faculty, students, and community partners, had no choice but to move instruction and service-learning activities online. The closures took place at a critical point in the course, when the momentum of student learning and community engagement typically peaks.

The responses of community partners to these challenges varied widely. Most organizations did their best to survey and address the situation, successfully staying engaged with their student teams and service-learning projects through the end of the semester. In other instances, students were not able to reach their organization supervisor, which created a predicament for those trying to meet course objectives.

Literature Review

Service learning has a good track record as an effective strategy for public relations courses, including writing and campaigns (Cox, 2013; Daugherty, 2003; Farmer et al., 2016; Gleason & Violette, 2012; Harrison & Bak, 2017; Lundy, 2008; Werder & Strand, 2011). These classes provide a win-win: nonprofit organizations gain extra expertise to meet their public relations goals in serving their stakeholders, and students expand their abilities and portfolios through pre-professional, hands-on activities (Harrison & Bak, 2017). In addition to this real-world experience, students are more likely to connect classroom concepts to their on-the-job experiences, and apply critical-thinking and problem-solving proficiencies to develop professional independence and collaborative skills (Daugherty, 2003; Gilchrist, 2007; Wigert, 2011). They also may develop "a greater sense of cross-cultural understanding" and a stronger commitment to civic responsibility and community service ("Universities and colleges," n.d.). Wigert (2011) determined that students "who contributed more hours to their service-learning placement, and wrote more in-depth reflections on their experiences, gained more from the service-learning requirement" (p. 96).

A crucial component of service learning is having students reflect formally on their experiences, which allows them to connect the relevance of their textbook learning with their on-the-job activities (Lahman, 2012; Wigert, 2011). As Dubinsky (2006) explains, "Students need opportunities to respond to their service intellectually and emotionally; to

discuss problems and questions; and to come to understand if and, if so, how their service activities are helping them learn and apply the course goals" (p. 307). Such a formalized process can solidify and heighten learning now (Wigert, 2011), while also preparing students to make better decisions down the road. Introspection also shows how students may develop empathy toward those facing social problems and see the value of their continued community service (Gilchrist, 2007; Lundy, 2008; Rogers, 2001). These insights can help instructors understand their students' experiences (Mahin & Kruggel, 2006) and then incorporate those viewpoints into their subsequent lessons.

There are a number of ways students can reflect, including journaling, end-of-semester papers, and informal, in-class conversations (Lake, 2008; Lundy, 2008; Wigert, 2011). Written reflections, stress Cone and Harris (1996), can help students perfect their ability to think and write critically (see also Lundy, 2008). Lake recommends providing students with clear prompts to guide their responses. These prompts may ask students how their experiences connect to the course material, how they feel about their client's situation, what recommendations they would make to their client, and, when applicable, how the team dynamic progressed (Lundy, 2008). Lahman (2012) added the question, "Of all the contributions you made, which one(s) do you value the most?" (p. 2).

These foundations for service learning and reflections address expectations through the course of a regular semester. But, it is also important to ask how students perceive their service-learning experiences when a crisis – the COVID-19 pandemic –changes how they take classes, interact with their clients, and meet course objectives.

Based on this literature and course background, the following research questions were posed:

RQ 1: How did undergraduate students in public relations classes perceive their service-learning experiences after the shift to online

teaching and learning?

RQ 2: How do their experiences inform service-learning course planning when it requires significant online activity?

Method

A total of 44 reflection essays publicly accessible from students' portfolio websites were analyzed qualitatively. Each essay is 1-2 pages in length, single-spaced, and addresses four prompts (aligning with Lake's (2008) recommendations) that helped students articulate their service-learning experiences in general and in the context of the unprecedented shift to online learning:

• How did this experience contribute to your education and preparation for the real world?

• What was the most-valuable part of your service-learning experience? Most challenging? Least-valuable?

• What recommendations would you make to the client regarding its public relations efforts?

• What recommendations would you make regarding continuing to work with this particular client as a future community partner?

Qualitative content analysis was used to analyze 44 essays that reflected students' perceptions of their service-learning experiences. This "inductive process of searching for concepts, ideas, themes, and categories … help[s] the researcher to organize and interpret data" (Benaquisto, 2008, p. 86) in ways that show how student experiences have similarities and differences.

The process began with open coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), which involved reading and re-reading the reflection essays to identify "categories of meaning" (Court et al., 2018, p. 61), guided by the first research question. In the axial coding step, the categories were revised, refined, and merged; the repetitive process helped show relationships among categories and explain the students' experiences. In vivo coding

– using the students' words and phrases – was employed to ensure the students' meaning was captured. Finally, in selective coding, category linkages were identified, themes were solidified, and the researchers revisited the literature to synthesize the results (Benaquisto, 2008; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Julien, 2008).

Results

The themes emerging from the analysis reflected both positive and negative reactions the students had regarding the COVID-19 shift to online-only class and client interaction. Primarily, positive comments focused on learning how to adapt when plans go awry, optimism, seeing the significance of effective communication, and their ability to make a difference in their community. Negative comments reflected students' frustrations with how the stay-at-home orders disrupted their routines and affected their ability to meet course requirements, paired with a feeling that they were in their client's way. The analysis begins with the two themes reflecting students' perceptions of the downsides of their experience.

"My Real-World Learning Opportunity Was Taken Away from Me"

Students definitely felt a loss when shifting from in-person and onsite classes to distance learning. They shared concerns that COVID-19 "definitely made it more difficult for me to learn" because "the whole dynamic of the course changed" and "we lost our direction." They found it challenging, "to still be as present and attentive to our clients in this chaos. … [O]nce my world and all of my classes flipped upside down, it was hard to be as helpful as I was before we moved to online classes." As a result, they also felt distanced from the nonprofit organizations they served.

One student found the changes untenable. "My real-world learning opportunity was taken away from me," they wrote, adding:

It is crazy how unfair the world can be sometimes. Here college students are trying to learn and prepare for their future and our full

learning experience is stripped right from our hands because of a pandemic that came out of nowhere.

Other students focused on how the changes affected their ability to complete required assignments. "I feel like I lost out a bit in developing my portfolio," one student wrote, "as my writing materials became based purely off of what I could salvage from the cluttered organization website." Another perceived the reduced client interaction as the antithesis of effective public relations:

> Unfortunately, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I was never able to visit the office or foster close relationships with the organization's staff. This inability to foster relationships within [the organization] limited my understanding of the organization as a whole and proved to be the least valuable part of my experience.

"More of a Burden than an Asset"

Most students also recognized the impact that sheltering in place had on their clients, as the nonprofits "had to shift their focus" to "address more-pressing issues." For example, "Once measures were put in place to prevent the spread of COVID-19, the organization also had to cancel its largest fundraising event of the year," one student wrote. Another student explained, "[Our organization] obviously had more on its plate than it would have anticipated when it agreed to take on a team of student volunteers, and we were no longer a top priority."

While they wanted to assist their organizations, some students expressed concern about being "more of a burden than an asset since I could not actively aid in helping or providing solutions to [our client's] main obstacles during this time." Another wrote:

> I began to feel like we were in her way more than anything. It was difficult to balance the feeling of wanting to help and fulfill the requirements for the class without feeling like a bother, especially during the pandemic. We tried to take the stress off of our nonprofit

by coming up with projects to work on by ourselves. This proved to be the most vulnerable part of the experience. I felt that we were out of line and wasting her time. Most of what we suggested she shot down.

Although students shared feelings about negative experiences and perceptions, many also wrote about positive experiences and opportunities to grow professionally. They applied classroom lessons and saw value in learning to adapt in ways that allowed them to make a difference for their clients and community.

"I Had to Learn to Quickly Adapt and Shift My Plans"

Despite the disruption and uncertainty of COVID-19 and the required shift to online, many students found ways to adjust to "the new normal," and "think proactively and use strategic communications to highlight the hope in the current situation." In fact, several saw change as an opportunity for personal growth. One student wrote about the need to adjust expectations:

[I] learn[ed] to adapt to change in times of crisis, not panic and continue to persevere in my responsibilities. Seeing an organization have to adapt to a drastic change like this and keep their publics informed is something I will likely not see again in my lifetime.

Others said they learned how to pivot when the COVID-19 crisis disrupted their routines. When "the events were cancelled and we weren't able to achieve certain PR goals … we did not give up on the client just because the work became more difficult," a student wrote. "I'm proud we persisted and it was a valuable learning experience about how to handle external crises impeding planned PR work with clients."

Motivated to be proactive, some students crafted messages and tactics their clients might employ in response to the crisis. As one student explained:

[Our supervisor] expressed that COVID-19 was negatively affecting [the organization] and may cause them to have to shut down operations. The pandemic's influence on the organization allowed us to come up with ideas for the company, such as making a case analysis to see what other nonprofits are doing during COVID-19 and make recommendations based on that information.

Lack of client direction did not discourage some of these pre-professionals. "[S]ometimes we did not receive direct communication from our client about what services to deliver or what we should be working on," wrote one student, adding:

At those times, I had to think like a professional, and cultivate the right tone and subject matter to give the client work that perhaps they did not know they needed. For example, when writing a news release about the coronavirus, I had to consult past communications from the organization, as well as read the affirmation and mission statement over and over to nail down the tone and the messages that the organization would want to send to its publics.

While some nonprofit supervisors went dark, others took advantage of the teachable moments. A student explained:

The challenges led to some of the most valuable parts of working with [the client]," said a student. "I learned a real-world scenario about how to implement crisis communication. Our team talked with [our supervisor] about the balance of protecting and promoting the [organization] while remaining sensitive to the issues surrounding COVID-19.

Another student wrote, "In the real world, there will always be some level of crisis to manage, and by working with my client I was able to put into practice protecting and promoting the organization."

One supervisor kept the students abreast of the strategies required

to shift gears:

> [Our supervisor] was transparent to our team about [the client's] priorities and capabilities during that time. She informed me that [the organization] not only had to stop offering many of their community programs, but that they were also suffering from staff shortages. Rather than releasing a statement about the postponement of the fundraiser, she emphasized that the focus of the organization should be to provide updates to the community about their available services as well as provide information about available online resources. Learning directly from [our supervisor] about how to adjust to a real-world crisis will definitely help me better evaluate potential difficulties I may face in future workplaces.

"Seeing the Good in Every Situation Is the Key to Success."

It is understandable that students would be discouraged that their service-learning opportunity did not progress as they had hoped. Yet, many students still were willing to "change my perspective," which, "helped me grow in ways that I believe will help me immensely in my career."

> Another student explained:
> I got to experience a logistical nightmare and find ways to communicate on behalf of my client in a way that would reassure and inform the target publics. The coronavirus is impacting [sic] businesses and people all across the world, and no one had time to prepare for it, so having to completely reorganize plans and come up with a new strategy is something I might have to do one day as a PR professional.

They also saw themselves grow personally and professionally: "In the real world of public relations, nothing is ever perfect; nothing goes exactly to plan. This pandemic helped me learn to be more flexible, while also giving me insight into how organizations respond to crises and

communicate with their publics in the face of adversity." The students'
ability to find or create opportunities contributed to their success, as well:

> I was able to learn more and produce more work, and now have a
> strong example of the importance of proactive reputation-building
> PR when trying to advocate for my services to a non-profit
> client.…We were able to create and deliver some good work, if not
> as much as we would've liked, I hope that [the client] will use this
> work in the future, and I know that I will carry my experience with
> this type of crisis management to be more adaptive in nonprofit PR
> work in the future.… Above all of it, I learned the importance of
> turning trouble into opportunities.

The instructor, as the third participant in service learning, also
played an important role in guiding students through the changes. As
one student explained, "While at first this seemed like a major setback as
many of the events and items my team planned to conquer were no longer
feasible, [our instructor] always encouraged us to see each potential threat
as an opportunity."

"I Realized Communication Is More Critical Now Than Ever."

Being in "a tough situation" meant student-client interaction
"dwindled off because of unforeseen circumstances." Yet, many students
"realized communication is more critical now than ever," both with their
clients and the clients' stakeholders.

The students' initial concern was reaching their organization
supervisors, many of whom "were busy with transitioning their practices
to something more adaptable for their clients during quarantine." As one
student wrote, "I learned about the importance of effective communication
as well as how to professionally navigate a frustrating situation without
risking the relationship with my client." Another noted, "Luckily, the staff
was great about communicating over email to ensure that there were no
misunderstandings throughout the semester."

That communication enabled students to modify their plans based on client needs. According to one student:

> During the transition, I had the opportunity to speak with a coordinator at [our organization] for an extensive period of time to create a game plan for the rest of the semester. After the transition, our group and client reestablished a solid communication channel and resumed work.

The result of reestablishing effective communication with supervisors "was an incredibly eye-opening experience" that allowed students to contribute their public relations expertise to support stakeholders. One student wrote:

> The deliverables I created for [our client], specifically the ones pertaining to COVID-19, are extremely important to the organization right now. This experience of COVID-19 will go down in history, and I got to create a news release and fact sheet for an organization that needs those right now. They need to communicate with their publics and I was able to do some of that communicating. That opportunity is unmatched.

Another summed up the experience this way: "I am still grateful for the learning experience and opportunity to adapt to a challenge. [The client] taught me a lot about the importance of strong leadership and consistent communication.

"Truly Make a Difference"

Students often identify that their reason for going into public relations and strategic communication is their ability to make a difference in their communities, country, and world. That theme was evident in these reflection essays, as well. "Fortunately (or unfortunately), the COVID-19 pandemic eventually gave our team a substantial problem/opportunity to work with," wrote one student. "This allowed us to create some potential PR strategies to make sure [the organization] stayed afloat during the

pandemic."

Students also reflected a sense of pride in their hands-on roles in helping nonprofit clients during these difficult times. "After moving past our initial disappointment, my team shifted our outlook and dedicated our work to serving [our clients'] needs in the midst of COVID-19," one student wrote. "We were able to practice our crisis communications skills and I believe, truly make a difference." Another shared appreciation for the experience: "Watching [our organization] transform to online while continuing to support its [clients] is truly inspiring and I am so grateful that I got to be a part of that change."

Overall, the positive comments outweighed the negative ones, showing that they were able to identify the value of their experiences despite the disruption. Any focus on assignments and grades was overshadowed by a sense of optimism and pride in accomplishments for the good of the organization, their stakeholders, and the community.

Discussion

As the results show, most students rose to the occasion, maintaining optimism, a can-do attitude, and a remarkable eagerness to apply course concepts to their clients' needs in real time.   Only a few students went silent for a time, but resurfaced soon after the initial upheaval as they learned to navigate their new circumstances at home and at work. Although some students ended the semester feeling pessimistic that their service-learning experiences didn't go as planned, most regained their bearings and expressed optimism, describing lessons they gleaned from their experiences, many of which reinforce the four service-learning outcomes identified by Witmer et al. (2008).

First, students related instances in which they were able to apply classroom learning to their real-world, service-learning experiences (Witmer et al., 2008). They identified examples of using their knowledge of crisis communication and relationship-building to strategize ways

to help their clients as well as meet course objectives. Their real-world learning occasionally seemed harsh, particularly when their ideas were dismissed or their emails went unanswered. But, they also relayed success stories and feelings that they had contributed to their organization's ability to weather the COVID-19 storm. Second, teamwork was evident as students conversed and collaborated to develop the most-effective ways to engage their clients despite the shutdowns. Although they expressed some disappointment and frustrations in their reflection essays, they also consistently referred to "we" and "our" more than "I" and "me."

Third, not all client interactions went as students had initially planned. Some found it challenging to connect with their nonprofit's leadership, some felt as if they were an extra burden, and others applied a quarantine pivot to help their clients navigate the crisis. This finding supports Harrison and Bak's (2017) contention that contingency planning is vital for students – and practitioners – to employ. While some students relied on instructor guidance or recommendations to jumpstart their efforts, others were proactive, sometimes employing trial-and-error approaches to find what was most effective. There is a tendency to expect upper-level students to take the initiative; however, it is also important to remember the high levels of stress and uncertainty these students experienced, which may have affected the speed with which they regrouped. Fourth, the students' references to doing good for others was particularly noticeable, which aligns with Witmer et al.'s (2008) and Cox's (2013) conclusions that civic responsibility can be nurtured in service-learning. Amid stress and uncertainty, there is a human tendency to focus inward on one's own needs and feelings. Despite their angst, many students connected with their client communities that had lived experiences different from their own, which supports literature about the potential for civic engagement and social responsibility growth (Gilchrist, 2007; Lundy, 2008; Rogers, 2001). These students found their way

outward to appreciate their ability to strengthen their communication skills for the betterment of nonprofit organizations.

Additionally, the reflection essays provided a medium for students to share accomplishments, make recommendations, vent, and show what they learned. There is a degree of "self-discovery" that Blomstrom and Tam (2008) discerned in their assessment of reflection essays. This finding also supports Dubinsky's (2006) contention that intellectual and emotional reflection helps students synthesize their experiences with course material, understand their own strengths and weaknesses, and help them prepare for post-graduation endeavors in public relations (see also Wigert, 2011).

Recommendations

There are three sets of players in the service-learning environment. Thus far, this research focused on two groups – the students, primarily, as well as the clients they served. The third group in this relationship is the instructors, who serve as coaches, leaders, and occasional confessors. As Harrison and Bak (2017) discussed in their article, instructors – like students – must also learn to pivot, whether realizing each semester's clients and students are different or tackling monumental changes during a pandemic quarantine. In their assessment, Harrison and Bak documented how their teaching assumptions sometimes didn't match the realities, which allowed them to do their own reflection on lessons learned and recommendations for subsequent classes. So, too, the now-infamous "pandemic pivot" pushed faculty out of their own comfort zones.

Instructor challenges

Amid the maelstrom of spring semester 2020, faculty – with their own stresses – embarked on a pedagogical journey in uncharted waters. A shift from in-class instruction to an online environment was fraught with technological trip-ups, but also opened time to refocus students on the opportunities ahead. The instructor, who occasionally added cheerleader to her repertoire, combined synchronous and asynchronous tactics to engage

students in real-world discussions that moved from "What about my assignments?" to "What about the client's new communication needs?"

But the challenges didn't end when spring semester books closed. Faculty shifted their focus to an eye on how much of spring's experiential learning approaches would continue into the fall semester. Although some classes began in hybrid or mask-to-mask formats, a shift back to all-online teaching and learning soon followed. Among the practices added or reinforced for fall:

• Start building relationships with students early to establish foundations for their success. The online environment can make it difficult to participate in pre- and post-class exchanges that occur organically in face-to-face classrooms. These one-on-one interactions help the instructor gauge student abilities and challenges early and over the course of the semester.

• Consider how to "manufacture" interactions. For example, an instructor may text students during a synchronous class meeting and invite them to reply with a question or comment. In addition to finding out whether students are engaged in the day's activities, it also opens the door for the instructor to respond individually and continue the conversations started in the first online, face-to-face introductions.

• Regular encouragement can be accomplished through video or digital measures. For example, sending a weekly, detailed group message to students on Sunday afternoons can provide an overview of the coming week, reminders about assignments and deadlines, and generally encourage them and equip them for a better week. Mix it up with written documents and short videos.

• Identify ways to stimulate the natural conversations with students that occur in hallways and classrooms, such as extended office hours and other appointments.

• Encouraging team and client dialogue around relevant topics in

online forums can facilitate participation and learning while also providing ongoing opportunities for student reflection. Although most posts come from an instructor's prompts, over time, students may converse with one another. It is also important for the instructor to provide students with regular feedback to maintain the momentum.

• There's a balancing act for instructors to show compassion for the physical, emotional, and financial struggles students may face while also retaining a sense of discipline.

Also consider the type of exchanges that will benefit the client partners. Typically, instructors meet or call the nonprofit leaders individually before the semester gets underway. With the limits imposed by the pandemic, these interactions typically occur online to solidify the partnerships and undergird the whole service-learning experience for students and instructor. Once student teams are assigned, instructors are less involved in day-to-day communications, which ensures students gain first-hand experience in client relations. However, recognizing that clients may have their own set of pandemic-induced challenges, instructor check-ins may mitigate any problems before they get out of hand.

Faculty at various universities have identified opportunities for service-learning engagement. For example, Susan Haarman (2020), with Loyola University Chicago's Center for Experiential Learning, created a resource for reflecting on civic responsibilities during the pandemic. It includes reflection prompts such as:

• "When you think of the individuals you met at your placement, are there certain factors that put them more at risk to outbreaks like COVID-19? Are there certain factors that uniquely give them an advantage?" (para. 3)

• "How do you understand your obligations and responsibilities to others? Has this experience challenged or confirmed that?" (para. 8)

• "What assumptions or implications does your coursework have about

an individual's role or obligations to their community?" (para. 8)

• "Some students experienced having to be relocated unexpectedly due to larger issues outside of your control. Has this made you more aware of or thinking differently about issues of freedom of mobility?" (para. 5)

Research supports the value of service learning incorporated in public relations classes such writing and campaigns. Although upfront planning and structure are essential for effective experiences, all players – students, clients, and instructors – must prepare for the unexpected. Not all disruptions are at the level of a pandemic, but as these students reflected, practitioners must be prepared to pivot when the need arises.

The analysis of student reflection essays provides valuable insights into how they processed the unprecedented experiences of a pandemic quarantine. The results of the 44 essays cannot be generalized, but do provide key measures to use in subsequent quantitative surveys. Additional insights from the community partners will also contribute to better understanding of how community nonprofit organizations adjust to crises and their perceptions of how service-learning initiatives may help or hinder their progress.

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