Utilizing Disruption as an Opportunity: A Comparative Case Study on the Impact of COVID-19 on Community Engagement Partnership Formation

Becca Berkey and Chelsea Lauder

Abstract

This article focuses on the implications and creative possibility catalyzed by the COVID-19 pandemic and reinvigorated racial justice movement on infrastructure that seeks to build transformational community-engaged teaching and research partnerships. Pulling from existing literature around critical service-learning and the wisdom of scholars from the Black, Indigenous, person of color (BIPOC) community, we discuss how these lasting changes will advance our institution's structures for responsible community engagement, as well as inform the field's focus on antiracist community engagement.

Keywords: community partnerships, COVID-19, comparative case study, racial justice, antiracist community engagement

---

Community-Engaged Teaching and Research at Northeastern University and the Impacts of COVID-19

At the crossroads of the COVID-19 pandemic and a global call for racial justice, we have unearthed new synergies in our university's work around community-engaged teaching in higher education. Northeastern University is a private, urban institution in Boston, Massachusetts. The university enrolls over 15,000 undergraduate students alongside an additional 10,000 graduate students and places a focus on experiential education, including service-learning opportunities for students at all levels. Northeastern's Office of City and Community Engagement, which is housed outside academic or student affairs with a standalone division, facilitates 80–100 service-learning courses each academic year. These courses enroll over 2,000 students, are taught by over 70 faculty members, and cut across all colleges and disciplines at the university.

In order to facilitate quality service-learning experiences across the university, we have formal and informal infrastructural support systems for faculty members, students, and community partners. The formal channels of support can be grouped into two main themes: classroom support and partnership support. For the classroom support, faculty members who want to integrate community engagement into their courses can meet with our team for consultations, utilize asynchronous resources on course design, or participate in our synchronous year-long, cohort-based Faculty Fellows Program. These course design and classroom support resources are supplemented with our Service-Learning Teaching Assistant (S-LTA) Program. Every faculty member has the option to work with an S-LTA, a student who is hired, trained, and mentored by our team over the course of the semester. Service-learning teaching assistants support service-learning courses by working alongside the faculty member to provide student mentorship, manage community partnership logistics, prepare

students for community engagement, lead reflection, and ensure integration of service with the course objectives. Outside the classroom experience itself, our team provides systems for evaluation and assessment. These include student pre- and post-service assessments, community partner mid and final semester evaluation, S-LTA program evaluation, and a faculty program evaluation. Responses and results of these assessments are utilized to enhance partnership and student experiences while also informing our programmatic structures and are shared with our stakeholders.

In terms of partnership support, we offer a centralized process through which we initiate community partnerships between faculty at the institution and community-based organizations. This process, which we call our Request for Partnerships (RFP), begins by gathering faculty member motivations, course goals, and student learning objectives. Then, community partners provide us with information about their organization's mission and overview, semester-specific goals, volunteer needs, and project ideas, as well as the general location of and populations that engage with the organization. Accompanying our RFP form itself are both synchronous and asynchronous resources for developing responsible community partnerships. These resources are shared with faculty members, community partners, and S-LTAs. After initial matches are made between community partners and faculty members, we provide conversation guides and regular check-ins with all parties to ensure partnerships are progressing and meeting the shared goals and expectations that have been established.

The spring 2020 semester included 53 service-learning course sections, taught by 41 faculty members who were supported by nearly 50 student leaders. Our university transitioned to fully remote learning beginning March 10 and, at that point, we asked faculty members, students, and S-LTAs to follow guidance set by their community partner around whether to continue their engagement component. That said, also during that upheaval the university was making decisions that impacted students and ultimately sent them back to their home communities if they lived in on-campus housing (meaning they were no longer in Boston for the duration of the semester). So, even if and when partner organizations still had the capacity and need for students

in person, we were no longer able to support those needs.

Despite all this, most community-engaged courses continued their service-learning partnerships. Doing so was possible both because in many cases projects were already primarily or easily adapted to a remote environment, or students stepped in as called in other ways (making phone calls for organizations to check in on their service population, finishing lesson plans and handing them off for future use, etc.). Our team spent most of this time in triage mode, first and foremost checking on our faculty, partners, and student leaders to see that they were okay, and then working to provide the support needed to salvage what they could from what remained. Our Virtual Service-Learning EXPO (https://web.north-eastern.edu/servicelearningexpo/?category_name=spring-2020) showcases some of the products of our spring 2020 partnerships.

Throughout the summer, we spent purposeful time with our faculty members and partners to learn about what they were experiencing and planning. We began formulating our own plans with multiple contingencies: What if we are back on campus but many of our partner organizations are not able to host students in traditional capacities? How would we need to adapt our structures if some students are back on campus and others are not, and our partners do or do not have in-person opportunities for students to serve? Clearly, the possible combinations of future reality were endless, and taking the time to consider the implications of each on our core infrastructural components was a huge task. As summer wore on and no contingency emerged as most likely, we made the program-level decision to plan for the minimum viable solution, a fall semester consisting of entirely virtual service-learning. Based on our ongoing discussions with faculty and partners alike, this at least gave them something certain to plan for despite the flux in other aspects of their planning and work.

All of this did not happen in a vacuum, and summer 2020 also brought the highly publicized state-sanctioned violence against Black and Brown bodies to the forefront of the collective consciousness through the killings of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and countless others. These tragedies incited community fervor around systemic racial issues and ignited (or for some reignited) a passion for antiracism

in philosophy and practice. It also drove people's newfound or renewed interest in and desire to hold accountable systems of oppression and all those who are contributing actors within them. With the volume turned up on racial justice, a presidential election fast approaching, and a global pandemic that was further highlighting systemic inequities, there was a perfect storm of dissonance and necessity that has driven our work ever since.

Although at times all of this was frustrating and overwhelming, COVID-19's disruption of our traditional systems transformed our thought and practice to be in better alignment with our existing values and renewed focus on antiracist community engagement. In what follows, we explore the ways in which COVID-19 has forced changes to the structures we have traditionally used to form and solidify partnerships between faculty and community organizations, and how that, coupled with a reinvigorated racial justice movement, has pushed us not only to realign our practices, but also to inform them with existing wisdom and creative thinking specifically by the Black, Indigenous, person of color (BIPOC) community.

Author Positionality Statements

Based on what we discuss throughout this article, we thought it important to include author positionality statements as a way to frame our approach, highlight what lenses we bring to this conversation, and offer context for interpreting the implications we see within the broader field of community engagement in higher education.

Author 1, Dr. Becca Berkey

I identify as a White, cisgendered woman and currently serve as the director of Community-Engaged Teaching and Research at Northeastern University. I have been at this institution for 8 years and have worked in higher education for the last 16, in multiple roles at a variety of institutional types at the intersection of faculty and administration, as well as the community and the university. I am from the Midwest (Indiana) and grew up in a predominantly White community. In my adult life I have lived in Florida, New Hampshire, and Massachusetts. I am an environmental sociologist and a scholar-practitioner in service-learning and community engagement, with my foundational roots in both worlds revolving around social and racial justice and community-based and participatory research and practice. Although my main role is as an administrator, I also teach community-engaged courses about food justice and community development.

Author 2, Chelsea Lauder

I am a cisgendered White woman and currently work as the program manager with Community-Engaged Teaching and Research at Northeastern University. I am from a predominantly White, Midwestern community (Wisconsin) and moved to Boston in 2015, where I earned my bachelor's degree from Northeastern University in 2019. I have been involved in local and global community engagement opportunities, including the service-learning courses and the service-learning student leadership programs as described throughout this article. My primary role is to facilitate community partnerships through community-engaged teaching and research programs, specifically through the lens of supporting community-identified goals, equity, and justice.

Literature Review

Antiracist Community Engagement With Responsible Community Partnerships

The structures we use to facilitate service-learning courses and associated partnerships are rooted in asset-based community development. This form of community development seeks to identify the strength points of a community to foster and develop social change. Kretzmann & McKnight (1993) stated that rather than focus on the deficits of a community, change makers must leverage existing gifts and wisdom in designing their development models. Although not specific to community-engaged teaching or service-learning partnerships, the application of this model in this space optimally creates structures that center community-identified goals. Moreover, partnerships that are formed on the basis of external analysis of community need (as opposed to assets) can be exploitative or extractive.

In order to facilitate quality and responsible service-learning partnerships, true collaboration must recognize the power and context between the community and

a particular institution (Mitchell, 2008). A critical perspective to service-learning must be applied to foster quality experience for students, faculty members, and community partners. When examined through a critical lens, service-learning is meant to aim toward social justice, meaning that the purposes of community partnerships cannot solely be centered on student learning and experience; rather, they must work toward a more equitable world and redistribute power. Mitchell (2008) described critical service-learning programs as ones that encourage "students to see themselves as agents of social change and use the experience of service to address and respond to injustice in communities" (p. 51). For students to be able to participate in critical service-learning, there must be a focus on building ethical community partnerships as well as preparing students for responsible engagement. As Mitchell et al. (2012) put it:

> The changing demographics of student enrollment should impel educators to examine how we implement service learning, paying attention to our biases, expectations, and traditions. Without such examination, service learning can become part of what we call a pedagogy of whiteness—strategies of instruction that consciously or unconsciously reinforce norms and privileges developed by, and for the benefit of, white people in the United States. These norms and privileges are based on color-blind and ahistorical understandings of social problems in society where race is indeed a crucial factor. Service learning projects based on a pedagogy of whiteness have minimal impact on the community and result in mis-educative experiences for students, such as unchallenged racism for White students and isolating experiences for students of color, and missed opportunities for educators to make their own instruction more transformative. (p. 613)

Given that faculty are key facilitators of these experiences, we must also consider how to optimally develop these knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors with this group. Kiely and Sexsmith's (2018) transformative S-LCE model for faculty development is instructive around the activities, faculty learning outcomes, and threshold concepts to "help faculty achieve a critically reflective and counter normative approach to S-LCE" (p. 288) in the areas of teaching and learning, institutional culture, knowledge generation and application, and community partnerships. As they further illustrate, "learning of new threshold concepts is an important area for faculty development; because these moments are rarer for faculty, they imply greater dissonance and resultant metacognitive shifts" (p. 288). Therefore, to reach the threshold concepts of critical reflection, positionality, reflexivity, and reciprocity, there need to be requisite activities not only to facilitate the faculty member's learning, but also to model how they facilitate that learning with their students.

Transformative partnerships as defined by Bringle et al. (2009) refer to university–community partnerships that display closeness, equity, and integrity as their main characteristics. In a critical service-learning program, it is essential to prioritize transformative partnerships that are not extractive, but also go beyond being solely transactional to become rooted in shared goals, marked by rich and meaningful interaction, and mutually beneficial in a way that supports community-identified goals (Bringle et al., 2009).

Service-learning and community engagement are meant to support the public good. This means that service-learning programs must adapt to larger societal movements in order to be effective as a model for social change. The convergence of the COVID-19 pandemic and reinvigorated racial justice movement in 2020 presented an opportunity and a need for our work to draw more directly from the existing wisdom of BIPOC scholars. The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted life and, coupled with calls for racial justice around the country, increased an awareness of deeply rooted inequities in our collective social consciousness. Scholars who study structural inequality, racial justice, and equity-centered education have been rightfully brought to the forefront of conversations around methods of social change. Service-learning and community engagement must be actively antiracist, a term defined by Kendi (2019) as "any idea that suggests the racial groups are equals in all their apparent differences." Without providing the historical context of how a community has been impacted by structural

inequalities and racism, service-learning experiences continue to perpetuate implicit bias, rather than dismantle systems of supremacy. Kendi's work in developing the guiding principles of being an antiracist can directly inform the ways in which critical service-learning is approached. Additionally, Rhonda Magee's *Inner Work of Racial Justice* (2019) offers powerful guidance for dismantling structures that continue to support colonialism and White supremacy.

Critical service-learning in many ways is the starting point for antiracist community engagement. Scholar Bettina Love, through her work around abolitionist teaching, calls us to take more risks, build communities "where people love, protect, and understand," and restore others' humanity (Stoltzfus, 2019). Alongside adrienne maree brown's work in *Emergent Strategy* (2017), which pushes change makers to recognize the multitude of exchanges that happen and the impact said exchanges and relationships have on the world, this powerful wisdom has guided our work as we seek to stay rooted in our values and support responsible service-learning partnerships that work toward racial justice.

The field has now needed, and committed, to make adaptations as a result of COVID-19 through the lens of antiracism as well as following best practices within the digital service-learning field. Digital service-learning, or e-service-learning, is recognized when either the instruction or service component of the course happens virtually. Typically, e-service-learning experiences are intentionally designed to incorporate the best practices of both service-learning pedagogy and online course instruction (Waldner et al., 2012). In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, when course instruction shifted to remote and community partner organizations that typically hosted students in-person needed to either close or shift to virtual programming, the field turned to digital service-learning for answers. Although stemming from a disruptive situation, the shift to digital service-learning has many potential benefits. For example, digital service-learning can promote digital literacy in students, extend past the limits of place-based engagement, and provide an opportunity to increase access to partnerships for various community organization types (Eaton & Leek, 2019). These benefits have encouraged us to support the intentional design and integration of digital service-learning into the courses that we support at Northeastern.

Considering our context and this review of the literature, we have the following guiding questions:

- What evidence is there when comparing fall 2019 and fall 2020 that there are new innovations in our practices? Where these differences exist, what have they resulted in (partnership-wise)?

- In what ways have these adapted structures made our work and program more accessible (how and for whom)?

- In what ways has adapting our systems for setting up course partnerships due to COVID-19 also allowed us to center antiracist community engagement?

Methodology

Given the time frame during which the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded, we approached this piece primarily from the lens of reflection. That said, to achieve this goal, we loosely applied a methodological approach to exploring our questions. We utilized comparative case study (CCS) to analyze our service-learning partnerships across two specific semesters: fall 2019 and fall 2020. This orientation toward analysis allowed us to examine how the creation of our materials and processes changed as a result of COVID-19, as well as to explore the variation of responses about and results from community partnerships. As emphasized in a methodological brief about CCS, "comparative case studies are particularly useful for understanding and explaining how context influences the success of an intervention and how better to tailor the intervention to the specific context to achieve intended outcomes" (Goodrick, 2014, p. 1).

Further, CCS methodology seeks to "look at how processes unfold, often influenced by actors and events over time in different locations and at different scales" (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017, p. 7). This approach moves beyond traditional case study approaches by removing the focus on bounding the case, which in many studies "is distinct from our spatially- and relationally-informed understanding of context and our processual notion of culture" because the notion

of "bounding the case from the outset" is "problematic" (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017, p. 10). Finally, this approach itself is in alignment with our purposes, objectives, and questions. As Bartlett and Vavrus (2017) asserted, the CCS heuristic is also informed by a critical theoretical stance. By critical, we mean

> that the approach is guided by critical theory and its concerns and assumptions regarding power and inequality. Drawing upon Marxist, feminist, and critical race theory, among others, critical theory aims to critique inequality and change society; it studies the cultural production of structures, processes, and practices of power, exploitation, and agency; and it reveals how common-sense, hegemonic notions about the social world maintain disparities of various sorts. Attention to power and inequality is central to the CCS approach. (p. 11)

Although these authors emphasize three different axes of comparison within this approach (horizontal—of actors, documents, other influences; vertical—at different levels/scales; and transversal—over time), we focus in what follows primarily on transversal and secondarily on horizontal. Given that we are analyzing at the program level, we do not touch on vertical comparison.

For this, we examined an exhaustive list of materials that represented fall partnership planning processes so that we could examine and compare as much relevant data as possible from both the fall 2019 and fall 2020 semesters. All program data are approved for research purposes by our Institutional Review Board. Examples of these data include

- the faculty course planning form that collects information from our faculty members on the courses in which they are planning to utilize community engagement;

- resources and materials to inform community partners of the scope of opportunities when submitting to our RFP;

- the RFP form through which we collect community partner semester goals and the ways they would like

to engage students in those goals;

- communication with faculty members and community partners throughout the matching and connecting process for each semester;

- updates from student leaders who support service-learning courses and report on the status of community partnerships and student engagement throughout the semester.

We analyzed additional information around our course partnership processes, from the initial interest of a service-learning faculty member to the final community partner and student evaluation at the end of the semester. We reviewed the literature and asked ourselves, "If we were looking for evidence of systems that support transformative, critical, antiracist service-learning and community engagement, what would we expect to see?" Informed by the literature, we identified the following four key characteristics to search for evidence of in comparing our program records from fall 2019 to fall 2020:

1. Tighter values alignment

2. More ethical and transformative partnerships

3. Potential for greater community impact

4. Relational accountability in our community-engaged teaching partnerships

In our process we examined how the unique materials from fall 2019 and fall 2020 did or did not showcase evidence of these markers and then analyzed the change over time across the two semesters. This would allow us not only to see how the unique materials highlighted the key markers above, but also to view the broader arc of our shifted thinking as a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic and racial justice movement.

Initial Findings and Results

Through the process described above, we combed through our programmatic data for evidence of these four characteristics (and to identify where gaps existed). Table 1 summarizes our findings.

In reviewing the materials above we found evidence of how the disruption that COVID-19 presented to our traditional infrastructural elements also impacted our community partnerships to showcase the four key

Table 1. Summary Review of Programmatic Data Evidence Areas, Comparison Fall 2019 (FA19) and Fall 2020 (FA20)				
	Tighter values alignment (1)	**More ethical and transformative partnerships (2)**	**Potential for greater community impact (3)**	**Relational accountability in our community-engaged teaching partnerships (4)**
Faculty course planning form* *Sent out pre-COVID for FA20, but there is some evidence of change.	FA20 includes reasoning for the shift of our se-mesterly partner-ship orientation event—this was partially to better center the value of relationship building.	In FA20 we put greater emphasis on faculty mem-bers to com-municate with past partners and highlight whether they would like to continue for future semesters.		Questions are framed to increase accountability for faculty members with their parners.
RFP outline/ application	FA20 materials asked community partners to submit a goal and/or interest rather than an applica-tion; sought to capture the root of reasoning behind the partner-ship to enhance cocreation. FA19 asked for specific reasonings behind collaboration; FA20 called for open responses to more easily see the realm of possibil-ity.	FA20 left more space for goals rather than just student roles look-ing to be filled. Needed to be both more flexible and direct about op-tions due to shift to digital S-L; these materials communicated the shift well while highlighting partnership.	Ask more targeted questions about community goals; evidence of better attention to the specific needs/ goals of commu-nity organizations due to COVID-19.	
Course one-pagers	FA20 course one-pagers were made public for more courses to show greater trans-parency in how partnerships could be made. Allowed more community partners to access information such as "Why are you integrating service-learning into your course" and partnership expectations prior to submitting.	Although we used these for some classes in past semesters, we created them for all classes seeking partners for FA20 and used them to better showcase the ways faculty could collaborate, which highlights stronger respon-sible partnerships.		Asking more faculty members (specifically in FA20) to pub-licly write out their reasoning and partnership expectations sup-ports relationship accountability.

Table continues on next page.

Table 1 Continued				
	Tighter values alignment (1)	**More ethical and transformative partnerships (2)**	**Potential for greater community impact (3)**	**Relational accountability in our community-engaged teaching partnerships (4)**
Faculty listening session notes	Centered listening/ understanding of faculty goals as we planned for FA20 in the midst of COVID-19.	Encouraged faculty to think early and often about how to partner with organizations in a way we just didn't directly communicate or have time to talk about in past semesters. More intentional time spent together as a result of COVID 19.		
Community partner listening session notes	FA20 listening sessions were more intentional in figuring out needs of partners for this semester as a result of COVID-19.	FA20, as a result of COVID-19—but now something we are continuing for SP21—brought partners into the planning process earlier to make sure it made sense for their goals/ needs.	Hosting them in FA20 helped us get a better sense of what community partners were prioritizing.	
Startup communication (preparing for the semester)	FA20 has evidence of listening sessions, resources for conversations, and specific action-oriented next steps for faculty and community partners to really align with our values of centering their voices.			There is evidence of a marked difference here, particularly in the way the shift to digital S-L was communicated.
Weekly updates from S-LTAs FA19 and FA20	There is evidence of this just in the depth between FA19 and FA20—a comparison between the weekly updates in both shows that there is much more focus on preparing students & social/ racial justice in FA20.	As stated in other areas, it just seems as though we're getting so much more information in FA20 about what is happening and about the impact of these partnerships.	There seems to be evidence in FA20 (as opposed to FA19) that more of the student leaders are focusing in their updates on how to ensure that the students in their classes are *getting* what it means to work with the community and the potential contributions of what they're doing	As stated in other areas, it just seems as though we're getting so much more information in FA20 about what is happening and about the impact of these partnerships.

characteristics as discussed. In some cases, however, we saw that there had already been a shift in our approach. This became apparent in comparing fall 2019 and fall 2020 faculty course planning materials. There was already a clear movement toward values alignment through the language and accountability for faculty members in regard to their partnerships. Our Faculty Course Planning form for fall 2020 was created prior to COVID-19, but the follow-up and shift to having greater flexibility for both faculty and community partners ultimately allowed for deeper, more intentional relationships. In some other areas, this comparative approach highlighted gaps that will allow us to be more proactive in our work to better align with our objectives.

Key evidence existed in our RFP materials, which, as described above, are central to building our program's responsible community partnerships. In comparing fall 2019 and fall 2020 we found increased use of language that highlighted flexibility and collaboration, as opposed to a strict structure into which only a certain type of partner could fit. For example, in our responses to the RFP we had an increase in neighborhood and community-member-focused goals and fewer specific direct service needs. This is a direct result of COVID-19 unearthing the need for more intentional partnership, rather than just an exchange of human capital. The format of our RFP in fall 2020 aptly resembled the intended goal of being a submission form rather than a formal application. In addition, our RFP in fall 2020 clearly outlined the shift to virtual engagement and provided guidance rather than dictating the types of engagement that could occur.

Following our partnership set-up processes and communication, we reviewed how materials from our S-LTAs, who directly support and report on service-learning partnerships throughout the semester, had shifted. In the courses that ran in both fall 2019 and fall 2020, we saw student leader updates that had a greater focus on critical service-learning as opposed to traditional service-learning (Mitchell, 2008). For example, S-LTAs shared deeper analysis of their students' partner engagement in updates in fall 2020 than in fall 2019, which provides evidence that our student leader program had greater intentionality around this after adaptations resulting from COVID-19. We provide further details of how these initial findings manifest in the four key characteristics across the fall 2019 and fall 2020 semesters in the discussion.

Discussion

Tighter Values Alignment

In every data source, we were able to identify ways our program documentation had shifted to reflect tighter alignment with our values. This shows up in two significant ways (see Table 1)—the first through a theme of listening to our stakeholders, or really taking the time to slow down, ask what was needed, connect as humans, and figure out a way forward together. brown's work in emergent strategy (2017) really highlights the need to recognize how each individual's relationships and creativity contribute to the broader picture of human networks. In pausing to connect with one another, at a time when staying connected felt more difficult than ever, we found a way to hold true to our values. The second way this emerges is through an acknowledgment of more focus on preparing students for engagement as well as in training around racial and social justice as it intersects with community engagement and specifically the role our student leaders play in facilitating it. For example, in fall 2020 we saw this evidence from an S-LTA in a weekly update: "I also led a discussion about 'White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack' by Peggy McIntosh. I thought it went well, as this can be a tough topic to discuss, but students were willing to join in." In training our student leaders on how to frame service-learning in the classroom with a focus on systemic issues and race, which is deemed necessary through Mitchell et al.'s (2012) work, we were able to highlight critical service-learning in many aspects of our programming.

It was not that we weren't listening to our stakeholders or providing training opportunities for our student leaders to consider these important topics prior to the pandemic, but the COVID-19 context increased the relevance and resonance of this work. Additionally, it necessitated that we take time in the midst of chaos to connect to people in our network as they navigated their own complex lives and roles in very apparent ways. Although we have always valued this type of authentic and genuine relationship building, this new context provided the opportunity to connect human-

to-human in ways we previously had not.

In all of this, we are reminded of the importance of truly reimagining systems, not simply adapting them for these current times. Rather than simply inject our values into our already fully formed operations, both our team and the broader field should evolve to a place where the operations themselves are dismantled, reexamined, and reconstituted in ways that will allow this work to respond and emerge along with the world around it.

More Ethical and Transformative Partnerships

A key programmatic goal and deeply held value in our operations is to build more ethical and transformative partnerships. We had been working toward this goal prior to the disruption of COVID-19 on our systems and heightened national calls for racial justice. In Table 1 you can see how our multiple structures of partnership building, both prior to a semester and throughout, show evidence of creating more ethical and transformative partnerships, as defined by Bringle et al. (2009). The key themes for how these changes occurred are (1) more intentional asks and communication with faculty members and (2) restructuring the language and format of our centralized RFP process.

Faculty development is a key part of our team's work, and we have specifically cultivated a network of faculty members who not only see the benefit for students to engaging with the community, but who have a more specific affinity for or interest in community impact and social justice. At our university, which heavily focuses on experiential learning opportunities for students, we have created structures for faculty to decide whether service-learning is the best pedagogical method for them. Beginning in fall 2019, we piloted an interactive, online Faculty Onboarding Module that more thoroughly describes our specific purpose and supports. With this module, coupled with faculty listening sessions in summer 2020 that allowed us to hear the specific goals, questions, and concerns of our faculty members going into the fall 2020 semester, we have been able to curate a more intentional and informed faculty network and tailor resources to these specific questions. As described through the literature that asserts engaged faculty are more likely to support responsible partnerships, this evidence from our fall 2020 semester aligned with our intended outcomes (Bringle et al., 2009).

With a large network of courses, faculty, and students being supported through our work each semester, it has been essential to create systems and structure that allow our small team to do this work more effectively and efficiently. Over time we have worked to automate various systems so that there has been increased time to work toward other goals. Through the disruption of COVID-19 we were motivated to reimagine our work in a way that could adapt to the needs of our network. This meant being more flexible and recognizing different types of service-learning that we potentially would not have imagined previously. Even as we kept parts of our structures the same to hold onto the image of our processes, we upended our timeline and expectations. For example, in our fall 2020 RFP reminder emails we wrote this:

> In order to be flexible both in process and time as we prepare for the fall, we have shifted our submission timeline. An African American artist and poet, Ashley Bryan, uses the term "lifeline" in place of deadline, and we want to do the same here. Our new priority lifeline will be Wednesday, July 8th. Please utilize the "intent to partner" option (you will see it when you start the form and enter your contact information) if you are still working through how you might want to partner in the fall—this option will allow us to streamline follow up throughout the summer as more pieces fall into place.

In addition to this language shift from "deadlines" to "lifelines," which was inspired by an artist and poet from the BIPOC community, the language around the RFP submission process was altered as well. As a comparison, in fall 2019 we simply wrote, "Don't Forget to Apply by June 24th! Partner with Service-Learning in Fall 2019—The Fall 2019 Request for Partnerships Application is now open!"

In order to frame the RFP as more approachable and goal-oriented, rather than an application by which you are "accepted" to work with us, our fall 2020 RFP described

the process as a submission form:

> Fall 2020 Service-Learning Request for Partnerships now available for community-based organizations: Our Fall 2020 Request for Partnerships process has been adapted to represent a fully digital/virtual semester of service-learning. Our submission form gives you the option to submit an "intent to partner" or a full submission for the Fall. Please review the information documents to familiarize yourself with our process.

The purpose is to highlight the cocreation of partnerships, rather than (even if unintentionally) perpetuate an "us versus them" mentality of community versus university stakeholders. Particularly in the case of our urban university, our students are residents of the primary communities with whom we collaborate. This shift in language was in large part due to the desire to promote authenticity and equity in our partnerships. By doing this, specific course partnerships through which students engage were seen as more impactful toward students' learning. For example, a student in fall 2020 who engaged virtually with a community partner via the course Education in the Community stated:

> I learned that I need to reevaluate my own biases when it comes to education. It really made me think deeper about what I believe education is and how it should be executed, compared to how it actually is around the world.

This is just one example from many reflections captured through our Service-Learning Virtual EXPO that showcases how service-learning, when facilitated critically and intentionally, can generate greater student learning.

Our community partnerships are truly the soul of our work; they are where the cocreation of student experience and community impact exist, and it is a primary commitment of our team to prioritize responsible and ethical partnerships. Considering the ways in which COVID-19 has disproportionately impacted communities of color, and specifically the communities around Northeastern, which are composed of primarily people of color, we feel an urgency in our commitment to ensuring that our community partnerships are rooted in building social justice long term, and not just through the semester-long student interactions.

Potential for Greater Community Impact

Measuring community impact beyond the experiences of community organizations hosting students is always a challenging component of our work. With many of our interactions being rooted in the shared goals defined by an organization and faculty member, it is not always easy to see more deeply into how these partnerships are creating greater community impact. In fall 2019 we received this response from one community partner:

> We were able to host weekly intergenerational programs in 17 different elder residential buildings or senior centers across the City of Boston. We couldn't have expanded the number of buildings we were in without the students' commitment, involvement or language skills!

Although this evaluation response represents the impact that service-learning partnerships had on our partner organization's programming, we saw less direct response to how the engagement created community impact beyond organizational capacity. In comparison, a partner with engagement very similar to that described in fall 2019, but virtual, shared this in their fall 2020 evaluation:

> The talks with our volunteers helped our foster grandparents feel happy and have a connection to mitigate social isolation. The students bring new perspectives, "fresh air" to our volunteers. They talked about traveling to China & holidays. They were able to build good relationships in the short time they were together.

Our partner final evaluations, in which not all community partner organizations participate, are our main source of measuring community impact. Again, we already considered community impact a priority, but the tandem occurrence of the pandemic and heightened calls for racial justice pushed us to unearth ways to more intentionally set up partnerships for both increasing impact and measuring that impact.

Other evidence of direct community impact comes from anecdotes from community partners and students. In seeing the impact of COVID-19 on our communities, we struggled to find evidence of ways that our partnerships would or would not be a successful intervention in direct community impact. Although we could see increased potential in some spaces between fall 2019 and fall 2020, the lack of evidence around this will certainly guide our coming work. Our Office of City and Community Engagement, specifically, is committed in its 2020–2021 goals to work toward intentionally building relationships with community members, neighbors, and residents in order to adapt our programming in a way that is directly informed by the community.

Relationship Accountability in Our Community-Engaged Teaching Partnerships

The emphasis on relationship accountability in our community-engaged teaching partnerships stems from the priority attached to supporting cocreation with community partners. In order for collaborations to embody the characteristics of transformative partnerships, they must be rooted in shared goals, and those goals and expectations must be met through relationship accountability (Clayton et al., 2010). While our team acts as the through line that expands past just one semester, course, or faculty member, with community partnerships we require that our service-learning faculty members hold themselves and their students accountable to a partner on a particular collaboration. Evidence of this accountability is not systematically tracked and is therefore difficult to obtain directly. Table 1 represents how we were unable to see this directly reflected in our data sources, but anecdotally we have heard community partners and faculty members share that they feel partnerships have been easier to manage during fall 2020 because the virtual space has led toward more accessibility. For example, one fall 2020 faculty member said of her service-learning course experience, "I think doing things over Zoom has actually made working with community partners even more accessible, as it requires asking less of a time commitment from each of our partners."

The sense that partners have been more accessible, making the relationship accountability more direct, is evidence of how restructuring our work as a result of COVID-19 has impacted us. In addition, we found instances where initial recommendations to faculty members about partnerships through our RFP instigated more creative conversations and then resulted in meaningful partnership. This result is in part due to the more personalized emails sent out to faculty members about their partnership options, rather than utilizing a stock email with instructions.

Even though tracking relationship accountability is difficult to represent in our data sources, it has always been an important part of our partnership tracking process. Considering the unknowns and challenges of the fall 2020 semester, our team has tried to build in systems as we go to set ourselves up for supporting greater accountability in future semesters.

Implications

The Changing Landscape of Community Engagement in Higher Education

In their 2012 article "The Centrality of Engagement in Higher Education," Fitzgerald et al. stated:

> Through engagement with local and broader communities, we seek a means to expand and shift from the established internally focused, discipline-based framework of higher education to a framework focused on a stronger level of societal relevance that improves both society and the overarching goals of higher education. (p. 7)

Additionally, they built on and referenced the work of the Kellogg Commission (2001) in developing a seven-part test of engagement that includes questions around (1) responsiveness, (2) respect for partners, (3) academic neutrality, (4) accessibility, (5) integration, (6) coordination, and (7) resource partnerships.

Never in recent memory has there been a year like 2020, one where we were faced with a global pandemic that also spurred an economic downturn and closed many of the on-campus components of higher education, where there were so many visible calls and so much organizing for racial justice, where we saw the impacts of political divisiveness on our presidential election,

and so much more. As the field revisits the call made by Fitzgerald et al. and the test of engagement developed by the Kellogg Commission, and with the world around us changing rapidly, our communities reeling, and our neighbors struggling, it becomes clear that for community engagement in higher education to work toward its broader public purpose, it must adapt. In fact, it must adapt *despite* the challenges our individual institutions are facing.

In addition to this changing landscape, it is clear that much of the knowledge and wisdom offered graciously by the BIPOC community aligns with our most ambitious justice-oriented goals as a field. There is a need to integrate and center these voices as we make the adaptations necessitated by our ever-changing context. As a field, we cannot afford to lose sight of these voices and the systemic inequity that drives them, and to examine what we do first from the perspective of how we might be contributing to those very systems of oppression rather than alleviating them.

Implications for Practice Within Community-Engaged Teaching and Research

Like many in the broader field, at Northeastern we find our programming and partnership efforts at a crossroads. We can wait for this storm to pass so we can return to the "way things were," or we can emerge with the lessons learned through this disruption to truly reimagine what, how, and why we do what we do. The comparative case study approach was an illuminating methodology for exploring whether we were shifting practice in alignment with our values and goals the way we assumed we were, and illustrated that in some ways we were, but in others we were not. We will go through this exercise at regular intervals in the future (disruption aside) to continually check for progress toward the characteristics we identified, and to modify those characteristics as more emerges at the intersections of antiracism and community engagement. We further suggest that other institutions might adapt or utilize this model for their own purposes.

One practice that emerged as central is listening and making sure that listening and adaptations are performed in ongoing, formal, and informal ways. The success of this strategy in moving toward the characteristics we identified (particularly tighter values alignment) solidifies that it should be a continued, intentional part of our focus even after this disruption. After the pandemic we intend to maintain both virtual engagement as an option, since this has allowed us to engage with more partners, and the shift in our processes to revolve around community-identified goals rather than logistics/scheduling.

In addition, even as we saw ample evidence of how our systems and structures have shifted to support and reflect more ethical and transformative partnerships, we saw less in our work that illustrated a focus on potential for greater community impact and relational accountability in our community-engaged teaching partnerships. These gaps highlight areas we can focus on in our program in the future, creating tools and systems to foster these areas as well as assess them. Additionally, they are not unlike the challenges faced in community engagement work at many institutions.

Future Paths for Scholarship

As the field considers how to work toward methods and practices of antiracist community engagement, we must also continue to research how (or whether) service-learning contributes to broader diversity, equity, and inclusion goals and initiatives in our institutions (particularly as they pertain to the recruitment, retention, and recognition of women faculty and faculty of color, as well as students from historically marginalized groups) as well as our communities.

We know, for example, that women and faculty of color are more likely to engage in community-based scholarship and/or teaching. Antonio (2002) found that "faculty of color are 75% more likely than white faculty to pursue a position in the academy because they draw a connection between the professoriate and the ability to effect change in society" (pp. 593–594). Research has also shown the impact of service-learning on students from historically marginalized groups. As Mungo (2017) highlighted about this pedagogical approach:

> It was found to improve graduation rates for all students regardless of their racial/ethnic backgrounds. Therefore, by increasing the number of students from all racial/ethnic backgrounds who graduate, service-learning results in increasing graduation rates of students of

color, thereby decreasing the retention and graduation rate gaps. (p. 48)

This reflective essay also suggests that there is utility in further exploring the impact of utilizing student leaders as partners in facilitating service-learning courses on the dynamics discussed above. Begley et al. (2019) discussed how partnering with S-LTAs impacted faculty members facilitating service-learning courses, and found that it had an effect not only in easing the logistical components of such an approach, but also on faculty members' understanding and implementation of this practice in their teaching. Beyond this, researching the impact on a student's professional journey of student leadership opportunities rooted in antiracist community engagement outside their coursework would be a rich line for future inquiry.

Although it is essential to continue to study the impacts of integrating and valuing service-learning and community engagement on faculty and students at our institutions, more attention is needed around the actual impact of this work and these partnerships on the most marginalized members of our communities and/or the most pressing issues they face. To truly move past disruption and its heightened impacts on those most vulnerable in our communities, as a field we must develop more sophisticated ways of measuring and understanding the impacts of our work (not just the intentions that guide it). Without doing this, we fail to recognize what Love (2019) described:

> Pedagogy should work in tandem with students' own knowledge of their community and grassroots organizations to push forward new ideas for social change, not just be a tool to enhance test scores or grades. Pedagogy, regardless of its name, is useless without teachers dedicated to challenging systemic oppression with intersectional social justice.

There is no time that this is more true than when our communities are stressed to their maximum levels by multiple coinciding disruptions that deepen inequity and are outside their control.

Finally, the guiding questions of this comparative case study unearth another line of potential questioning for future research specifically for program administrators about whether or not (and how much, if so) programmatic policies, processes, and wraparound support and development can move the needle toward truly antiracist community engagement efforts on the part of all involved stakeholders.

Conclusion

As we have reflected on and researched the ways in which our work has been altered as a result of COVID-19, we see many opportunities for more deeply rooting our service-learning partnerships in critical service-learning theory and the wisdom of BIPOC scholars. Although often overwhelming and difficult to see beyond, COVID-19 has enabled us to tighten values alignment, support more ethical and responsible partnerships, foster potential for greater community impact, and increase relationship accountability in the partnerships we support. We have clear evidence of the ways in which we have achieved these accomplishments; further, we have been offered an opportunity to improve how we might continue this movement in the future. The disruption caused by COVID-19 in 2020, coupled with a call for racial justice and the dismantling of systems of oppression, has pushed us—and will continue to push us—to find new synergies in our work for building transformative community partnerships through service-learning and the centering of antiracist community engagement.

About the Authors

Becca Berkey is the director of Community-Engaged Teaching & Research at Northeastern University.

Chelsea Lauder is the program manager of Community-Engaged Teaching and Research at Northeastern University.

References

Antonio, A. L. (2002). Faculty of color reconsidered: Reassessing contributions to scholarship. *The Journal of Higher Education, 73*(5), 582–602. https://doi.org/10.1080/002215 46.2002.11777169

Bartlett, L., & Vavrus, F. (2017). Comparative case studies: An innovative approach. *Nordic Journal of Comparative and International Education, 1*(1), 5–17. https://doi.org/10.7577/njcie.1929

Begley, G., Berkey, B., Roe, L., & Schuldt, H. E. Y. (2019). Becoming partners: Faculty come to appreciate undergraduates as teaching partners in a service-learning teaching assistant program. *International Journal for Students as Partners, 3*(1), 89–105. https://doi.org/10.15173/ijsap.v3i1.3669

Bringle, R. G., Clayton, P. H., & Price, M. (2009). Partnerships in service learning and civic engagement. Partnerships: *A Journal of Service Learning & Civic Engagement, 1*(1), 1–20. http://libjournal.uncg.edu/prt/article/view/415

brown, a. m. (2017). *Emergent strategy: Shaping change, changing worlds*. AK Press.

Clayton, P. H., Bringle, R. G., Senor, B., Huq, J., & Morrison, M. (2010). Differentiating and assessing relationships in service-learning and civic engagement: Exploitative, transactional, or transformational. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning, 16*(2), 5–21. http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.3239521.0016.201

Eaton, L., & Leek, D. (2019, March 26). *Digital service-learning: Leveraging technology to expand service and community*. Eastern Regional Campus Compact.

Fitzgerald, H. E., Bruns, K., Sonka, S. T., Furco, A., & Swanson, L. (2012). The centrality of engagement in higher education. *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement, 16*(7), 7–27. https://openjournals.libs.uga.edu/jheoe/article/view/949

Goodrick, D. (2014). *Comparative case studies* (Methodological Briefs: Impact Evaluation 9). UNICEF Office of Research.

Kellogg Commission. (2001). *Returning to our roots: Executive summaries of the reports of the Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities.* National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges.

Kendi, I. X. (2019). *How to be an antiracist.* One World.

Kiely, R., & Sexsmith, K. (2018). Innovative considerations in faculty development and service-learning and community engagement: New perspectives for the future. In B. Berkey, C. Meixner, P. M. Green, & E. Eddins (Eds.), *Reconceptualizing faculty development in service-learning/community engagement: Exploring intersections, frameworks, and models of practice* (pp. 283-314). Stylus Publishing.

Kretzmann, J., & McKnight, J. (1993). *Building communities from the inside out: A path toward finding and mobilizing a community's assets.* The Asset-Based Community Development Institute, Institute for Policy Research, Northwestern University.

Love, B. L. (2019). *We want to do more than survive: Abolitionist teaching and the pursuit of educational freedom.* Beacon Press.

Magee, R. V. (2019). *The inner work of racial justice: Healing ourselves and transforming our communities through mindfulness*. TarcherPerigee.

Mitchell, T. D. (2008). Traditional vs. critical service-learning: Engaging the literature to differentiate two models. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning, 14*(2), 50–65. http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.3239521.0014.205

Mitchell, T. D., Donahue, D. M., & Young-Law, C. (2012). Service learning as a pedagogy of Whiteness. *Equity & Excellence in Education, 45*(4), 612–629. https://doi.org/10.108 0/10665684.2012.715534

Mungo, M. H. (2017). Closing the gap: Can service-learning enhance retention, graduation, and GPAs of students of color? *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning, 23*(2), 42–52. https://doi.org/10.3998/mjcsloa.3239521.0023.203

Stoltzfus, K. (2019). Abolitionist teaching in action: Q&A with Bettina L. Love. *ASCD Education Update, 61*(12). http://www.ascd.org/publications/newsletters/education-update/dec19/vol61/num12/Abolitionist-Teaching-in-Action@-Q$A-with-Bettina-L.-Love.aspx

Waldner, L. S., Widener, M. C., & McGorry, S. Y. (2012). E-service learning: The evolution of service-learning to engage a growing online student population. *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement, 16*(2), 123–150. https://openjournals.libs.uga.edu/jheoe/article/view/936