

**Finding “Community” in Service-Learning with Higher Educational  
Institutions**

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## Abstract

Service-learning, also known as community engagement, involves a collaboration between institutions of higher learning and their communities and is essential to each student's growth as a thoughtful individual and community member prepared to combat society's most pressing challenges (National et al. on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, 2012). Since the 1980s, service-learning has become a staple in higher education, with valuable potential for students, faculty, and community partners (Stanton et al., 1999). Regarded as a high-impact educational practice by the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), service-learning, when incorporated into a comprehensive curriculum, can help students increase retention in classroom learning, meet their learning goals, and improve their overall engagement (Resch & Schrittmesser, 2021; Savini, 2019). Professional accreditation standards have expanded to include service-learning and community engagement in medical, nursing, physical therapy, and social work programs, as well as in many other social-based and science-based practices (Standards et al. LCME, 2023). Successful community engagement experiences have three essential aspects: relationships, communication, and reciprocity. Of the three aspects, reciprocity is recognized as the most critical part of defining and understanding service learning. However, little research is exploring reciprocity in service-learning and community engagement experiences (Dorado & Giles, 2004). Using the theoretical frameworks of feminist, critical race, experiential learning, and reflective theories, this paper analyzes service-learning and community engagement from educational, political, and systems perspectives.

*Keywords:* Service-learning, community engagement, reciprocal, high-impact, service, experiential learning, higher education

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## Finding “Community” in Service-Learning with Higher Educational Institutions

### Introduction

Service-learning, also called community engagement, allows students to participate in purposeful service to the community while creating educational opportunities that enhance and expand classroom teachings (Mason, 2023) and reasoning skills (Omar-Eves et al., 2013). The Carnegie Foundation for Advancement of Teaching (2015) describes community engagement as “the collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity” (Ginsburg et al., 2020, p.167). Faculty also benefit from receiving meaningful real-world challenges to resolve and return to the classroom. (Resch & Schrittmesser, 2021). Despite the research showing benefits of service-learning, the community’s understanding of those benefits remains a significant knowledge gap, and some researchers have noted that additional research should focus on the community perspective (Sanders Thompson et al., 2021). Saltmarsh (1996) and Geller et al. (2016), describe the necessity of understanding the community's perspective on the design, execution, cost/benefit of their effort, and outcomes of service-learning projects. Unfortunately, the community perspective on service-learning has not been a research priority.

Some researchers suggest that a misunderstanding of the meaning of “community” may explain the knowledge gap in appreciating the value of service-learning” or something similar (Kravetz, 2016; Rowland et al., 2020). In this paper, the word *community* is defined and examined since understanding its meaning in the context of community engagement and service-learning is vital to students, faculty, administration, community agencies, and community members. Unfortunately, the word community and service-learning project requirements are

misunderstood, specifically within higher education institutions. Adding service-learning and community engagement to professional accreditation standards and sometimes to graduation requirements can increase confusion and frustration by not agreeing on what constitutes “community” and its needs and goals.

The paper’s focal issue is identifying “community,” as crucial to engaging its members in mutually beneficial service-learning experiences with higher education. The review of the literature covers research defining key terms and concepts, including the meaning of community as it relates to service-learning and community engagement; key components of service-learning, especially reciprocity; issues of partnership, trust, and forced volunteerism; as well as educational, systems, and political perspectives on service-learning. The issues are then analyzed through the lenses of experiential learning theory, reflection theory, feminist theory, and critical race theory. Finally, ethical implications and policy recommendations are presented.

## **Literature Review**

### **Background of Service-Learning and Community Engagement**

#### ***Definition of Community***

The word *community* can have a variety of definitions, but in this paper, it refers to individuals connected by close social ties (e.g., family, friends, and neighbors); this is in contrast to *society*, which refers to “abstract associations among individuals who do not share feelings and do not necessarily share space and time” (Cobigo et al., 2016, p. 183). The essential components of most definitions of community include a group of people who spend time together (e.g., as friends), time spent together usually in a similar geographical area, and generally shared common beliefs and behaviors.

Although this paper uses the definition of community given by Cobigo et al. (2016), several alternate definitions are essential to review because they help understand where the confusion lies in discussions of service-learning. A popular definition in the literature explains community as a stakeholder, as geography, as a group, as a community of practice, and as a system (Keenan & Meenar, 2023). Another definition is as follows: “A systems approach that allows the definition of the elements that compose a system, the boundary, and the structurally coupled environment - while not to be confused with reality - is the most useful definition of community” (Arnold & Wade, 2015, p.672). These definitions provide some additional insights, but exclude important elements needed for a useful definition in this analysis. The definition of Cobigo et al. emphasizes an agency, group, or individual outside of the higher education institution or a person or group that can benefit from working with students, faculty, or staff from the institution. As such, this definition is used hereon because it is broad enough to include a variety of possible community partners.

### ***Definitions of Community Engagement and Service-Learning***

*Community engagement*, another key term, is “the process of working collaboratively with and through groups of people affiliated by geographic proximity, special interest, or similar situations to address issues affecting the well-being of those people” (ATSDR, 2018, p.81). Often, community engagement goals include increasing communication skills, improving overall outcomes in the community, and creating new relationships (Schiavo, 2021). The research reveals downsides or limitations, with the focus being to work *on* rather than *with* the communities. Community engagement has much in common with community organizing, including justice, empowerment, and self-determination (Wallerstein & Duran, 2006). Considered “an umbrella term encompassing a continuum of approaches to engaging

communities of place and interest in activities aimed at improving population health and reducing health inequalities” (Omar-Eves et al., 2013, p.10), community engagement can encompass experiences that vary in impact, from how information is exchanged to who helps administer or run the experience.

Service-learning, another term for community engagement, combines learning objectives in the classroom and service in the community to help students grow intellectually and emotionally. For this paper, community engagement and service-learning are used synonymously. The most often-used definition of service-learning, which is critical for its depth, comes from Bandy (2011),

Service-learning is a teaching and learning strategy integrating meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities. A community engagement pedagogy or teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and build strong communities (p.2).

To achieve service-learning goals, projects need built-in reflection and reciprocity, and, ideally, try to achieve social change (Mason & Dunes, 2019). Service-learning allows students to participate in purposeful service and generates educational opportunities to increase classroom learning and critical reasoning skills (Salam et al., 2019). Further, faculty also benefit from bringing real-life experiences back to the classroom (O’Neill & Short, 2023). The question remains: What is the community’s perspective on service-learning in higher education, and what, if anything, can they gain from the collaboration?



### ***Components of Service-Learning***

Service-learning, as characterized by Kasinath (2013), has several components. The service needs an academic connection, meaning it is related to the curriculum and part of the course objectives and grade, with the objectives and service components being treated equally. In addition, there is a need for community opinion and quality service, in which service projects fulfill a recognized community need. This affects everything from the required training to the timeframe and skills needed to complete tasks. Further, goals must be created to meet the goals of all involved (students, community partners, faculty members, etc.), and students must be introduced appropriately and trained before attending the service project. Other essential components are collaboration and reciprocity, meaning that all involved parties (students, community agency, faculty) gain something from this experience, learning from and teaching one another throughout the process. A reflection component allows students to engage in self-reflection and connect the course and project objectives with their personal experiences. “The hyphen in service-learning represents the reflection that links service to learning and learning to service” (Kasinath, 2013, p.3). Informal and formal reflection is conducted multiple times throughout the experience and is critical because it helps the participant gain self-awareness, which can lead to personal growth. The last component is assessment and evaluation of the effectiveness of service-learning for all involved to check if all the course objectives (learning and service) and tasks were met (Kasinath, 2013).

### ***Reciprocity***

Kasinath (2013) notes reciprocity as a key component of service-learning, and Petri (2012) affirms its importance by arguing that reciprocity must exist between institutions and their community partners. Jacoby (2003, as cited by Petri, 2012) states:

reciprocity is necessary for the students to be a part of transformational learning and necessary to feel empowered to take action toward social change. In service-learning, reciprocal learning is fundamental: ‘Service-learning is a philosophy of reciprocity which implies a concerted effort to move from charity to justice (p.13).

This view implies that underlying this activity are questions of power, which can be a challenge regarding research. Reciprocity is often stated but not enacted—lip service is given to community partnerships without true reciprocity regarding learning objectives and educational/outcome goals. The best service-learning occurs when reciprocity is at the forefront, and all parties benefit equally. Without reciprocity, service-learning is seen as volunteering (Pompa, 2002).

As with *community*, the definition of the term *reciprocity* is crucial for service-learning and community engagement. Although expressed as fundamental to projects described in the literature, it lacks conceptualization (Dostilio et al., 2012). According to one article, reciprocity can be defined as a negotiation process, working *with* a partner instead of working *for* a partner (Kliwer et al., 2010); it needs to be defined for common understanding. “Mutually beneficial” and “reciprocal” are often used interchangeably within research and practice, but that is not always accurate. John Saltmarsh and colleagues (2011) shared in their research that in the 2006 Carnegie community-engaged classification applications, the biggest obstacle was creating and sustaining reciprocal campus-community relationships. In the same study, higher-learning institutions only vaguely described how they believed they were achieving true reciprocity with their communities. Achieving reciprocity is a goal of service-learning; however, there is also value in understanding the goals of the community partner, which needs to be added to the research literature.

Reciprocity is linked to social justice, a critical theme in all higher education institutions, and essential to creating genuine partnerships between community educators, community, and students. Scager et al. (2016) argue that social-learning projects and relationships help teach social justice and create a fairer society. Reciprocity in the service-learning experience can lead to social justice by utilizing the idea that everyone is a teacher and a student. Students bring their knowledge to the community, and the community imparts its knowledge to the students--neither is greater than the other. As a result, these projects and experiences can reveal the true colors of the community's and society's social, political, and economic inequalities (Schiavo, 2021). This can start with focusing on how the project is developed with the community and how social justice is represented.

Critiques of service-learning focus on the fact that the experience and projects tend to meet students' needs before the community partners' needs (Resch & Schrittester, 2023). Creating an opportunity to communicate each participant's (students, faculty, community partners) goals can help meet them all. Brown (2001) emphasizes that creating solid partnerships between the community and the institution of higher learning is as essential as meeting the student's learning goals. A "critical" service-learning experience aims to ensure positive gains for all parties. One solution is to create longer-lasting service-learning projects to help avoid staff and student turnover. Semester long or continual projects can also help to create "critical" service-learning experiences by avoiding constant "turn-over" (Harkins, 2020). Following these ideas can help distribute power more evenly among the students, the community partners, and the faculty.

### ***Concerns of Service-Learning and Community Engagement***

The focal problem identified here is that service-learning and community engagement need more community participation and community opinion on service-learning. By concentrating on partnerships (i.e., networks), all parties can identify the challenges and strategize to develop individual partnerships into a more extensive community engagement network (Bringle et al., 2009). A problem noted by Lawlor and Neal (2016) is that once the service-learning project begins, sometimes the relationships themselves need to be formally examined by participants through data accumulation and testing. The collection of data from the community perspective on all aspects of the projects, including implementation and design, has been minimal (Sgoutas-Emch & Guerrieri, 2020). This problem reinforces the issues related to defining “community engagement” without the community's perspective.

More evidence-based research is needed on the role of the greater community and its perceptions and expectations of universities and their effects on university-community engagement. Continuously increasing collaboration between universities and community agencies can be a multifaceted process; many individuals with very different agendas are involved, clearly showing the need to identify appropriate roles and models (Goddard et al., 2016). To ensure reciprocity and a positive experience for all parties involved in the project, more information is needed to help address the barriers. Significant challenges appear linked to priorities, timelines, and goals (Holland et al., 2018; Lawlor & Neal, 2016), including students' schedules and time in the community, which may be overlooked.

### ***Concerns with Partnership, Trust, and Open Communication***

Evaluations completed after service-learning projects state that trusting partnerships are grounded in open communication (Mason & Dunes, 2019; Nelson et al., 2015; Smith, 2015).

Academic research and working with higher education institutions often come with negative perceptions from the community. Trust and open communication from the beginning of the partnership are vital to breaking these negative perceptions. Potential community partners are often wary of the idea that the academics in the partnership are in control -- a perception that can lead community partners to become less trusting and even unwilling to invest in a potential collaboration. On the other hand, strong, positive, and open communication from the beginning, especially from a higher education institution, can negate the impact of these impressions. Focusing on improving interpersonal dynamics is essential in diminishing tensions related to power and control and resources that can lead to the ending of partnerships (Baird & Benson, 2022). While communication and trust may seem inherent to these relationships, they are often overlooked.

Academic partners may work hard with a university's institutional review board (IRB) to gain approval of project protocols. However, community partners may perceive this as an attempt to control project parameters in an undemocratic way. Sometimes, this tension leads academic or community partners to try to manage research activities to reduce stress and keep the process on track. However, this one-way management can lead to breakdowns in communication and trust (Martin et al., 2005, p. 3).

Protocols are necessary for IRB and accreditation, but this can be conflicting for community partners. Faculty and administration may have a siloed perspective regarding project goals and the need to follow institutions' rules and guidelines, focusing on school protocol to lay the foundation for a reliable and duplicative study. When faculty and administration were questioned in Basinger & Bartholomew's (2006) study, they reported believing that all partners benefit from services equally. Educators feel that involving the school and their students in the community is

great for everyone, often without asking for others' opinions. Institutions share their students and resources, which has led to their sense of power. Some institutions believe that since they share their students with the most significant resources in higher education, the community partner should ask for a little more (Petri, 2012).

It has yet to be asked what the community partners experience or how the projects enable participation of all those involved, as demonstrated by research needs on this subject.

Community partners may be losing resources (time, money, staff) by becoming involved in service-learning projects. Often, under-resourced community organizations are asked to use their resources to teach students. In the United States, it is not uncommon for medical schools to pay hospitals to take on student clerks (Kaminski et al., 2021), an approach that the academic/higher-education community should consider for their service-learning students. The imbalance of resources (i.e., students for community resources) is a crucial example of the imbalance in the relationship of higher-education institutions with their service-learning partners.

### ***Forced Volunteerism and Hierarchies***

One criticism of service-learning and community engagement is suggested by the term "voluntold." This is a new phrase adopted from the military, where it is strongly suggested that individuals do something (i.e., volunteer), and if they do not, they will be penalized (i.e., for not following orders). In the case of community engagement, some students consider service-learning to be "forced volunteerism." Others have found that it can reinforce hierarchies and appear patriarchal (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002; McBride et al., 2006). This view follows from the idea that students are the most critical aspect of these projects; essentially, students are placed higher on the hierarchy than the community partners and their needs. Pienkowski (2017) further discusses some of Pompa's (2002) research findings and the reservation that unless

facilitated with great care and consciousness, ‘service’ can unwittingly become an exercise in patronization, also known as ‘colonization,’ in Canada. In a society filled with hierarchical structures and patriarchal philosophies, service-learning’s potential danger is to become the very thing it seeks to avoid (2017).

To avoid the hierarchy, service-learning should include monitoring the equality and equity of the parties (i.e., student and community partner). This problem of the hierarchy in service-learning underscores the importance of creating a common language and goals, and ensuring reciprocity within service-learning projects. Given this situation, many communities surrounding universities and colleges only sometimes think highly of those academic institutions. Exploitation in the past has led to a large gap between institutions and community agencies (Campus Compact, 2022), and this history can impact current relationships and perceptions. Higher education institutions must contact community partners and try to mend past misunderstandings from projects or service-learning experiences from all parties involved. Furthermore, each party involved (community and higher education institutions) is dealing with its own struggles and politics. Some have even suggested that the community agencies are the problems that need to be fixed, and that the higher education institutions, service-learning projects, and partnerships are the only solution (Enos & Morton, 2003). If higher education institutions always consider the community as the problem to be fixed, this belief can cause more harm than good.

### ***Crossing Boundaries Between Higher Education and Community Partners***

Over the past few years, the community’s role in service-learning has been of concern. One idea to help facilitate a two-way dialogue between partners has been to identify “boundary spanners,” individuals who work across organizational red tape to accomplish service-learning

project objectives. Adams (2014) found that identifying people willing to work across the boundary between institutions and communities can enhance relationships and future partnerships. If a boundary spanner is found early in the partnership, many barriers can be overcome before the project begins.

Blending the science and art of service-learning helps build connections and relationships, promoting rapport and commonality.

In practice, community engagement is a blend of science and art. Science comes from sociology, public policy, psychology, and other disciplines. It also comes from organizing concepts drawn from the literature on community participation, community development, constituency-building, and community psychology. The art comes from the understanding, skill, and sensitivity used to apply and adapt the science to fit the community and the purposes of specific engagement efforts. (ATSDR, 2018, p.6).

Sharing the idea that service-learning crosses disciplines and agencies and can appeal to the community, students, and higher education institutions. This review of the literature has identified several themes related to the central issue of community perspective, including reciprocity and the importance of maintaining common definitions. To further frame the problem, the literature on these issues is presented based on three perspectives: educational, systems and political.

**Educational Perspective on Service-Learning and Community Engagement.** Service-learning is, first and foremost, an educational activity. One main goal of colleges and universities is to help shape graduates who are open-minded, respectful, engaged in social issues, and involved in and caring about their community (Holland et al., 2018). A way of doing this is to provide students with opportunities for service-learning and community engagement, which



requires students to learn the course material and use it to build a stronger community connection (Beer et al., 2014; Colvin, 2020).

From an educational perspective, implementing service-learning and community engagement as an instructional methodology can be helpful. Service-learning originates in experiential activities defined by John Dewey (1938), Paulo Freire 1970, and David Kolb (1985). This type of education becomes transitional, where self-reflection combined with action and theory is applied (Colvin, 2020). This pedagogy can help students to understand real-world challenges they may not find in the textbook. These three prominent educators and researchers argue that experiential education is reciprocal between the learner and the community. In addition to meeting course and service objectives through service-learning, all parties involved can link their learning to other aspects of their lives, especially regarding issues of equity, power, and educational resources (Bringle et al, 2022). Service-learning can be a part of any discipline or program, helping to fulfill course objectives/curriculum and examine implicit goals such as social justice and politics.

Educators also support using service-learning and community engagement to enhance the curriculum. Researchers found that students for whom service-learning was a course requirement learned more about their assigned materials, building a community relationship, and developing a caring attitude (Farber & Bishop, 2018). Educators' obsession with defining service-learning may be distracting to many community groups. Community partners often need clarification on whether the students are volunteering, getting graded, or fulfilling a different course requirement (Resch & Schrittester, 2023). Involving communities from the beginning can provide clarification, perhaps leading to a standard operational definition of service-learning and community engagement.

Higher education institutions often emphasize the importance of service-learning and community engagement on their websites, during tours, and in communicating with their students, faculty, and the community. However, these projects often require funding and internal support from the administration (Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2011). The Carnegie Foundation has an elective classification for community engagement, and only 196 school campuses applied during its first two cycles. Through elective classification, schools can apply based on their desire to be known for this type of program. The Carnegie Foundation does not come to schools and ask them to apply; interested schools apply independently. This shows the disconnect between what the higher education institutions say and what they do (Carnegie Foundation, 2023). Service-learning projects can only develop over time; they require staff, collaboration, and planning. Institutions must stand behind service-learning and give money and staff to support these projects. The classification involves rigor, meaning, and purpose:

The elective classification involves data collection and documentation of important aspects of institutional mission, identity, and commitments and requires substantial effort invested by participating institutions. It is an evidence-based documentation of institutional practice for self-assessment and quality improvement. In this way, it is similar to an accreditation process of self-study. A National Review Panel reviews the documentation to determine whether the institution qualifies for recognition as a community-engaged institution. (Carnegie Foundation, 2023, p. 4).

A higher educational institution caring about service-learning could demonstrate their commitment by applying to Carnegie Foundations Classification.

Educators have noted service-learning and community engagement as a movement to transform higher education, especially over the last decade. The practices have gained

acknowledgment as a holistic pedagogy (Salam et al., 2019) because of the emphasis on the self-reflection and growth of all involved parties. This is significant because it supports students' emotional, social, ethical, and academic needs; community partners; and higher education institutions. In 2014, the National Society for Experiential Education awards were overwhelmingly distributed to institutionalized service-learning programs and promoters. COVID-19 allowed faculty, institutions, and community partners to get creative while developing projects. Today, awards are given for service-learning achievements such as the Campus Compact Impact Awards, which include the Thomas Ehrlich Civically Engaged Faculty Award and the Nadinne Cruz Community Engagement Professional Award.

In Dewey's 1932 seminal work, community engagement and service-learning represent an educational philosophy that led the way for a pedagogy connecting practice and theory, what he called linking "action and doing on the one hand, and knowledge and understanding on the other" (Pienkowski, 2017, p.47). Dewey's approach to education connects knowledge, moral conduct, theory, and practice at all levels (school, community, world). It calls for reorienting the higher education institutions' relationship with the community, continuously focusing on experiential education and linking academic learning with learning through experience. In Dewey's 1938 publication, central to his educational philosophy is the individual's engagement in the world and bringing meaning into existence (Cardona, 2016). Dewey's books, theories, and research on community engagement and experiential learning remain the foundation of this educational perspective today.

The educational perspective only focuses on the students, faculty, scholarship, and higher education institutions. It tends to view the community as a resource for educating students, but that is where its perceived value ends. At the same time, while some literature on the value of

service-learning for educational institutions exists, it is not robust, and remains an area of needed research.

**Systems Perspective on Service-learning and Community Engagement.** The systems perspective views the concept of service-learning by recognizing its necessary parts (i.e., students, faculty, agency) and how they work together to achieve a goal. From a systems perspective, “a community is similar to a living creature, encompassing different parts that represent specialized functions, activities, or interests, each operating within specific boundaries to meet community needs” (ATSDR, 2018, p.3). Examples of systems working toward specific goals include a school focusing on education, a restaurant focusing on feeding its patrons, for-profit businesses focusing on making money, religious groups centering on the spiritual welfare of people, and healthcare agencies centering on treating physical injuries and diseases (ATSDR, 2018). Like any system, for a community to function successfully, all pieces must carry out their small roles, effectively connecting to the operation of the whole. Although the system may have one focus, for example, a school’s focus to educate, other parts of the system (i.e., cafeteria, gym, etc.), allow for achieving other functions as well (i.e., providing food and exercise).

From a systems perspective, it is essential to understand how participants at all levels of the community function and contribute to the outcome. Understanding how the various players at all levels contribute to the outcome is essential. Understanding how participants define their roles is important, so it is essential to ask community partners how they want to be recognized, rather than making assumptions based on past experience. In a strong and stable community, individual participants rely on each other to resolve problems and work towards well-being. Addressing the community’s issues requires incorporating, collaborating and coordinating resources from all parts (ATSDR, 2018).

Just as systems themselves have many pieces, systems thinking requires various steps, including observing events or data, identifying patterns of behavior over time, and developing underlying structures that drive the events and patterns (Zucher et al., 2018). Understanding a system involves analyzing causal relationships between its parts, not just individual components, from various perspectives. Once a plan is formulated, tools, experts, and high-power interventions are used to enable the system transformation (Goodman, 2018). Understanding systems and systems theory can help in several aspects and reveals countless frameworks, concepts, (Lasker, 2019).

Systems thinking is taught in all social service educational programs and nonprofit agencies to promote understanding of the variety of needs within a system and how they work together or against each other. Completion of a service-learning project can raise the community agency's awareness of systems issues they did not know existed. One example is an agency penalizing participants who are late because their parking lot was one mile away, an issue brought to the agency's attention by students working on projects at the facility. Systems theory can be taught through books and case studies. However, when taught through community engagement and service-learning projects, students retain the knowledge they gain because it stays with them physically and emotionally.

Experiential learning is adjacent to service-learning and has proven to assist students in gaining valuable skills in higher education settings. Increased academic success has been directly linked to service-learning and skill development for all aspects of students' lives. When service-learning was part of a science discipline, technical and analytical skills were noted to increase along with the ability to communicate specific complex scientific concepts (Lasker, 2019). When service-learning objectives are embedded in the course, students can support the

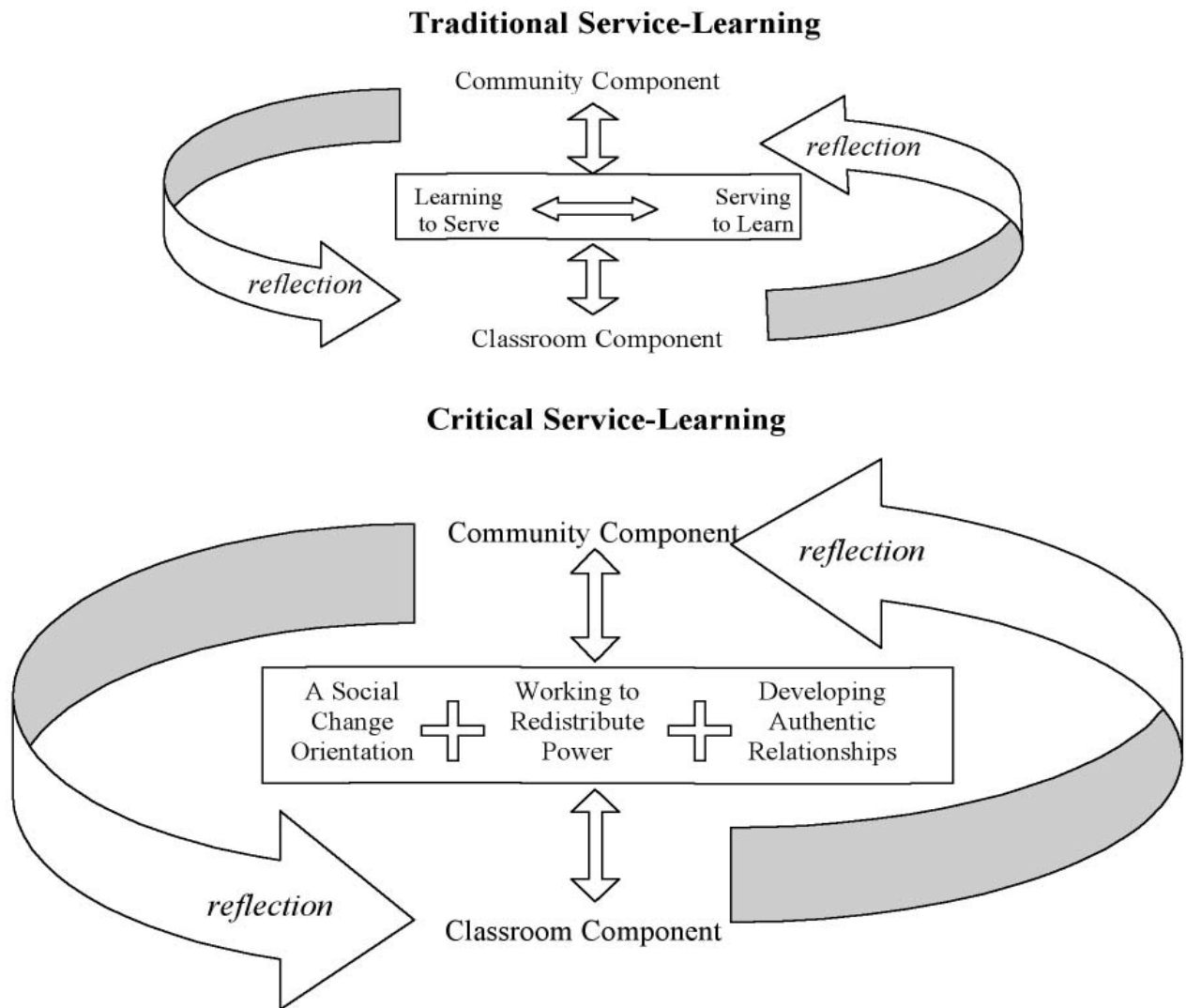
community by addressing the identified issue. Often, students' learning extends beyond their project objectives, and they discover themes, such as that everything is a part of the system. "One specific example of linking systems thinking with service-learning was in a chemistry classroom where it helped provide a framework for students to tackle higher-order problem-solving at the systems level while encouraging interdisciplinary partnerships as key" (Lasker, 2019, p. 2713). Understanding systems theory can help in solving minor problems and projects while learning about the more extensive systems at work in the community. Reciprocally, service-learning can help students understand systems theory through their own experiences with relationships and connections in the community (Resch & Schritteser, 2021).

The most successful systems are based on solid relationships and communication between the groups or parts, yet many social networks have strengths and weaknesses. Strong social ties that benefit members of one group may also be used to exclude others outside the group from sharing those resources (O'Mara-Eves et al., 2013). Within a system, equality does not mean equity, and systems must consider the power differential between parts. Even though they work together to achieve a shared goal, some parts try to overpower the others.

Lasker (2019) explains four steps of systems thinking: understanding the system, introducing collaboration, assessing the outcome, and making changes as needed. These steps can be used during the implementation process of service-learning projects to provide students with an opportunity to see their role in the project system, and they align directly with some of the steps of community engagement and service-learning. Figure 1 demonstrates how the collaborative aspects of systems thinking equate very well with developing authentic relationships from critical service-learning. (See Figure 1)

**Figure 1.**

Traditional vs. critical service-learning



Applying Mitchell's diagram can help future service-learning and community engagement projects align with a systems perspective.

**Political Perspective on Service-Learning and Community Engagement.** The political perspective/movement surrounding service-learning and community engagement advances the idea that the process and experience are a joint responsibility between the communities and

higher education institutions. Through the democratic process, they can work together to confront problems and enact change. Dewey is the inspiration for democratic, experiential community engagement. Dewey's work has been the foundation for education, connecting knowledge and skills learned through experience and reflection in an experience outside the classroom. This learning experience has promoted democratic instructional practices to create democratic society (Kiess, 2021). Learning about the democratic process adds value to incorporating service-learning into various disciplines and programs of study.

Shih (2018) points out that Frierre's (1970) critical theory highlights the political nature of education, so utilizing an open-minded and problem-solving approach when evaluating social systems and education's civic responsibilities is necessary. Community engagement and service-learning can help educate students and participants about democracy and facilitate the enactment of political changes in the community. One of the primary purposes of the American education system is to educate students about democracy and to create schools and institutions that foster a democratic society. One way to accomplish both these purposes is to implement a service-learning project within the curriculum (You & Rud, 2010), by using a democratic process to choose the project and again to choose roles within the project. Service-learning can help meet curriculum goals and educate students about democracy beyond reading a textbook or listening to a professor sharing an opinion.

The Kettering Foundation (2008) identified ways to help enhance democratic citizenship as a priority at higher education institutions and as it relates to the state of civic engagement. The Presidents' Declaration on Civic Responsibility of Higher Education was an attempt by over 500 college and university presidents to re-establish the importance of education through service-learning and civic engagement, to teach democracy, and to increase youths' involvement in the



political world (Saltmarsh & Hatrley, 2011). Even though educational institutions have increased service-learning and community engagement throughout the curriculum, a fundamental understanding of political engagement still needs improvement. Those promoting and supporting service-learning in higher education institutions believe individuals running the programs need the opportunity to teach the importance of political engagement.

Null (2009), in reviewing a book by Benson, Harkavy, and Puckett (2009), emphasized what institutions must do to create the environment for continuous civic engagement. They suggest that higher education institutions must do things differently to contribute to a democratic revolution. Much needs to change to achieve this transformation. To start, universities must re-evaluate and align their structures democratically while creating wide-ranging, effective strategies (Saltmarsh, 1997). Most importantly, higher education institutions need to align what they say with their actions. They must become part of the solution and be dedicated to transforming themselves into socially responsible civic institutions. Over fifty years ago, the most important goal of higher education was to teach and emulate democratic values and ideals (Zook, 1947). Since then, service-learning has increasingly gained national attention: politicians see it as a possible way to reengage youth with academic and civic values. Several fiscally sound nonprofit organizations have made it the foundation of their financial grants, funding projects within secondary education (National et al. for Liberal Education (NCSL), 2002; Seifer & Connors, 2007).

Saltmarsh (2011) discusses an early publication in which Dewey states that the community is a democracy, a parallel to principles associated with life. Dewey's ideas made discussing education, politics, and philosophy essential for community and service-learning. The same article suggests that democratic culture and education (which service-learning is part of)

need to impact all humans and their associations (Saltmarsh, 1997). Even though Dewey's writings were from the early 1900s, the ideas are still relevant today. Education lives within our democratic and society and allows learning of our political systems.

Kolb's experiential learning theory is based on Dewey's early studies and research (1985). Dewey's writings inform service-learning through education, an idea of community and democratic life, and a philosophy that individual engagement leads to a greater, stronger society. Dewey never used the term "community engagement or service-learning"; his writing describes five areas critical to the service-learning field today. Saltmarsh (1996) discusses these five areas: "1) linking education to experience, 2) democratic community, 3) social service, 4) reflective inquiry, and 5) education for social transformation" (p.15). Together, they promote the teaching of democratic values and citizenship.

In summary, service-learning can be viewed from three perspectives. First, the educational perspective focuses on community engagement and service-learning as a pedagogy. The students and higher education institutions have been the focus of this perspective in the past. In the future, using the educational lens to enhance the possible educational outcomes for the communities involved is vital. Second, the system perspective acknowledges each participant (student/community/faculty) as a part of a whole, and all pieces must work together or, at minimum, have a clear language and way to communicate for a successful experience. Third, the political perspective on service-learning and community engagement clearly grows from Dewey's advocacy of teaching democracy and political thought to all learners (1938). Although this may not be covered during each service-learning and community engagement project, it is an underlying goal of the experience.

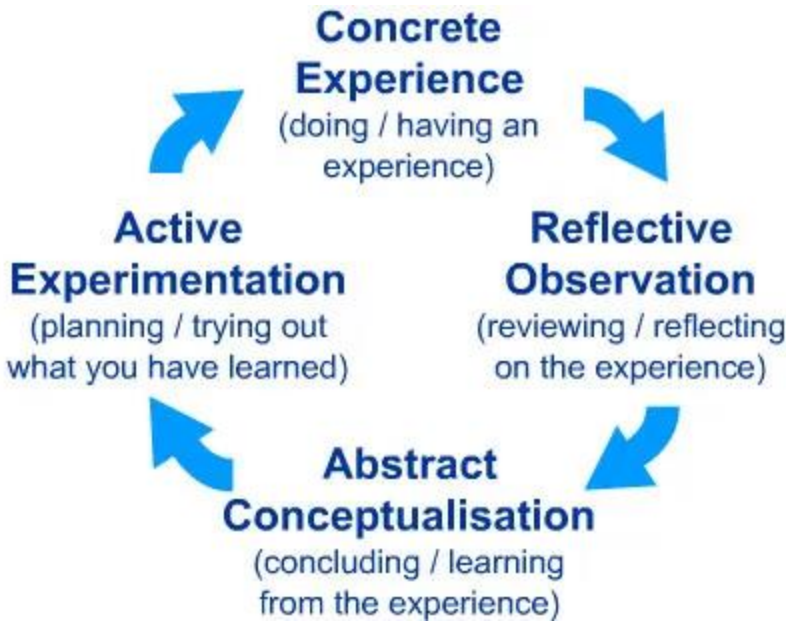
### **Analysis**

## **Experiential Learning Theory**

David Kolb founded experiential learning theory (ELT) (1985) and was influenced by the great philosophers before him, including John Dewey and Jean Piaget. One of the best-known learning theories in higher education, ELT, consists of four stages: (1) Concrete experience occurs when a student engages in a new experience and deciphers an experience from the past in a new way. For service-learning, this stage aligns with the beginning of the project, when students and the community recognize similar experiences. (2) Reflective observation occurs when the student reflects on the experience. At this stage, the student and the community can explore aspects of this experience together. (3) Abstract conceptualization occurs when the student creates a new idea based on reflection and experience. At this point, the student can present or create a final manageable outcome to help themselves and the community based on the first two steps. (4) Active experimentation occurs when the individual applies the new idea to the current situation. The student and community can assemble to process and plan for new projects and collaborations. This process has no time limit (Healey & Jenkins, 2017). (see Figure 2)

### **Figure 2.**

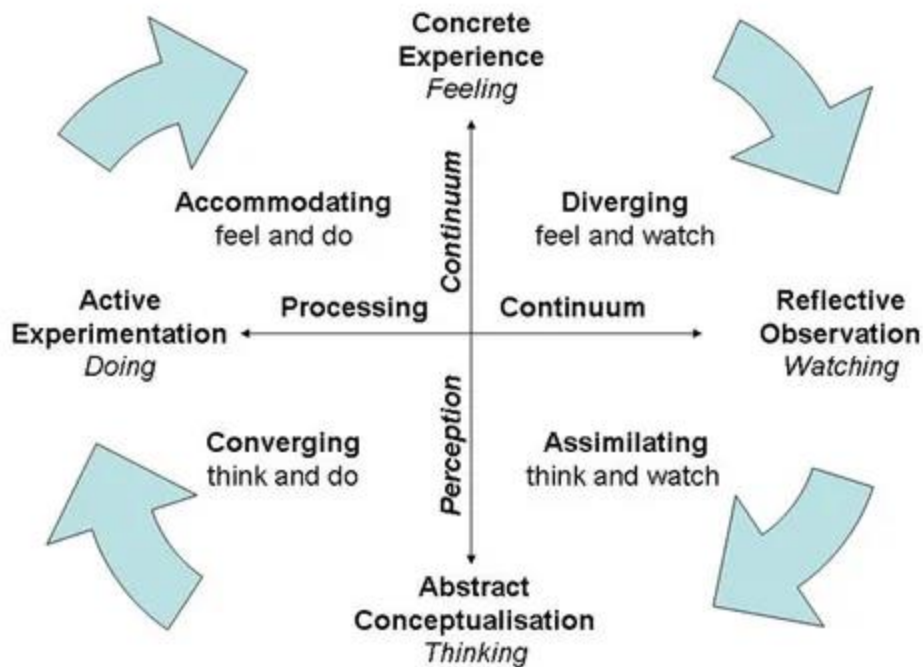
Experiential Learning Cycle



Kolb (1985) also created four learning styles based on the learning cycle, noting that a person's style can be influenced by the environment, social or physical influences, cognitive abilities, and educational experience. (1) Diverging is when individuals can look at things from a unique perspective, observing on the outside instead of doing. Imagination is a significant part of this style. (2) Assimilating involves learners getting clear information. These individuals like to use analytics, focusing on abstract concepts and reflective observation in the experiential learning style. (3) Converging learners like to solve problems, applying what they have learned in the past to practical situations. They can be known to use live experimenting. 4) Accommodating learners prefer to be helpful. They like new challenges, use their instincts to complete tasks, and use active experimentation (Anderson & Adams, 1992; Healey & Jenkins, 2017; Kolb, 1985). (see Figure 3)

### Figure 3

Kolb's Two Continuums of Experiential Learning, (2021)



Service-learning and community engagement are two ways of using ELT, as developed by Kolb, to educate students (Umpleby, 2011). Using the ELT lens, the four stages and learning styles can help identify where the students, faculty, and community agencies are in this process and try to align like parties for optimized reciprocity.

### ***Reflection Theory***

Reflection is not only a term used in higher education curricula, especially in the helping professions. It is a powerful tool in service-learning and community engagement, an educational modality focusing on reflection after a student's involvement in a community project or experience. Reflection is the key to unlocking the students' moral and academic growth potential. Since service-learning became a pedagogy in education, theorists and faculty have tried to identify standard definitions and values as a field (Saltmarsh, 1997). Reflection needs to be

defined, communicated, and understood by all parties involved, emphasizing the crucial role of each individual in the process.

Saltmarsh (1997), in his earlier works, discusses the learner's attainment of knowledge through reflection. Peters and Jandrić (2017) mention that individuals become aware of their attitudes when they take the time to reflect upon an experience after it has ended. Reflective learning can help individuals recognize the difference between action and thought. Reflection as a means to personal and educational growth is essential to experiential learning and connects the service activity with associated knowledge. Finally, reflection makes the difference between community service or volunteering and true service-learning (Saltmarsh,1997).

In the reflective process, the "value of knowledge is subordinate to its use in thinking" (Collins, 2019, p.121). Encouraging reflective thinking can help learners escape black-and-white, in-the-box thinking, and helps them move their learning beyond formal education. The connection between thought and action only happens during reflection, which then makes further action possible. Reflection allows an experience to be processed, understood, and communicated. In order to process their experience, individuals need to view it from an outside perspective; this allows them to understand how others may experience the event, which leads to a tremendous appreciation of differences in personal experience. (Peters & Jandrić, 2017). Reflective inquiry connects pieces of information and then makes a connection between purpose and result (Peters & Jandrić, 2017).

Reflection is a primary instrument through which participants in service-learning projects make sense of their experiences and, ideally, challenge their previously held perceptions. Confronting beliefs that are deeply rooted in social and cultural systems—such as stereotypes about people experiencing homelessness or about single mothers on welfare—constitutes a

challenging task if individuals have not been exposed to readings and discussions about oppression (Ward et al., 2000; Williams, 2002). Reflection theory is directly connected to experimental learning, service-learning, and community engagement. Reflection helps the learner derive deeper meaning from the experience, which can then be connected to the coursework. Reflection can also help our community become more democratic (Saltmarsh, 1997) and is the key to the growth of service-learning as well as the growth of the individual, institution, and community.

### **Feminist Theory**

Feminism and feminist theory can be described as a movement for social justice and equality. This lens helps us to clearly see the gender differences, especially the greater opportunities available for males, in all areas of our lives (Bell et al., 2019). Feminist theory is often linked to social change and advocacy because it is recognized as a theory of action. Community engagement and service-learning are also closely related to these concepts. Both feminist theory and service-learning share a focus on the groups instead of the individual. They also both teach social responsibility and usually have an advocacy or social justice component (Bosch et al., 2021). Public versus private institutions have been noted to lead to gendering parts of our communities and have an influence on those with whom the institutions create projects (Felski, 1989). Public institutions sometimes can partner with any community members, while private institutions have stricter policies, often because of their funding source.

Feminist theory is applied in pursuit of equality and justice for all. The work of feminist scholars continues to fight against inequality, oppression, and injustice (Seethaler, 2014)—and not only for women; they are looking for equality for all. Service-learning projects shaped by this theory can offer additional positive outcomes, such as social change, and promote discussions

regarding oppression and privilege. The feminist lens can help students see and understand the oppression created while participating in a service-learning project. This theory helps students look at service-learning projects holistically instead of idealistically (Seethaler, 2014). Feminist theory can help students, faculty, and the community collaborate in an equitable partnership by keeping oppression, power, and privilege at the forefront.

Women and gender studies classes are not the only places feminist theories or ideas can be applied to service-learning projects. When taught and practiced through the feminist lens, service-learning becomes more instrumental as a social justice tool. Implementing women and gender studies texts, concepts, and exercises in service-learning classes across the curriculum—not just in feminist-based courses—introduces students to an activist mindset focusing on political engagement and lasting social transformation (Zaborskis, 2018). It has been stated that service-learning should focus on empowerment while teaching empathy, and the history of powerlessness and power of all involved parties should always be kept in mind (Seethaler, 2014). Feminist service-learning, with its explicit teaching and focus on oppression and power, promises to meet these objectives successfully.

By its definition and purpose, service through the lens of feminist theory is much closer to activism than volunteering. Sometimes service-learning projects can be viewed negatively by institutions or communities because they focus too much on activism and thus can be seen as too political (Andrews & Leonard, 2018). Service-learning can help achieve activism and advocacy while completing a project to both help our community and enhance our classroom goals. Although the project's purpose may be to help advocate for a community need, it may be interpreted as fighting oppression and regarded as a “non-academic pedagogical tool” (Andrews & Leonard, 2018, p.29). Feminist service-learning offers the opportunity to rectify many



misconceptions about feminism and highlight its focus on social justice, its efforts to fight systems of oppression, and its emphasis on intersections of identity markers. Feminist service-learning lets students practice feminism outside the classroom as a real-life tool for lasting change.

### **Critical Race Theory**

Higher education institutions are almost always the initiators of community engagement and service-learning projects. Often, those involved do not pay attention to or purposely avoid the power differential between the parties and the possible harm this imbalance can cause (Becker & Paul, 2015). Jones (2016) reported that acknowledging the power difference is the first step, and then, as soon as possible, that difference needs to be fixed, or the partnership will create more inequality than existed before it started. Critical race theory (CRT) offers a way to explore social oppression. It has been used to analyze various theories and perspectives but has only touched the surface of community engagement and service-learning literature. CRT has been used in service-learning projects to explore concerns with the healthcare industry. These have indicated the need to alter healthcare institutions because of the social, political, and economic struggles continuously faced by people of color (Becker & Paul, 2015).

When utilizing CRT, the projects should be led by communities that have been marginalized and desire to transform. Higher education institutions must recognize the power and domination that structures exert over each other, people, and communities and commit to transformation within themselves to help stop the cycle (Vergee, 2012). The faculty or institution needs to conduct research to understand the history and structures that may have led to inequality and to help create service-learning and community engagement projects that help alleviate oppression. It has been suggested that for service-learning projects in Black, Indigenous, and

Other People of Color communities, it is essential for the institutions to look within themselves for the various forms of injustices and fix them (Vergee, 2012). This acknowledges that oppression and racism exist, and that ignoring them during service-learning projects could be detrimental to students, the institution, and the community. Even though individuals would like to pretend these issues do not exist, they do. If we have reciprocity with everyone at the table, we can ensure equitable projects and experiences.

Community members are concerned that these projects can reinforce prejudiced beliefs (Schiavo, 2021), and they worry that these experiences support negative stereotypes surrounding race, gender, and sexuality. Critical race theorists continue to uncover how these projects can have a connection to adding to an already broken system infused with racial inequality. Meanwhile, some academics feel that the communities may need to change their perspective on students and higher education institutions (Felten & Clayton, 2011). If we know that students gain knowledge and a shift in perspective about the community and race, can communities change in knowledge and perspective? For example, some research has found that service-learning projects can help shift negative stereotypes and bias about disregarded populations, such as incarcerated youth, the unhoused population, and immigrants (Mitschke & Petrovich, 2011; Plummer et al., 2021).

Community engagement projects can enable students to identify types of oppression that exist in our world, such as that based on gender and class, and to understand how poverty is a systemic and societal problem instead of something deserving of blame. (Jacob & Lum, 2012; Mebert, et. al, 2020). Power differentials can exist between individuals, institutions, and communities; recognizing them can help promote learning and change. Students who are accustomed to these unequal partnerships could be inclined to reproduce them. Educators must

be cognizant not to create an “us-versus-them” mentality for students in a service-learning course focused on racial inequalities because they can unconsciously fuel racism (Becker & Paul, 2015).

A possible positive educational experience with this approach is that it embeds students into their community, where they have the opportunity to witness examples of structural inequalities. They can complete their service hours while observing the experience of those living with structural inequalities. Institutionalized service-learning can be a significant problem. Educators tell students to pick their project and placement based on their preferences and future goals, since it can enhance their resume. (Chovanec et al., 2012). Carefully worded instructions about the service-learning projects are essential. In many cases, students are learning about inequality theoretically (Gaughan, 2002), which is valuable but has more impact in the context of faculty-embedded service-learning pedagogy (Mitchell, 2008). Moving away from “using” community agencies and service-learning projects to meet the student's needs is essential to maintain reciprocity. This practice only perpetuates the cycles of privilege and power.

In one study, Greene (2014) found that going into “underprivileged” communities did not help her students understand the systems of oppression that keep the individuals stuck in their social and economic positions. This thought process can lead to the danger of service-learning that confirms bias and prejudice instead of fighting it. It could be problematic if students are not exposed to challenging readings or critical thinking focused on oppression and privilege. These students practice what Fricker (2007) calls “epistemic injustice” by discrediting the values and experiences of those outside their community, not seeing them as knowledgeable, and imposing their privileged understanding of life onto others (p.281).

In summary, both feminist and critical race theories examine community engagement through a lens of privilege, power, and oppression. From the educational, political, and systems

perspectives, the power is in the hands of the institution and the students. They set boundaries, and the community needs to follow them. These perspectives tie directly into the definition of service-learning proposed in this paper by acknowledging the importance of an exchange of knowledge and resources in the context of a mutually beneficial partnership with reciprocity, while considering the power differential and role of the system.

### **Ethical Implications**

If the community does not acquire a greater role in the design and direction of community engagement, the power gap will keep growing, and eventually, the community will only want to engage in these projects once. There are three common ethical critiques of higher education's relationship with communities. The first is the need for more respect for communities and the existing assets. One example is students wanting to impose a solution to fix problems rather than partner with the community agencies. This mindset can be harmful, and if the universities and communities do not work through the problem at the same table, the students are learning, through the hidden assumption, that they are better than those with whom they are working. (Fricker, 2007; Mitchell, 2007; Mitchell, 2008; Mitchell, 2013)

The second ethical critique is that research extracts knowledge without crediting or benefiting communities. Often, faculty or students obtain data for journal articles from community agencies, and the community never sees it again. (Mitchell, 2007; Mitchell, 2013). These projects often lead to publications by students and faculty to help with promotions or career advancement and assistance in applications to graduate programs. If schools do not share these data and findings with the communities from which they are extracted, they are potentially doing more harm than good. It is unethical to essentially “use” the community.

The third ethical critique is that universities operate like businesses and pursue institutional purposes that detract from communities. One example is using community agency resources, such as land (Fricker, 2007; Mitchell, 2013). Ultimately, an institution is a business that makes decisions based on money, which can cause an ethical dilemma when the purpose is service-learning and community engagement.

The way we define community can have ethical implications. The word *community* has several definitions and, depending on how it is being used, can be seen as a product or an exchange. Sometimes we refer to working with or within the community; in reality, we are working with an agency that is not controlled by the community but instead the other than those served by the nonprofit organization (Stoeker & Tryon, 2009). This relates to an important concept: word choice and language can impact our perception and goals. “We use the rhetoric of ‘reciprocity,’ but what we mean by the term is that we usually transact unskilled charity service to the nonprofit in exchange for student learning.... That is not a community but an isolated free-market economy” (Stoeker & Tryon, 2009, p.172). Reciprocity must be considered a top priority when creating and completing service-learning projects. Ethically, the projects should be equitable and reciprocal.

Finally, before entering a relationship with a community, students need to understand the systemic nature of oppression that works in favor of the status quo. By understanding the oppressive forces on many groups, students can avoid reproducing images of difference if they see preexisting stereotypes affirmed (like the assumption that the poor need to work harder to overcome economic hurdles). This leads to two ideas: social justice issues could begin to be processed through service-learning, and service-learning students can critically engage with issues of racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression (Chovanec et al., 2011; Seider et al.,

2011; Wood, 2017). These are all important ideas in considering service-learning and community engagement through an ethical lens.

### **Policy Recommendations**

The primary focus of policy in service-learning and community engagement should be on reciprocity, defining, creating, and maintaining reciprocity. Since reciprocity is one of the central concepts in service-learning, it would be highly beneficial if the field agreed on one conceptualization or definition for the continuity of projects and research (Dostilio et al., 2012). Reciprocity can be discussed in various ways, leading to confusion and diluted meaning. Reciprocity ensures that the community and community partners benefit as much as the students and institutions from the service-learning/community engagement experience, if not more. Saltmarsh & Hartley, (2011) noted that establishing reciprocal campus-community relationships was one of the biggest obstacles to the 2006 Carnegie community-engaged classification. After the project evaluation, most institutions could only explain minimal or vague reciprocity with their communities and agency partners. A clear outcome for the community should not only be stated but understood.

One possible solution is to have the community be the initiator. Instead of the projects and ideas being generated by higher education institutions, they should start in the community. This could begin with an initiative from the specific community where the service-learning will occur. Incentives can be given to communities to begin creating projects and working with colleges and universities. Changing the project creator can help put the “community” back into “community engagement.”

Another policy recommendation is to design longitudinal programs, such as those created through the Bonner Foundation, to ensure that the community is not left at the end of each

semester and that they are continuously working with the institutions on their schedule. The Bonner Foundation is a nonprofit organization that helps higher education institutions by creating a network, alumni, and tools to support service-learning and community engagement (Miller, 2020). They created the Bonner Scholars Program and Bonner Leaders Program. For this program, more than 67 colleges and universities enable more than 3,000 undergraduates to have a service-learning experience (Hackett, 2022). These students serve 6 to 8 hours a week throughout the school year, leading to solid relationships and reciprocity. Serving for an entire year cements the relationship and provides consistency for everyone involved.

The final recommendation would be to create a third space where higher education institutions and community agencies can meet and have open dialogue. This will allow for an honest exchange and create a common language. Third Places/Spaces is a term coined by Ray Oldenburg; he identifies “‘third places’ as the public places on neutral ground where people can gather and interact. This third place allows people to put aside their concerns and enjoy the company and conversation around them” (2002, p,16). For community engagement purposes, the Third Place/Space would allow for open dialogue and slowly minimize the power imbalance between higher education institutions and agencies in the community.

### **Summary**

Service-learning and community engagement have become cornerstones of higher education institutions across the United States. The Carnegie Community Engagement Classification has helped differentiate the various institutional dedication levels. Service-learning helps reinforce objectives taught in class by showing students many different concepts the community is working through, such as the community's barriers to services and social determinants of health.

While the practice of service-learning and community engagement has been studied, is well known in undergraduate education across a wide range of disciplines and institutions, and has well-documented effects as a “high impact practice” on undergraduate students (Brownell & Swaner, 2010; Kilgo et al., 2015; Rowland, 2020), many gaps still need to be filled. Research has repeatedly documented that students benefit from these often-acknowledged self-fulfilling actions (Eyler et al., 2001), but little research examines the benefit to the community. One significant gap is the community’s perspective on service-learning and community engagement.

This paper and future dissertation research will slowly fill the gap by collaborating with the community partners to explore their feelings and opinions about service-learning. One foundation of service-learning is reciprocity, and having a universal definition and conceptualization of the term is essential. Since creating and sustaining reciprocity is an important policy recommendation and implication for future research, it is essential to do more than describe vaguely how reciprocity is achieved through service-learning (Driscoll, 2008). There has been a loud call for more reciprocal exchanges between universities and communities to revive service-learning from its inaction (Saltmarsh et al., 2011).

The critical first step is to ask the community how they define reciprocity and if this is one of their goals of service-learning and community engagement. Just as we teach healthcare professionals to meet their patients or clients where they are, the same must be said for service-learning and community engagement. If the community does not want or need reciprocity, then reciprocity does not need to be such an essential part of the definition or process.

Ensuring that the service-learning and community engagement project fits the class and curriculum is essential. Although such service-learning has been recommended as a teaching methodology for many different majors and courses, it is essential to acknowledge that it may



only be feasible or valuable for some. Even though it is possible to have service-learning in any course, it may not be implemented in every course (Enos & Morton, 2003). This paper analyzes service-learning and community engagement from educational, political, and systems perspectives, as well as experiential learning, reflection, feminist, and critical race theories, trying to solve the problem of finding the community's perspective. Through these various perspectives and theories, service-learning has been a problem-solving instrument of social and political reform, education, and reflection (Fenwick, 2001).

Service-learning and community engagement projects often ignore issues of power/privilege and exploitation that are endemic in this field. In a society replete with hierarchical structures and patriarchal philosophies, service-learning's potential danger is to become the very thing it seeks to end (Mitchell, 2008, p.61)

Research must continue from the educational perspective, focusing on ELT from various majors, courses, and institutions. The Corporation for National and Community Service reported that 33% of American students undertook service-learning during the civic engagement assessment (Kecskes, 2015). By 2014, The National Survey on Student Engagement data showed that 52% of first-year students and 62% of all seniors had taken at least one service-learning course (Soria & Mitchell, 2017).

Overall, service-learning and community engagement continue to grow within higher education institutions. The Liaison Committee on Medical Education (LCME), the accrediting body for educational programs at schools of allopathic medicine in the USA and Canada, has a standard for service-learning. Element 6.6 of their standards states: "Service-Learning and Community Service: The faculty of a medical school ensures that the medical education program provides sufficient opportunities for, encourages, and supports medical student participation in

service learning and community service activities” (LCME, 2021, p. 8). This is only one example of many healthcare professions requiring service-learning and community engagement.

Two common critiques of service-learning were presented from the educational and experiential learning perspectives: (1) students go to college to learn, not to serve, and (2) higher education’s integration into community issues costs communities more than it gives them (Resch & Schrittmesser, 2023). Universities’ existence might be questioned if those who have credentials or degrees claim to solve society’s problems (Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2011). Service-learning advocates note that there is a need for knowledge to be local and co-created with, rather than for, the community. An opposing view comes from Dewey (1908), who stated that charity "assumes a superior and inferior class and that treats individuals as separate, to whom, in their separateness, good is to be done" (p. 349). With community involvement from the beginning of a project, the experience becomes less and less like charity. Service-learning has been seen as the best kind of help to others when it is indirect and parallel to everyday life (Dewey, 1908). When we look through the political lens, it is hard not to include critical race and feminist theories, since politics and power often go hand in hand.

Through reflection theory and ELT, the focus is on relationships and achieving collaborations that are not transactional but transformative: i.e., collaborations. Reflection is essential in the class and community before, during, and after the service-learning projects for the greatest growth to occur. This process can help interpret different experiences in and with communities and enhance the quality of learning and partnerships. More intention put into the course and project objectives encourages students to see community engagement as an enhanced learning opportunity, not as just an additional requirement. Switching this perception can help overlooked and resistant students become ambassadors for experiential learning. Finally,

through a systems perspective, service-learning and community engagement projects often reveal significant systems-level issues, impacts, and community-level needs to students as they work within and with communities.

After analyzing the problem of the community's role in community engagement from the three perspectives and four theories, we have two clear takeaway messages. First, service-learning and community engagement continue to grow and integrate into higher education. Research continues on barriers and student/faculty perspectives on service-learning and community engagement. However, there remains a wide gap in learning about these projects and experiences from the community perspective. Filling this gap is essential since the definition of service-learning and community engagement includes the word reciprocity, yet the lack of research from the community perspective makes it clear that reciprocity is only sometimes happening; reciprocity would mean we have the same amount of research on the barriers and perspectives of the community. As we advance, research conducted on an aspect of higher education should also be done for the community. The second takeaway is that discussing oppression, power, and social justice is essential when using service-learning and community engagement as experiential learning. Ginwright and Cammarota (2002) criticized how service-learning reinforces social hierarchies and deficits-based approaches to community.

To conclude, high-quality service-learning and community engagement are experiential, enhance practical understanding of course content, meet accreditation requirements, and are intended to benefit community partners. Despite intentions, current service-learning and community engagement activities are not reciprocal. Higher education institutions must meet community needs and work with them as equal partners in the service-learning process to

provide the greatest benefit for all involved. Future research should aim to identify barriers to community involvement and to create solutions.

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