ORIGINAL RESEARCH

The Effect of Pandemic Disruption on Community-Based Leadership Education, Students' Experiences and Learning Outcomes

Elizabeth Goryunova [1,*], Tara Coste [1]

[1.] University of Southern Maine, 04104 Portland, ME, USA

Abstract

As humanity continues to negotiate the short- and long-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, there is a renewed focus worldwide on building an inclusive, socially, and economically just future. This process can be facilitated by nurturing engaged citizens and responsible leaders through a holistic approach to education that combines instruction and community service. Over the last 20 years, community-based learning in the form of the service-learning championed by institutions of higher education worldwide has grown and matured, yet the systematic approach to its curriculum structure, as well as methods for assessment of learning outcomes, continue to evolve. Of specific interest is the effect of COVID-19 pandemic disruption on service-learning instruction and learning outcomes. This qualitative study is focused on community-based pedagogy in leadership education. It explores and compares leadership-related learning outcomes and experiences of students in multiple sections of service-learning-designated course offered by a leadership program at a medium-sized public university in the United States, before and during the COVID-19 pandemic (Spring 2019 and Spring 2020). Study findings offer insights into disruption-resilient service-learning education opportunities.

1 Introduction

Community-based learning is recognized as high-impact pedagogy for enhancing learners' civic engagement, critical reflection, and social awareness [1]. Consequently, there has been an ongoing and growing effort by institutions of higher education worldwide to build community partnerships as a foundation for community-based learning. Higher education institutions are in a unique position to utilize community-based "engaged" scholarship as a springboard for strengthening civic responsibility practices and building inclusive social processes and policies [2,3]. However, the COVID-19 pandemic revealed that neither the community nor educational institutions were prepared for global disruption and isolation. Those have essentially compromised community engagement efforts and threatened community-based learning, along with higher ed institutions' resilience that is cultivated through responsiveness to the needs of local communities.

Facing challenges, learning from them, and looking into the post-pandemic future, universities must not only innovate but also transform their community service and engagement. Now, more than ever, universities must acknowledge that their community engagement efforts should be about being responsive and supportive to specific, current community needs and realities, rather than about logging in a certain number of service hours. Under constrained resources, they must evaluate existing engagement practices, purposes, and relationships for sustainability and meaning. Thus, based on lessons from the COVID-19 disruption, Law [4] emphasizes the following principles of engagement with the community: strategic, sustainable, smart, safe, and sensible. While Rohman [5] refers to the need for educational institutions to focus on partners in vulnerable communities to mitigate the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 in these areas.

This study focuses on community engagement efforts of a leadership program at a medium-sized public university in the United States. The program has a long history of community-based learning that is integral to its mission of developing responsible leaders of the future. Community-focused efforts of its students can be broadly grouped under the following categories: developing community resources, responding to community needs, and supporting the community. As the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded, the scope and experience of service-learning projects had to be re-imagined and adjusted for the disruption, potentially affecting the range of the leadership-related learning outcomes of the service-learning-designated courses.

The qualitative study explored and compared the leadership-related learning outcomes and experiences of students (n = 47 total) in multiple sections of the service-learning designated leadership course, Deliberate Creativity and Innovation, taught before and during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic (Spring 2019 and Spring 2020). Thematic analysis of the narratives of de-identified self-evaluating students' reflections collected at the conclusion of each course offers insights into the limitations imposed by the pandemic disruption on community-based learning and suggests ways to mitigate those limitations. It also points to the emerging opportunities for strategic partnerships that broaden community outreach efforts, increase positive community impact, and sustain the vitality of community-engaged leadership education.

2 Literature review

Community-based learning is rooted in theories of experiential learning that meaningfully combine experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation all taking place in engagement with the community [6]. The Carnegie Foundation, which offers classifications for types of community engagement at institutions of

higher education, defines community engagement as a strategic process with the sole purpose of working with identified groups of people, be they connected by geographical location or identity affiliation, and addressing issues that affect their well-being. This involves a blend of science (sociology, anthropology, and other disciplines) and art (the understanding, skill, and sensitivity) that is used to apply and adapt science in ways that fit the community as well as the purposes of special engagement efforts [1].

According to Carnegie, community engagement can make a tangible contribution to society as it provides community organizations with access to information that is frequently out of their reach, practically addresses critical issues, and works toward a common good. It also benefits students and faculty because it enriches their learning and creative activity, prepares them for engaged citizenship and leadership, strengthens democratic values and civic responsibility, and enhances curriculum, teaching, and scholarship. As such, community-engaged learning translates into interdisciplinary teaching and learning and results in the university's reputation being strengthened [1].

In the last two decades, universities' community engagement has grown, while community-engaged pedagogy has become a global phenomenon and an integral part of education in the U.S., Canada, U.K., Hong Kong, Philippines, Mexico, Japan, and other countries [7-10]. It is supported by national and international organizations, such as the Talloires Network of Engaged Universities (410 members in 79 countries with a combined enrollment of over 6 million students) that advocates for university collaboration and action-research programs [11] and the International Association for Research on Service-Learning & Community Engagement that advances knowledge on the topic [12].

The context of community engagement has matured as well. In the past, most universities'

community-focused initiatives were conceived of and driven by faculty and student perspectives, which inadvertently resulted in community members feeling excluded from the process [13]. Yet the most recent U.S. Campus Compact survey on community-based learning, community partnerships, and civic education in higher education reveals that community partners no longer are only the recipients of help but serve as active co-creators of the engagement process, providing insights about community engagement programs and assisting with course design [14]. It indicates that member institutions are building connections across their campuses and with community partners and expanding their community-based learning and engagement possibilities for students [14]. 396 institutions that responded to the survey (national response rate of 39.52%) reported purposeful and diverse collaboration with community partners on a range of community issues, such as college readiness in K-12 (90%), food security (86%), and individual and community health (85%).

While the objective of community-engaged learning is clear—to have a positive impact on all parties involved (students, faculty, institutions, communities), the systemic approach to practice and the ability to accurately measure the effort and outcomes are still evolving [15,16]. Melaville et al. [17] suggest that to meaningfully connect instruction with the needs of surrounding communities, community-based learning relies on a variety of teaching strategies, such as academically based community service, civic education, environmental education, place-based learning, service learning, and work-based learning. Here, service learning, one of the most common, is conceptualized as a curriculum-based strategy that connects students' academic learning to community service.

Bringle and Clayton [18] define service-learning as a

course or competency-based, credit-bearing educational experience in which students (a) participate in mutually identified service activities that benefit the community and (b) reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of personal values and civic responsibility (pp. 114-115). Jacoby [19] defines service-learning as a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs, together with structured opportunities for reflection designed to achieve desired learning outcomes. While definitions of service-learning may vary, the centrality of community partners to the practice is essential [20].

A substantial and growing scholarly interest in service-learning yields both constructive and critical perspectives on its impact on a broad range of outcomes, across a variety of academic disciplines from applied and health sciences to liberal arts [21]. Thus, Brand et al.'s [22] study of service-learning in geoscience demonstrates increased knowledge and interest in course content as well as students' empowerment to make a difference in their community. Knecht & Fisher's [23] investigation of the service-learning experience of nursing students points at the resulting shattering of students' stereotypes and increased advocacy for the community.

Kilgo et al. [21] liberal-arts-focused research finds service learning to be a significant predictor of political and social involvement, but less so of critical thinking, moral reasoning, or intercultural effectiveness. Yet other studies find positive effects on cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal development, such as improvement of learners' civic awareness, advocacy, diversity-related outcomes, and global perspective [24,25]. Collaboration (team dynamic), communication, creativity, and resourcefulness (designing alternative solutions in lieu of local

resources) were brought up as well [26-28].

Commonly recognized service-learning outcomes, such as a collaborative and empowered approach to solving problems, creativity, communication, civic and global awareness, ethical decision making, and advocacy are representative of the essential cognitive, behavioral, and attitudinal qualities of effective leaders [29,30]. Consequently, Dugan et al.'s [31] multi-institutional study of leadership program delivery demonstrates that community service experience serves as a strong predictor of learners' leadership capacity, due to its powerful potential for developing commitment to action, group skills, building a resilient and innovative spirit for functioning in complex systems, and disrupting assumptions about social systems. Sabbaghi et al. [32] demonstrate a positive effect of service-learning on students' leadership qualities and social justice awareness. Law [9] emphasizes its contribution to developing critical leadership competencies, such as communication, collaboration, cross-cultural competency, social responsibility, and confidence in taking up a leadership role.

Within the broader landscape of community-based learning, the significance of service-learning in leadership development remains underexplored, and even more so its capacity to deliver commonly anticipated leadership-related learning outcomes under conditions of pandemic disruption. As the world grapples with the short and long-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, the disruption of traditional ways for educational institutions to engage with the community undermines the foundation of community-engaged pedagogy. This emphasizes the need to investigate the effect of pandemic disruption on service-learning leadership outcomes and to identify innovative community-engaging opportunities, which could ensure sustained vitality of the service-learning component of the leadership program

and its overall resilience to disruption.

To accomplish these objectives, this qualitative study explored and compared leadership-related learning experiences and outcomes of students in service-learning designated courses of a leadership program at a medium-sized public university in the United States before and during the unfolding of the COVID-19 pandemic. Data analysis points to the disruption-induced shift in the hierarchy of leadership-related learning outcomes. It also highlights considerations for innovative, disruption-proof approaches to existing community-engaged learning practices.

3 Methods

This exploratory study utilizes reflexive thematic analysis: a qualitative method with an open, exploratory, flexible, and iterative nature [33,34] to capture the meaning of students ' individual service-learning outcomes and experiences. Braun & Clarkle [35] identify thematic analysis as a "method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (p. 79), where the focus is on the meaning of the stories 'told' by the data. In this study, a reflexive thematic analysis was applied to the collection of narratives: de-identified self-evaluating concluding reflections of students (n = 47 total) in multiple sections of a service-learning designated leadership program course: Deliberate Creativity & Innovation, offered in Spring 2019 and Spring 2020 (before and during the unfold of COVID-19 pandemic). No demographic data or any other identifying information was collected from students to ensure their confidentiality, and to maintain focus on pandemic disruption as the key determinant of their shared learning experiences.

In their analysis, researchers followed the following steps recommended by Braun & Clarke [33]: first, they got familiar with the data by thoroughly reading all collected narratives. After that, the entire dataset was coded to capture the important meanings conveyed by the narratives. Then, across the meanings, researchers looked for potential patterns. Generated patterns became themes that were subsequently further developed and refined. And finally, themes and meanings were contextualized in relation to the existing scholarly literature. NVIVO qualitative analysis software was utilized to aid with analysis and to generate illustrative word clouds. The 47 de-identified narratives (26 from Spring 2019 and 21 from Spring 2020), yielded the following two overarching themes: Attitudes and behaviors that contribute to a meaningful service-learning experience (with subthemes Before COVID-19 pandemic and During COVID-19 pandemic) and Multitude of leadership development opportunities in service-learning, which are discussed in detail next.

4 Results and Discussion

Service-learning is recognized as a powerful tool for developing attitudes and skills that enable individuals to serve as agents for social change. Across the disciplines, service-learning provides students with opportunities to learn about the impact of social inequity and engage in a team and community collaboration that is inclusive of multiple perspectives, approaches, and priorities for the common good [36]. Those lessons are especially important in the context of leadership education, as they belong among the cognitive, attitudinal, and behavioral competencies recognized by leadership scholars as critical for the leaders of the future [29,30]. As leadership students participate in developing community resources, responding to community needs, and supporting the community, their service-learning experience is intended to facilitate the development of leadership skills and competencies.

Seemiller [36] suggests a framework for a meaningful design of a service-learning program in which learning objectives are aligned with a particular type of service

experience, the community partners are approached to explore existing needs and program capacity to meet those needs, and the ensuing action (service) is followed by a reflection (learning) and assessment of the outcomes for both students and community. Accordingly, each of the leadership program service-learning courses was designed to incorporate the following essential elements: integrated learning, service that addresses an actual community need, collaboration, student voice, civic responsibility, reflection, and evaluation.

Specifically, students were assigned work groups where, over the duration of each course, they identified and addressed an identified community need. To better guide students, the process was structured as a sequence of layered learning tasks with concrete objectives. Students applied the knowledge gained throughout the course to successfully execute their projects and share their results with the entire class. The community perspective was solicited and incorporated into their decision-making process as well as class reports.

One of the critical components of service-learning is reflection: it serves as the processing 'mechanism' that transforms a service experience into a concrete learning experience and an individual growth opportunity [6]. Hence, at the conclusion of each course, students wrote self-evaluating reflections in which they discussed individual learning outcomes and most memorable experiences, as well as related their observations to the course concepts and the broader social, economic, cultural, and political context. As mentioned earlier, the thematic analysis of narratives revealed numerous illustrations of the developmental impact of service-learning on students, including an impressive range of leadership-related learning outcomes such as communication, ethics, consensus building, innovation, collaboration, inclusivity, negotiating across multiple perspectives, flexibility,

and creativity. The two themes that coalesced from the data are 1) Attitudes and behaviors that contribute to a meaningful service-learning experience (such as collaboration, communication, consensus-building, flexibility, creativity, innovation, negotiating across multiple perspectives), and 2) a Multitude of leadership development opportunities in service-learning.

4.1 Attitudes and behaviors that contribute to a meaningful service-learning experience

4.1.1 Before COVID-19 pandemic

To begin with, the decision on the type of community engagement to pursue was a result of an inclusive process, a multi-perspective consensus-building. After being assigned to work groups, students explored each group member's perception and passion about critical challenges in the local community. As the group discussed the future of their collaborative effort, multiple perspectives were inclusively explored, discussed, and the consensus was reached on the community partners to engage with and the type of service to offer, "so the project felt interesting worthwhile, and feasible to everyone" as noted by one of the students. "When coming up with a project idea," writes another "our group was able to maintain an atmosphere of encouragement and acceptance in hearing everyone's ideas, opinions, and concerns. We were able to appreciate the backgrounds and experiences of each group member". Yet another student states that "after all members shared their own ideas, we found that the common interest was helping children and the elderly, particularly elderly veterans".

Some of the group decisions were influenced by individual members' experiences: "20 years ago, I had to live in a youth homeless shelter. Knowing what it is like to be on your own and homeless as a minor enables me to have an understanding of what they might be feeling or going through. We decided that

homelessness is something that has an impact on all of our communities and then narrowed it down to youth homelessness." In other instances, when logistics interfered with group members' ability to develop a shared community service, they were still able to commit to a common service theme. Thus, one group decided on "planting trees, volunteering to help weed invasive species and raking flower beds"; however, due to the geographic distance between their individual locations, each group member completed the service individually and independently in their local community.

After consensus was reached, each group contacted (or visited) community partners to gauge existing needs along with the group's capacity to satisfy those needs. As the reflections demonstrate, at this point, many groups had to adjust their initial expectations about the service they would provide. Thus, one of the groups planned to organize a fundraiser for a local non-profit organization focused on environmental issues. "However, when we approached [the organization] with the proposal, they indicated they had a need on a property to clear it to create an urban pocket-park." The group then visited the site and "quickly realized it wasn't ideal for their original idea." They then met the community's need through a "clean-up project that included a fence sculpture which incorporated the cast-off sticks and branches from the undeveloped lot. The final result was a beautified, neighborhood 'pocket park'".

Another group planned on helping an animal shelter to care for the animals; however, they were directed to the Animal Welfare Society instead, where the program manager expressed an immediate need for outside yard work around the facility since the cold weather had come much sooner than expected. As one of the students wrote, "Admittedly, the yard work was not the most rewarding task as we were hoping to spend more of our time around the animals. After

spending more time with the attendants at the shelter, we saw how much they cared for the animals and how hard they worked to provide basic necessities for them. Witnessing this in action gave us a greater appreciation of the facility and motivated us to help out with whatever we could. After the yard work, we started bathing dogs. This was an extremely rewarding opportunity".

In addition to the realignment of the group plans to meet community needs, some reality checks and expectation adjustments were necessary during the implementation of the service projects. For example, "Project Patriot" proposed by one of the groups planned to engage children enrolled in a pre-school community center in creating 150 artistic cards and drawings to distribute to veterans in a nursing home. But the flu season interfered with the capacity of both community partners to complete the project: 139 cards were created by children, but due to the nursing home being understaffed, it took much longer than anticipated for the cards to be distributed to the veterans. Yet another group came up with an idea to help fire crews during the grueling winter by shoveling snow away from fire hydrants. However, the group's inadequate resources would likely result in a very limited community impact, so they "decided to create #FireHydrantChallenge social media movement" that was successfully communicated to and scaled up by the community.

Analysis of reflections written during 2019 indicates that student service-learning experiences were predominantly developing community resources or responding to community needs. Students reported tangible and measurable community outcomes: they created the #FireHydrantChallenge social media movement; inspected, cataloged, replaced, and re-stocked books in the Little Free Libraries in the greater community; collected non-perishable Thanksgiving food items for the Boys and Girls Club,

enough to create thirteen baskets to distribute to families in need; collected well over 250 lbs. of clothing and donated it all to a homeless shelter, etc.

The challenges, according to narratives, were abundant, but a meaningfully structured service-learning framework [36] ensured students' success. Additionally, consistent with findings of other scholars [26-28], students' stories clearly illustrate valuable attitudes and behaviors practiced and manifested by them throughout their service-learning experience, such as collaborative spirit, ethics, community advocacy, willingness to take into account perspectives of their peers and community members and mitigate possible differences, ability to adjust expectations and carry through challenges.

4.1.2 During COVID-19 pandemic

Reflections dated 2020 indicate that once COVID-19 entered the landscape of decision making, and social distancing had to be factored in, students' community outreach and service-learning experience mostly shifted into the "supporting community" gear. Considering that the spring semester of 2020 began in January and the widespread of COVID-19 was not registered until March, community projects conceived by groups prior to that time had to be completely re-envisioned. Neither volunteering for community organizations nor on-the-ground fundraising campaigns was feasible. Thus, according to one student, their group project was to "raise awareness of the need for female hygiene products on campus and collect donations to make those available for students. However, the unpredictable changes led us to adjust our plan; we decided to cancel product donations and focus on raising awareness." Another student wrote: "Our original plan was to collect supplies for a school that was financially in need. We were going to base our decision on which school to select by reviewing statistics on students who receive free and reduced lunch assistance. The plan for the

service-learning project was foiled as soon as the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic shifted K-12 and all higher education to remote learning".

On one occasion, donations left by students on doorsteps in the neighborhood remained untouched by residents due to a fear of contamination. Instead of distributing resources or volunteering within the community, students began building connections with the community online. "We set out on an ultimate goal of sharing positive interactions to help the people of our state get through this trying time. We strived to provide a set of resources for our friends, family, and neighbors that would be a refuge of sorts, away from the endless stream of bad news that has infected every social media platform and news feed available to them." Another student offered: "We came up with a Facebook group called 'Neighborly' that, during the COVID-19 pandemic, is on a mission to build community through this virtual group. Our goal is simple: to be a good neighbor. Right now, we can do that by practicing social distancing, staying home if you have symptoms, and of course following the CDC's recommendations during this pandemic. Let's each do our part and be a good neighbor, and stay connected as well as keeping a positive attitude." Yet another group expanded the target audience of their outreach: "Our group originally decided to create and write notes to children who were spending time at the Children's Hospital. We thought that these children could greatly benefit from a boost of sorts. This idea morphed into writing notes and cards to include the frontline workers dealing with COVID-19, all endeavors were efforts I personally felt strongly about".

As evidenced by the narratives, the impact of COVID-19 on community engagement and service-learning experience has been profound and potentially long-lasting. While expecting students to falter in their community engagement work as the

pandemic became more widespread and campuses closed down, we found just the opposite to be true: students were even more inspired to perform acts of kindness and act as a resource for the community. Yet the gap between students' desire to make a difference in the community and their extremely limited ability and resources to accomplish that was palpable.

To mitigate this challenge, and to encourage students' innovation and creativity in problem-solving, the leadership program made a concerted effort to connect students with inspirational and reputable non-profit organizations, such as Random Acts, that offers encouragement and support to people worldwide to "commit" one random act of kindness at a time and change lives for the better [37]. As a result, students formed a local Random Acts Student Chapter intending to continue to engage in extra-curricular community service after completion of their service-learning coursework. Overall, students' community support efforts during the Spring 2020 service-learning included:

(1) A Notes of Kindness campaign (write five notes that send words of support to people you wouldn't normally send something to)

(2) Thank you notes sent to local schoolteachers (760 area schoolteachers received thank you notes for supporting their students through the pandemic)

(3) Holiday cards going out to folks around the country & internationally (305 people who indicated they would like a holiday greeting will receive a card, 20% international)

(4) Signs thanking health care workers are placed near local hospitals

(5) Fabric masks were made and distributed to a local substance abuse recovery center

The thematic analysis of narratives revealed that the range of valuable attitudes and behaviors manifested by students during that difficult time remained largely consistent with previous findings [26-28]. It also highlighted the limitations imposed by the pandemic disruption on the attainable scope of community service. This creates an opportunity to supplement the framework proposed by Seemiller [36] with intentionally designed alternatives to the traditional "brick and mortar" community service, possibly through strategic partnerships with community-focused non-profit organizations.

4.2 The multitude of leadership development opportunities in service-learning

Leadership scholars believe that leadership is an activity and not a position, and leadership development is a lifelong journey, not a finite destination. Fostering students' leadership competencies is an important part of that journey. According to Seemiller [36], there are 60 key student leadership competencies that can be grouped under eight categories: learning and reasoning, self-awareness and development, group dynamics, interpersonal interaction, civic responsibility, communication, strategic planning, and personal behavior. Any one leadership competency can be demonstrated through various learning outcomes of service experiences that provide breadth and depth to students' leadership development process. For instance, the most common service-learning opportunities (short-term direct service and ongoing community involvement projects) are associated with the following student leadership competencies: problem-solving, collaboration, empathy, empowerment, confidence, diversity, social responsibility, innovation/creativity, self-development, negotiation, and others [38].

In this study, leadership lessons refer to student knowledge of what makes an effective leader. Accordingly, student leadership competencies are demonstrated across all narratives in abundance. In

their reflections, students refer to deciphering group dynamics, ability to negotiate across multiple perspectives and diverse cultural backgrounds, empathy, awareness of social justice issues and commitment to action toward building a better community, ideation, and creativity, problem-solving, and self-development to name a few. Thus, one student "learned valuable lessons in applying creative thinking, learning to work with others in challenging situations, and to address complex problems with innovative solutions." Another developed " the knowledge to be a compassionate, empathetic, caring and understanding leader. One who is sensitive to the journey and struggles of those who choose to follow me." Yet another shared that he has "learned how to analyze different aspects of group work to gain a better understanding of how effective groups work along with how to be a better group member and even leader".

Other lessons included the " responsibility to contribute, to be a model citizen of society. It may not be easy to do at times, but it is nevertheless the essence of what makes society better. We cannot wait for change to happen. If we really want it to happen, we need to take ownership of the self and most importantly how it affects every other aspect of human existence." The importance of trust, "I will

look for authentic and creative ways to cultivate relationships among staff members to increase communication lines and trust while working toward common goals." And courage and the importance of agency, "this class taught me that, I am no longer willing to accept the predetermined path they desire for me. It is important to follow my own aspirations, dreams, interests; I am done believing that my only role is to become a proper woman for a suitable husband. I aspire to work on our chaotic world that is full of every kind of inequality across the globe and become a valuable member of society and work toward being a leader that stands up for others".

A close look at the meaning of leadership lessons revealed various degrees of progress toward becoming a better leader, from those at the very start of their journey, "as someone who struggles to push against the traditional structure of society and likes to follow the rules" to individuals in formal leadership positions that discovered better ways to lead with inspiration, "only now, almost a decade later, do I better understand what it means to have a vision and to guide others toward that vision" or with empathy, "allowing them to follow their passion and creativity in a way that is unique and valuable to them" while another declared: " I will try to be more of a transformational leader myself".

Figure 1 Comparison of word clouds for leadership-related outcomes: 2019 vs. 2020.

Comparison of the content of reflections written in 2020 against those written prior to the pandemic reveals the shifting hierarchy of leadership competencies, where traditional leadership competencies were overshadowed in a time of crisis by creativity, flexibility, and resilience (Figure 1). As one of the students summed it up, "Engaging in a

course about creative leadership during a historic pandemic has been fortuitous. In no other time in my life have I better understood the connection between creativity, perseverance, and resilience".

5 Conclusion

Scholars and higher-education practitioners recognize

that community-service-focused learning pedagogy improves learners' civic engagement, social awareness, and critical reflection. Yet, the disruption caused worldwide by the recent pandemic revealed potential vulnerabilities associated with community-based learning. As demonstrated by this study, Higher Education institutions should exercise a strategic approach to developing community engagement opportunities. Thus, meaningfully structured community-based learning should include emergent and organically developing instructional components. Furthermore, it should focus on addressing the specific needs of the serviced communities and should be facilitated through intentionally designed 'disruption-proof' community engagement pathways. Thematic analysis of narratives about the service-learning experience before and during the pandemic of students enrolled in a leadership program at a medium-sized public university in the United States, indicates that service-learning outcomes consistently include valuable behavioral, attitudinal skills, and critical leadership attributes. The pandemic-imposed limitations heightened the learning that took place, both for students and faculty, bringing to the forefront of their shared educational experience the primary lesson of engaged leadership, that no matter the challenges, there is always a pathway for constructive action and a way to improve, make things better for academic communities and broader communities they serve.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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Supplementary Materials

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