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## Finding Remote Service Opportunities Appropriate for a Course on Social Justice

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# Finding Remote Service Opportunities Appropriate for a Course on Social Justice

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One of the struggles for social justice educators who are committed to providing students with experiential learning is identifying appropriate placements. Educators typically approach this in one of two ways: sending students to find their own opportunity or creating a list of possibilities, either alone or with centers devoted to experiential learning (increasingly common on campuses today). Either way, the task is not easy due to limitations among students, educators, and community partners alike. Students face issues with scheduling, transportation, and communication with service partners. If they are looking for their own placement, many do not know where or how to start and are often unfamiliar with the communities in which they are studying.

For educators, sending students out on their own often results in challenges later, as some students may scramble for help late in a semester if they waited too long or could not find a workable placement. On the other hand, creating the connections to establish appropriate service options also takes a great deal of time. Furthermore, social justice educators want their students to have an

experience that is meaningful and enriching, yet community partners may assign students menial tasks that are difficult for students to connect to coursework. This is what Elizabeth Hollander described as “drive-by” service and is not what is most effective (as cited in Butin, 2010, p. xv). Community partners are sometimes hesitant, understandably, to host students who typically only have to earn a set number of hours and then disappear. These struggles have become even more challenging given COVID-19.

I teach a course titled Perspective Consciousness and Social Justice (SOC 200) at a small, Catholic, liberal arts university. The course is required for students whose major falls in the College of Arts and Sciences. Its focus is on understanding social injustices such as racism, sexism, homophobia, and classism and identifying working or potential remedies. SOC 200 carries a ten-hour service-learning requirement so students can see these problems firsthand and engage in activity to address them. I have utilized various approaches to identifying appropriate service placements. Allowing students to find

their own has been the worst for me. Many do, despite repeated reminders, wait until the last minute then beg for my help. We have a significant number of international students who struggle with language barriers and, like many of our residential students, lack transportation to get to service sites. Public transportation in Miami is notoriously poor. Plus, I have found that when students make their own placements they have a hard time seeing how the work connects to class.

When I have sent students to our Center for Community Service Initiatives (CCSI) to help find a placement, that has gone better. The staff in CCSI know my course content so can help guide students somewhere appropriate. The transportation issue remains, however.

For the past spring semesters, I have taken a different approach. Each February, I work with colleagues from six other universities and many community groups to organize a dating and domestic violence awareness campaign on our campus and that of our nearby partner, Johnson and Wales University (JWU). This event, the College Brides Walk, involves a walk component from Barry University to JWU as well as speakers and workshops. It has grown quite large for a campus of our size, with close to 1,000 attendees annually and about 300 who participate in the actual walk. Students have been offered service hours to help plan, execute, and evaluate the campaign. They can help make signs and posters, PSAs, and other educational materials used at the event, help plan events to advertise this one, be trained

to present about these issues at school and community groups, and be involved in the set up and implementation of the actual day of the event. We also offer a few opportunities after the event, such as collecting evaluations or tabling to obtain signatures on relevant petitions, which helps students who are unable to earn all their hours with the College

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Brides Walk before or during the event. This service alleviates the transportation issue, and I have found that since I am there with my students as an organizer, they take more pride in participating. Additionally, since I require them to attend an orientation and a debriefing, I have found that my students’ required service-learning reflection papers are much better, as these sessions help them identify how our campaign relates to course concepts like social construction of gender, gender role norms, patriarchy and more. Since we collaborate with groups and organizations, both internal and in the community, students get to speak to service providers and many follow up their service-learning experience by getting involved with those agencies.

Spring 2020 made this a challenge. We were able to host the event on February 21, 2020, a few weeks before my campus switched to remote learning. Some students, however, were not able to earn all their hours before or during the event and, because one of the three weeks in between the event and the move to remote teaching was spring break, they did not have other opportunities to do so. Thus, students contacted me in a frenzy, trying to figure out how to satisfy the

course requirement. I struggled at first as well, but came up with a few options I think worked, at least as last-minute measures. First, every year we create a memorial PowerPoint that we download into hard copy signs that features photos and descriptions of people who have lost their lives to domestic or dating violence. My colleagues and I have generally done the research for this, but this year I was able to have some students remotely conduct the research. Our CCSI offered this as an option for other sections of SOC 200 as well. We provided students with a template and instructed them to focus their efforts on certain states so they did not all duplicate one another. This will be helpful for future events, and it showed the student researchers patterns in terms of who is a victim, who is an offender, and in what ways domestic violence homicides are committed.

Another option I gave students was to come up with additional PSAs we could collect and use on our College Brides Walk social media. I gave them some current statistics and asked them to create short, engaging videos to highlight the problem. Again, in reviewing the statistics and coming up with the content for a video, students learned about the issue. A third option I provided was for students to go to Amnesty International's (AI) website and search and sign petitions relevant to gender violence and gender equality. In doing so, they had to learn about and take action on international cases and could thus see how the gender issues we discussed are occurring globally. They also saw the crackdown on activists around the globe and could then see the importance of our being allowed to host an event like the College Brides Walk.

A fourth option I offered was for students to conduct an interview with an attendee that was not from Barry but had provided their contact information and noted they would welcome the chance to be interviewed. I provided a list of interview questions related to their understanding of domestic violence before and after the event, their favorite components of it and what they thought could be improved, and what they felt were the most important take-aways from the events. Through conducting these interviews, which students could do via email or on the phone, they saw what other people understood about abuse and saw how our event helped correct misconceptions that had been discussed in class. Finally, I offered an additional debriefing session, worth one of their service hours, via Zoom. As noted, this tends to help students process the event and connect it to class, so I wanted to ensure that those who missed it still had the opportunity.

The biggest challenge with these changes was the rapid nature in which I had to generate new projects for students I would not see in person. I am happy I was able to come up with options, but they all did require computer access except the interview option. We learned after we went remote that many of our students do not have reliable internet or, in some cases, even computer access. Like people all over the globe, many of our students were stressed, living in challenging housing circumstances or having to work to help their families. Keeping up with classwork was a struggle as is, let alone having to complete service hours. Another challenge was in how many service hours to assign each of these options. The debriefing session

was easy, as we did a 45-minute Zoom call that I rounded up to an hour. But the others were fairly arbitrary. I simply tried to be generous given the circumstances.

It is uncertain whether we will be able to hold the event in 2021 or, if so, it will need to take a different form since large gatherings may still be prohibited or unwise. But we would like to offer something, as we truly believe the College Brides Walk makes a difference in educating people about abuse and inspiring them to take action. As I work with the other organizers to think about that, I am considering ways we can involve our students for service hours, even in fall semester, which we typically do not do. I am giving thought to how to assign hours to various remote projects and what would be the most impactful activities students can do from home, even without computer access. One idea is to encourage them to make art that denounces abuse. We have sporadically offered such an option and have displayed the art at the event, but I think there's more we could do with asking students to contribute poems, songs, spoken word, visual arts and more. Although I did use Zoom for the one debriefing session, I am considering other ways to use group virtual meeting technologies for the event as well. I am particularly interested in asking students what they might come up with for alternate events and hours options, as surely their creativity can best mine.

In conclusion, while switching to remote teaching mid-semester was a challenge for social justice educators seeking to engage students in service learning, it was an important wakeup as well. The global pandemic reminded me that we

need to be innovative in how we approach service learning. Further, since domestic abuse rates have increased under stay-at-home orders, as they typically do during crises, I have been thinking about how to incorporate students in service that can assist in times like this. We are always thoughtful about having counselors on site during the event in case there are students in need or who want to talk about past incidents, and obviously we could not provide this remotely. I need to consider additional ways to support students who might be triggered by this service. Finally, while I always offer to read students' service-learning papers as drafts, this semester overwhelmed so many of them that they did not have time to send a draft before the end of the semester. It will be important in future to think of more ways to help guide them in making course connections. ■

## References

- Butin, D. (2010). *Service-learning in theory and practice: The future of community engagement in higher education*. Palgrave Macmillan.