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Rebecca Burwell

Trinity Christian College, rebecca.burwell@trnty.edu

Jonathan Brooks

Chicago Semester, jonathan.brooks@chicagosemester.org

Mackenzi Huyser

Chicago Semester, mackenzi.huyser@chicagosemester.org

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Chicago Semester Experiential Learning Amid COVID-19

**REBECCA BURWELL,
JONATHAN BROOKS, AND
MACKENZI HUYSER**

*Trinity Christian College
Chicago Semester
Chicago Semester*

Introduction

Chicago Semester is an experiential education program that was founded 45 years ago by six private, faith-based colleges in the Midwest. During the spring semester of 2020, we were serving 56 traditional-aged undergraduate students. These students came from 16 different colleges with student bodies between 1000-4000 students, mainly located in rural or suburban communities. On March 13, 2020, we made the decision to conclude our in-person programming because of COVID-19. Students moved home and the program continued remotely for the duration of the semester.

This article offers insights into how our program adapted as we pivoted to a remote experience. Beyond this adaptation, our program sought opportunities to dive deep into what was happening in our city as a way to learn more about Chicago, its response to the pandemic, and the many layers of inequality embedded within. More specifically, this article will focus on how two of our courses—Social Justice and Urban Planning—adapted curricula and approaches to move forward in engaging students in experiential learning

in our city. Drawing on research that explores best practices for online experiential learning (Snyder, 2019), this article shares strategies we tried in these two courses, challenges we encountered, and takeaway lessons from this experience.

Program Description Prior to COVID-19

Chicago Semester's program model prepares students for professional work experiences through internships, while equipping them for service to their communities. Students move to the city for our 16-week program. While in Chicago, students intern at an organization in their field of study for 32 hours a week guided by a learning contract and hands-on supervision; engage with peers and faculty in a weekly professional seminar experience that reflects on learning that is taking place at the internship site; and explore the city through a set of courses that offer a lens into issues of diversity and inequality, social justice and the criminal legal system, and city planning and the built environment. Our model allows students, through their entire semester experience, to learn through reflection on doing so the semester becomes an immersive city experience for the students.

Our Social Justice course examines the criminal legal system with attention to other social structures that impact people's experience of the world, such as housing and economic justice. The course was developed 2 years ago as a requirement for Criminal Justice majors and as an elective for other students. Prior to COVID-19, this course would have invited students to examine, through a justice lens, the history of and challenges with housing inequality and mass incarceration in Chicago. Through meetings with community-based organizations and observations at the city's newly developed Restorative Justice court, students would be trained in the practices of restorative justice. They would also examine the role of race, poverty, and inequality in people's experiences of the criminal legal system. This course was being taught during the second 8-weeks of the spring 2020 semester, and the first class was held 2 days prior to suspension of our in-person programming.

Our Urban Planning course focuses on the relationship between persons and institutions in the built environment of the city. Prior to COVID-19, this course would have offered students opportunities to explore the history of Chicago while investigating its underlying culture and social, economic, and political foundations. The course would have also allowed students the opportunity to explore alternative models of urban planning and restorative efforts to renew the city. Weekly field trips to Chicago neighborhoods would have been accompanied by engagement with community leaders. This course was also being taught during the second 8-weeks of the spring 2020 semester, with the first class held 4 days prior to suspen-

sion of our in-person programming.

Changes Made Due to COVID-19

In mid-March, when our in-person programming was suspended, faculty teaching these courses needed to entirely revamp their curricula. Not only were pre-planned experiences cancelled, but faculty felt an urgency to use this opportunity to engage students in the current issues at hand that were rendered even more visible by the growing COVID-19 pandemic. In Chicago, this meant diving into the inequities that COVID-19 was illuminating between various neighborhoods and racial/ethnic groups throughout the city. This was carried out in a number of ways.

In our Social Justice class, the final research project was adapted such that students were asked to research a health-related social justice issue; several students chose to look at COVID-19 and how the rates of illness, hospitalization, and death varied across racial/ethnic groups. Additionally, we held virtual conversations with practitioners that could address the loss of community health clinics in Black and Brown neighborhoods that impacted how people could get tested for COVID-19 as well as access preventative care. Since students would be studying patterns of housing segregation in the city, community activists tied this lack of access to health care to decades-old patterns of disinvestment in communities of color and racial residential segregation. They also pointed out how many people in neighborhoods with high rates of COVID-19 worked essential jobs and used public transportation, possibly leading to higher rates of infection. It laid bare how privilege

shaped who could or couldn't work and/or learn remotely during the pandemic.

Students were then invited to analyze and reflect on the how the virus was affecting their local communities. We asked students to visualize and compare the neighborhoods where they worked and lived in Chicago with their home communities where most of them had returned following suspension of in-person programming. To do this, they researched and mapped their communities' assets (such as health clinics, grocery stores, affordable housing, green spaces, etc.) as well as mapped patterns of housing segregation, rates of poverty and health outcomes in their communities. The class then did this for several Chicago neighborhoods. We compared what they saw in their own communities with what was being reported in Chicago, coupled with what they had seen and experienced while they were here. This comparative mapping helped students visualize how a community's experience of the COVID-19 virus is impacted by access to basic infrastructure such as health clinics, testing facilities, and affordable housing. Finally, we asked students to reflect on the injustices they found and to propose concrete solutions to address them. In that way, students could contemplate being part of the solution to injustice in their community. Similarly, in the Urban Planning class students explored the basics of Figure Ground Study Drawings (studying impact of land density and zoning) and Downtown Planning Drawings (studying the impact of planning on real people and places); discussion centered around intent vs. impact in city planning, which took on new meaning during the pandemic. Typically, this con-

versation is rooted in discussions about general inequities in the city due to the systemic segregation that Chicago is so known for. However, the pandemic's demographic statistics came out the same week as this discussion and allowed us to have serious, real-time conversations about inequities in health care and why the virus hit Black and Brown communities so hard. Many of the students had to face, for the first time, the systemic markers of poverty and racism that have led to the disproportionate rate of sickness in communities of color. The connection of inequities in infection and deaths from COVID-19 to poor access to quality health care and higher rates of diabetes, kidney disease, and liver failure (themselves the result of limited healthy food options) were laid bare during the discussion of city planning.

Additionally, students still had the opportunity to engage community leaders, including the City Deputy Major of Infrastructure, but conversations shifted to massive planning efforts underway for temporary hospitals to be set up in city parks to address the pandemic and how she was leading, as a young Black female, in a field dominated by white males. She not only shared the difficulties of being successful in the field but the underlying issues of systemic racism in the field of architecture and planning. This gave the students another opportunity to experience the way White supremacy has impacted our country vocationally. The hope for our classes is to help students see that inequity, racism and marginalization are the water we swim in here in America. The pandemic, although a difficult time of loss and hurt, was a prime experiential teacher when expressing the truth that when White America gets a

cold, people of color get pneumonia and most likely die. Thus, statements such as “COVID sees no class, race or gender,” while meant with good intent, have a very different impact on communities of color. Consequently, though they weren’t physically in Chicago, our students got to learn about these differential impacts firsthand through our courses.

All of these course changes allowed students and faculty to achieve what theorists in the experiential learning world know deeply: that is, that concrete experiences, coupled with space to reflect, conceptualize, and then practice what they have learned is essential for students in developing skills and making meaning out of what they are learning (Snyder, 2019). Students in both classes took virtual field trips, analyzed maps and archives of Chicago neighborhoods, engaged online with practitioners, and observed their own communities’ assets to extrapolate about justice issues and the built environment. They then put into practice the new knowledge through presentations and virtual discussions.

Challenges Faced or Problem-solving Techniques Employed

For both of our courses, moving remotely was not ideal. How would we replace the rich engagement we had planned for our students around Chicago neighborhoods? How would they be able to meet and hear from people working on the front lines of neighborhood challenges? How could they compare and contrast the assets and inequities present in Chicago communities if they couldn’t be there in person? These were some of our challenges. To address these obstacles, instructors invited in

practitioners and others who they would have introduced students to, so that they could still hear from them about their work and their communities. Though this had to be done remotely, students got a chance to hear from firsthand about their work. Additionally, there is a treasure trove of online sources about Chicago neighborhoods that we asked students to read and view. This helped students to see some of the places they would have visited. Finally, we asked students to reflect on their own communities, and on the fears and worries they had about what was happening in the world. That helped them to name and then connect to the collective anxiety that many other people were feeling about COVID-19, in Chicago and elsewhere.

Looking Ahead

While our program is preparing for in-person programming for fall 2020 and spring 2021 we have learned several lessons from this semester that will guide our work moving forward. Some of these lessons relate to online experiential learning during COVID-19 and others relate to capturing moments of significance for the sake of experiential learning.

As we reflect on online experiential learning, the following lessons were learned from moving experiential learning online during the COVID-19 pandemic:

- While it is a preferred experience, learning does not necessarily have to be in the form of physical presence in a space.
- Using real life everyday experiences truly drives home the lessons that typically can only be explained through historical events.

- Students are resilient and if the content is engaging and done with integrity they will step up their comprehension and create in unimaginable ways.

- Experiential learning should not be disconnected from the local even when the issues are national or international. It is important for local geography and sociology to guide the conversation of what is happening nationally and internationally. Especially when discussing intent versus impact.

- Students can make observations about what is happening in their own communities and draw conclusions from what they see in conversation with the theories and research they are learning about in class; they don't have to be in Chicago to do this.

- Students learn from each other and connecting together virtually was important to unpack what was happening in Chicago. Short, virtual weekly conversations were important spaces to hear from students about what they were seeing and feeling.

As we reflect on online experiential learning, the following lessons were learned related to capturing moments of significance through this form of learning:

- Students will reveal what moments were significant for them when allowed to share openly and honestly. Educators must keep creating spaces for this vulnerability.

- It is important to allow students to discuss how the experiences they are having are affecting them and their families. Their local context matters.

- Experiential learning is bigger than providing experiences—it is truly about experiencing the learning in a way that results in broadening students' understanding of the world. To achieve this, lessons must be responsive to the way students experience the topic and content.

Conclusion

The required Independent Study in Biotechnology course is an important discerning element of the Agricultural and Medical Biotechnology program at the University of Kentucky. Because this course is critical to ensuring students are ready to enter the workforce upon graduation, the program will continue to provide training in different aspects of the research enterprise. As faculty operate under the reasonable assumption of inevitable COVID-19-related disruptions in the future, program leadership will continue to explore additional novel avenues of providing enriching undergraduate research experiences. It is important for academic programs and individual enrichment courses to develop reasonable adaptive strategies that best achieve student learning objectives while maintaining the rigor of their offerings. ■

References

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