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# Surveying the Syllabus

*What Syllabi Communicate About Service-Learning at  
Four-Year Institutions*

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## Surveying the Syllabus

### *What Syllabi Communicate About Service-Learning at Four-Year Institutions*

Tania D. Mitchell and Carmine Perrotti

#### **Abstract**

Seeking to advance knowledge and understanding of service-learning, this study analyzed how 270 syllabi from 193 four-year institutions that were recipients of the Carnegie Elective Classification for Community Engagement communicated frameworks and expectations of service-learning courses. Findings revealed variance in how syllabi identified, defined, and discussed service-learning as well as differences in how syllabi communicated the work and expectations of service experiences tied to courses. Specifically, findings revealed that numerous terms and definitions invoked throughout syllabi are used to describe academic work linked to community-based experiences. Findings also revealed a lack of clarity within syllabi regarding community work (e.g., whether service was mandatory or optional, the time required in service, whether credit was awarded for service) as well as a lack of specifics on community partnerships. Through this survey of the field, syllabi were used to visualize service-learning practice, explore its contours, and raise pertinent questions that invite further examination about the field.

**Keywords:** *U.S. higher education, service-learning and community engagement, content analysis, syllabi*

## Examinando el programa de estudio

### *El significativo de programas de estudio respecto al aprendizaje de servicio en las instituciones de cuatro años*

Tania D. Mitchell and Carmine Perrotti

#### **Resumen**

Con la meta de promover el conocimiento y la comprensión del aprendizaje de servicio, este estudio analizó como 270 programas de estudio de 193 instituciones de 4 años que recibieron la Carnegie Elective Classification for Community Engagement comunicaron el trabajo y las expectativas del aprendizaje de servicio relacionadas a las clases académicas. En especial, los resultados revelaron que varios términos y definiciones incluidos en los programas de estudio se usaron para describir el trabajo académico conectado a las experiencias basadas en la comunidad. Aún más, los resultados revelaron una falta de claridad dentro de los programas de estudio con respecto al trabajo comunitario (por ejemplo, si el servicio fue requerido u opcional, el tiempo de servicio requerido, y si ofrecieron crédito para el servicio) y una falta de detalles con relación a las colaboraciones comunitarias. A través de este análisis del campo, se utilizaron los programas de estudio para visualizar la práctica de aprendizaje de servicio, explorar sus complejidades, y preguntar sobre temas que invitan más examinación con respecto al campo.

**Palabras clave:** *la educación superior estadounidense, el aprendizaje de servicio, el análisis del contenido, los programas de estudio*

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Following the passage of the National and Community Service Act of 1990 and the National and Community Service Trust Act of 1993, service-learning has seen tremendous growth across U.S. higher education institutions. As a pedagogy and practice, service-learning has become nearly ubiquitous across postsecondary institutions, cutting across disciplines as a strategy for educating college students for civic and democratic engagement (Butin, 2006). In 2017, 59% of continuing-generation students and 61% of first-generation students responding to the National Survey of Student Engagement (2017) reported having taken at least one service-learning course during their academic career.

Over the last three decades, more than 200 studies have been published about service-learning's impact on student learning (Seider et al., 2013). For example, studies have revealed that service-learning can lead to enhanced academic learning, social and emotional development, career and citizenship development, and increased satisfaction and higher retention rates among participating students (Astin & Sax, 1998; Astin et al., 1999, 2000; Bean & Eaton, 2001; Beaumont et al., 2006; Bringle et al., 2010; Eylar et al., 2001; Markus et al., 1993; Sax & Astin, 1997; Scott, 2012; Vogelgesang & Astin, 2000). Additional studies have suggested that service-learning increases students' commitment to social justice (Einfeld & Collins, 2008; Mitchell, 2014; Moely et al., 2002). As a result of the positive student learning outcomes associated with service-learning, scholars have declared it a high-impact practice of higher education (Hutson & Wulliford, 2018; Kuh, 2008; Mayhew et al., 2016).

Although best practices in service-learning often emphasize tasks like targeting community-identified priorities and ongoing reflection (Honnet & Poulsen, 1989; Mabry, 1998; Mintz & Hesser, 1996; Welch & Plaxton-Moore, 2019), little direction has been provided to guide implementation. Mabry (1998) and Gilbride-Brown (2011) argued that though research on service-learning touts a narrative of transformation, the field lacks understanding about the logistical, design, and curricular elements of service-learning experiences that yield the outcomes frequently lauded.

Several decades later, these critiques remain critically relevant. This study aimed to respond to Mabry (1998) and Gilbride-Brown (2011) by interrogating the pedagogy through an analysis of the common practices that reflect service-learning across U.S. higher education today.<sup>1</sup> To advance knowledge and understanding of service-learning, this study, drawing on content analysis methods, analyzed the ways 270 syllabi from 193 four-year institutions that were recipients of the Carnegie Elective Classification for Community Engagement communicated frameworks and expectations of service-learning courses.<sup>2</sup> We, borrowing from land surveys, offer a topographic view of service-learning practice using this broad data set to help us visualize the field, explore its contours, and identify areas that might compromise its integrity.

## Review of the Literature

Best practices in service-learning and community-engaged teaching have often emphasized tasks such as articulating clear goals for the service-learning experiences, ongoing reflection, and targeting community-identified priorities, among others (Honnet & Poulsen, 1989; Mabry, 1998; Mintz & Hesser, 1996). These best practices have been reemphasized in recent scholarship. For example, Welch and Plaxton-Moore (2019) offered a blueprint and tools for instructors to craft community-engaged courses, including syllabi development. Their blueprint emphasized tasks such as clearly articulating learning outcomes, partnership information, engagement opportunities, reflection, and assessment related to the course's service experience in class and through syllabi. Kieran and Haack (2018) developed a rubric to

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<sup>1</sup> Although service-learning has become increasingly popular abroad, this study is explicit in examining service-learning within U.S. higher education. Despite similarities between the United States's and other countries' approaches to service-learning, emerging literature has critiqued the U.S. approach to service-learning, suggesting that it is not necessarily transferable to international contexts (Regina & Ferrara, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> This research was funded by the Grant-in-Aid of Research, Artistry, and Scholarship Program at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities.

evaluate course service-learning syllabi for such best practices found in literature. Furco et al. (2023) have recently advanced this work through the Service-Learning Quality Assessment Tool that is designed to evaluate not only the design of service-learning courses but also the pedagogy's implementation. Although best practices, rubrics, and assessment tools exist to guide the development and implementation of service-learning, few studies have used syllabi as a unit of analysis to explore how syllabi communicate frameworks and expectations of service-learning.

Studies have used syllabi to explore civic engagement among college students enrolled in philanthropy courses (Campbell, 2014) and introductory politics courses (Bell & Lewis, 2015). Especially relevant to this research are studies that used syllabi to explore service-learning's implementation in teacher education (Rowls & Swick, 2000) and special education teacher education courses (Jenkins & Sheehey, 2009). Syllabi were also studied to understand how business education programs implement service-learning (Steiner & Watson, 2006) and to explore service-learning assessment strategies across disciplines (Messineo, 2007). Though limited (and dated), these studies utilizing syllabi as a unit of analysis to explore service-learning advance knowledge and understanding of the pedagogy and practice.

Rowls and Swick (2000) analyzed 11 syllabi from teacher education courses that included a service-learning component. Syllabi were collected from a sample of institutions at the Annual Meeting of the American Association of Colleges for Teachers Education and analyzed for common practices that reflect service-learning in teacher education. Specifically, the authors analyzed the syllabi for service-learning descriptions, service hour requirements, community partner information, and assessment strategies and grade values, among other course elements. Rowls and Swick found that syllabi varied in how service-learning was communicated and suggested that though the pedagogy was effective in teacher education courses, syllabi must explicitly name "the important variables of purpose, context, time, activity descriptions, supervision, reflection and analysis procedures, and related support factors" to offer greater integration of service experiences into courses (p. 194).

Jenkins and Sheehey (2009) examined the implementation of service-learning in six undergraduate and two graduate special education teacher education courses by two instructors at one large state university. In addition to eight syllabi from 1994 to 2004, Jenkins and Sheehey's data collection included student grades, course evaluations, and instructors' teaching notes. Like Rowls and Swick's analysis, Jenkins and Sheehey analyzed syllabi for descriptions, hour requirements, community partner information, and assessment strategies and grade values, among other course elements. However, Jenkins and Sheehey specifically sought to understand how the two instructors' implementation of service-learning developed over time. Although Jenkins and Sheehey found service-learning to be effective in special education teacher education courses, they concluded that service-learning projects need to be clearly described in syllabi, including learning outcomes and assessments; linked to the service-learning experience; and explicit about service requirement expectations.

Steiner and Watson (2006) and Messineo (2007) used content analysis to examine service-learning syllabi. Steiner and Watson (2006) examined syllabi from 100 undergraduate business courses across 60 U.S. colleges and universities to understand how service-learning may promote civic-mindedness and social responsibility among students. Through an analysis of learning outcomes and assessment strategies, Steiner and Watson concluded that most business educators are not promoting civic-mindedness and social responsibility through service-learning. They suspected that rather than embracing the civic possibilities often proclaimed about service-learning, business instructors view service-learning as a tool solely to advance academic skills. Steiner and Watson wrote, "At the extreme, faculty may view service-learning as just another assignment where the experience coincidentally takes place in a nonprofit instead of a for-profit organization" (p. 431). They also wondered if instructors aimed to be "value-neutral" in their syllabi by failing to articulate civic outcomes that might be perceived as "imposing their personal views on others" (p. 431). Steiner and Watson said that including value-based objectives in syllabi can be an institutional constraint but concluded that this value-neutral stance conflicts with the civic aims generally considered essential to service-learning. Steiner and Watson argued, "By having no objectives related to values, students may be learning that it is not just acceptable, but also preferable, to be disconnected" from the service component of a course (p. 431).

Finally, Messineo's (2007) content analysis drew on a national sample of 127 service-learning syllabi posted on two national websites. Messineo's study, which focused on assessment strategies, analyzed how service-learning syllabi reflected Campus Compact's recommended service-learning grading criteria, including evidence of student engagement, reflection, reciprocity, and public dissemination. Messineo argued that the many different ways in which service-learning was defined resulted in a variance of assessment strategies and a range of different service-learning experiences for students. Messineo also found that approximately one-third of syllabi granted credit for hours served and argued that a focus on the documentation of hours for credit risks becoming "predominant, perhaps to the exclusion of more important learning objectives" (p. 96). Messineo showed that although most syllabi included assignments with reflective elements on service, few syllabi offered connections between these assignments and the course learning outcomes. Messineo called for instructors to prioritize greater integration of the service experience into course assessments by creating assignments connected to course learning outcomes that respond to students' service participation beyond granting credit for hours served and, then, providing critical feedback on such assignments.

Though few studies have utilized syllabi as a unit of analysis to explore service-learning, the important knowledge shared in the existing literature highlights the impetus for this study.

## Methods

Content analysis is used in research to analyze, describe, and interpret written text (White & Marsh, 2006). The methodology reflects "the characteristics of language with attention to the content or contextual meaning of the text" (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1278). Thus, content analysis of syllabi can be a "methodology for evaluating the philosophies, topics, and pedagogic approaches of programs across universities" (Steiner & Watson, 2006, p. 427). This survey of syllabi employed content analysis to offer greater understanding of the common practices that reflect service-learning in institutions of higher learning.

### Syllabi as a Unit of Analysis

Syllabi, a consistent tool among all courses (Graves et al., 2010), describe course expectations and support class socialization by "serving as a contract" between students and instructors (Ishiyama & Hartlaub, 2002, p. 567). Syllabi identify the subject of study, course materials, and modes of assessment as well as "communicate the role of different actors in the activity settings of the classroom, the course, and the curriculum" (Dowd & Bensimon, 2015, p. 69). For service-learning courses, this means communicating the role of not only students and instructors but also community partners. Thus, syllabi, specifically service-learning syllabi, are "an excellent source of information about what is being taught ... and how it is being taught" (Priester et al., 2008, p. 29). For these reasons, syllabi are seen as offering a lasting account of a class and are increasingly used for empirical study (Ishiyama & Hartlaub, 2002).

This study analyzed post-2010 service-learning syllabi from four-year institutions with the Carnegie Elective Classification for Community Engagement.<sup>3</sup> Institutions with this classification have engaged in significant self-study and national panel review to qualify for this recognition. The classification reflects an institution's commitment to community engagement to "enrich scholarship, research, and creative activity; enhance curriculum, teaching, and learning; prepare educated, engaged citizens; strengthen democratic values and civic responsibility; address critical societal issues; and contribute to the public good" (Carnegie Elective Classifications, 2023).

We worked with the New England Resource Center for Higher Education (NERCHE), which, at the time of our data collection, facilitated the application process for the Carnegie Elective Classification for Community Engagement, to obtain a list of four-year institutions with the classification ( $n = 332$ ). At the

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<sup>3</sup> We acknowledge that two-year institutions have received the Carnegie Elective Classification for Community Engagement. Our focus on four-year institutions was a parameter set within the grant that funded this study.

time of our data collection, institutions were classified (or reclassified) in 2010 or 2015. Those institutions that were reclassified in 2010 or 2015 had been classified since 2006 or 2008.

The expansion of learning management systems means that syllabi are often distributed online. Thus, syllabi were collected electronically (e.g., Microsoft Word, PDF, URLs of course sites) because they generally “result in a higher return rate than lengthy surveys” (Priester et al., 2008, p. 29). We developed a database of institutions with the Carnegie Elective Classification for Community Engagement based on the list we received from NERCHE and conducted a web-based search to identify key service-learning staff or faculty member(s) from each institution. We then reached out to each contact via email to request one current “exemplary” service-learning syllabus. Our call defined *exemplary* as “syllabi that institutions would share with faculty who were interested in developing courses that integrate community-centered work or a syllabus from a faculty member who has been recognized for their community-engaged teaching.” Our analysis found that a number of different terms are invoked to describe academic work linked to community-based experiences. Although our study specifically sought service-learning syllabi, we did not eliminate any syllabi that did not use the term “service-learning” as our aim was to interrogate the pedagogy through an analysis of the common practices, including terminology, that reflect how service-learning is operationalized across U.S. higher education today.

Our call for syllabi resulted in an institution response rate of 58% ( $n = 193$ ). Of the institutions represented in this study, 58% ( $n = 112$ ) were public, and 42% ( $n = 81$ ) were private not-for-profit. The sample included 48 (25%) federally recognized Minority Serving Institutions. Of these, 50% ( $n = 24$ ) were Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institutions (AANAPISIs), 21% ( $n = 10$ ) were Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs), and 27% ( $n = 13$ ) were federally recognized as both AANAPISIs and HSIs. One institution was federally recognized as a Historically Black College and University. None of the responding institutions were a Tribal College. The institution response by region of the country was comparable with 25% ( $n = 49$ ) from the Midwest, 28% ( $n = 54$ ) from the Northeast, 27% ( $n = 52$ ) from the South, and 20% ( $n = 38$ ) from the West.

Although we requested one syllabus per institution, some institutions chose to send more, resulting in a data corpus of 270 syllabi and 24 syllabi addendums ( $n = 294$  total documents) between the years 2011 and 2018. Addendums included additional course communications, such as calendars, reading schedules, service site descriptions, and assignment or project instructions. Syllabi addendums were read and analyzed as part of the original syllabus submission. However, in some instances, we excluded syllabi addendums for consistency in the data set. Throughout our presentation of findings, we note when our tabulations and counts included only syllabi and when they included all documents (syllabi and syllabi addendums). Syllabi and syllabi addendums totaled 2,587 pages of text.

Of the 270 syllabi, 13% ( $n = 35$ ) were from the applied sciences (e.g., engineering, nursing), 1% ( $n = 3$ ) from the formal sciences (e.g., mathematics, computer science), 14% ( $n = 38$ ) from the humanities (e.g., English, philosophy), 16% ( $n = 42$ ) were interdisciplinary studies syllabi (e.g., women and gender studies, justice and peace studies), 4% ( $n = 12$ ) were from the natural sciences (e.g., biology, chemistry), 39% ( $n = 105$ ) from the social sciences (e.g., sociology, political science, and included career-oriented studies like education and social work), and 13% ( $n = 35$ ) were from specialized courses for service or first year seminars (e.g., “Figures of Service and Justice,” “Foundations of Civic Engagement”). Although service-learning has historically occurred across the disciplines (Zlotkowski, 2000), it was not surprising that syllabi from the social sciences represented the largest aspect of our sample, as these disciplines are well known for implementing community engagement strategies to illuminate course concepts. Two percent ( $n = 6$ ) of syllabi were from online courses.

## Data Analysis

Data were managed and analyzed using NVivo, a qualitative analysis software program. Data analysis included an iterative process of reading/rereading and coding syllabi to better understand how syllabi communicated frameworks and expectations of service-learning. We (both authors) first read each syllabus and syllabus addendum individually to begin to understand how service-learning was

communicated within the documents. Through our readings of the syllabi and through weekly conversations, we began to discover patterns in the ways syllabi communicated frameworks and expectations of service-learning. As community-engaged scholar-practitioners, we drew on our academic knowledge about higher education community engagement and began to identify possible domains to guide our analysis. Because it is impossible to observe every instance in content analysis, we made decisions on domains to guide our analysis supported by the reviewed literature, including best practices in service-learning, that we believed important to understanding service-learning experiences.

After reading each syllabus, a “text search” query of selected words (e.g., service-learning, civic and community engagement) based on our reading of the syllabi and informed by literature was conducted. This text search allowed for the identification and tracking of different terms used to name service-learning experiences. Next, we reread and coded specific aspects of each syllabus (e.g., words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs, and sections) for descriptive information about the service-learning experience across the courses, including service-learning definitions and learning outcomes. We then reread and continued coding each syllabus to understand what constituted service, including, for instance, if there was a required number of service hours noted in syllabi. Finally, we reread and coded where service experiences happened and who community partners served to better understand how campus–community partnerships are operationalized in syllabi. Although content analysis is a highly interpretive method and we recognize that we made inferences based on our readings of the syllabi text, our collective and iterative process of reading/rereading and coding syllabi strengthened the reliability of this study.

## Findings

The content analysis revealed variance in how syllabi communicate frameworks and expectations of service-learning courses. Service-learning terminology, definitions and learning outcomes, community work, and course readings and assignments are explored here to visualize the field.

### Service-Learning and Related Terminology

The term “service-learning” was used across 74% ( $n = 216$ ) of all documents ( $n = 294$ ; syllabi and syllabi addendums). Our analysis found numerous terms invoked throughout the total documents to describe academic work linked to community-based experiences. Other common terminology included “civic engagement” or “civic education” (22%,  $n = 66$ ); and “community engagement,” “community-based learning,” or “community-engaged learning” (54%,  $n = 160$ ). Seventeen additional terms, and variations of them, were used across 55% ( $n = 163$ ) of the total documents. Table 1 displays the frequency of terms used to identify service components of courses across all documents.

**Table 1.**

*Frequency of Service-Learning Related Terminology Across All Documents.*

Terminology	Frequency (%)	<i>N</i>
Service-learning	74	216
Community engagement, community-based, or community-engaged learning	54	160
Civic engagement or civic education	22	66
Experiential education or experiential learning	18	53
Field experience, field placement, field project, field study, or fieldwork	16	46
Volunteering or volunteer work	15	45
Internship	7	21

Direct service	6	18
Active learning	6	17
Charity	5	16
Community-based or community-engaged research, community-based Nursing, community outreach, community partnership work, or community archiving partnership	5	16
Civic leadership	3	10
Place-based or project-based learning	1	4
Immersion experience	1	3
Participatory artwork or participatory democracy	1	3
Fellowship	<1	2
Political engagement	<.05	1
Public scholarship experience	<.05	1
Publicly engaged academic work	<.05	1
Service residency	<.05	1

*Note:* Because multiple terms were invoked throughout a majority of the total documents, the percentages in Table 1 are greater than 100%.

Using more than one term to describe service-learning was common. Across the total documents, 59% ( $n = 173$ ) used “service-learning” and at least one additional term found in Table 1 to describe the connection between academic coursework and community-based experiences. To better understand how these terms were communicated, we analyzed the syllabi for service-learning designators, definitions, and learning outcomes.

### Service-Learning Designators, Definitions, and Learning Outcomes

**Designators.** An institution-wide service-learning designation, such as “S” (service) or “CE” (community engagement) that follows the subject code and course number, was included in 25% ( $n = 67$ ) of the total syllabi ( $n = 270$ ). A service-learning designation is an institutional commitment to the pedagogy that can help students and advisors identify service-learning courses at an institution. Although we did not ask service-learning staff or faculty from each institution about service-learning designations when soliciting syllabi for this study, after reading and coding the syllabi, we conducted a web search to better understand how institutions, if at all, publicly described their service-learning designation. Qualifying for a service-learning designation varied by institution; however, it was common for an institution to have a set of eligibility criteria. Eligibility criteria most often related to how service-learning was defined, learning outcomes related to a course’s service component, and the assessment strategies utilized.

**Definitions.** After examining the syllabi for a service-learning designation, we examined each syllabus for a definition of service-learning to better understand how the pedagogy is communicated. Thirty-six percent ( $n = 97$ ) of syllabi included a definition of service-learning. However, because of the many terms used to describe service-learning across the syllabi, definitions varied. Definitions ranged from simplistic terms (e.g., combining academic work with community service) to ones informed by the literature that explained the “what” and “why” of service-learning. To explore this further, definitions of service-learning from three different social science courses (the most represented discipline in the sample; 39%,  $n = 105$ ) follow.

One syllabus defined service-learning as “a method where students learn by active participation in organized service that addresses community needs and is linked to academic study through structured reflection.” Here, service-learning is a simplistic equation: community service plus learning goals plus reflection equals service-learning.



The second syllabus, drew directly from the literature, using Jacoby's (1996) definition of service-learning: "a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and development. Reflection and reciprocity are key concepts of service learning" (p. 6). Other syllabi in the sample included definitions offered by various scholars (e.g., Boyer, 1996; Bringle & Hatcher, 1995, 2011; Ehrlich, 2000; Eyler & Giles, 1999), higher education organizations (e.g., Association of American Colleges & Universities), and national service legislation and government programs (e.g., National and Community Service Act of 1990, National and Community Service Trust Act of 1993, Serve America Act of 2009).

The third syllabus offered a definition that explained the "what" and "why" of service-learning. After describing the pedagogy as connecting course objectives to service and reflection, the syllabus elaborated:

This means that your service experience: (1) Will be conducted in and will meet the need of the community through a community organization; (2) Is integrated into and enhances the academic curriculum (your class); and (3) Includes structured time for you to reflect on your service experience (in-class discussions and final paper). Service-learning is a planned and structured experience in which students use prior knowledge and skills (acquired in the classroom and/or through life experiences) to address a community problem or issue and participate in a structured activity to critically analyze the service experience so as to extract learning from it.

The definition continued informing readers that critical reflection is an expectation and invoked through "thought provoking activity that deliberately connects the service experience to learning objectives" with hopes that students will understand the implications of their service for themselves and the communities with whom they are engaged.

**Learning Outcomes.** Although not all syllabi had a service-learning designation and most did not include a definition of service-learning, it was more common for syllabi to contain learning outcomes related to the service component of a course. Seventy-one percent ( $n = 193$ ) of syllabi included at least one learning outcome related to service. The most common themes across learning outcomes anticipated the development of critical thinking skills, such as increased self-awareness through reflection ( $n = 113$ ) and connecting theory with practice ( $n = 109$ ). Other common learning outcomes promoted citizenship ( $n = 84$ ); diversity, equity, and/or social change ( $n = 80$ ); collaboration with community partners ( $n = 78$ ); and communication skills ( $n = 70$ ). Less frequently cited were learning outcomes related to leadership skills ( $n = 43$ ), research skills ( $n = 41$ ), and career development ( $n = 30$ ). The analysis reveals more syllabi included learning outcomes specific to the service-learning experience than provided a definition of service-learning. Of the 36% ( $n = 97$ ) of syllabi that included a definition, 71% ( $n = 69$ ) of those syllabi also included at least one learning outcome related to the course's service component. The example below from a humanities syllabus demonstrates this integration of definition and learning outcomes. The syllabus defined service-learning as:

A community-engaged learning experience with classroom instruction. Students will engage in a form of pedagogy that connects ... theory and practice enhancing learning and providing a reciprocal relationship among university and [community partner]. The course is designed to reduce disparities and resolve social problems by addressing prejudice and negative stereotypes about human differences generally, and specifically, about [community partner] and college populations. This course fosters community-engaged learning for social justice as a way to reduce the stereotypes and the social reproduction of oppression.

A corresponding learning outcome in this syllabus suggested students would "learn how to develop respectful, meaningful, collaborative, and mutually beneficial partnerships with each other and the various ... community members. Students will demonstrate this skill in their regular attendance and participation in discussions and activities." A second learning outcome anticipated students would "develop critical self-reflection as a means of analyzing the efficacy and potential of individual and collaborative agency. Students will demonstrate this skill in the 'Readings Analysis' and 'Reflective Journal' course

assignments.” A third learning outcome expected students to “demonstrate the ability to transfer knowledge of course concepts into community engagement. Students will demonstrate this skill in the ‘Final Project’ assignment.”

This example shows how definitions and learning outcomes can be utilized in syllabi to communicate service-learning expectations. However, not all syllabi showed this integration between service-learning definitions and learning outcomes. For example, one natural science syllabus defined service-learning but offered no learning outcomes reflecting the service experience in the course. The syllabus defined service-learning as “a method of teaching and learning that allows students to participate in service to the community as a way to explore the topics and themes discussed in the course.” The only learning outcomes included in the syllabus were “Critical thinking. Critical analysis. Synthesis, application, judgement aptitude. Develop informed ... responses to existing issues.” These outcomes could relate to the community engagement experience, but without explicit connection and articulation, the expectations for how the course content and community work are linked is unclear.

### What Community Work Looks Like

Syllabi also communicated expectations regarding community work, including service requirements, where service took place, who community partners are, and who those partners served.

**Service Requirements.** Overall, 92% ( $n = 249$ ) of syllabi indicated a mandatory community component of the course, and 5% ( $n = 13$ ) indicated that the service component was optional. In some instances, students could choose between completing a service-learning project or a research project. In 3% ( $n = 8$ ) of syllabi, it was unclear if the service component was mandatory or optional. To better understand the place of community work in service-learning, we examined syllabi for service hour requirements.

Table 2 displays service hour requirements across the syllabi. It also includes those syllabi that indicated a service component for the course but did not list a service hour requirement. Eighty percent ( $n = 216$ ) of the syllabi are represented in Table 2. The other 20% ( $n = 54$ ) of syllabi not represented in Table 2 listed service not as an hour requirement, but instead as a specialized class project, travel (including winter, alternative spring break, or international travel components), or a choice students could make between a service or research experience. Of the syllabi included in Table 2, the majority (41%;  $n = 89$ ) required 10 to 30 hours of service throughout the semester. Thirty-two percent ( $n = 70$ ) of the syllabi in Table 2 indicated a service component of the course but did not list an hour requirement. However, of these syllabi that indicated a service component of the course but did not list an hour requirement, 84% ( $n = 59$ ) indicated in the text of the syllabi that the service component of the course was mandatory.

**Table 2.**

#### *Service Hours Required.*

Hours Required	Frequency (%)	<i>n</i>
Service hours not listed	32	70
1–6 hours/week	4	9
1–9 hours/semester	7	16
10–29 hours/semester	21	46
20–29 hours/semester	20	43
30–39 hours/semester	6	13
40–49 hours/semester	4	8
50 or more hours/semester	5	11

*Note.* Hours required are reported as presented in the syllabus. Of the syllabi represented in Table 2 that listed service hours required (68%;  $n = 146$ ), 6% ( $n = 9$ ) of the syllabi listed hours per week where the remaining syllabi (94%;  $n = 137$ ) listed hours per semester.

Of the total syllabi ( $n = 270$ ; both those in Table 2 and those not included because they listed service beyond an hour requirement), 10% ( $n = 27$ ) indicated that the required service included both direct and indirect service. Through service-learning, direct service often refers to activities where students interact with community members being “served” by a partner organization (e.g., students volunteering at an after-school tutoring program or food pantry). Indirect service can include, for instance, students working on a bounded deliverable for a partner organization, such as a social media plan. Within the syllabi, indirect service sometimes also included preservice trainings or orientations, time to complete assignments related to the service component outside of scheduled class time, or, in few instances (<1%;  $n = 2$ ), transportation to and from service sites.

Finally, we examined the syllabi to determine if courses granted credit for service. Thirty-nine percent ( $n = 104$ ) of the syllabi indicated that students received credit for completion or documentation of their service. However, credit for service was often one component of a larger graded category. For example, one syllabus indicated that students received credit for “[class] attendance, participation, and service hours.” Another syllabus indicated that students received credit for documentation of “service hours and [a] supervisor evaluation.” Another syllabus indicated that students received credit for “documentation of service hours with field notes.” Therefore, credit for service varied across syllabi.

**Community Partner Information.** To further understand what community work looked like, we examined syllabi to understand where students were placed in the community and who community partners served. Seventy-six percent ( $n = 204$ ) of the syllabi provided at least some partner information, which ranged from syllabi vaguely describing community work and noting that detailed partner information would be provided in class, online, or from a coordinating office, to naming partner organizations. This sometimes included describing in detail the work of the partner(s). Partnership information was unclear or not provided in 24% ( $n = 66$ ) of the syllabi.

Of the syllabi that provided partner information (76%;  $n = 204$ ), the largest number of syllabi (39%;  $n = 80$ ) described the service component of a class as taking place in and serving “the local community” but did not identify with any specificity the site location or constituency to be served in “the local community.” For example, one syllabus identified the course’s community partner(s) this way: “Students work in teams with a community partner, a local nonprofit organization. Teams will create a project specific to each partner’s needs.” Another syllabus offered this description of the community work: “Teams of students provide service and develop and implement projects with and for non-profit, community partners. The projects address genuine needs that are important to the partner and provide significant opportunities for student learning.”

Although some syllabi had more than one community placement, of those syllabi that identified partner information (76%;  $n = 204$ ), the largest number of syllabi included at least one youth-focused community placement, such as schools that served local youth (33%;  $n = 67$ ). Other common community placements across the syllabi included at least one international-focused site, including immigrant and refugee services (17%;  $n = 34$ ); health care sites serving populations with both mental and physical health care needs (14%,  $n = 29$ ); and community placements focused on local agriculture and environmental issues (12%;  $n = 24$ ). Finally, of the 76% ( $n = 204$ ) of syllabi that included details on partnerships, 21% ( $n = 42$ ) referenced students working with “clients” through service-learning.

## Readings and Assignments

**Readings.** Although some syllabi drew on literature to define service-learning, findings revealed no common set of readings across syllabi. However, 24% ( $n = 66$ ) of the syllabi included readings related to service experiences (e.g., readings on service-learning and community engagement, citizenship, community, and/or nonprofits). Of the syllabi that included readings related to service experiences (24%;  $n = 66$ ), the most frequently cited reading specific to service-learning was Cress et al.’s (2005, 2013)

*Learning Through Serving: A Student Guidebook for Service-Learning and Civic Engagement Across Academic Disciplines and Cultural Communities* (14%;  $n = 9$ ). However, various civic readers, such as Davis and Lynn's (2006) *The Civically Engaged Reader: A Diverse Collection of Short Provocative Readings on Civic Activity*, appeared in 18% ( $n = 12$ ) of these syllabi. Other readings included readings by or about figures of service, such as Jane Addams, Myles Horton, or Martin Luther King, Jr. (14%,  $n = 9$ ); Illich's (1968) "To hell with good intentions" (11%,  $n = 7$ ); and various excerpts from Robert Putnam's work (11%,  $n = 7$ ).

**Assignments.** In addition to some courses granting credit for service, there were various assignments across the syllabi related to students' service-learning experiences. These assignments included exercises exploring the context and/or social concern centered in the service component (e.g., community mapping assignments; 28%;  $n = 76$ ), analytical assignments (e.g., interviews, observations, field notes; analytic/research papers; class/campus presentations of service project results; 55%;  $n = 148$ ), intervention or implementation assignments (e.g., development of an activism campaign, writing letters to elected officials, off-campus presentation of deliverables to community partners; 32%;  $n = 87$ ); and reflection assignments, including journaling (71%;  $n = 193$ ).

Taken together, these findings reveal a complicated landscape of how frameworks and expectations of service-learning courses are communicated via syllabi.

## Discussion

Similar to prior research, this analysis revealed a need for greater integration of service experiences into courses. Specifically, we found variance in how frameworks and expectations of service-learning are communicated in syllabi. These discoveries lead us to a series of questions about the field of service-learning and community engagement.

First, we know engagement efforts across higher education manifest in a variety of ways due to different institutional characteristics (e.g., type of institution, mission, and values; Welch, 2016). As such, research across the decades has found that an assortment of terms is used to depict engagement efforts by campuses (Kendall, 1990; Saltmarsh et al., 2009; Welch, 2016). Our analysis also found that a number of different terms are invoked to describe academic work linked to community-based experiences, as displayed in Table 1.

Because of individual institutional characteristics (Furco, 1996) and the multiple terms employed to describe community-engaged teaching, definitions are also varied (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Mooney & Edwards, 2001). Although we understand that service-learning does not conform to a narrow definition (Stoecker & Tryon, 2009), scholars have argued that these variations in definition may lead to some instructors having misconceptions about service-learning (e.g., volunteerism, preservice training, other forms of experiential learning; Bringle & Hatcher, 1995).

Barker (2011) and Welch (2016) suggested that the diverse terminology and definitions imply a fragmented movement and argued that engagement efforts may be advanced if there was a common articulation of terms and practices. Yet, a universal service-learning definition is likely unrealistic given that the pedagogy is often defined in relation to institutional characteristics and by individual instructors across disciplines. Thus, we question what the differences in terminology and definitions might suggest: Is there *a* community-engaged practice? Is it instead a number of different pedagogies, practices, and strategies?

Noteworthy is that 74% ( $n = 216$ ) of the total documents used the term "service-learning." Although there has been discussion in the field about the use of a hyphen between "service" and "learning" (i.e., "service-learning") to represent a balance between the student learning and service outcomes of the pedagogy and practice (see, for instance, Sigmon, 1994, for a discussion on a typology of service and learning), scholars have critiqued the hierarchies imposed by labels of service—regardless of if the hyphen is used or not—and have called for shifts in naming the pedagogy (Cooks et al., 2004; Costa & Leong, 2013; Hernandez, 2018; Hicks Peterson, 2018; Santiago-Ortiz, 2019; Stoecker, 2016; Vincent et al., 2021). Despite this criticism, our analysis found that the term "service-learning" still predominates.

How do we account for the retention of the service-learning label despite critiques against it? Is the language of service problematic or is the focus on terminology a distraction from the practices that bring critique?

The lack of clarity within syllabi regarding community work (e.g., whether service was mandatory or optional, the time required in service, whether credit was awarded for service) points to some debate within the field as to whether service hours, for instance, should be explicitly stated and required in service-learning courses. Although generally not considered a best practice of service-learning, we focused on this domain in our analysis, given our reading of each syllabus and noticing of required number of hours across the syllabi. Whereas some studies have found that students have positive attitudes toward service requirements (Moely & Ilustre, 2011), others have found that such requirements weaken students' resolve toward future involvement in community-engaged work (Stukas et al., 1999). Other studies have found that student attitudes toward participating in service are shaped not only by whether service is required but also by how service-learning is contextualized in a course (Dienhart et al., 2016). Thus, because service requirements are often tied to course credit (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996; Markus et al., 1993), scholars have worried that granting credit for the documentation of hours served may risk becoming "predominant, perhaps to the exclusion of more important learning objectives" (Messineo, 2007, p. 96). Despite this warning, 39% ( $n = 104$ ) of the syllabi indicated that students received credit for completion or documentation of their service. This finding compares to previous research, including Messineo's (2007) study, which found that approximately one-third of the syllabi analyzed in their study ( $n = 127$ ) granted credit for hours served. As was the case with our analysis, Messineo found that receiving credit for service was often one component of a larger graded category (e.g., attendance, participation, and service hours), but the completion of hours was part of the assessment.

The lack of clarity within syllabi regarding community work suggests that community work is a less important aspect of the work than the various terms and definitions used imply. Students may believe they can pass the course whether or not they complete the expected service activity. Alternatively, students may view overemphasis on a credit-bearing service requirement as an individual assignment rather than something integral to the course. That 71% ( $n = 193$ ) of syllabi included at least one student learning outcome related to service-learning is promising as it helps signal clear service and learning goals for students (and community partners).

The lack of specifics on community partnerships seen in this data set raises questions about the value placed on these relationships. Because service-learning cannot exist in the absence of partnership, we question what partnership means in the context of service-learning. What constitutes a partnership? How is partnership defined? What does it mean when a partnership is not named in a syllabus? How prominent should the partnership be in a syllabus?

We found it noteworthy that 21% ( $n = 42$ ) of syllabi that included details on partnerships (76%;  $n = 204$ ) referenced students working with clients through service-learning. We interpreted "clients" to mean the people served by the partnership organization. The language of partnership in service-learning is typically geared toward place (i.e., nonprofits, K–12 schools, and government agencies with whom service-learning courses often partner) and not the people most impacted by student engagement. Although naming the people involved in service-learning is a suggested best practice and we recognize the language of "client" may be typical in some disciplines (e.g., social work), the term builds on our concerns regarding the lack of clarity of the service-learning experience in syllabi. "Client," for instance, can suggest that community residents be viewed through social service and marketplace values (Stoecker, 2016), as opposed to democratic values that frame residents as producers of community work (White, 2012). We encourage communication that disrupts the bifurcation of place and people in describing partnerships and community work.

Best practices for faculty developing service-learning experiences include tasks like clearly articulating learning outcomes, partnership information, engagement opportunities, reflection, and assessment related to the course's service experience (Welch & Plaxton-Moore, 2019). Rubrics and assessment tools have emphasized these best practices, among others, for the development and implementation of high-quality service-learning courses (see Furco et al., 2023; Kieran & Hack, 2018).

Although such best practices are noted as central to service-learning in literature, our findings tell a different narrative about how service-learning is communicated in courses and throughout the field. The findings from our analysis reinforce the importance of intention and reveal the opportunity to do better at communicating the intentions and expectations of service-learning in syllabi.

We encourage instructors, in collaboration with students and community partners (with appropriate compensation), to think about how service-learning can connect to the overall course goals and partner priorities to foster greater integration of community work into a course experience. This should include being explicit in naming and defining service-learning in syllabi and during class sessions; identifying learning outcomes that connect to the service-learning experience; being explicit in naming and describing community partners (places and people) and the community work students will engage in; and identifying not only relevant course materials and assignments that relate to learning outcomes but also materials and assignments that allow students to come to know, understand, and see themselves, issues they are passionate about, and their campuses in relation to the people and places in which they intend to engage with through service-learning. This should also include developing assignments and assessment strategies that do not focus on granting credit for hours served, but rather on measuring students' ability to demonstrate understanding, learning, and growth toward the course-learning outcomes, including students' understanding of service expectations and partner priorities. Clearly articulating how service-learning is central to a course experience allows students to understand the "unique value of this pedagogy" (Steiner & Watson, 2006, p. 425) and see service-learning as "an integral part of the course right from the beginning" (Ballard & Elmore, 2009, p. 72). In doing so, service-learning can be seen as a strategy to achieve course goals, facilitate student learning and development, as well as foster community benefit and impact. Thus, we call on instructors developing and implementing service-learning courses to integrate the service-learning experience into their syllabus, situating service-learning and community partnerships as meaningful and beneficial to the course experience.

## **Limitations**

This study expands consideration of the syllabus as an empirical unit of analysis for research on teaching and learning. Although this article provides an expansive look at the field of service-learning and community engagement across U.S. higher education today, it also engaged a more interpretive understanding of the syllabi. Specifically, this study allowed for engagement with a larger sample to examine a ubiquitous practice within higher education like service-learning. Our interpretive understanding of the syllabi, however, is not without limitations.

Although the review of literature supports syllabi as a unit of analysis, we acknowledge that syllabi can be an imperfect proxy of the service-learning experience. We recognize that there can be multiple readings and interpretations of syllabi depending on the lenses with which they are examined. We also recognize that institutional constraints and politics may limit what is and is not included in the text of syllabi (Steiner & Watson, 2006). Correspondingly, we understand that syllabi may not fully reflect instructors' enactments of service-learning in the classroom. These reasons offer insight as to why syllabi are an underdeveloped and underutilized unit of analysis. However, as a contract between instructors and students (Ishiyama & Hartlaub, 2002), we still found syllabi valuable for exploring service-learning.

As we present findings derived from our review of syllabi from multiple institutions (including varied institution types), it is useful to name that multiple individuals were relied upon to identify and share syllabi they deemed exemplary. There were notable distinctions between syllabi, as demonstrated by the findings, that suggest that those individuals (and perhaps their institutions) hold different understandings of what is necessary and exemplar in community-engaged teaching. These different understandings inherently shape the data set though we also contend that they provide a more complete picture of the different ways service-learning is implemented across U.S. higher education institutions.

Overall, we acknowledge that our use of content analysis was highly interpretive, and we recognize that we made inferences based on the syllabi text and do not benefit from being able to talk with instructors about their practices and methods of implementing service-learning. Our intention was not to

study individual instructor practice but instead to survey service-learning across higher education. A future direction for our work may include case studies of individual campuses where we not only analyze syllabi but also interview instructors to better understand enactments of service-learning.

Likewise, because it is impossible to observe every instance in content analysis, we made decisions on domains to guide our analysis supported by literature, including best practices in service-learning, that we believe are important in understanding service-learning experiences. A future direction of our work may include analysis of other domains, such as understanding how service-learning syllabi address power differences in status between campuses and communities and value of community partner knowledge, expertise, and lived experience as well as communicate issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion in relation to service-learning experiences. Acknowledging disciplinary variation within service-learning, a future direction of our work may also include some comparison by disciplinary groupings to better understand how service-learning is operationalized across disciplines. Finally, a follow-up study may also include collecting post-2020 syllabi to consider how variables of interest (e.g., institutional designations or terminology used) changed overtime, given that the 2020 application cycle for the Carnegie Elective Classification for Community Engagement took place following our data collection for this study.

## Conclusion

This study aimed to respond to Mabry (1998) and Gilbride-Brown's (2011) concern that the intricacies of service-learning have not been fully explored in research. Specifically, this study allowed for engagement with a significant data set to examine the practice of service-learning. Through a survey of the field, we can visualize practice, explore its contours, and raise pertinent questions that invite further examination and questions that take up critical topics, such as those related to naming and defining community-engaged practices in syllabi as well as the centrality of partnerships within community-engaged courses.

The findings from this study suggest opportunities for offices and organizations (e.g., teaching and learning centers, community-engaged learning offices, state and national organizations that elevate civic and community engagement) to be attentive to distinctions between those practices and values embraced by the field and those articulated in service-learning syllabi. This study reveals possibilities for visioning, training, and development to create broader recognition and acceptance of desires and expectations for community-engaged teaching and learning as well as better preparation to be able to design and implement courses responsive to those values and practices.

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