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# Community Engagement

*A Retrospective Learning Experience During the COVID-19 Pandemic*

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## Community Engagement

### *A Retrospective Learning Experience During the COVID-19 Pandemic*

Sarah Beth Dempsey

#### **Abstract**

All undergraduate students at Saint Mary's College of California complete a community engagement (CE) course to fulfill a core curriculum graduation requirement. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many community partners did not have the capacity to collaborate with the college for CE. To address this shortage of CE courses, a course titled Community Engagement: A Retrospective Learning Experience was created for graduating seniors who had already completed significant work/service/praxis directly related to their past coursework but did not receive the course credit. In this CE course, students actively and critically reflected upon their past service experiences in real time and integrated them into their academic understanding of the world to meet the CE requirement. With faculty guidance and critical reflection, the analysis of student data demonstrated that this CE course was perceived by students to be meaningful and beneficial to their learning.

**Keywords:** *community engagement, critical reflection, higher education*

## La participación comunitaria

### *Una experiencia retrospectiva de aprendizaje durante la pandemia COVID-19*

Sarah Beth Dempsey

#### **Resumen**

Todos los estudiantes de grado de Saint Mary's College en California completan un curso de participación comunitaria para cumplir un requisito académico para graduarse. Durante la pandemia COVID-19, muchos colaboradores comunitarios no tenían la capacidad de colaborar con la universidad en el contexto de la participación comunitaria. Para abordar esta falta de cursos, una clase titulada "La participación comunitaria: Una experiencia retrospectiva de aprendizaje" fue creada para los estudiantes de último año quienes ya habían completado trabajo o servicio significativo (relacionado con sus clases anteriores) pero no habían recibido crédito académico. En esta clase de participación comunitaria, los estudiantes reflejaban de manera activa y crítica sobre sus experiencias pasadas con el servicio y las integraban dentro de su comprensión académica mundial para lograr el requisito de participación comunitaria. Con la dirección de la facultad y la reflexión crítica, el análisis de datos estudiantiles demostró que este curso fue percibido por los estudiantes como una experiencia significativa y beneficiosa para su aprendizaje.

**Palabras clave:** *la participación comunitaria, la reflexión crítica, la educación superior*

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Community engagement (CE) is an opportunity for students to immerse themselves in community-based service experiences and critically reflect on those experiences, theories, and knowledge in the classroom (Bowen, 2014; Mitchell, 2008). In CE courses, students take ownership of their educational experiences, analyze the social inequities in communities, and share their personal stories to cocreate meaning of their service experiences with classmates (Bowen, 2014; Norris et al., 2017; Yosso, 2005). While there is an abundance of literature highlighting the best practices in critical pedagogy and successful course design in the field (Ash & Clayton, 2009; Battistoni, 2012; Bowen, 2014; Bringle & Hatcher, 2000; Butin, 2010; Jacoby, 2003; Mitchell, 2008; Motoike, 2017; Vogelgesang & Astin, 2000), there is limited literature on successful postexperience reflections—a retrospective of service—and student learning. This case study addresses this problem. Using the theoretical concepts of service-learning and critical pedagogy, I explored the question, “How do students construct personal meaning from their prior service engagements within the framework of a retrospective course?”

## Theoretical Framework

This qualitative research case study analyzes the design of this CE course that was created to address the shortage of CE courses during the COVID-19 pandemic. Merriam-Webster (1998, as cited in Yazan, 2015) defines a qualitative case study as “an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a bounded phenomenon such as a program, an institution, a person, a process, or a social unit” (p. 148). The theoretical framework for this study is based on service-learning and critical pedagogy. Jacoby (2003) stated service-learning is “a pedagogy that is grounded in experience as a basis for learning and on the centrality and intentionality of reflection designed to enable learning to occur” (p. 5). Critical service-learning pedagogy delves deeper into systemic issues and community needs by relating “a course’s academic content to challenging students to articulate their own visions for a more just society and investigate and contemplate actions that propel society toward those visions” (Mitchell, 2008, p. 56). Using critical service-learning as a framework for this research was an opportunity to understand how students made the meaning of their learning, service experiences, and roles in the community.

## Literature Review

There is limited literature in terms of examining the design, implementation, and outcomes of innovative CE courses as most scholars focus on traditional CE courses. Traditional CE courses are designed for students to serve in and with the community while concurrently enrolled in a course where they apply theoretical understanding to their service work (Eby, 1998; Green et al., 2021; Hansen, 2012). Jacoby (1999) explained that “service learning enables colleges and universities to enhance student learning and development while making unique contributions to their communities, the nation, and the world” (p. 19). Students create community in the classroom by sharing their community experiences and written reflections with each other. Mitchell (2008) described that “this exchange develops authenticity through vulnerability and trust-building” (p. 51).

The current literature on retrospective reflection, where students reflect in real time on past experiences, focuses on community partnerships (Kreuter et al., 2012; Tilley-Lubbs, 2009; Zimmerman et al., 2019), the use of reflection as a teaching tool in CE courses (Darby & Newman, 2014; Gutstein et al., 2006; Mink & Twill, 2012), understanding field-workers’ experiences at a residential college (Magolda, 2000), and students’ transformational experiences and changes in their perspectives of service (Brown & Bright, 2017; Chan et al., 2021). Additional studies invited college alumni to reflect on service experiences after graduation (Huff et al., 2012; Martin, 2016; Mitchell & Rost-Banik, 2019; Mitchell et al., 2015; Stolley et al., 2017). There is some retrospective service-learning literature that is grounded in sensemaking theory, which is a way to make sense of the world (Weick et al., 2005). Sensemaking theory has been applied to institutional assessment data for service-learning (Chadwick & Pawlowski, 2007), transformational learning on international immersion service-learning trips (Larson & Fay, 2016), and service-learning students’ commitments to social justice (Mitchell, 2014).

The core components of traditional CE courses include meaningful student work in the community, intentional learning outcomes, student input in creating the partnerships, serving diverse communities, and critical reflection (Battistoni, 2012). Mitchell (2008) described critical reflection as “questioning assumptions and values, and paying attention to the impacts and implications of our work” (p. 61). CE courses are intentionally designed to be a transformational learning experience for students as they participate in critical reflection on the topics of social justice, systems of oppression, charity models of service, and deficit-based versus asset-based engagement (Ash & Clayton, 2009; Bowen, 2014; Mitchell & Donahue, 2017; Motoike, 2017; Wubbena & Stewart, 2017; Yosso, 2005). Another way to view student reflection is self-authorship, which is a way for students to name their own identities and beliefs in their own words as they make meaning of their experiences in the world (Carpenter & Peña, 2017; Day & Lane, 2014; King et al., 2009).

## **Institutional Community Engagement**

Saint Mary's College of California was founded in 1862 and is a small, private, Lasallian, liberal arts college located in the east bay hills of the San Francisco Bay Area. The College motto is “Enter to Learn, Leave to Serve.” The undergraduate enrollment is around 2,000 students and the graduate enrollment is nearly 800 students. It is a designated Hispanic-serving institution.

In 2013, a new undergraduate core curriculum was implemented and included a CE requirement. Although many faculty members were already teaching service-learning, community-based research, and social justice courses, this was the first time such a course requirement was institutionalized. Since 1999, the Catholic Institute for Lasallian Social Action (CILSA) has been the social justice and CE office to coordinate social justice programs and support service-learning/CE courses. CILSA staff provides the CE infrastructure for the institution by facilitating faculty development sessions for new CE faculty; supporting students, faculty, and community partners collaborating in CE experiences during the academic year; and managing the formal community partnership agreements in the form of memorandums of understanding. This centralized office with dedicated social justice educators demonstrates the institutional commitment to CE (Bringle & Hatcher, 2000).

## **Community Engagement in the Pandemic**

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit in March 2020, some service experiences for CE courses were modified for remote service and some were canceled. The graduation requirement remained in place, but the campus was closed and students were sent home for remote learning. They could not go into the community for service. Many community partners did not have the capacity to support remote or indirect service, and others shifted their priorities to focus only on immediate community needs such as food distribution. The students continued to learn remotely in the 2020–2021 academic year. This significantly impacted the CE course offerings as the college usually offered approximately 50 CE courses annually, with about five courses available in January term, when many graduating seniors, athletes, student parents, and science majors enroll in CE courses.

## **CE Course Design**

With the shortage of January term CE courses and a large number of graduating seniors needing to fulfill the CE requirement, I created the course titled Community Engagement: A Retrospective Learning Experience for students who had already completed service that was directly related to college coursework but did not have an opportunity to reflect on those experiences. Students independently served their communities for a variety of reasons—résumé building, internship opportunities, and because it made them feel good to give back—but did not receive CE credit. This course was designed for students to reflect in real time on past service experiences, which I called retrospective, just as they would have reflected on concurrent service activities if they were enrolled in traditional CE courses. It was rooted in critical service-learning pedagogy with a commitment to social justice (Mitchell, 2017).

This one-unit, short course was offered one night a week for four weeks on Zoom. As an online course, it provided flexibility for students with families, demanding work schedules, and athletic commitments to fulfill the graduation requirement in a format and time that was convenient for them. In addition to students satisfying the college's CE learning outcomes in this course, they also had to meet the course's learning outcomes, which centered on analyzing their service experiences from a CE framework, exploring systemic issues being addressed at their service sites and their roles in community, critically reflecting on their engagement experiences, and understanding their arc of transformative learning (Dempsey, 2001). It was a highly interactive lecture and discussion course with Jamboard activities, breakout groups, and reflection prompts for students to fully integrate their service work, academics, and class content, which addressed a different theme each week: week 1) groundwork; week 2) equity, power, and antiracism; week 3) community partner benefits and curricular connections; and week 4) moving forward.

Each class started with a check-in and ended with a checkout. In the first class, students read Brave Space Guidelines (Arao & Clemens, 2013), then created their own agreements to make this space in the Zoom classroom a shared, successful experience. Their course agreements often included confidentiality, active listening, respect, patience, and honesty. The students were assigned to the same reflection activity breakout groups each week as a way to develop rapport and build trust with their classmates. Students reflected on engagement experiences and moments of transformational learning, and related them to prior college courses they completed. For example, students who served at hospitals, tutoring centers, and nonprofit organizations related service experiences to biology, math, and business courses, respectively.

The reading assignments included works by Donahue and Plaxton-Moore (2018), Eby (1998), Kretzmann and McKnight (1996), Mitchell and Donahue (2009), and Voices for Racial Justice (2014). In the class activities and homework reflection papers, students critically reflected on their values and assumptions about their service experiences, the communities they served, and the systemic issues of oppression that impacted their communities and their roles in it. They explored issues such as asset-based versus deficit-based mindset, racism and antiracism in service, and notions of charity versus solidarity. They completed weekly reflection papers that integrated the readings, class conversations, past courses that related to their service work, and service experiences connected to that week's theme.

In the first class, they were given five minutes to address a written reflection prompt and generate as many ideas, questions, and concerns about this course and/or the first reading assignment as related to service experiences. In the third class, students revisited that reflection to explore where they were in that present moment, if they had more concerns, if the initial questions or concerns were addressed, and if they had new ideas and questions. In the last class, they gave short presentations to highlight their service experiences, learnings in this course, and next steps. Students shared PowerPoint slides and photo collages of their community sites, and one student even wrote a poem about his service experience at a food bank.

## Methodology

This exploratory case study focuses on a particular unit of study (Yazan, 2015): This CE course was created in response to the shortage of CE courses during the COVID-19 pandemic and students needed to fulfill their CE requirement for graduation. Using a qualitative method of analysis, the data collected were student reflection papers and end-of-semester course surveys for evaluation. The students' reflections on their service experiences were based on critical pedagogy in that students "use what is happening in [the] classroom—the readings, discussion, writing assignments and other activities—to reflect on their service in the context of larger social issues" (Mitchell, 2008, p. 55). Using the theoretical concepts of service-learning and critical pedagogy, I explored the question, "How do students construct personal meaning from their prior service engagements within the framework of a retrospective course?"

This research was guided by the constructivist worldview to better understand the students' learning experiences in this CE course (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). A content analysis was completed on student reflection papers, as well as indirect data via end-of-semester student course surveys. According

to Finley and Rhodes (2017), “Indirect evidence captured through student self-reported surveys or course evaluations provides insights into the ways in which students *perceive* their learning experiences” (p. 304). Students were invited to participate in the research study on the first night of class with an oral and written invitation and provided with a consent form to complete online. Positive and negative comments in the reflection papers, as well as (lack of) participation, did not impact students’ grades.

## Participants

The CE course for this study was offered online in three terms (January term 2021, summer 2021, spring 2022). All students were invited to participate in this study across all terms, with a total of 51 students enrolled, and 40 students (78% participation rate) agreed to share their weekly reflection papers for this research project. They identified which four reflection papers they wanted to include in the study, and most students ( $n = 38$ ) granted permission to use all four papers. There are 157 student reflection papers in this study.

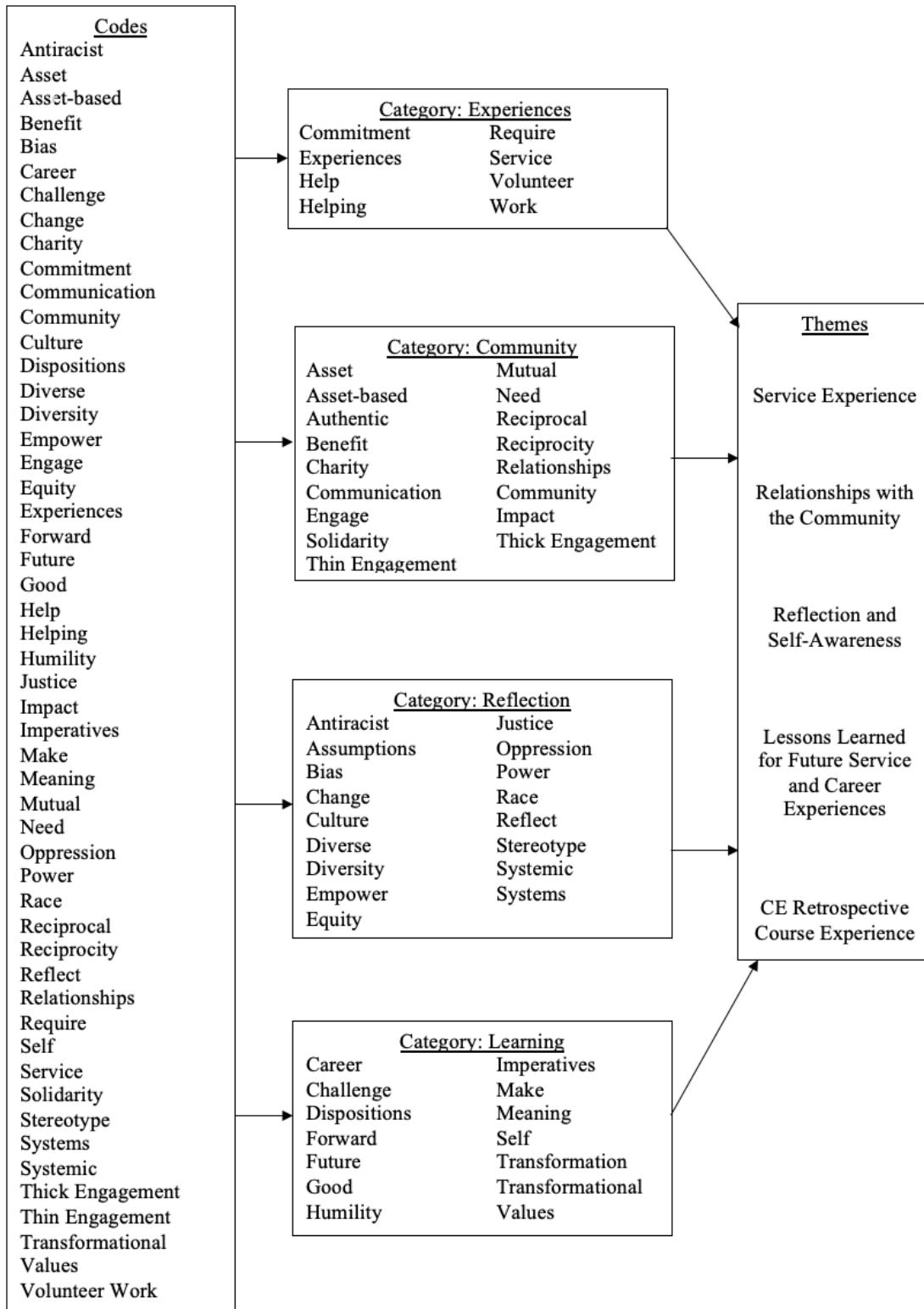
Of the 40 participants, 39 provided their demographic information. Twenty-one women and 18 men participated in this study with the majority of them being college seniors ( $n = 35$ ) followed by three juniors and one sophomore. Students majored in programs in the School of Economics and Business Administration ( $n = 10$ ), School of Liberal Arts ( $n = 13$ ), and School of Science ( $n = 16$ ). They ranged in age from 20–21 years old ( $n = 17$ ), 22–23 years old ( $n = 15$ ), 24–25 years old ( $n = 3$ ), and over 29 years old ( $n = 4$ ). Half of the participants identified as a person of color or of more than one race ( $n = 19$ ) and half identified as white ( $n = 20$ ).

## Data Analysis

In the first cycle of coding the reflection papers using NVivo, 56 first codes were created based on frequency of words used and topics covered in class. After the second cycle of coding, four categories were created for these codes. Finally, five themes emerged from the data (see Figure 1).

### Figure 1.

*Coding Process.*



*Note.* The coding process for qualitative inquiry.

## Findings

Student weekly reflection papers and end-of-semester college feedback surveys were analyzed for this exploratory case study.

### Student Reflection Papers

There were 157 student reflection papers analyzed in this study. After coding and categorizing the reflection papers in NVivo, five themes emerged based on the frequency in which they were mentioned: service experiences, relationship with the community, reflection and self-awareness, lessons learned for future service and career experiences, and the CE retrospective course experience (see Table 1).

**Table 1.**

*Themes in Student Reflection Papers.*

Themes	Definition of themes	Select quotes
Service experiences	Reflection focused on service experiences and projects	“This atmosphere of mutual help and commitment allowed me to become more comfortable and eventually be more open with clients and other staff.”
Relationships with the community	Reflection focused on relationships and interactions with community members and/or community partners	“This is how I choose to define community: as a place where diverse people come together with mutual respect to teach and learn from each other.”
Reflection and self-awareness	Reflection focused on a new self-awareness the service experience had on personal growth	“By recognizing my own privileges, dispositions, and biases, I can better serve my community because I am self-aware of my own strengths and weaknesses.”
Lessons learned for future service and career experiences	Reflection focused on applying what was learned in this class to future service and career experiences	“I appreciate taking the time to include reflection with my volunteer work because it helps me understand what I actually was able to do with the community, how I could have done better and how I plan to improve in the future.”
CE retrospective course experience	Reflection focused on this retrospective course	“Through assigned readings and class discussions, I gained a deeper understanding of what it means to contribute and support others in an authentic way.”

### Theme: Service Experiences

Students vulnerably shared how they selected their service sites. In addition to volunteering or interning in their communities for future academic and professional advancement, students disclosed that they selected their partner organizations because they did not go back home during the pandemic and were homesick. They missed their families so they volunteered with youth-based programs and animal rescue centers for comfort and connection. Some students had a history of addiction, mental health issues, and food insecurity so they served clients at community resource centers who had similar lived experiences. Other students moved back home during the pandemic and volunteered at their parents' places of work, which happened to be nonprofit organizations and schools. Even though this course was designed to be a course reflecting on past service experiences, a handful of students were still serving at their community partner sites while enrolled in the course. They had either been serving with the organization for years or they recently started volunteering during the pandemic when there was a high need for community volunteers. One student described her service experience this way:

My community engagement work exposed me to a diverse group of individuals, and a particularly vulnerable population considering they were all dealing with a unique set of circumstances including trauma, mental illness, or addiction. I quickly realized that patience and empathy were necessary because working with each client was its own unique experience. There was no handbook or checklist to follow, but rather you had to adapt and meet that individual where they were at in order to effectively support them.

Another student reflected on her service experiences during college:

Something in particular that I have gained from my service has been an amplified amount of empathy and passion that I have for those suffering from the impact that economic and racial inequalities bring to so many people. Something else I see that has come out of my service experience is my commitment to not going back to where I once was of being unaware of the issues within my community; I do think I fear becoming desensitized to very real issues that people face everyday that I might not be impacted by.

Because students had choice in their community partner sites, they had a deep commitment and dedication to their service work.

### **Theme: Relationship With the Community**

In class, students described how they built relationships with the community. They explored the concepts of thin and thick engagement (Donahue & Plaxton-Moore, 2018), where they discussed their level of commitment ranging from volunteering to look good on their résumés for future employers to being deeply invested and developing relationships in the communities they served. They had breakout conversations about how their levels of engagement impacted their service experiences. One student shared a reflection on community relationships:

Learning from other people and building relationships go hand in hand. I believe that in order to adequately and fully learn from other people, you must build the relationships first. ... In order to really get to know someone, you must show up and be vulnerable. This means putting forth your authentic self and lowering those "walls," this includes being engaged, being present, being honest and showing genuine curiosity in what you are learning about. A large part of building relationships is consistently showing up, someone will not be willing to open up if they do not think you will be coming back the next day, you must show your commitment to build that trust.

Students expressed a range of emotions when describing their relationships with the community, from fear of not knowing what to expect or if they would do a good job to frustration that they were unable to make systemic changes in a short period of time. One student commented, "I'm not certain about how I, or we, can dismantle the structures that are perpetuating oppression, but I know that I, as well as we, must first commit to acknowledging and engaging in dialogue around these problems." Overall, the students shared an excitement of being in the community and serving in a way that was personally and/or professionally fulfilling for them.

### **Theme: Reflection and Self-Awareness**

As the students reflected on their service experiences in classroom activities, they started to learn from and with each other about their experiences. They had a new level of understanding about engaging with the community and about their skills, strengths, and areas of growth. One student commented:

Compassion for others was something I believed I possessed when going into my service work, however practicing compassion for myself was something I had to learn along the way. Working with others inevitably comes along with challenges and new opportunities for learning, and I definitely found this to be true in my experience where I was often left feeling emotionally drained and powerless. However, I was committed to growth and serving others so I had to learn

how to show myself the same gentleness, understanding, and care that I was willing to give to others.

Most of the College's CE courses are in the School of Liberal Arts. Students in the Schools of Economics and Business Administration and Science often have limited CE courses in their majors or have schedules that make it difficult to enroll in CE courses. The majority of students in this course were from these two schools. One science student reflected on what it was like to have this course available:

The uniqueness of this course was extremely valuable, especially since as a Biology student there are very few other community engagement courses that relate so deeply to what I wish to do with my life in the future. By being able to reflect instead of learn while volunteering I'm able to want to improve on my future work with a new energy that I do not think I would experience otherwise. I hope to improve my future service work in a way that benefits the community first, instead of being there for my own selfish expectations and focusing on only those. I have been able to define my imperatives in a stronger way, wanting to focus on health care inequity, racial bias within medicine and education about medicine in areas that otherwise would be mistreated by the systems in place.

One student shared what it is like to take this course and highlighted how the reflection was more meaningful after the completed service experience:

Additionally, by reflecting on my service experience after it was finished, I had even greater perspective on the lessons it provided and the qualities it helped me to develop. I was able to reflect on my arc of transformation with much more clarity than if I were reflecting at the same time as these experiences were occurring. The reflection process, along with the text, showed me areas of personal growth that I was not aware of during my mentorship. In this way, I was able to experience even more growth and understanding from this experience. Not only did we gain valuable knowledge about community engagement and issues of social justice, this course also demonstrated the value of critical reflection in one's own personal development.

With a comprehensive perspective of the service experience from start to finish, another student noted:

I can now say my biggest takeaways are having a greater understanding and sense of personal efficacy, personal identity, and spiritual growth. Through service work I have established and increased my self confidence in being able to communicate with others and also having the ability to positively impact and contribute to meaningful work.

These reflections were echoed by students in Jamboard activities and breakout group conversations as they shared their arcs of transformational learning and their awareness of the impacts they had on the community, both positive and negative, as they navigated unfamiliar environments, professional workspaces, and supervisor expectations for communicating with staff, fellow volunteers, and clients.

### **Theme: Lessons Learned for Future Service and Career Experiences**

At the end of the course, students reflected on their overall engagement experiences, personal growth, and lessons learned. They were challenged to think beyond this course about how they will apply this new knowledge to the next steps in their journeys. One student shared:

I have been able to reflect on my volunteer experience as a whole throughout this course, starting with my hopes and fears, the transformative learning I experienced, what I learned about myself throughout this time and how my experience in community engagement will continue to influence my life. I appreciate taking the time to include reflection with my volunteer work because it helps me understand what I actually was able to do within the community, how I could have done better and how I plan to improve in the future.

Many students planned to take their new awareness of systemic issues and professional skills into their next service opportunities and career settings. One student reported:

My experience in community engagement has helped form a better idea of my life after Saint Mary's. While I have planned on attending medical school for a long time, I was unsure of what aspect of medicine I hoped to focus on. Entering my service learning I thought I wanted to go into surgery but while volunteering I found that I enjoyed interacting with patients and their families significantly more than the actual surgery portion ... I want to be a safe space for marginalized and underrepresented families, helping them feel heard in an environment where they are used to feeling ignored.

The reflection activities provided meaningful opportunities for students to identify their values, prioritize their interests, and prepare for their next steps after graduation.

### **Theme: CE Retrospective Course Experience**

As a newly created CE course, students had much to share about their experiences in the course and the opportunity to fulfill the CE graduation requirement during the pandemic. One student commented:

I can confidently say that I have learned more about myself in the past two months than I have over the course of the past year. While COVID inevitably slowed the pace of our lives, I have never had an experience so memorable and impactful, while having the opportunity to reflect on what happened and how it changed me as a whole. ... This course in particular taught me how valuable service truly is, and what it means to be a valuable participant in your community.

Additionally, students were relieved to have an opportunity to fulfill the CE graduation requirement during the pandemic when there were fewer CE courses available to them. One student mentioned:

I am very grateful for this class, the reflections have allowed me to think back at the service I did and understand the real impact it had on me and the community. I now look back at the student I was before this class and know that Community Engagement of some form should be a requirement for all students. Being active in the community you live in and serving those that are in need is extremely important for the bettering [*sic*] and success of communities; teaching these values to students is important so that we can go into the world and use these experiences to create real change. I no longer read the college's motto "Enter to learn, leave to serve" and wonder how it can be applied to me; I am now aware that community engagement is present and possible everywhere and I look forward to seeing how I can apply what I learned at [my site] in my career, as well as excited to participate in other service projects in the future.

### **End-of-Semester Student Feedback Surveys**

The college's end-of-semester student feedback survey results were also reviewed for this study. Across all terms, all 51 students enrolled in the course were invited to complete the college survey and 19 submitted it (37.3% response rate). Students highlighted the readings, Jamboard activities, reflection papers, and small breakout group discussions that helped with their learning. Two students commented that they value "reflecting on the service work [they] have done after the fact, focusing on racial inequities, community and relationships" and "what it means to be a community partner, how community engaged learning can transform a person, and how to help a community without hurting."

Additionally, students reported the reflection papers were key components of their learning experience. A student commented, "I valued the reflection aspect of the course and the shift in perspective provided by the papers," and another noted, "I think the four papers helped me to solidify the ideas of the text, and gave me insight onto [*sic*] how my lived experience changed because of my service experience." One student shared a challenge experienced in their learning was "being honest with myself about how I affected the work and how the work affected me."

## Discussion

Based on the findings of this exploratory case study, students were overwhelmingly positive about this CE course and the critical reflections that contributed to their learning experiences. Additionally, they valued the weekly, evening course in an online format so they could tend to their personal, academic, and professional obligations. In closing class conversations, the students appreciated the flexibility of the course and me, as the instructor, for recognizing them as whole people with lives and responsibilities beyond the classroom.

This course was designed for students who had independently completed a service but needed the academic connection to community and reflection to fulfill the CE graduation requirement. Donahue and Plaxton-Moore (2018) wrote, “Reflection is the process of making meaning of experiences by integrating our intellectual, emotional, and spiritual responses to them. It’s the enactment of intellectual curiosity and open-mindedness, tempered by humility and infused with empathy” (p. 58). Through this reflection process, students were able to understand their service experiences and their roles as community members from a new perspective. It is because of their reflections and transformations that they became unofficial ambassadors for this course. They shared their experiences with academic advisors and encouraged friends to enroll in it.

A new core curriculum was implemented in fall 2023. The CE requirement has been renamed to engaged learning (EL), with new learning outcomes and expanded opportunities for students to fulfill the EL graduation requirement through courses, internships, independent study, and summer research, where “students will experientially learn to put academic content to practice while working collaboratively with their community partners. Students will also consider the immediate or long-term impact of their work on themselves, the community partner, and society more broadly” (Saint Mary’s College of California, 2023). This course has been offered twice since the conclusion of this study. Under the new core curriculum, it will be offered in fall and spring semesters and continue to be an evening, online course because of the flexibility it provides to nontraditional students.

## Limitations

There are some limitations in this study. I have been the only instructor for this course and the participants are only the students who were enrolled in it. Battistoni (2012) noted that this is a common problem of assessment research in higher education. Since this course was only offered online during the pandemic, there are no comparable data for an in-person course or a traditional CE course. Saint Mary’s College is a small institution and most classes enroll around 20 students, so the participant numbers are small. Another limitation is time; this CE course is only four weeks long. If it were an entire semester, like the traditional CE courses, students could have more time to participate in additional critical thinking and self-reflection activities.

## Conclusion

The college experienced a shortage of CE courses due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In response to this problem of students needing to fulfill the CE graduation requirement with fewer course offerings, the CE course, Community Engagement: A Retrospective Learning Experience, was created for students who have already completed significant work/service/praxis that was directly related to coursework and that occurred while students were in college, but did not receive CE credit. This case study, based on qualitative research and service-learning and critical pedagogy, explored the question “How do students construct personal meaning from their prior service engagements within the framework of a retrospective course.” The analysis of the data—both from the NVivo coding of 157 written reflections and 19 end-of-course surveys—led to the following conclusions: (1) even though the service experiences had occurred months or years prior to this course, students made meaning of past service experiences through critical reflection and by sharing their experiences with their classmates; and (2) a CE course designed to

reflect in real time on past service experiences—if well designed and implemented—is beneficial to student learning.

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