



Fall 2021 Newsletter

A Social Justice Approach to Mitigating a Local Crisis

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At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, many K-12 schools in the United States made the difficult decision to extend school closures into the 2020-21 academic year, offering remote instruction in place of in-person classes. While families with resources arranged for tutors and organized private learning pods, parents lacking socio-economic privilege and flexible work schedules were left to solve an impossible equation: How to supervise their children in online classes while keeping a job and caring for other family members? The disparity in resources and opportunities available to children from different socio-economic backgrounds reflected longstanding inequities in educational access and offered a stark illustration of how the COVID-19 crisis amplified existing inequalities.

Community engagement advocates have long sought to align university resources with community priorities to advance the cause of social justice (Welch and Saltmarsh 2016). As an unmitigated educational crisis was unfolding in the “backyards” of universities across the United States, many universities committed to social justice principles faced a critical question: How might they respond to such an urgent and challenging situation?

At James Madison University (JMU), a working group of faculty and community members coalesced to develop a short-term solution. Though lacking experience in administering a licensed childcare facility, the group endeavored to design and implement a free educational pod for families that most needed its services. The working group served as community members and not just as JMU representatives. The JMU Community Service-Learning (CS-L) center used its position to bring university resources, community connections, university leadership, and an institutional “stamp of approval.” With endorsement from the local school district and key community stakeholders, the working group organized a space in a local church, furnished, and staffed the pod with supplies and volunteers, and provided a safe and nurturing place for children to participate in school virtually.

Despite countless hurdles in logistics, staffing, resources, and risk, the pod provided free daily access to 20 K-2 students from 8:00am-3:30pm for nearly five months until in-person schooling resumed. The local elementary school, located in one of the most racially, ethnically, and economically diverse areas in the city, recommended which families would benefit from this pod. The school later reported that the students who participated in the pod were more prepared to re-enter the classroom environment.

While many universities espouse community engagement as a core value, community-campus partnerships are frequently stifled by bureaucratic red tape and institutional inertia. Community engagement offices, like CS-L at JMU, are positioned to negotiate those institutional barriers and navigate community concerns. The Students, Organizations, Faculty, Administrators, and Residents (SOFAR: See figure 1 below) framework for community-campus partnerships (Bringle Clayton and Price 2009) describes how community engagement offices can serve as a “home base” for managing the dozens of dyadic relationships involved in a complex partnership. For instance, CS-L side-stepped institutional concerns about risks associated with managing a childcare center by connecting the working group to community organizations, government agencies, community assets, service-learning courses, interns, and Federal Work Study student staff. By making the pod a signature partner, CS-L shouldered the risk and provided staffing—freeing up the working group to focus on the day-to-day logistics and students’ socio-emotional learning.

Although the pod was successful, it reflected tensions within higher education institutions and the importance of developing and maintaining trust in community-campus partnerships. Implementing a COVID-safe, caring, culturally respectful childcare center with nearly all volunteer staff was daunting. Part of what made this possible was that CS-L provided cover and an institutional endorsement. The working group’s deep commitment to the web of relationships that sustained the pod established a well of trust. When the trust was undermined due to a breakdown in staffing, an unenforced policy, or a misunderstanding with procedures, the working group sought to rebuild it by focusing on the social justice goals of the effort and not on placating the institution.

Our experience leads to an important question: What do universities and community engagement offices do when a crisis like this intensifies inequity in K-12 education? We may have temporarily addressed injustice in this effort, but not without uncovering tensions, highlighting power disparities, and raising new questions. Higher education institutions are understandably risk-averse, but they should pursue alternatives to deploy their ample resources successfully. Faculty members can be one such resource, but how can universities support them? The community engagement office provided essential advocacy and support in this example, but what resources were not tapped? And what if the pod had failed? How would that affect future community-campus efforts to pursue social justice? These questions highlight concerns around how higher education institutions can involve its resources (e.g., departments, faculty) in the surrounding community. In our case, relationships were strengthened and now serve as a foundation for more in-depth partnerships, cycling us to the question that we return to so often in service-learning courses: Now what?

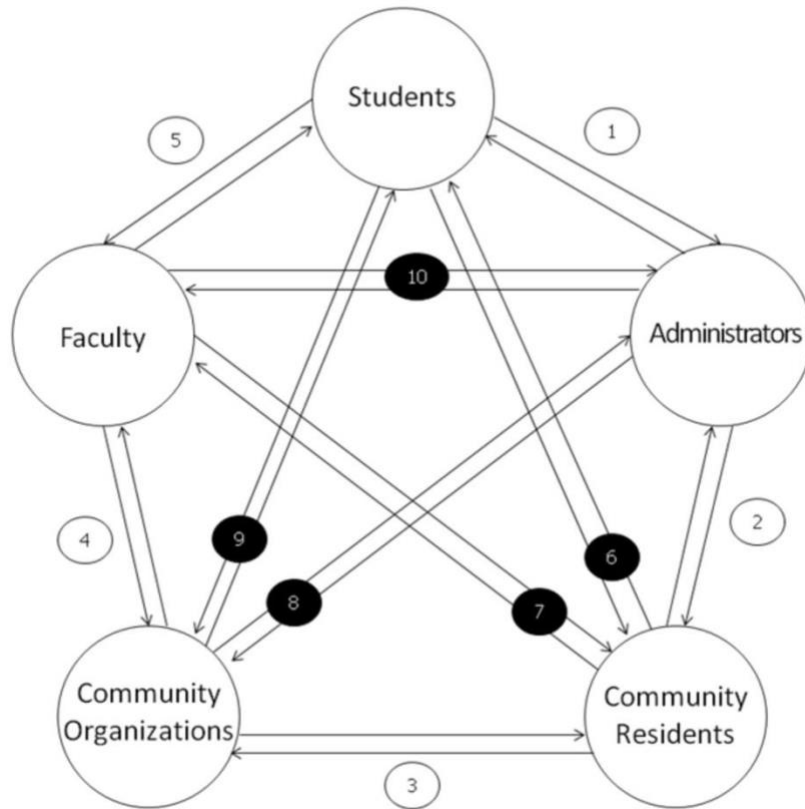


Figure 1: SOFAR model of Service-Learning/Community Engagement Relationships and Partnerships (Bringle Clayton and Price 2009)

Works Cited

Bringle, Robert, Patty Clayton, and Mary Price. "Partnerships in service-learning and civic engagement." *Partnerships: A Journal of Service-Learning & Civic Engagement*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2009, <http://libjournal.uncg.edu/prt/article/view/415/228>

Welch, Marshall, and John Saltmarsh. *Engaging Higher Education: Purpose, Platforms, and Programs for Community Engagement*. Stylus Publishing, LLC, 2016.