

CLIENT-BASED SERVICE LEARNING: A PUBLIC HEALTH INNOVATION FOR STRENGTHENING COMMUNITY RESILIENCE

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ABSTRACT

Experiential learning in public health undergraduate education is critical to teaching students the real-world application of the concepts and topics they learn in the classroom. This article discusses an example of a client-based service-learning course conducted over the past four years focusing on issues at the intersection of homeland security and emergency management. The authors describe the course content, the importance of participatory action research for community partner engagement, the application of experiential learning theory and specific skills strengthened for students, and how their activities fit a socioeconomic model's dimensions. Results from four years of the course are summarized as it bridged institutional cultures of academia and community to provide an innovative learning opportunity that empowered and strengthened student knowledge and experience.

INTRODUCTION

In public health undergraduate education, experiential learning is an integral pedagogical tool to help students see how what they learn in the classroom applies in real-world settings and can impact populations in need (Chorazy & Klinedinst, 2019). Faculty can enhance and broaden their teaching capabilities and experiences by moving their classroom to the field of practice with client-based service-learning (CBSL) courses (Carey, 2018; Marx et al., 2021; Pollard, 2012; Waldner & Hunter, 2008). This paper discusses the case of a CBSL and a research course delivered by two instructors before and during the COVID-19 pandemic (2018-2021). The authors discuss the background of the course, the application of experiential learning theory, their outcomes and results with students and community partners, and plans for the course.

BACKGROUND

The University of South Florida (USF) Tampa campus has 49,867 students (2021-2022), with 36,854 undergraduate and 9,493 graduate students located in the South Census U.S. Census Region Three (South) (University of South Florida [USF], 2022a). In addition, USF is one of the country's most diverse campuses, with 4,692 international students from 146 countries (USF, 2022a). Designated as a preeminent state research university, USF is accredited by the Southern

Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges. This course is offered explicitly through the USF College of Public Health (COPH), which the Council on Education accredits in Public Health.

As of fall 2021, 3,682 undergraduate and 967 graduate students were enrolled, with 241 faculty and 180 staff designated to the college (USF Health, 2022). According to the *U.S. News and World Report* (2021), USF COPH is ranked nationally in the top 20 and holds the highest-ranking public health degree program in Florida. The college has a Master of Public Health (MPH) degree in Global Disaster Management, Humanitarian Relief, and Homeland Security ($n = 121$) and a minor in Community Engaged Homeland Security and Emergency Management for undergraduate students ($n = 108$) (USF, 2021). Addressing homeland security, emergency management, and population health within these degree programs provides a novel educational opportunity for students to expand their interdisciplinary public health knowledge. USF adopted the Enhanced General Education (GenEd) requirements in 2020. All undergraduate students complete high-impact practice (HIP) courses where students engage with global and national problems relevant to the Tampa Bay area (USF, 2022b). The design of this course meets the requirements for pursuing the Public Health Innovation Studio (PHIS) as a certified Enhanced GenEd course in the future. The process allows faculty on the USF Undergraduate Council to review each assignment and course assessment to provide peer-reviewed feedback.

PUBLIC HEALTH INNOVATION STUDIO COURSE DESCRIPTION

In the summer of 2018, two instructors from the COPH launched a new course, Public Health Innovation Studio (PHIS [PHC 4942]), modeled from traditional design studios in architecture and engineering academic programs aimed to engage students in problem-based group learning strategies (Carey, 2018; Marx et al., 2021; Masdeu, 2019; Pollard, 2012; Shaqour, 2021). PHIS is a client-based service-learning course based on Kolb and Kolb's experiential learning theory (ELT) and applies the learning cycle, style, and space. Instructors serve as facilitators of the learning experience, coaches in the field of practice, subject matter experts, and managers of the "learning space" in terms of the social, institutional, cultural, and physical dimensions of the learning experience (Kolb & Kolb, 2017).

PHIS is an elective course. The collaborative approach allows students to work alongside graduate students, faculty, and community partners to address identified needs in the community. Each year the course addresses various topics such as public health preparedness (social services, special needs populations), homeland security (food and agriculture sector, refugee resettlement), and resilience (hurricane preparedness, community dialogue, research, capacity building). The course introduces students to the public health discipline and research methods and theories pertinent to the intersection of homeland security and emergency management. The course aims to enable students to engage and understand how to assess and address community needs through research, program planning, implementation, and evaluation. The course aims to achieve this goal by teaching community engagement practices on working with community stakeholders through a community-engaged CBSL project. It incorporates principles of participatory action research (PAR), bringing together faculty-led students to work with community members on the

agenda, with data collection and analysis producing deliverables for community stakeholders' follow-on actions (Baum et al., 2006; McTaggart, 1991; Meyer et al., 2018). Throughout the semester, students develop the following competencies:

1. Written and verbal communication
2. Collaboration skills in a project team
3. Community needs assessment
4. Equity analysis in research with vulnerable populations
5. Applying systems thinking to social determinants of health to assess community-level public health issues

Student enrollment is limited to 15 to facilitate collaboration and student engagement. The class meets over six to ten weeks, depending on the time needed to complete the CBSL project. Class sessions are divided into two segments: examining the needs of vulnerable populations and communities through lectures and class discussions and applying qualitative research techniques that include field notes and photovoice methodology from service-learning class field activities. Students apply public health concepts throughout the course while learning to work with community partners under faculty guidance. Throughout the process, students learn about qualitative research skills based on the needs of a pre-identified project. Engaging in data collection and analysis, learning about community mobilization and capacity building, and building trust through community service are critical objectives of each course.

Students reflect on their experiences and the impact of each summer project on various socioeconomic model (SEM) levels ranging from individuals and households to county and regional populations. The course integrates essential topics, including systems thinking, vulnerable population assessments, logic models, social network analysis, and social determinants of health that lead to coordinating services and public health activities to build community resilience. Table 1 summarizes the four studio course topics, outcomes, and service-learning deliverables. Representative of a PAR approach, deliverables included an assessment of the issues reflected upon and suggested actions based on the empowerment of community members for meaningful change in systems and policies to support vulnerable populations (Baum et al., 2006).

CLIENT-BASED SERVICE-LEARNING COURSE ASSESSMENT

Each course varied to meet different community needs. Hence, assessments come from both the student feedback to faculty and through the university's course evaluation system on the value of the course to student knowledge and experience acquisition. In addition, feedback from community stakeholders and partners engaged in the projects has been helpful to faculty in shaping the student engagement experience for subsequent years. Stakeholders do not provide student ratings; however, qualitative feedback offers a cohort-level assessment to the stakeholder of the importance of having the students participate in the community effort. In line with the application of ELT, faculty serve as evaluators to ensure student success by providing a consistent structure for concept and knowledge conveyance followed by coaching with students in the field activities to demonstrate how learned concepts can apply in the field of practice (Kolb & Kolb, 2017).

Table 1. Summary of Public Health Innovation Studio Course Topics

Year	Topic	Outcome	Deliverables
2018	County Social Services Needs Assessment	Students learned about social service and public health needs in socioeconomically disadvantaged neighborhoods by observing focus group sessions and supporting surveys with community stakeholders and residents.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eight community statistical profiles and photovoice stories on community needs • Final presentation to county officials • Community service at a local food pantry, community garden, nursing home, social services office, and migrant farmworker food bank
2019	Hurricane Preparedness Information Dissemination to Vulnerable Populations	Students contributed to the physical dissemination of county disaster preparedness guides for migrant farm workers. They worked one-to-one with special needs clients from the Special Needs Shelter registry to develop a disaster plan. Facilitation, data collection, and analysis of participants' responses from a World Café model community conversation focused on building resilience.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Final Technical Report for the Department of Social Services • Qualitative analysis of World Café conversations • Photovoice stories on mitigation, preparedness, and resilience • Dissemination of disaster kits and hosting workshops in high social vulnerability areas (e.g., special needs clients, low-income, and migrant farmworker communities)
2020	Local Food Agri-Food Supply-Chain Impact from COVID-19	Students piloted a semi-structured qualitative interview guide and then conducted qualitative interviews across the agri-food supply chain to assess the impact of COVID-19 on the food and agricultural sector. Students completed Institutional Review Board (IRB) training for certification to conduct research.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transcribed interviews for further analysis and understanding of impacts on the local food system • Photovoice stories centered around experiences accessing food during the pandemic • Identified needs for the county Office of Emergency Management and Economic Development to support agri-business leading to the procurement and dissemination of 22,000 masks for incoming farmworkers

Year	Topic	Outcome	Deliverables
2021	Refugee Women’s Empowerment and Leadership (WEL) Institute for Food Security and Advocacy	Students engaged with refugee women to learn about their experiences accessing food using asset mapping, journey mapping, and storytelling tools to capture refugee experiences. Students used and learned ethnographic observational methods, field notes, and photovoice methodology throughout the service activities and in-class sessions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Piloted the first Women’s Empowerment and Leadership (WEL) Institute for the Refugee and Migrant Women’s Initiative • Final report to showcase refugee experiences and program evaluation • Service activities included volunteering with a local food pantry, volunteering at community gardens, and hosting a recipe showcase by cooking with the refugee women

FUTURE PLANS FOR THE PUBLIC HEALTH INNOVATION STUDIO

This course has contributed to the student’s learning experience and provided various stakeholder engagement opportunities for faculty to strengthen relationships with key organizations in our communities. Plans for the course over the next two years include focusing on hurricane preparedness with local refugees (2022) and security of the food and agriculture sector (2023). The summer 2022 course is detailed in Table 2.

Table 2. Summer 2022 Course Overview

Day	Description
Day 1	On-campus lectures: introduction to disaster preparedness for refugees and migrants, refugee resettlement and crisis communications, refugee journey, and qualitative research methods.
Day 2	On-campus lectures on social networks and systems thinking, vision statements and logic models, community engagement, and program planning.
Day 3	Discuss preparedness concepts and build family plans for potential hurricane hazards. Participate in a field service-learning activity
Day 4	Discuss building a disaster kit and participate in a field service-learning activity.
Day 5	Discuss basic medical first aid and disaster behavioral first aid. Participate in a disaster exercise to test knowledge and practice skills. Participate in a field service-learning activity.
Day 6	Conduct a train-the-trainer session for refugee participants to teach other newly arrived families about preparing for potential threats. Conduct teach-backs to practice newly developed skills. Participate in a field service-learning activity.

CONCLUSION

This article summarizes the first four years of a new client-based-service learning course in the University of Southern Florida's College of Public Health. The application of experiential learning theory and participatory action research provided models and concepts that have enhanced course development and its delivery in the classroom and field. The course strengthened the learning experience for students by bridging the institutional cultures of academia and community to help visualize changes needed in systems and policies to help our most socially vulnerable populations (McTaggart, 1991; Meyer et al., 2018, Kolb & Kolb, 2017). Community partners play a vital role in these courses each year. An overview for the summer 2022 course highlights what will be built upon to support the local refugee community and help educate participating undergraduate students about the importance of community partnerships in education and research. The goal is to help vulnerable populations at the intersection of public health, emergency management, and human security.

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