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Qianhui Tian

DePaul University, qtian3@depaul.edu

Thomas Noel Jr.

DePaul University, TNOEL2@depaul.edu

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Service-Learning in Catholic Higher Education and Alternative Approaches Facing the COVID-19 Pandemic

Qianhui Tian and Thomas Noel Jr.
DePaul University

Drawing on a review of the literature on service-learning in Catholic higher education and the development of online service-learning, as well as an empirical case study of 2020 Vincentian Service Day at DePaul University, this article examines an alternative way to develop service-learning in Catholic schools in response to the reality and needs of the world in front of us. Service-learning is widely practiced in higher education institutions and plays an essential role in Catholic schools as it integrates students' faith, morals, and spiritual growth with social justice commitments. School closures due to COVID-19 significantly impede service-learning. However, a successful case of virtual service-learning design and practice at DePaul University in May 2020 can provide insights and prospects of developing service-learning during and beyond the pandemic. This article highlights the importance of service-learning in Catholic higher education and explores the feasibility of developing virtual service-learning during this unprecedented time and moving forward.

Keywords

COVID-19, Virtual/Remote/Online Service-Learning, Catholic Higher Education

The COVID-19 pandemic has and will continue to change the world as we know it. The rapid changes and challenges require educators to be prepared and take different approaches to develop education. With the increased concern about the spread of COVID-19, university campuses were closed during the quarantine time since March 2020. In this unprecedented and uncertain time, while a transition of academic courses to online instruction were largely implemented, most of the co-curricular, extra-curricular activities, and student affair events which highly depend on face-to-face interactions were canceled or postponed. Service-learning is not an exception. During the past few months, a great number of service-learning programs in higher edu-

cation institutions have been suspended and service-learning research projects are only announced to be rescheduled when the situation permits.

Defined by Jacoby (2014), service-learning is “a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs, together with structured opportunities for reflection designed to achieve desired learning outcomes” (p.1). As a form of experiential education, service-learning projects emphasize the value of hands-on, mind-on practice and the significance of building relationships between students and the marginalized population they serve (Gelmon, Holland, & Spring, 2018). Thus, the mandate for social distancing has largely impeded direct service activities on- and off-campus. However, service-learning plays an essential role in Catholic education in cultivating students’ moral and spiritual growth (Lavery & Hackett, 2008). An indispensable element of Catholic identity can be identified as the need to serve the less fortunate. Rizzi (2019) points out that in Catholic higher education, a great number of universities regard service-learning as a convenient, inclusive approach to express their missions. For example, the mission statement of DePaul University declares that “DePaul develops service learning and educational partnerships with other institutions and agencies” (DePaul Division of Mission & Ministry, 2020), and highlights the public service responsibility of faculty, staff, and students. In addition, the Catholic faith and religious values are featured in the mission statement as distinguishing marks, which suggests “DePaul encourages theological learning and scholarship, all academic disciplines endorse critical moral thinking, and scholarship founded on moral principles” (DePaul Division of Mission & Ministry, 2020). Therefore, it is necessary for educators in Catholic higher education to recognize that service-learning directly intersects with its purposes and it is important to explore alternative approaches in order to respond to the pandemic and demonstrate a commitment to the mission of Catholic education.

Rather than suspend, postpone, or cancel service-learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, this article highlights the necessity and significance of exploring alternative approaches to develop service-learning despite campus closure. In this article, an integrative literature review will be first presented to explore the important role of service-learning in advocating faith and mission in Catholic higher education. Second, aiming at responding to the pandemic, this the authors suggest is feasible and ideal for educators to change focus of direct service-learning to indirect, research-based, and advocacy-based service projects. Examples and alternative ways to practice

service-learning remotely are presented and discussed. In addition, an empirical case study will be provided in this article as an example of response to the pandemic that demonstrates a commitment to the mission of Catholic education despite the mandate for social distancing. This article concisely presents the significance and rationale of developing service-learning in Catholic higher education from a new approach, which may provide some insights for educators and administrators facing the dilemma during this unprecedented circumstance.

Literature Review

Service-Learning in Catholic Universities

With a commitment to serve people in need, respect human dignity, and promote justice, service-learning plays an indispensable role in Catholic higher education institutions (Bergkamp, 1997; Brigham, 2018; Rizzi, 2019). Through practicing active service to others, Catholic education emphasizes on doing civic good with one's faith, living out the Catholic legacy, and understanding being agents of transformation and advocacy for social justice is a duty (Stewart, 2008). Besides focusing on civic responsibility, service-learning in Catholic universities highlight the value of moral and spiritual growth (Brigham, 2018; Rizzi, 2019). As more and more service-learning components are included in the curriculum in higher education institutions, Catholic education endeavors to inspire and empower students to take part in work for justice and social change (Lavery & Hackett, 2008). Wagner (2017) points out the mission statements of Catholic colleges and universities commonly declare their contributions for the public good and commitment to cultivate their students as engaged and responsible citizens.

Examples can be found in the mission statement of Catholic Universities. For instance, as an urban university in Chicago, DePaul University is dedicated to serving urgent human needs and provides students with various service-learning opportunities to keep its Catholic and Vincentian traditions. The mission statement suggests "DePaul University emphasizes the development of a full range of human capabilities and appreciation of higher education as a means to engage cultural, social, religious, and ethical values in service to others" (DePaul Division of Mission & Ministry, 2020). Another prestigious Catholic university, Loyola University Chicago's mission and vision also puts forward that "service promotes justice" and promises "to use learning and leadership in openhanded and generous ways to ensure

freedom of inquiry, the pursuit of truth and care for others” (Loyola University Chicago Mission & Identity, 2020). Additionally, a top-ranked Catholic university, Loyola Marymount University also holds the mission that “The LMU community encourages learning, educates the whole person, serves faith, and promotes justice on and off campus” (LMU News and Spotlights, 2020). Therefore, even though the pandemic and social distancing guidelines bring difficulty in developing service-learning, it is important for Catholic education researchers to take their missions in action and explore alternative approaches to respond to current issues.

Alternative Approaches for Service-Learning

While the most prevalent format of service-learning is direct service, facing the pandemic it is wise to explore other areas of service-learning, such as indirect service that people can conduct without physical contact, or service-learning research that focuses on advocating social justice and consciousness of social issues. For example, social issues that are intensified by the COVID-19 include public health care, unemployment, poverty, racial discrimination, political corruption, the shortage of schools, and so on (Chick, et al., 2020). However, while sheltering in place and experiencing unpredictable changes, individuals in society may not recognize these social problems. Thus, it is important to spread the voice, bring the social issues to people’s attention, and demand action for social justice, where everyone deserves equal economic, political and social rights and opportunities (Bharath, 2020).

When mentioning service-learning, direct service-learning is the most prevalent approach. Direct service-learning refers to person-to-person, face-to-face service projects, in which students conduct service on-site and build relationships with the population they serve (Gelmon, Holland, & Spring, 2018). This type of service allows students to make a direct impact on the people who receive the service (Huda, Alas, Qodriah, Dacholfany, & Jam-sari, 2018). These types of service projects include face-to-face tutoring, street outreach, soup kitchens and more. However, facing the current pandemic and the needs of the world in front of us, in-direct service, especially virtual service-learning programs gradually show their advantages (Bharath, 2020). Virtual service-learning, also named as online service-learning or eService-Learning, refers to at least part of the service, the instruction, or the reflection completed remotely using the internet (Jacoby, 2014). Although research and practice of virtual service-learning in higher education is still in an early stage of development, in order to respond to current needs, it is important to

implement virtual service-learning to accommodate social distancing practices.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, with academic courses and activities transitioning to an online format in Catholic higher education institutions, to remain relevant, it is important to also adopt service-learning online to support students, the populations they serve, and the university community. The benefits and necessities of virtual service-learning has been discussed in literature prior to the pandemic. Similar to online learning, virtual service-learning is free from geographical constraints (Guthrie & McCracken, 2010; Purcell, 2017; Waldner, Widener, & McGorry, 2012). Virtual service-learning is more accessible because participants can conduct service-learning remotely from their homes, working places, and other locations. It allows participants to reach out to communities all over the world and benefits more communities. In addition, as participants are no longer exposed to only the social issues of their local community, virtual service-learning fits the trends of globalization and the advocacy for cultivating students as global citizens (Larsen & Searle, 2017; Tyran, 2017). Whereas global awareness also stands as an essential feature in Catholic Education, which demonstrates an awareness of the interrelation and interdependence of people and society in the world (Loyola University Chicago Mission & Identity, 2020).

Admittedly, virtual service-learning highly depends on the use of technology and a limitation of virtual service-learning would be the difficulty for students in poverty to get the access to digital devices and internet service. However, different from taking online classes where students have to use separate devices, virtual service-learning allow students in one family to share their device with family members or even can be conducted on a cellphone. Research suggests that virtual service-learning is relatively more inclusive, as it attracts participants who may not be willing to join an on-site activity (Waldner, Widener, & McGorry, 2012). Such as students who commute hours away from service sites (Gelmon, Holland, & Spring, 2018), people with special needs and/or physically disabled population (Andreoletti & Howard, 2018), introverted individuals who try to avoid social connection with new people (Johnson, McKay-Jackson, & Grumbach, 2017), and students whose universities are located in areas unreachable from communities in need (Gasper-Hulvat, 2018).

Virtual service-learning provides an accessible way for students with concerns, opens the horizon of participants to more social issues (Waldner, McGorry, & Widener, 2010), and also provides various options to arouse

students' interests (Purcell, 2017). In this special time, developing service-learning in a virtual way could significantly inspire students and deepen students' understanding of the Catholic mission. A case study of 2020 Vincentian Service Day (VSD) at DePaul University is a recent example of virtual service-learning. It shows the spirit of the commitment to serving people in need, be resilient, stay in solidarity, and hold Vincentian value. The Division of Mission and Ministry commits to "develop the capacities of everyone to put DePaul's mission and values into practice with a spirit of collaboration" (DePaul Division of Mission & Ministry, 2020). Inspired by the Vincentian wisdom "Love is inventive to infinity", the 2020 VSD provided an opportunity for DePaul community to take action and respond to the reality and current social needs with creativity and love (DePaul Division of Mission & Ministry, 2020).

Case Study: DePaul 2020 Vincentian Service Day (VSD)

Background of Vincentian Service Day

As the largest Catholic university in the U.S., DePaul University is dedicated to offering regular service-learning opportunities for the members of the university community in order to practice its Catholic and Vincentian tradition of serving marginalized populations and people in need (Dalton, 2007). Provided by the Division of Mission and Ministry, Vincentian Service Day is an annual tradition at DePaul started during the 1998-1999 academic year. As part of DePaul's Centennial celebration, 500-1000 DePaul students, staff, faculty, and alumni participate in VSD to conduct a one-day service-learning event with more than fifty community partners in the Chicagoland area and cities around the country. Following community services, VSD promotes personal and shared reflection that focuses on the questions of social justice and human dignity. After more than two decades of this annual DePaul tradition, facing the COVID pandemic, this year's VSD was carried out in a different way. Following the guidelines of social distancing, 2020 VSD was conducted virtually by students, staff, faculty, and alumni remotely from all over the world on Saturday, May 2.

As service-learning connects students with local communities to build town-gown relations, preparation and planning play an important role in developing service-learning activities (Jacoby, 2014). Prior to campus closure and DePaul's implementation of remote learning in mid-March, the VSD team had already connected with over 75 community partners for 2020 VSD

and built partnerships with more than 30 non-profit organizations. However, due to the social distancing guidelines, it was impossible to host traditional on-site service. Based on the commitment to the Vincentian, Catholic, and urban mission that emphasizes solidarity and compassion through service for people in need, rather than cancel 2020 VSD, the VSD team pivoted to reimagine the event with less than two months lead time.

Method of the Case Study

Case study research offers a simple descriptive design. As a method, case study research is used in multiple situations to contribute to researchers' knowledge of an individual group, organization, social, political, and other related phenomenon (Yin, 2017). Moreover, case study research is the preferred method when, "The main research questions are *how* and *why* questions; a researcher has little or no control over behavioral events; and the focus of the study is a contemporary phenomenon" (Yin, 2017, p. 2). Thus, case study research investigates contemporary phenomenon in *real world* context (Yin, 2017). For the purpose of this study, case study research assists with the lack of empirical data available regarding virtual service-learning. Additionally, case study allows the researchers in this study to address and investigate, "contemporary phenomenon (p. 2)" (i.e., virtual service-learning) in a practical, *real world* context (Yin, 2017).

This case study uses secondary data from 2018-2020 Vincentian Service Day, which was collected by the Division of Mission and Ministry at DePaul University. Working as a Vincentian Service & Formation Assessment Intern, the first author was granted access to review and assess the evaluation surveys of 2019 VSD (on-site service-learning) and 2020 VSD (virtual service-learning). With the permission and collaboration from the VSD team at the Division of Mission and Ministry, attendance numbers and social media review numbers are used in this case study to serve the frequency purpose, and direct quotes are cited to reinforce participants' experiences engaging in VSD service-learning in-person/face-to-face, as well as online (the most recently available data collected on May, 2, 2020). This recent case study serves as an example of how a Catholic University responded to the difficulties brought by COVID-19. It is solid evidence that virtual service-learning is feasible and practical. The results and reflections of this case study may inspire and motivate Catholic educators to develop service-learning in a creative way and take the opportunity that's provided by the pandemic.

Design and Rationale of VSD

In order to reflect on the current social issues that are brought up by COVID, such as health care, accessing educational resources, poverty, and unemployment, three virtual service categories were provided by DePaul's 2020 VSD: correspondence and communication, skill sharing, and small donations. Correspondence and communication activities focused on expressing gratefulness and support to healthcare providers, lifting spirits of seniors or children who are living in isolation, and connecting to people experiencing homelessness. Major activities included card making and personalized letter writing. More than 150 cards and letters were sent to non-profit community partners in the Chicago area and other places in the country. Aside from correspondence and communication, skill sharing activities were also used, which emphasized providing support for workforce shortages, while also introducing physical exercise ideas to cheer people up while sheltering in place. Activities included making masks for seniors and healthcare professionals, completing online work (such as transcription and document organizing) with community partners, and exercising video-recording from student athletes and coaches at DePaul. In addition, small donation activities provided participants with the options to contribute to DePaul's own Student Emergency Assistance Fund and Food Pantry, Vincentian organizations, and other local organizations.

Apart from various virtual activities provided by the 2020 VSD, participants had the option to join as individuals or teams. Although quarantined, small communities within DePaul maintained open communication, in addition to practicing solidarity. In 2020 VSD, nearly 40 teams were formed from student organizations, departments/offices, and friend groups. Some of these groups were connected via Zoom conducting service on VSD to stay virtually together but physically located at different places. Additionally, social media played a powerful role on VSD for marketing as well as advocating social justice and consciousness for social issues. The preparation process consisted of Newsline Distribution, Constant Contact, Facebook, Instagram, and emails were used to promote the virtual VSD and contact reach out to students, faculty, staff, and alumni located all over the world. A promo video and a kick-off video were posted on Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. After conducting service on VSD, participants were encouraged to post and share about their experiences and stories on social media using a hashtag.

Findings of the Case Study

Virtual Service-Learning is Accessible and Understandable

The VSD can be regarded as a valuable example for Catholic schools to deliver service-learning during and beyond the pandemic that demonstrates a commitment to the mission of Catholic education. Collaboration and resilience help the DePaul community stay in solidarity in spite of the mandate for social distancing. During the quarantine, virtual service-learning demonstrates its strengths more than ever before, as it is not limited by participants' schedules and location, and still brings the community together (Bharath, 2020). In the end, DePaul's Vincentian Service Day 2020 had 829 participants comprised of 463 Students, 221 Staff, 49 Faculty, and 96 Alumni and was a rousing success of virtual service-learning. This number is higher than 2018 on-site VSD, which had 711 participants, and not substantially lower than 2019 on-site VSD, which had 913 participants. In addition, feedback on social media shows more than 95% of participants agreed that the instructions for virtual service-learning projects were clear and understandable. In addition, the virtual VSD shows various activities can be done remotely. Three categories of service options provide participants various service-learning activities. Specific activities provided by 2020 VSD included letter writing, card marking, face mask making, research help, transcription, video making, and small donations. In addition to these activities, participants social media posts showed that volunteers were actively finding creative ways to serve, such as making art, painting, and drawing.

Cooperation and Interaction Can be Achieved Virtually

Teams sign-up and registration allowed participants to join the VSD as a group with people they already know. Although connection and interaction are limited by the virtual format, some virtual meetings initiated by teams encouraged students to build relationships and practice cooperation with their peers. Great attention and interest were drawn by the videos posted on social media. The promo video received a total 8,230 views on Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram, and the kick-off video obtained a total of 1,514 views on these platforms. Participants were grateful and inspired by the 2020 virtual VSD.

A great number of comments expressed appreciation for DePaul not canceling the traditional service-learning opportunity due to COVID-19. Social media posts showed students' gratefulness and expectations: "We are all in this together. Today's experience connected me to DePaul's mission by

answering the call to unite,” “No matter what happens in the world, you can still be Vincentian,” “Showing love is the best medicine for this pandemic,” “Service can take many forms”, and “I am looking forward to participating in more activities like this through DePaul.” They suggest the virtual VSD not only provided an accessible way for them to help, but also got them closer with the DePaul community, and lifted their spirits with a Vincentian identity: “It was nice to see all the different organizations DePaul supports and to feel a part of that from home,” “I love being rooted in gratitude and showing humble support and love for others. So many people are doing so much for a world in pain right now. It is nice to promote healing and love.” This relatively new format of service-learning is highly recognized by volunteers and is suggested to be offered in the future in addition to on-site service.

Discussion

Facing the guideline of social distance, when conducting on-site service-learning is not an option, it is a feasible and effective way to develop virtual service-learning programs (Bharath, 2020; Chick, et al., 2020). The example of DePaul’s 2020 VSD shows solid evidence that virtual service-learning can be substituted with face-to-face service during the pandemic. Looking forward, virtual service-learning can be added to support on-site service-learning and attract more people to take action, help people in need, and gain spiritual growth (Waldner, McGorry, & Widener, 2010; Waldner, Widener, & McGorry, 2012)

While it is inevitable that virtual service-learning shows some limitations, such as it requires access to digital devices and provides less interpersonal connection (Waldner, Widener, & McGorry, 2012), the design and practice of 2020 VSD presents that alternative ways can be found to overcome the limitations. Though certain virtual service activities require high-speed internet, 2020 VSD provides various options and participants can join card writing or face mask making activities which didn’t require using digital devices throughout conducting service. Additionally, it is possible for participants to schedule a synchronous meeting while doing service, as well as share feelings and reflections via an online meeting.

The COVID-19 quarantine amplified the advantages of virtual service-learning. Participants felt the sense of belonging to the university community. They found a way to express their appreciation to frontline professionals and gained the opportunities to help people in need. Social media can be used as a powerful tool to advocate the value of service-learning and provide partici-

pants a space to share their feedback. Thus, it is a wise idea for Catholic universities developing virtual service-learning during and beyond the pandemic.

Conclusions and Future Study

In sum, facing the COVID-19 pandemic, it is necessary for Catholic education educators to explore alternative ways and develop virtual service-learning. While following the guideline of social distancing, the case study of DePaul's 2020 VSD shows service-learning can be developed virtually, with a changing focus to indirect, research-based, or advocacy-based projects. Virtual service-learning brings some benefits that complete the limitations of on-site service-learning. With the significance and rationale of developing service-learning remotely and a case study of a virtual service-learning program, this article contributes insights for educators and administrators facing the dilemma during this unprecedented circumstance.

We have to admit that virtual service-learning provides limited interaction between participants and the communities they serve. Participants might show discomfort with technology while conducting service-learning online. In addition, certain types of service still require participants to be on-site in order to better serve the population in need. Other limitations of virtual service-learning may include but are not limited to: internet access to remote and rural communities, the shortage of community partners who have the capacity to hold a virtual service-learning event, the declining retention of participants due to isolation, less impact on the community being served, and so on (Gelmon, Holland, & Spring, 2018; Jacoby, 2014). In order to better develop virtual service-learning in the long run, future research could focus on exploring the limitations of virtual service-learning and look for ways to overcome those shortages.

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