

Winter 2-24-2022

Online Community Engagement Enhances Service Learning

Dan Baron

Kaliah Liggons MPA

David Pintor

Jonathan Handrup LSW

Rubén Álvarez Silva M.Ed

Follow this and additional works at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj>

Recommended Citation

Baron, Dan; Liggons, Kaliah MPA; Pintor, David; Handrup, Jonathan LSW; and Silva, Rubén Álvarez M.Ed (2022) "Online Community Engagement Enhances Service Learning," *Vincentian Heritage Journal*: Vol. 36 : Iss. 2 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj/vol36/iss2/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Vincentian Journals and Publications at Via Sapientiae. It has been accepted for inclusion in Vincentian Heritage Journal by an authorized editor of Via Sapientiae. For more information, please contact digitalservices@depaul.edu.

Online Community Engagement Enhances Service Learning

Dan Baron, Kaliah Liggons, MPA, David Pintor, Jonathan Handrup, LSW, and Rubén Álvarez Silva, M.Ed

BIOS

JONATHAN HANDRUP, LSW, has been with the Steans Center since the summer of 2011. Jonathan is responsible for locating health focused non-profits in the Chicago area to partner with master's level nursing students for two-year service-learning partnerships. In fall 2012, Jonathan helped initiate the first departmental-wide service-learning partnership with DePaul's School of Nursing. He now places over 210 graduate nursing students in community-based organizations throughout Chicago over the course of an academic year. Primarily, these students engage in developing and implementing health, wellness, and nutrition curricula for organizations' participants, staff, and parents. Since joining the Center, he has earned master's degrees in public service management (2015) and clinical social work (2020). Jonathan also currently works as a licensed social worker, seeing clients for individual and group psychotherapy.

KALIAH LIGGONS, MPA, is the community development program manager at the Steans Center for Community-Based Service Learning. She is responsible for developing community-based service-learning courses and researching and building relationships with Chicagoland area community organizations and academic service-learning colleagues who support DePaul's

[Previous Article](#)

[Next Article](#)

[Table of Contents](#)

service-learning students. Liggons holds a BA in Sociology and a BA in Criminology and Criminal Justice from Southern Illinois University in Carbondale, IL. In June 2018, she received an MPA from DePaul's School of Public Service with a specialization in public management. Her professional interests include educational reform, youth advocacy, homelessness, and other social justice issues.

DAVID PINTOR was born in Chicago and raised in Chicago's Pilsen neighborhood by Mexican immigrant parents. He's currently the student engagement program manager at DePaul's Steans Center, where he connects DePaul's resources to Chicago's communities and contributes to a transformational experience for students and faculty. Prior to that, he was the volunteer manager at 826CHI, a youth writing lab, where he used his skills to frontload solutions based in anti-oppression and social justice. David studied sociology and anthropology at Carleton College in Minnesota and has over fourteen years of experience as an educator, community advocate, and nonprofit administrator. In his spare time, David likes to take road trips and cuddle with his pups Frijol, Cacahuatate, and Chucho and enjoys a good plate of chilaquiles.

RUBÉN ÁLVAREZ SILVA, M.ED, a double demon, has been involved in DePaul's community engagement efforts as a student, staff member, and adjunct faculty member for the last twenty-one years locally, nationally, and internationally. Rubén served as the associate director for the Steans Center for Community-based Service Learning and Community Service Studies, where he challenged and supported the Academic Service Learning (ASL) team in their efforts to connect DePaul's faculty and students with Chicago community leaders to develop community-based service-learning courses rooted in the Vincentian mission of direct service and systemic change. He is now serving as the associate director for Just DePaul in the Division of Mission and Ministry. A lifelong resident of Chicago's Southwest Side, Rubén currently resides in Berwyn with his better half, Cristina Salgado (CSH 2007), and their three children Lluvia, Luna, and Sol. In his free time, Rubén enjoys biking, running, yoga, and perfecting the art of pancakes in honor of his paternal grandfather, Ignacio "Nacho" Álvarez. If you are interested in developing transformational educational opportunities that support social justice efforts across Chicago and beyond, please do not hesitate to contact him.

It was spring 2020, and the Steans Center faced a challenge unlike anything in its almost twenty years of supporting service learning at DePaul: how to safely engage students with community when they were no longer attending class in person. During a typical spring term, DePaul has approximately one thousand students engaged with Chicago communities through courses. That spring, the Center shifted course and staff created [Online Community Engagement](#) (OCE), a program faculty employ to encourage dialogue on select topics relevant to curriculum, communities, and students. Within a matter of weeks, OCE provided self-directed modules, including reading materials and videos for students focused on issues such as mental health, immigration, community organizing, police accountability, and gentrification. The modules culminated with live online events on Fridays featuring guests from DePaul and Chicago communities.

A year later, OCE is not only a valuable teaching and learning strategy during a time of crisis. It has become a new pedagogical tool to be integrated into Steans Center support of service learning as the university reemerges into a post-pandemic world. “The series is very much geared to students who are enrolled in community-based service learning courses as a way to enhance any civic engagement activities,” says Jonathan Handrup, a program manager on the Academic Service Learning team. “We have found that in this virtual space, we can have experts in the field and faculty sharing information with students—as well as other faculty and community members—on a wide variety of topics.” David Pintor, Student Engagement Program Manager with the Academic Service Learning team, says that the online events are a good way to share more perspectives. “With this format, modules can share the perspective of local, statewide, and even national voices on key issues.” Issues for spring quarter 2021 include Vaccinating our City (in collaboration with the School of Nursing), Podcasts for Change, LGBTQIA + Allyship, Mental Health in 2021, and Prison Abolition.

78 percent of people in the city live in areas where there is a lack of therapists.

Emphasis on Mental Health

The popularity of OCE has grown. During summer 2020, more than ninety people attended a module titled Mental Health Within a Global Pandemic & Civil Uprising. One of the panelists was Dr. Arturo Carrillo, Director of Violence Prevention and Health Initiatives for the [Brighton Park Neighborhood Council](#) on Chicago’s southwest side. He conducts research on the impact of disparities in mental health access on low-income communities



[Click to enlarge](#)

Chairs are stacked on tables in the Market in the DePaul Center on DePaul's Loop Campus during the COVID-19 pandemic the week of March 22, 2020.

Courtesy DePaul University/Randall Spriggs

and serves residents as a clinical social worker. He presented data on mental health disparities, mapping out where therapists are available and how specific communities were being impacted by lack of access to services. “When we talk about mental health access as an issue, it is really a systemic problem,” Carrillo says. “Our research has shown that 78 percent of people in the city live in areas where there is a lack of therapists. The areas that are in the highest need of mental health supports are those with the most violence, poverty, and all sorts of socioeconomic problems. They also have the least amount of access to mental health services.” The problem, he explained to participants, has been exacerbated by the pandemic, noting that “with COVID, there’s much more awareness of why people have to take care of mental health.”

Katrina Wagner, Health Promotion Coordinator and Interim Sexual and Relationship Violence Specialist with DePaul’s [Office of Health Promotion and Wellness](#), was a panelist on the Mental Health in 2020 module presented during fall quarter 2020. “The module was an easy way for us to get more involved with DePaul’s community,” says Wagner. “That’s the beauty of it—more and more people can be connected in this way.” OCE was therefore a way for her office to connect with students about self-care. “We work with students who are pretty young, healthy, and resilient. Health is not always the first thing they want to talk about. We try to provide a support system for students, and participating in this module was a great way to share messages about mental health.” During the module, Wagner presented a brief mindfulness meditation activity and then offered important personal health and well-being practices.



[Click to enlarge](#)

Essential staff. Danny Cruz, custodian in Facility Operations, maintains O’Connell Hall during the COVID-19 quarantine. April 21, 2020, on the Lincoln Park Campus.

Courtesy DePaul University/Jeff Carrion

Course Integration

Online Community Engagement created a new way for faculty, students, and community partners to engage with one another through curriculum. “The modules provided a firm basis of understanding on a lot of issues,” says Professor Desma Mitchell who teaches Health Promotion for Families and Communities, a course taken by students seeking a degree in the [Master’s Entry to Nursing Practice](#) (MENP) program. “For my students, it’s a place where social justice and health care meet up. It offers a deep dive into issues.” Mitchell says her students participated in a wide range of OCE modules, including those focused on identity and racial justice, immigration and refugee rights and services, homelessness, and disability justice. The nursing program, she says, takes a multidisciplinary approach and the modules are directly relevant to healthcare. Mitchell adds that OCE emerged as an effective way to engage with others and to learn about topics impacting communities. “We’re learning new ways to deliver content and information,” she says. “OCE is showing us one way we can do a good job of teaching remotely, providing content, and keeping it interesting and beneficial.”

One of the best parts of these modules is that students can meet organizers in the community.

In Professor Susan Reed’s course Active Citizens: Making a Difference in the Community, Workplace World, students drew upon OCE to learn about prospective



[Click to enlarge](#)

Signs displayed outside the Career Center during the COVID-19 pandemic the week of March 22, 2020.

Courtesy DePaul University/Randall Spriggs

partners. “When the pandemic happened, students asked ‘How can we work with communities safely?’ and the Steans Center made a big contribution with these modules,” says Reed. One student, she says, wanted to work with an organization that does mentoring through sports, but the organization was closed during the pandemic. “He did some readings and learned about disparities among children in different communities from participating in OCE modules. In particular, he got a lot out of the youth advocacy module which helped him understand that children in different communities are having very different experiences.” According to Reed, “This resource is valuable now and can be valuable when we open back up.” She notes, “One of the best parts of these modules is that students can meet organizers in the community who are working on housing, homelessness, food security, or other issues.”

Online Community-Engaged Learning

Several students in Reed’s Active Citizens course used OCE resources while exploring service learning opportunities. Charles Judd graduated fall 2020 with a degree in management information systems. He was among several students who learned about opportunities through OCE. “This information was clear and easy to use,” says Judd, who eventually worked on political elections. DePaul student Jamilah El-Saleh also accessed OCE materials as she pursued her degree in business administration through the [School of Continuing and Professional Studies](#). She says, “The Steans Center was very active and very helpful and provided us with a lot of links and literature on key topics.” Through OCE, El-Saleh eventually engaged in remote service learning activities with the [Council of American](#)

[Islamic Relations](#) (CAIR) in Chicago, where she did research related to presidential debates and on Supreme Court cases.

For other students, like Bety Camino-Salgado, participating in OCE had a direct impact on how they engaged with Chicago communities during the pandemic. Camino-Salgado, a returning student who is pursuing a degree in photography, participated last fall in modules on gentrification, community organizing, and mental health. In the community organizing module, she says, she learned about asset-based community development (ABCD) and the [ABCD Institute at DePaul](#). “I learned more about why community-based organizations build on the assets of people who live in [the] communities,” she says. Camino-Salgado says her service learning activities for the Active Citizen course involved delivering food for two organizations—Wicker Park-Bucktown Mutual Aid and the Grocery Run Club. She adds that the format of OCE modules, “allows people to be more curious and empathetic to each other. It’s great hearing what other people experienced.”

Camino-Salgado also explained that the OCE module on gentrification helped her better understand the connection between community organizing, service, and action. “This experience helped me feel connected to these communities,” she says. In the live session, Professor Jesse Mumm in [Latin American and Latino Studies](#) and [Critical Ethnic Studies](#) reflected on the long history of gentrification in Chicago, explaining that “the history of Chicago is the history of displacement.” Mumm presented maps, a timeline, and other documents to share the complex history of neighborhood change in the city and how it has negatively impacted Latino and African American communities. Camino-Salgado says the modules encouraged her to think about the city’s history and her own personal journey. “Being involved in the life of a community is not something that starts one day and ends the next,” she says. “It requires a lot of reflection.” Rubén Álvarez Silva, Steans Center Associate Director for Academic Service Learning, reflects on a year of progress building OCE and notes, “OCE allows the Steans Center to center community, student, and faculty voices on the social justice issues of our times and hold space virtually for collective learning, healing, and calls to action. My hope is that these encounters are just the beginning for continuous dialogue and liberatory actions.”



[Click to go back](#)

Chairs are stacked on tables in the Market in the DePaul Center on DePaul's Loop Campus during the COVID-19 pandemic the week of March 22, 2020.

Courtesy DePaul University/Randall Spriggs



[Click to go back](#)

Essential staff. Danny Cruz, custodian in Facility Operations, maintains O'Connell Hall during the COVID-19 quarantine. April 21, 2020, on the Lincoln Park Campus.

Courtesy DePaul University/Jeff Carrion



[Click to go back](#)

Signs displayed outside the Career Center during the COVID-19 pandemic the week of March 22, 2020.

Courtesy DePaul University/Randall Spriggs