

Abolition as Praxis and Virtual Community-Based Learning

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Abstract

The distressing events of 2020 challenged the United States to reimagine how our social institutions can and should respond to demands for racial justice. These demands impacted higher education and debates arose about whether the classroom is an appropriate place for teaching abolition. I address this debate by introducing a senior-level elective course, *Policing in the American City*, to explore how abolitionist pedagogy can guide our teaching, learning, and doing sociology alongside our students. I begin with a brief grounding in abolition and then introduce virtual community-based learning (VCBL) as an ideal medium to facilitate abolitionist pedagogy in the classroom. Next, I provide preliminary insights into the use of VCBL to illustrate how it helped students develop critical skills, mobilize their learning, and benefit community partners. Throughout, I call on instructors to consider how online education, service learning, and public sociology can align with abolitionist practices to create communities of care in our classrooms and empower students to engage abolition as praxis beyond their college years.

Keywords

community-based learning, critical pedagogy, abolition, online teaching and learning

The distressing events of 2020 challenged the United States to reimagine how our social institutions can and should respond to demands for racial justice. These demands made their way into higher education, raising discussion about the role of abolition in the classroom (Love 2020). An abolitionist approach requires the dismantling of violent social institutions and the making of new collectives invested in thriving futures (Chartrand and Piché 2019; Gilmore 2019). Put another way, abolition examines the origins of social insecurity and precarity and considers how we might refashion the world into resource-abundant communities (Gilmore 2019). These intentions are well aligned with sociology's learning goals to understand how social institutions affect social stratification and life chances in society (Atkinson and Hunt 2008) and how these dynamics ultimately lead to transformation when resources and power shift across and between social groups and institutional contexts

(Meiners 2011). Given this pedagogical alignment, and the fact that classrooms are key sites of radical possibility (hooks 1994), I position the sociology classroom as an appropriate site for teaching abolition. Building from this assertion, I ask: how can sociology instructors familiarize ourselves and our students with the value of abolitionist praxis in ways that promote student learning?

I address this debate by engaging with the role of abolition as praxis and the benefits of introducing abolitionist pedagogy into our course content in three ways. First, I aim to increase familiarity with abolitionist pedagogy among sociology instructors.

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Second, I discuss the importance of community-based learning (CBL) as a pedagogical approach and introduce virtual community-based learning (VCBL) as an ideal medium to facilitate abolitionist pedagogy in the classroom. Third, I provide preliminary insights into the use of VCBL to illustrate how it helped students develop critical skills, mobilize their learning, and benefit community partners. Throughout, I call on instructors to consider how online education, service learning, and public sociology can align with abolitionist practices to (1) create communities of care in our classrooms and (2) empower students to carry these tenets with them beyond their college years.

This article introduces an advanced undergraduate course titled Policing in the American City to explore how abolitionist pedagogy can guide teaching, learning, and doing sociology alongside our students. In my course at Virginia Tech, 49 students formed 16 research groups, identified community partners, set up meetings to discuss their partners' research needs, and used their time, research skills, and sociological knowledge about policing to offer tangible work products that were useful to the organization's efforts. Most students were seniors (78.6 percent), between the ages of 18 and 22 (89.3 percent), and sociology and criminology majors (97.1 percent). Students self-identified as female (53.6 percent) and male (46.4 percent), with over a third of the class identifying as first-generation (39.3 percent). Racially, students self-identified as white (53.6 percent), black (3.6 percent), nonwhite Hispanic (7.1 percent), multiracial (21.4 percent), and Asian/Pacific Islander (14.3 percent).

Students were encouraged throughout the semester to think critically about policing and what a post-police society might look like. Additionally, the course integrated abolitionist practices and enhanced student accessibility using VCBL as a central learning tool. The virtual aspect of the projects (necessitated by COVID-19) allowed students to expand their geographic search to include community partners that fit their interests, weekly schedules, and comfort operationalizing an abolitionist perspective. My findings indicate that students had varying degrees of success establishing relationships with community partners. For example, students with prior partner connections were more successful than those who relied on cold calls and email. Overall, students reported that the experience was valuable, offered them skill-building opportunities that would benefit them in the future, and helped them feel like their studies had meaning

and value in the world in a way that they wanted more of in their college experience.

WHAT IS ABOLITIONIST PEDAGOGY?

Abolition is a dynamic social process designed to abolish a system, practice, or social institution. Borrowing Mariame Kaba's approach to the concept, I apply a more activist understanding and engage abolition as a collective project that promotes social restructuring so that everyone has what they need to live dignified lives (Rodríguez 2021). Thus, abolition challenges us to replace capitalist concepts of scarcity and competition with mutual support, sharing of resources, and solidarity (Scott 2013). In the context of the present moment, abolition seeks and performs a "radical reconfiguration of justice, subjectivity, and social formation that does not depend on the existence of either the carceral state (a statecraft that institutionalizes various forms of targeted human capture) or carceral power as such (a totality of state-sanctioned and extrastate relations of gendered racial-colonial dominance)" (Rodríguez 2018:1576). Abolition is also as a series of intentional actions. For example, "[p]eople do abolition every day when they connect to their community, learn how to take accountability, and foster communal responsibility for preventing and responding to harm" (Sultan and Hersking 2020). Contemporary definitions emphasize that abolition is a political horizon, social process, and praxis with care for one another outside of the carceral state.

Abolition has received increased visibility as some educators have used an abolitionist framework to attend to their students' growing social awareness of institutionalized racism, predatory policing, and racist practices embedded in the criminal justice system (Feliciano 2021; Gillespie and Naidoo 2021). However, many sociologists have long been concerned with our role in these social issues. The discipline may not have explicitly named the intersection of teaching, scholarship, and activism as integral to understanding abolition's historical and contemporary relevance, but the abolitionist implications are clear. For example, Du Bois's engagement with social problems through study, teaching, and action indicates a foundation of abolition in the discipline over 100 years ago. From qualitative studies that revealed education's reinforcement of white supremacy (Du Bois 1932) to quantitative studies of the devaluation of black Americans' work in professions that

require a college education (Du Bois 1903) to the creation of *The Crisis* to bring scholarship to a broader public by calling out racist policies, Du Bois created a model for contemporary activist-scholars to bring our findings to the public and mobilize them for the social good (Daniels 2018). Modeling these approaches to the research-teaching nexus in collaboration with our students is abolition as praxis.

Much like Du Bois's insistence on action against injustice, contemporary abolitionist educators take a critical view of their institutional positionality. For some, taking up abolitionist pedagogy means embracing an ethos of care for underrepresented voices, eliminating institutional barriers to inclusion (Lawrence 2015), and taking up the call for "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (Freire 1972:52). Rather than pushing participants to subscribe to a particular agenda, abolitionist pedagogy often follows Ruth Wilson Gilmore's (2019) framing that abolition is "about presence, not absence... about building life-affirming institutions." I used this pedagogical approach in my classroom because the long-standing connection between abolitionism and policing offers tools to challenge the relations of power and normalized state violence, found within empirical sociological studies, through the act of teaching (Rodríguez 2010). This choice was supported by existing findings that students can often understand the basic tenets of abolition but struggle with what to do with it when they lack opportunities to engage the practice directly (Chartrand and Piche 2019). My approach also centered a sense of shared responsibility, rather than shame and guilt, about identifying and addressing race and policing injustices in the world (Zembylas 2021). Likewise, the course structure invited students to consider their own complicity in social injustice while they took direction from a community organization on what might be done about it.

COMMUNITY-BASED LEARNING AND RESEARCH IN THE SOCIOLOGY CLASSROOM

Within the framework of abolitionist pedagogy, CBL is an ideal approach for teaching and learning about social problems and connecting the classroom with the social world in meaningful ways (Kozimor-King and Prince 2018). CBL has been found to broaden student understanding on a variety of topics, including public health (Lichtenstein

and DeCoster 2014; Rodini 2015), racial inequality (Becker and Paul 2015; Clever and Miller 2019), and poverty (Mayer et al. 2019). Studies also confirm that CBL projects involving students in social change enhance research skills and increase understanding of the local and federal policies that perpetuate existing social inequalities (Mobley 2007). Together, CBL and community-based research (CBR) allow students to apply curricular knowledge to the world around them and contribute to the communities they serve (Garoutte 2017). They can also provide valuable data that might otherwise be too costly for their community partners to fund (Shostak et al. 2019). Throughout, CBL/CBR can help students develop their sociological imaginations by disrupting individualistic understandings of the world and by introducing them to social realities that would have been unfamiliar to them otherwise (Garoutte 2017).

What is less well understood is how CBL/CBR can be a meaningful intervention for the urgent study of policing and racial violence. The demands for greater police accountability and calls to defund and abolish the police throughout the summer of 2020 made it even more pressing that students understand the persistence of racial and social hierarchies and learn how to apply sociological training toward tangible policy solutions. In response, I employed CBL/CBR to study contentious topics outside of the classroom environment, encouraged by several studies that confirm the possibility that these pedagogical approaches can increase empathy and awareness about the struggles of marginalized populations (Mitschke and Petrovich 2011). I designed my project by having students work with community partners to address their current needs (Kozimor-King and Prince 2018), addressing Stoecker et al.'s (2010) concern that service learning comes at a significant cost to the community (time and money required to train students). Additionally, these tools offered my students a chance to experience the complexity of research in real-world settings (Bach and Weinzimmer 2011), especially the nonlinear stages of research (Soria and Weiner 2013), while reimagining social problems as rectifiable issues (Strand 2000) rather than permanent fixtures of society.

I accomplished my merging of abolitionist pedagogy with CBL/CBR by introducing a VCBL model into the course. This method provided students with opportunities to be intimately engaged with the goals and circumstances of organizations and consider their role in cultivating a more just and equity-centered future. VCBL is used across

disciplines and is generally beneficial to both students and partners, especially those with limited resources (Maddrell 2015). Beyond the benefits to participants (Soria and Weiner 2013), studies also suggest that VCBL is a means to create general social good, inspire students to participate in civic engagement, and create service-oriented professionals (Branker et al. 2010; Garcia-Gutierrez, Ruiz-Corbella, and del Pozo Armentia 2017; Purcell 2017). VCBL was an essential tool in creating accessibility for students who might not otherwise have these applied experiences and spaces for network building. Students with disabilities, caregiving responsibilities, or financially precarious situations often have fewer means to leave campus to engage in service learning. By shifting online, students could complete their activities anytime and anywhere. In my planning, I took Davis and Roswell's (2013) advocacy for taking students into the community for learning opportunities seriously. Their "inside out" classroom orientation thoughtfully engages reciprocity, dialogue, collaboration, and the innate assumption that all human beings, regardless of social location, have something important to contribute to the classroom (Davis and Roswell 2013:3). In this way, the complementary pairing of VCBL and abolition are consistent with sociology's tenets of inquiry-guided pedagogy and can help instructors use the classroom as a haven for reimagining a more just and equitable society (Atkinson and Hunt 2008:1).

INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT AND COURSE DESIGN

Virginia Tech is a public land-grant university with a strong commitment to public service, embodied through the institution's motto, *Ut Prosim* (That I May Serve). The university prioritizes the goal of "preparing graduates for a purpose-driven career and life" (Virginia Tech 2020) by incorporating experiential learning into undergraduate research, internships, study abroad, and service learning. In this tradition, the current VCBL project brought together Virginia Tech students and community organizations to address relevant issues of race and policing in America today. Students chose community partners that varied by organizational type and physical location; students also learned how to apply sociological research skills to address community-specific concerns in real time. The university's flexibility with experiential learning opportunities is well aligned with the abolitionist goal of cultivating "communities of care" (Gilmore

2019), allowing us to work alongside diverse organizations to address common problems.

Course and VCBL Project Design

While every semester is the "right time" to study the intersectional violence of racial injustice, national events in the summer of 2020 fostered an unprecedented awareness of police violence against communities of color. At the time, I was scheduled to offer an advanced undergraduate sociology course in fall 2020 titled Policing in the American City that would examine the history and function of police in the United States from a social science perspective. The mobilizing of millions of Americans throughout the summer sparked my investment in transforming lectures and discussions about abolition and defund movements into an opportunity for students to engage with contemporary policing debates firsthand using VCBL.

In the first section of the course, students learned about the historical and organizational structure of policing, police employment, police discretion and use of force, police culture, accountability and the lack thereof, and the function of community policing from a criminological perspective. Next, students interrogated the cultural, social, and political assumptions inherent within the notion of "law and (dis)order" from a sociological perspective by examining the relationship between policing and the maintenance of white supremacy, capitalism, and patriarchy. In the third and final section of the course, students selected community partners and considered how they might use their empirical and theoretical knowledge about policing to offer useful work products to the problems that community partners face in their daily practice. Throughout, it was important that students were educated and conversant in past and present developments transforming the nature of U.S. policing. To accomplish this goal, students began and ended the course learning about movements to abolish and defund the police.

The VCBL component culminated into the final project for the course. Early on in the semester, students created small research groups of one to four members and identified a short list of community organizations and/or municipal government partners they would be interested in working with. I provided students with a template letter they could modify to begin their outreach, and they had three weeks to finalize their partnerships. Students selected and initiated partnerships based on their interests and, in some cases, prior relationships.

Student outreach to their community partner organizations took place virtually. Initial contact occurred via email, with follow-up contact (interviews) occurring via Zoom and by phone. Next, students met virtually with their partners a minimum of five times. Students reserved the first few visits to choose a relevant policing topic or project they could contribute to the organization. The final visit was dedicated to debriefing how the partnership went and communicating the work product's contributions.

All student groups collaboratively researched their agreed-upon community issue, completed the assigned work product, and wrote a 2,000-word research paper summarizing their work and offering informed policy suggestions based on the organization's needs. Research papers included an introduction to the topic, a well-reasoned problem statement, methods used to evaluate the problem, a summary of their findings, and a conclusion that offered a minimum of two tangible solutions or interventions to pursue as next steps. The research methods used varied depending on the project. Some groups conducted a content analysis of organizational documents, and others conducted a series of interviews among past organizational leaders. In contrast, others fielded surveys for partner organizations and analyzed the data collected. Students were each required to write a 500-word reflection on the course's service-learning component, reflecting on what it meant to share their policing knowledge with the world in a meaningful way and how they felt this enhanced their learning broadly and abolition specifically. Finally, student groups summarized their work in a virtual research poster shared with both their community partners and the Department of Sociology. All students engaged in some form of empirical data collection and analysis; each student enrolled in Policing in the American City was able to satisfy their senior research seminar requirement for their major in either sociology or criminology with this polished work product if desired.

Community Partner Selection

Students were directed to partner with organizations with a clear relationship to policing, and many groups chose to work with social justice organizations, city councils, and law enforcement departments. As seen in Table 1, most partnerships were created with local organizations in Montgomery County, such as Virginia Tech's Police Department and the Future Economy Collective, a

fiscal sponsor for a variety of mutual aid projects in the local area. Some student partnerships stretched northward approximately 40 to 450 miles to include collaborations with the NAACP in Roanoke, Virginia, and a police department in Manalapan, New Jersey.

Over the semester, I encouraged students to consider how an abolitionist future requires a broad coalition of community organizations to address social harms collectively. Three examples of student-led partnerships demonstrate what such a collective might look like: the Coalition for Justice, the NOVA Equity Agenda Coalition, and a police department in Blacksburg, Virginia. First, the Coalition for Justice is a multistate nonprofit organization committed to raising awareness about and combating racism in the criminal justice system. Students initiated this partnership due to an interest in their mission to enact social change through education, advocacy, and community involvement in the local area. Second, the NOVA Equity Agenda Coalition is a community organization in Virginia that seeks to create policy change around issues of race and gender by connecting advocacy groups and religious institutions in order to build grassroots movements. Students were drawn to the organization because of their work examining the role of school resource officers in Virginia schools. A third group partnered with the Blacksburg Police Department's community policing unit, building on one student's prior connections and their desire to take policing concepts from the classroom back to their home community. None of these partner organizations had participated in a CBL/CBR course prior; yet all three student-driven partnerships made creative connections between classroom knowledge and community organizations to effect positive change.

FINDINGS AND ASSESSMENT

The course final reinforced abolition as a series of intentional actions, namely, the ability to meaningfully connect with others and foster "communal responsibility for preventing and responding to harm" (Sultan and Hersking 2020). I received student feedback using pre- and posttest surveys and a qualitative reflection detailing how service learning impacted their research skills and perspectives about the link between social justice issues and community partnerships. Next, I outline student characteristics and the organizational partnerships they cultivated and then focus on findings dealing with community service work

Table 1. Community Organizations by Distance from the Virginia Tech Campus.

Organization	Location	Distance from Virginia Tech (miles)
Policing and state agencies		
Virginia Tech Police Department	Blacksburg, VA	0.0
Radford City Police Department	Radford, VA	14
Martinsville Victim Witness Protection	Martinsville, VA	73
Danville Police Department	Danville, VA	108
Virginia Beach Police Department	Virginia Beach, VA	322
Beaver Borough Police Department	Beaver, PA	342
Cape Charles Police Department	Cape Charles, VA	346
Manalapan Police Department	Manalapan, NJ	453
Nonpolicing organizations		
The Dialogue on Race	Blacksburg, VA	0
Future Economy Collective	Blacksburg, VA	0
Virginia Rural Health Association	Blacksburg, VA	0
Montgomery County NAACP	Christianburg, VA	7.6
Women's Resource Center of the New River Valley	Radford, VA	15
Citizens for a Better Leesburg	Leesburg, VA	242
Arlington Public Schools	Arlington, VA	262
NOVA Equity Agenda Coalition		

and research skills as both were a critical part of my course design.

As seen in Table 2, student pretest responses indicate high confidence in the importance of the work that community organizations do ($M=4.12$) as well as the expectation that students would learn about community concerns as a result of the partnership ($M=4.21$). Survey responses suggest that there was room to grow in understanding the vulnerable populations that their community organizations serve ($M=3.36$). Despite the university's stated commitments, most students (89.3 percent) had no previous experience with service learning during their time at Virginia Tech but had neutral to moderately favorable views of service learning as a university practice ($M=3.86$). Most students also reported feeling considerably worried about their ability to execute the project ($M=4.32$). Mindful specifically of our second goal to increase the use of social science research skills to address real-world concerns, most students believed they were at least moderately confident that they could perform the listed skills apart from designing a research plan. As seen in Table 3, the skill with the highest confidence average was "I can work on a research team" ($M=4.25$).

Connecting with Community Sparked Student Anxieties

While students were very excited about the project, the idea of connecting with community partners sparked several anxieties about time constraints and logistics. Students reported feeling uncertain about what time the project would require, as the bulk of the work would be determined by the community partners' needs and requests. Students also shared that these feelings of stress were related to their unexpected adjustment to online classes generally and the prospect of entering the job market in the middle of a pandemic and recession.

Students were eager to partner and share their skills even though the practice of negotiating project logistics with community partners was very new. Initially, students were worried about how to reach out to form and maintain personal connections with their community partners online and with those agencies disparately impacted by COVID-19. For some students, these anxieties manifested in a reluctance to reach out to partners altogether, many out of a fear of rejection. At the project's close, 60 percent of students confirmed communication issues with both group members

Table 2. Changes in Student Confidence Regarding Community Partnerships (N = 28).

Item	Pretest M (SD)	Posttest M (SD)	Mean Score Difference [95% CI]
I feel confident that I know a lot about the community partner I am going to be working with.	3.36 (1.19)	3.93 (1.41)	-0.57 [-1.09, 0.05]*
I feel confident that I know a lot about the people who are serviced by this community partner.	3.36 (1.16)	3.71 (1.33)	-0.36 [-0.90, 0.18]
I am excited about working on a research team made up of other students.	3.54 (1.17)	4.07 (1.27)	0.54 [-1.02, -0.05]*
I am currently volunteering with a community organization.	2.14 (1.46)	1.89 (1.37)	0.25 [-0.34, 0.84]
I think research service learning is a valuable university course practice.	3.86 (1.18)	4.18 (1.09)	-0.32 [-0.73, 0.09]
I am excited about working with the community partner I have chosen.	3.75 (1.21)	3.86 (1.41)	-0.11 [-0.56, 0.34]
I think that the community organization I am going to work with is important for the community.	4.12 (1.06)	4.07 (1.30)	0.12 [-0.37, 0.58]
I think the community organization I am going to work with has a lot to teach me about community concerns.	4.21 (1.17)	4.21 (1.29)	0.00 [-0.41, 0.41]
I am worried about my ability to execute this service learning project.	4.32 (0.94)	3.29 (1.24)	1.04 [0.56, 1.51]

Note. CI = confidence interval.
*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001. (two-tailed tests).

and community partners to be worrisome obstacles. These problems range from community organizations declining or ignoring requests for student partnerships to not having confidence in coordinating with their group mates without offline familiarity with one another. One student shared, “The most frustrating thing about this was the fact that we had been denied so many times that it seemed as if my grade was in jeopardy.” Another wrote, “It has been stressful in a sense that... we have no control of when they respond.” I welcomed this feedback so I could assist students in the best way throughout the project. Groups that chose organizations. This experience speaks to the underlying need for “collectivity building” in abolitionist work (Gilmore 2019), which means that groups/

individuals with preexisting connections may be more willing and ready to use those connections for intergroup collaboration, so there is an ongoing need to cultivate these connections. I discuss this emphasis on collectivity building later as it is of particular importance for social scientists considering how best to maximize the potential of VCBL to effect positive change.

Fostering Communal Responsibility for Change Resonates with Students

Despite their concerns, most students had a positive attitude toward service learning in general and their community partner projects were very successful. Students were chatty; flooded my office

Table 3. Changes in Student Confidence Regarding Research Skills (N = 28).

Item	Pretest <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Posttest <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Mean Score Difference [95% CI]
I can design a research plan based on assessment of the client's needs.	3.68 (0.98)	3.93 (1.18)	-0.25 [-0.74, 0.24]
I can work on a research team.	4.25 (0.89)	4.43 (0.63)	-0.18 [-0.57, 0.22]
I can make research-based programming recommendations.	3.36 (1.03)	4.00 (0.94)	-0.64 [-1.13, -0.16]**
I can conduct an interview.	4.12 (0.88)	4.25 (1.04)	-0.14 [-0.62, 0.34]
I can come up with a research question.	4.14 (0.81)	4.54 (0.74)	-0.46 [-0.91, 0.02]*
I can find texts to answer a research question.	4.11 (0.96)	4.61 (0.50)	-0.50 [-0.89, -0.11]**
I can clearly present my findings to the client.	4.00 (0.90)	4.04 (1.10)	-0.04 [-0.45, 0.38]

Note. CI = confidence interval.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$. (two-tailed tests).

hours; emailed me with ideas about how to conduct meaningful, solution-driven research; and felt empowered to mobilize our learning throughout the semester. Those who believed service learning was important for communities also said that involvement in service learning cultivated life skills and helped them apply what they learned in class to the real world. About half of the students who wrote about service learning being important also said they wished they could have this experience again after the COVID-19 pandemic because of the emotional, social, and economic strain experienced by both students and organizations. Further emphasizing the importance of service learning, students expressed the belief that these experiences helped them make a difference in their communities, with one saying, "Allowing us to view policing issues in certain organizations fully solidifies the information we are learning in class. In addition, this project allows us to initiate change in our communities, which helps the community as well as the student body." This is the goal of most service-learning projects: to apply classroom knowledge to the world around us and to give back to the community surrounding the university. Importantly, student enthusiasm with the collective process of building organizational relationships across communities speaks to the actualization of a liberation future, in which individuals and institutions can build mutually beneficial coalitions to address social harms.

VCBL fits seamlessly with the abolitionist goal of identifying the root causes of widespread social

inequality and the course goal thinking critically about the origins of policing. The VCBL projects allowed students to approach real problems in local communities using a abolitionist perspective. Regarding the link between theory and practice, one student wrote, "It was a great opportunity to incorporate and utilize what we learned in class to actual field experience." Five other students repeated this sentiment, writing that they were able to use knowledge from their courses to inform their projects. Some students wished that more of their classes involved service learning, with one saying, "Otherwise, what are we here for? A good applied, hands-on approach to the material that we learn is precisely what we need as students. If you take architecture students for example, they go on field trips and study architecture; why not do the same for liberal arts students?" This sentiment reinforces the finding in previous studies that service learning is an invaluable way for students to contextualize their classroom knowledge (Bach and Weinzimmer 2011; Gallini and Moely 2003; Mayer et al. 2018).

Modeling Communities of Care

One way to model abolition as praxis is to cultivate communities of care within the classroom. My approach was to scaffold assignment components, increase instructor feedback, and center empathy for my students' online learning. To begin, I provided students with a detailed research paper and research poster template to guide their writing,

scheduled multiple small deadlines spread throughout the semester, gave comprehensive feedback after each phase of the project, and held mandatory office hours to discuss that feedback (Kozimor-King and Prince 2018). Out of 28 open-ended student responses unrelated to my pedagogy, five independently mentioned that the templates were helpful. Eight students mentioned that the sequential deadlines and continuous feedback helped them progress in their assignment. More than half (60.7 percent) of respondents mentioned the assistance they received from the professor and teaching assistants as reasons why their project was successful. Three students underscored the care and understanding they received, with one writing, "Thank you for your encouragement and actively checking on all students. I just can't say thank you enough." Virtual community-based research can be a challenge to both students and instructors, but with empathy, communication, flexibility, and departmental support, it can also be a valuable way to integrate abolitionist praxis into the classroom.

Additionally, several students excelled in ways that bolstered their confidence in social science research above and beyond expectations. Thirteen respondents mentioned feeling more prepared for graduate-level work upon completing this project. One respondent wrote,

In graduate school I'll have to conduct my own research . . . this legitimately gave me the foundation to feel less anxious writing this kind of work in the future. I want to find ways to combine all of my skills and passions and research papers, which I hadn't realized before.

Other students named more specific skills, such as interviewing, public speaking, and time management, as ways the project helped them improve as scholars. Many groups enjoyed working with their community partners and mentioned how glad they were to contribute positively to the greater community and enact change.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Prior findings indicate that participating in a service-learning project as part of an academic course requirement allows students to understand and connect classroom concepts with practical applications (Vogelgesang and Astin 2000; Wickersham et al. 2016); strengthen their critical

thinking, research skills, and adaptive responses to problems (Bach and Weinzimmer 2011; Jakubowski and Burman 2004); and improve their perceptions of community service work more broadly (Bach and Weinzimmer 2011). Most service-learning evaluations on beneficial student experiences rely on collecting qualitative data (e.g., journal entries students were responsible for writing throughout the project) with some Likert scales utilized to measure precise skills (e.g., administering a research survey). My assessment also focused on student data but asked students to reflect on not only the effect the project had on them independently (i.e., skill mastery, confidence) but also how they perceived the community organization in relation to themselves and how they wish to see racial justice working in the world (i.e., what is valuable about the organization and/or the partnership). This reflection prompted students to consider themselves as active community members in equal standing with organizational partners, reimagining and resisting the typical research-researched dichotomy.

Although the benefits of service learning are typically framed as flowing toward academic communities, Blouin and Perry's (2009) qualitative study with community-based organizations found that the additional labor provided to organizations allowed limited financial resources to stretch further and enhanced organizational impact. I cannot speak definitively for the students' partner organizations about whether service learning is "generally a net positive" for all parties (Blouin and Perry 2009:132), but I can say that I received unsolicited communication from most partners expressing appreciation for our student's efforts. For example, students working with the local NAACP chapter produced an organizational timeline that integrated oral interviews of past and present chapter members. This work product had the potential to increase the chapter's visibility and did not require additional training of my students in the process. Consistent with related research that contends CBL is a site for building potential long-term, mutually beneficial relationships (Bach and Weinzimmer 2011), four students went on to seek employment at their chosen partner organizations, and two other students used the research associated with this project as the centerpiece of their graduate school applications.

These findings reinforce the importance for undergraduate social science programs must include meaningful, supervised, and scaffolded opportunities

for students to develop independent research skills. To this point, students regularly commented on the need for this learning to be interwoven throughout the undergraduate curriculum in a consistent, meaningful, and transparent way. Student feedback echoed the belief that college graduates with well-developed problem-solving, writing, communication, technological, and analytic skills as well as experience applying those skills in real-world settings are favored by employers (Ciabattari et al. 2018). Community partnerships allowed students to demonstrate their skill mastery by applying police accountability concepts to real word settings (i.e. brainstorming solutions to complex institutional problems, and confidently engaging in respectful conversations with community members of diverse perspectives. Additionally, by emphasizing the inherent connection between the classroom and the proactive service-learning component, students were able to conceptualize themselves as moving freely across sites of knowledge production.

In closing, I explore important insights about the future use of VCBL. Namely, I am invested in takeaways that speak to increased accessibility to service-learning opportunities for students and community partners and what these learning opportunities provide for abolitionist futures. First, VCBL has the potential to increase both student accessibility and organizational reciprocity. Students without the means to visit volunteer sites, and/or community organizations without the resources to constantly train new volunteers, can work together virtually to meaningfully contribute to the surrounding community. Building a service-learning component into the sociological curriculum allows students, who may not have had the time or resources to perform unpaid labor of this kind, to gain volunteer experience that makes them competitive applicants to graduate schools, internships, and jobs while also receiving credit toward their degrees. These efforts should be paired with funded programs to ensure that low-income, first-generation, and otherwise marginalized students receive the guidance necessary to be successful during and after college. To this point, universities have a responsibility to cultivate a network of potential professional skill-building opportunities for students. We often speak to young people about employment in terms of professions opposed to the skills that are necessary and strategically positioned across various employment opportunities; yet the integration of hard and soft skills into the sociology classroom is necessary, as are students'

abilities to identify, describe, explain, and apply them.

VCBL as a central learning tool provided several critical advantages to students. First, students had greater flexibility regarding time, travel, and financial constraints for participation. By conducting their initial outreach and meetings virtually, this approach also broadened the pool of potential community partners. Second, the flexibility of virtual learning also allowed students to create partnerships around social issues happening in real time. By combining classroom knowledge about the origins of policing, information about the populations their community partners serve, and their own observations of social inequality, students applied their knowledge and research skills to effect positive change. More formal classroom methods, such as reading quizzes, discussions, and essays, were designed to address other learning objectives in historically "traditional" ways, while the service-learning component allowed students to demonstrate their course learning objectives within a more creative, hands-on environment.

A second prominent takeaway from this project is the impact of student-driven deadlines and flexibility. Incorporating a degree of collaboration and flexibility in the classroom environment enables students to more intuitively grasp the core tenets of service learning and the broader abolitionist perspective. Student feedback showed a great appreciation for several smaller project deadlines throughout the semester as well as extra opportunities to check in with instructors. This flexibility and creativity can be extended beyond the confines of pandemic instruction because many student hardships will remain throughout their college experiences. Students who have responsibilities outside of their studies (e.g., wage employment and caregiving), for example, will continue to be impacted as they work to complete their academic requirements while also ensuring their personal and family's survival.

And finally, I wish to note how this project speaks to the pervasive nature of American socialization around policing, namely, the extent to which society frames safety and community service professions as largely tied to a limited class of persons, including police, firefighters, teachers, and doctors. Although the initial intent behind this VCBL project was to encourage students to partner with nonpolicing organizations to address community health and safety concerns through more informal means, the persistent availability (and

willingness) of police departments to partner with our students influenced partner choices. For example, nearly all police departments responded to students within one business day, whereas community organizations averaged a one week response time. The structural constraints of local and nonprofit organizations juxtaposed against the built-in organizational infrastructure of policing also makes police organizations ready and available for these kinds of partnerships, perhaps more so than other community-led groups that may not be prepared to undertake a student partnership. This is likely attributable to the push for police departments to cultivate a positive public relations image, thus incentivizing student partnerships. Nevertheless, students who chose to partner with police organizations brought their well-rounded sociological and criminological perspective on evolving policing practices, implicit biases, diversity training and hiring, community policing, abolition.

Suggestions for Future Study

Future instructors should consider preparing and disseminating a presurvey to assess sociological research skills so they can more effectively identify opportunities for growth in key research areas (Kozimor-King and Prince 2018). Some ways to approach gaps in research training include constructing thematic working groups and building tailored skills training, such as conducting interviews or making research-based programming recommendations. Another approach involves providing students with a predetermined list of community partner organizations, which would alleviate student stress and allow organizations to be fully versed in the project's expectations. Some scholars recommend initiating contact with community partners months in advance to clearly outline the research design, objectives, and other requirements (Kozimor-King and Prince 2018). Having much of the logistical work necessary for CBL done before the students begin working allows them to concentrate on the project details without spending large amounts of their (limited) time getting the initial groundwork in place. However, in my test run the summer before the semester-length course, I found that providing a list of preapproved community partners may inadvertently limit the creative potential and collective imagining I aimed to cultivate through abolitionist praxis.

Additionally, future instructors might consider integrating community partners into the process of

designing the VCBL component of the course and establishing a way to collect more systematic partner feedback. This was the first time any of the organizations participated in a service-learning project, and several expressed their energy and excitement to work with another group of students in the future. Many also expressed that their desire to participate in the projects stemmed from the students' excitement and genuine desire to build meaningful relationships between their studies on policing topics and the organizations that worked each day on these issues. Since this time, several students have taken internships and paid employment with their community partner or another organization introduced to them through their VCBL research. In addition to showing me areas where I can improve, this project taught me that VCBL can successfully educate students through an abolitionist lens and encourage the formation of community-minded coalitions to address local problems. It also taught me that students are eager to learn about American policing from a community-affirming perspective that encourages them to begin to unravel existing assumptions about power, the state, and the function of police in society as architects of the social order.

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