

A Community-Engaged Learning Cohort

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My project for the Ignatian Mentoring Program entailed creating a multi-semester learning cohort centered on community-engaged learning. This multifaceted project supports Xavier's mission of *cura personalis* and aimed to improve student learning outcomes, retention, and well-being; to foster a passion for service and being a *person for others*; and to provide appropriate tools and training to start a business. The pilot project redesigned part of the core curriculum so students worked in a service-learning cohort across two core classes, one in fall, and one in spring. The cohort was deliberate in not only creating a learning community, but to also allowing students access expert guidance and support for eight months as they start their own gourmet mushroom-growing business. Guidance on mushroom farming came from Caps and Trade, a local organization that operates alongside Brick Gardens, a local nonprofit that manages the XU Urban farm and other vacant lot revival community gardens and hydroponic growing operations in formerly abandoned properties. The class also worked together on the XU Urban Farm, co-managed by Brick Gardens and Bellarmine Chapel, to help feed surrounding neighborhoods.

There are three primary components of the experimental course design. First, a multi-semester learning cohort wherein the same twenty students took my ENGL 101: English Composition class in the fall and my ENGL 205: Literature and the Moral Imagination course in the spring. Vincent Tinto's *Schema for Dropout From College*, often referred to as the *Student Integration Model*, posits "it is the individual's integration into the academic and social systems of the college that most directly relates to his continuance in that college" (96). Despite the strong social networks available to be developed through student groups, club sports, and athletic teams, and the academic support facilitated through the Student Success Center, Xavier has a 68% four-year retention rate and a 69% six-year graduation rate ("Retention and Graduation"). This is an opportunity for improvement. The pedagogical and social-emotional benefits of cohort learning are well-documented (Marts; Nordone, Jr.; Wathington, et al.). Furthermore, students report enjoying being in a cohort learning community and are more comfortable collaborating with their peers in such an environment (Nordone, Jr.). Students also believe their motivation, critical thinking, and learning all improved under the cohort model (Nordone, Jr.). Not only do cohorts benefit students socially and academically, they meet Xavier's mission to build *solidarity and kinship* among students.

The second component of this experimental cohort was the community-engaged learning: both classes carry service-learning designations. Most Tuesdays during class time (weather permitting) was spent volunteering with Brick Gardens. Service-learning supports institutional goals and benefits community members, but research has also demonstrated a significant benefit to students. Findings indicate students enrolled in

service-learning courses receive higher grades than in non-service-learning courses and go on to take more college credits than those who do not (Marts). That is, the service-learning component—in addition to the multi-semester cohort structure—can also help improve graduation and retention rates. While many learning cohorts work with different professors in different classes, my involvement in both classes allowed me to be well-integrated into the community and be more attuned to concerning behaviors and promptly get students needed support. Students fare better in classes with more engaged faculty (Marken). A number of elements of this experimental service-learning cohort are intended to increase the likelihood students will succeed in both academic and interpersonal realms.

Integrating *service rooted in justice and love* into our class not only supports institutional and student success alike by increasing the likelihood a student will graduate, service-learning also helps shape student worldviews, deepening understanding of social issues and injustices, reducing stereotypes, and demonstrating a “increase in tolerance for diversity” (Niro). Community-engaged learning allows students the opportunity to practice social justice in class, working to improve outcomes for their community members. In this course we read fiction and nonfiction that brings to light inequities—particularly regarding the food industry—and we worked on the campus farm to try to actively reduce such inequities in our surrounding neighborhoods.

The third component of the community-engaged learning cohort was a small-business incubator. Brick Gardens has a new sister organization, Caps and Trade, which is an indoor urban farm specializing in growing gourmet mushrooms. Caps and Trade aims to provide a “trade school” (hence the *trade* in the name) to the public to help lift or keep individuals out of poverty by providing a steady income stream from home, which is especially beneficial to those without cars, people with difficult schedules—like college students taking classes and working but still having a hard time making ends meet—or single parents. The mushroom industry was valued at \$46 billion in 2020, and expects 9.5% compound annual growth by 2028 (Price). Mushrooms are an increasingly popular food with an array of species grown for various purposes and markets. Mushroom farms have small physical and carbon footprints, and the barrier to entry is low, especially compared to other types of urban farms. Fungi are a great intro product for urban farming and small business ownership alike.

Students in the class piloted the Caps and Trade community education programming, helping to bring to light areas where busy novices might struggle with while starting to grow their mushrooms and their business. In this manner, the partnership was mutually beneficial, as students learned from Caps and Trade, and Caps and Trade learned from the students. To avoid saviorism and perpetuating a charity model that does not adequately support the community, community-engaged learning must be mutually beneficial for students, community partners, the institution, and the community (Mitchell). This community-engaged learning cohort was designed to benefit all parties.

To support the students in starting their own mushroom farm business, some of the assignments for the ENGL 101 component of the cohort were tailored around small-business ownership, such as writing plans and crafting websites. In the quest for *magis*, the big dream for this partnership with Caps and Trade is to have a pipeline for students who need more financial support to be able to get set up with mushroom farming, as well

as providing education and resources for people wanting to start their own business in our surrounding communities. Kreniske and colleagues find low-income and first-generation students—as compared to their peers—have less support from family, sleep fewer hours, and work more. Their research “identifies an urgent need for institutional level adjustments” and “broader policies and programmatic changes to build campuses where students of all backgrounds can thrive” (Krenikse, et al. 8). The cohort model, with integrated support for starting and maintaining a flexible business from a home or dorm room, is an alteration to the core curriculum that supports student learning and social development. The program can especially help students who are supporting themselves financially, as the business is not particularly time-intensive and hours are flexible.

This experimental community-engaged learning cohort was funded by an Innovation Fellows Grant from our Center For Innovation (CFI). The service-learning component of the proposed pilot cohort supports two of the CFI’s pillars: it created a mission-focused experiential/signature program building on the Jesuit missions to combat poverty, address racial injustice, and promote environmental stewardship. The fact that this project was receiving financial and logistical support from the university through the CFI was something I wanted students to be aware of: campus entities were putting their money where their mouth was, so to speak. The institutional support through the CFI, coupled with my participation in the Ignatian Mentoring Program (IMP), fueled my desire to incorporate explicit instruction and *reflection* on our six Jesuit values: *magis*, *discernment*, *reflection*, *cura personalis*, *solidarity and kinship*, and *service rooted in justice and love*. Each week in the spring semester ENGL 205 course, we would visit or revisit one of the values and consider how we see them present in our class and in our lives. Since the cohort was centered on creating a sense of community and belonging among our students, I wanted to be sure students recognized the values of our campus community and the tenants that make this place so special and unique.

Our experimental cohort has concluded, and I will soon begin analyzing IRB-approved survey data on belonging among first-year students to try to discern if our project had a meaningful impact on the student experience. As I *reflect* on the past two semester, I recognize that in some ways, we were not successful: we failed spectacularly at growing mushrooms. This, though, is itself a valuable lesson. We now know where future mushroom farmers in the Caps and Trade community education program may run into issues, so we can work to reduce the likelihood of failure for people in this program. In this manner, our pilot program succeeded.

I believe there is also a lot of value in learning to fail together, in showing our students that sometimes we will try a thing and we will fail at said thing, but fear of failure should not prevent us from trying. In the literature course, we read the novel *Underground Airlines*. As we look at how literature like this can inspire us to be better humans, we discuss what is perhaps one of the most famous quotes from Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*, “I wanted you to see what real courage is, instead of getting the idea that courage is a man with a gun in his hand. It’s when you know you’re licked before you begin, but you begin anyway and see it through no matter what.” We look at this idea of courage in the context of inequality and fighting what feels like an uphill battle for social justice, but we were also able to consider it in the context of our failed attempt at mushroom farming.

Had I known we were going to be so bad at growing mushroom, at sanitizing our space and remembering to mist them during the necessary period, I would still try this experiment, though I would reduce the class time and curricular emphasis of this component in the course and instead further highlight writing skills.

I would absolutely teach a cohort of first-year students again. It was an honor to be a part of my students' journey adapting to college. It was a privilege to watch them grow in confidence and conviction and develop friendships with their peers. From a pedagogical standpoint, I appreciated having the opportunity to reinforce themes we discussed in 101 in the subsequent 205 course. Of course, my 205 course is always designed to build on the foundational skills covered in 101, but knowing exactly what they learned in 101 helped me revisit and reinforce idea in a more meaningful and concrete way. Reminding students what they learned and showing them how to apply it in novel contexts was invaluable. We may have failed together in these past two semesters, but we also thrived together.

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