

# The Application of Faith and Learning: Faith-Based Anchor Institutions and Community Engagement

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## Abstract

Higher education institutions face many competing priorities and are still expected to serve the public good. Faith-based institutions, in particular, aim to meet a faith-inspired calling and serve the communities in which they are situated while guiding students in their faith formation by integrating service and academic priorities. In this paper, the authors explore, through a case study methodology, the unique positionality of Messiah University, a faith-based university located near the capital city of Harrisburg, PA. Specifically, this study explores the impact of a community engaged course with an urban nonprofit agency.

**Keywords:** community-university partnerships, experiential learning, cultural humility, service-learning, faith integration

## Introduction

An anchor institution's ability to address the issues of their respective community has elicited much needed attention over the past twenty years. Hodges and Dubb (2020) suggest university leaders have not worked hard enough to address important national problems. The focus has primarily been on how anchor institutions situated in urban environments have served urban communities. Anchor institutions best serve others when they align their mission and strategic plans with priority concerns, not only within their local context but their surrounding regions as well. Cantor, Englot, and Higgins (2013) have specifically called on universities to consider how to leverage their unique strengths in order to break down university and community barriers. Universities can avoid being the expert in the ivory tower by truly working with communities, as

part of the community, to address need and generate solutions. Faith-based institutions are uniquely positioned to do this work. This paper provides an example of how a faith-based anchor institution located in a suburban context can fulfill its mission by extending its reach into an urban environment and work in concert with an urban place-based anchor institution.

### **Context of the Institution of Higher Education**

Messiah University is a liberal arts university known for its orientation to Christian service (Messiah University, n.d.-a). The university was founded in 1909 on the outskirts of the capital city of Harrisburg, PA upon receiving a plot of land from the first university president. The mission of Messiah University, “to educate men and women toward maturity of intellect, character, and Christian faith in preparation for lives of service, leadership and reconciliation in church and society,” reflects its commitment to faith and service (Messiah University, n.d.-b). Because service, leadership, and reconciliation are firmly rooted in the context of Christian faith, this impacts the university’s approach to service: “We don’t just serve because it’s the ‘right thing to do’; we serve because God calls us to open our hearts to the poor and needy and to work for justice wherever injustice prevails” (Messiah University, n.d.-b, para 4).

Messiah University is rooted in the Anabaptist tradition, which upholds pacifist beliefs (Messiah University, n.d.-c). Due to their status as conscientious objectors during World War II, many faculty completed Civilian Public Service in lieu of military service (Haynes, 2005). Service has, therefore, been an integral part of the campus culture for decades.

In the early 1990s, Messiah University was awarded with a Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE) grant to develop “Innovative Projects for Student Community Service” to strengthen service-learning across the curriculum (Agapé Center for Service and Learning, 2012). In 1998, Messiah dedicated a newly renovated space on campus called the Agapé Center for Service and Learning. The Agapé Center houses co-curricular educators and faculty partners dedicated to ensuring community partnerships with areas of great need, such as inner city Harrisburg. Through the Agapé Center, students serve the local community by addressing needs such as hunger and homelessness, literacy, and health and wellness. The Agapé Center also connects faculty with community partners for academic service learning and provided tremendous support to the current research project.

### **The Context of Community: The Allison Hill Community (Harrisburg, PA)**

Harrisburg, the capital city of Pennsylvania, is one of the most industrialized cities in the northeastern United States. It serves as home to heavy manufacturing, agriculture, and chocolate maker the Hershey Company. Despite the city’s decade-old financial troubles, it was ranked the second-best place in the United States to raise a family in 2010 and has favorable financial stability due to its high concentration of state and federal government agencies. It is a racially diverse city, majority-minority with 51.8% Black or African American, 21.8% Hispanic or

Latinx, and 22.6% White. The overall college attainment is 20.2% which is indicative of the median household income of \$37,356 and poverty rate of 27.7%. Additionally, only 34.6% of residents own their homes (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). As with most industrialized cities, the gradual loss of industry after WWII led to White flight to the suburbs.

The community of focus for this study is located directly east of downtown Harrisburg, PA and is accessed by bridges and across a wide path of train tracks along the Susquehanna River. Allison Hill, known by locals as the “Hill,” the “Ville,” and the “Third Ward” is Harrisburg’s first suburb and comprises many neighborhoods representing a variety of cultures such as West African, Vietnamese, Indonesian, Latin American, African American, and European American populations. The majority of residents are low income and one third are under the age of 18 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). Over the years, a number of homes and buildings have fallen into disrepair and have been condemned. One source reported 199 buildings in the neighborhood as “abandoned” and another 121 as “vacant” (Malawskey, 2014).

## Literature Review

### Anchor Institutions

While universities, the government, and hospitals have always played an important role in our communities, it was not until 2002 when the term anchor institutions was coined by Michael Porter to emphasize the long-term and vested nature of these institutions in a particular city or region (Rutheiser, 2016). Dubb, McKinley, and Howard (2013) further define anchor mission as “a commitment to consciously apply the long-term, place-based economic power of the institution, in combination with its human and intellectual resources, to better the long-term welfare of the communities in which the institution is anchored” (p. 48). It is for this reason that higher education institutions (HEIs) are uniquely situated to do this work due to their vast network of knowledge and resources located within a geographic location or community.

William Rainey Harper, the first president of the University of Chicago, had an evangelical view of the university as a “prophet of democracy” (p. 43), a place embedded in the issues and life of urban America with the purpose of serving the city and country and fulfilling the university’s democratic promise (Benson et al., 2017). The United States has a long history of community engagement partnerships with HEIs. In the nineteenth century, many states established land grant universities linking higher education with agriculture, heavy industries, and local communities (Jacob, 2015). Those strong ties have persisted with many land grant universities, but with the growth of system-wide educational entities (e.g., R1, community colleges, regional comprehensive universities), community engagement efforts have seemed to shift in priority based on the HEIs designation. As such, public institutions are not inevitably vested in community engagement efforts. Many HEIs have competing priorities such as recruitment and retention of students, maintaining a high-level research profile, and fundraising to meet multi-

million-dollar campaign goals. Faith-based institutions have to weigh these priorities, but their faith mission also heavily influences how they enact their mission and what drives leadership decisions. In considering the unique make-up of HEI's as anchor institutions, we must consider how community engagement is viewed by leadership as central to the mission of the university. For example, even though community engagement, along with teaching and research, is considered a core function of HEIs, it is not generally given equal weight in their reward systems (Saltmarsh, 2011). Therefore, any opportunity to link teaching and research with community engagement initiatives is advantageous to meeting the commitments of faculty and the institution writ large.

University–community partnerships encompass many iterations in linking teaching, research, and service, with opportunities such as community-based research projects, service-learning activities, and community-based training programs (Russell & Flynn, 2001). Yet, by and large studies show that universities tend to benefit from these long-term partnerships more than communities do, creating a sense of resentment and mistrust (Gray, 2000; Perkins et al., 2004). Whereas engaged campuses advance the concept of full participation and are both in and of the community, participating in reciprocal, mutually beneficial partnerships between campus and community (Strum, 2011). One such campus is the University of Pennsylvania, which serves as a model in developing and implementing an effective response to urban issues by partnering with local communities advancing the core purposes of the university and the wellbeing of the community (Benson et al., 2017). In essence, full participation requires people, including students, faculty, and community members, within and beyond the university coming together to transform a community with the foundational understanding that HEIs are rooted in and accountable to multiple communities. HEIs are accountable to students who matriculate within their walls and they are also accountable to entities connected via physical space (e.g., adjacent residential neighborhoods) and collaborative projects (e.g., nonprofits dependence on service-learning classes).

The intersection between faith and community engagement has implications not only for college students but for communities as well. The faith tradition of an institution is imbued in the intentions of faculty, staff, and students; ideally, their intentions embody the very nature of living out faith through actions in one's community. When examined in relation to place-based anchor institutions, the call to serve in one's community, to seek justice and defend the oppressed, and be good stewards of our resources and time seem to go hand in hand. Wuthnow (1998) emphasized a spirituality of seeking, which readies the spiritual sojourner for the road. Taken literally, we might even suggest that where faculty and students seek out their spiritual experiences as a member of an institution is logically going to be influenced by how and where the institution is integrated in their community. College and university campuses have a responsibility to communicate the context of the community to students early on and help students understand they are part of an ongoing effort to serve the community.

## Integration of Faith into the Classroom and Curriculum

In *Mapping the Terrain*, Huber and Hutchings (2004) define integrative learning as “connecting skills and knowledge from multiple sources and experiences; applying theory to practice in various settings; utilizing diverse and even contradictory points of view; and, understanding issues and positions contextually” (p. 13). Integrative learning experiences provide an opportunity for the learner to address real-world problems, adapt their intellectual skills, and understand and develop individual purpose, values, and ethics (Rhodes, 2010). When applying Christian theology to address real-world problems through service-learning, Christian colleges and universities are positioned to help their students frame engagement around faith principles such as to love their neighbors.

Messiah University has established learning objectives for undergraduate students that are accomplished through curricular and cocurricular learning structures. Through *Social Responsibility*, one of the six university-wide educational outcomes, students demonstrate a commitment to service, reconciliation, and justice, and respond effectively and ethically to the complexities of an increasingly diverse and interdependent world. Specifically, students (a) gain an appreciation for cultural and ethnic diversity; (b) become servants, leaders, and reconcilers in the world; (c) develop a sense of civil responsibility and commitment to work with others for the common good; (d) develop the courage to act responsibly and redemptively in a complex world; (e) practice good stewardship of economic and natural resources; (e) act in ways that respect gender, cultural, and ethnic diversity; and (f) make decisions that reflect an ethic of service, a concern for justice, and a desire for reconciliation (Messiah University, n.d-d) Service-learning provides an opportunity for students to integrate their faith and learning through service to the community.

## Accomplishing Educational Goals Through Experiential Learning

Messiah University aims to achieve educational outcomes through curricular and cocurricular structures, and one of the major ways is through the Experiential Learning Initiative (ELI). Students participate in an approved experiential learning activity that involves goals of meaningful career development and community engagement (Messiah University, n.d-e). This involves a guided process where students are challenged to learn, apply and integrate knowledge and skills in an authentic context (Messiah University, n.d-e). Service-learning courses are one of the ways students fulfill their ELI requirements. These courses engage students in community service beyond the classroom while employing intentional reflection to help students connect their service with course content. Service-learning has been shown to have positive benefits on academic learning, promotes civic engagement, and builds strong partnerships with communities (Eyler, Giles, Stenson, & Gray, 2001). Saltmarsh and Hartley call for democratically engaged work, which is “framed as inclusive, collaborative, and problem-oriented work in which

academics share knowledge-generating tasks with the public and involve community partners as participants in public problem solving” (Benson, Harvkavy, & Puckett, 2007, p. 20).

### Description of the Service-Learning Course

Health Promotion Management (APHS 220) is a three-credit course offered as an Applied Health Science elective within the Health, Nutrition and Exercise Science Department at Messiah University. Students in the Applied Health Science major are required to take several of these elective courses to complete graduation requirements. The course is offered every other academic year, during the fall semester. Since 2017, APHS 220 has been approved by the institution as an Experiential Learning Initiative (ELI) course, designed to support self-awareness, professional preparation, and community engagement. To complete the ELI component, all students establish and evaluate personal learning goals regarding professional development and community engagement during the semester. At semester conclusion, they also create resume wording regarding their experience.

In the course, students collaborate with Brethren Housing Association (BHA), located on Hummel Street in Harrisburg, PA to promote health in areas identified by staff and interested participants. BHA operates the Transitions, Side-By-Side, and Next Steps programs, employs eight staff members, and owns 10 parcels of land for 22 apartments for supporting families. BHA’s mission is “to help individuals and families, who are experiencing homelessness, achieve their God-given potential by providing a holistic program of stable housing, supportive services and loving relationships.” (Brethren Housing Association, 2019-2020, para 6). This shared mission between BHA and Messiah University is an effective foundation for collaboration and partnership. Students are required to be on-site at BHA several times during the course. During on-campus class time throughout the semester, students engage in communication with staff members, creating sustainable wellness support for BHA within small group learning communities. Students authentically work through the health promotion process through the creation of health interest surveys, implementation plans, sustainable support tools, and assessment plans. At the conclusion of the semester, students share their process and support tools with staff and families at BHA.

### Community-Based Learning Pedagogy

Within a traditional classroom setting, addressing tangible societal issues with faith integration may be challenging. However, engaging students in service and partnership encourages realistic practice and reflection on experiences (de Groot, Alexander, Culp, & Keith, 2015). Creatively pursuing community engagement can enhance student learning and provide an opportunity for authentically exploring faith as students learn with and from community partners. Within the applied health science field, a pedagogical emphasis on service and community relationships

involves learners in sustainable practices to enhance wellness and address social justice through stewardship (Culp, 2016). Through personal reflection and listening to the stories of others, learners are equipped to pursue action steps toward community engagement in their own future professional work. Instead of a singular discussion or one topic in the syllabus, each class encourages students in exploring the integration of their faith and work. They have opportunities to reflect on their own personal experiences of privilege and oppression, consider areas of explicit or implicit bias, and develop relationships with a foundation of cultural humility. APHS 220 aims to enhance student learning while also addressing a significant community need.

## Methodology

Qualitative research is a process of inquiry that strives for a greater depth of understanding of social phenomena (Creswell, 2018). Qualitative methods were employed to explore students' experiences and engagement through the service-learning course, providing thick, rich descriptions. These "participant perspectives" (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998) facilitated the exploration of the students' experiences as well as the perceptions of the community partner. This case study was guided by the following research questions: (a) What themes emerged that demonstrate the impact of the service-learning course on students' career application and faith integration? and (b) In what ways does the community-university collaboration have an impact as described by the community partner?

## Context of the Course

The APHS 220 course meets twice a week for 75-minute class periods. The students are required to complete two on-site visits to Brethren Housing Association (BHA) in Harrisburg, PA and have additional volunteer opportunities, such as organizing a Thanksgiving dinner and assisting with weekly childcare for BHA support groups. Students are challenged to take input from staff and families to create supportive wellness tools that are useful and sustainable at BHA.

## Participants

In fall 2019, there were 25 students ( $N = 25$ ) enrolled in the APHS 220 course. Regarding gender, seven students were male ( $n = 7$ ) and eighteen students were female ( $n = 18$ ). In terms of class status, two students were sophomores ( $n = 2$ ), 15 students were juniors ( $n = 15$ ), and eight students were seniors ( $n = 8$ ). While service is a required component of the course, the students know about this requirement when registering for the class. Students have the opportunity to choose between this course and other courses once they learn about the required service with BHA.

## Community-based Learning Experiences

In the initial weeks of the course, students worked in their small group learning communities to design a health interest survey to gather relevant information regarding the primary nutrition interests and goals of staff and participants at BHA. Before preparing their survey, students were required to do background research to assist in their design. As they created their surveys, they were reminded to maintain clear organization and formatting while using audience-appropriate language, which included clarity, as well as statements that were empowering and not assumptive. Students included scaled items for respondents to check interest level in nutrition-related issues, as well as open-ended questions. In addition, at least one question was designed for respondents to discuss other holistic wellness interests (i.e., physical, emotional/mental, environmental, spiritual, social). The surveys were reviewed and edited by the instructor and then distributed to staff and participants at BHA. Staff responses (n = 4) to the survey revealed that the majority of BHA families would benefit from practical nutrition education and strategies and simple, healthy recipes (n = 4). They also affirmed that families have enough supplies for cooking, but strongly disagreed that families have a lot of knowledge about nutrition (n = 4). The students compiled the feedback in class and established themes for their initial project implementation plans. These plans were shared with BHA staff for feedback before students begin actively creating their nutrition support tools. The collaboration continued throughout the semester, as students shared their progress and asked for insight from staff who work directly with participants on a daily basis.

With continual feedback from staff at BHA, the five student learning communities designed and created nutrition support tools for 20 families who would be living in apartments at BHA. The student-designed tools included interactive laminated placements for children, a nutrition infographic to place on kitchen walls, a nutrition logbook for grocery shopping and reflection, a cookbook including breakfast, lunch, dinner and snack recipes, and physical activity cards for families and youth staff. During the final week of the semester, students were on-site at BHA to share their tools with staff and available participants. This was an important component of student learning and partnership. Students shared the educational components of their tools, the rationale for their designs, and their hopes for how they can be used in the future. The students asked for questions from staff and received feedback on how the tools would be integrated with BHA.

## Course Reflection Activities

The students responded to specific questions used in the “Reflection and Application” assignments in APHS 220 throughout the semester:

- Professional development: What specific skills will you work to develop through our course this semester that can enhance your professional effectiveness? Please describe one or two skills in detail, including action steps you will take.
- Community engagement: What do you hope to learn about community or do as a member of a community this semester? Consider our class community, as well as our involvement with the BHA community.
- Listen deeply to the TED talk by novelist Chimamanda Adichie, “The Danger of a Single Story.” Then, respond to the following questions. In your own words, how is a “single story” of people formed? What are practical suggestions for how our class can avoid a single story of homelessness as we work with BHA?
- Using your own words, create a definition for cultural humility. What are practical ways that we can approach our work with BHA this semester with a commitment to cultural humility?
- Go to the Project Implicit website and choose two Implicit Association Tests (IAT) to take for personal reflection: <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html>. What two IATs did you choose to complete? Reflect on the experience of taking IATs (most of our scores do reflect some bias). How can tests like this be helpful? Why do you think you scored as you did?
- Revisit the personal commitments that you set at the beginning of the semester (professional development and community engagement). Discuss your progress and any adjustments that you would like to make in these areas for the remaining weeks of the semester.
- (ELI question) Consider the knowledge you gained and the skills you practiced in this course that can be applied within a professional context. Describe two transferable skills you gained or improved from this course experience. Describe how these skills might benefit you in a professional setting in the future.
- (ELI question) What did “community” look like in your experience this semester within the Health Promotion Management course? As you reflect on your experience, what is one specific way you believe you will engage in and contribute to a specific community in the future?
- Discuss a significant moment during this experience that left a lasting impact on you. What made this moment significant for you?

## Data Analyses

Students were invited to respond candidly to the reflection and application assignments throughout the semester. An overall construct that emerged from the data was the notion of authenticity. Students’ reflections were honest and authentic. The concept of authenticity is liberating in the sense that one acts out of commitment and choice through their existential experiences not out of duty to external constructs (Kirylo & Boyd, 2017).

An inductive research approach was employed as well as a constant comparative analysis of the data to draw three major themes Cultural Humility, Knowledge of the Community, and Faith and Vocational Application. Table One includes the major themes that emerged, including a description of the theme and an example quote from the data.

**Table 1.** End of Semester Student Reflections

| <b>Theme</b>           | <b>Theme Description</b>   | <b>Example Quote</b>   |
|------------------------|--|--|
| Cultural Humility      | Reshaping a privileged mindset to adopt a posture of cultural humility, similar to Christ. | <i>The concept of cultural humility was a brand-new idea this semester. I loved learning about the mindset “[allow the client to be] the expert” and applying it by being mindful of the vocabulary we used. I think this can transfer to physical therapy when I get people of different minorities and backgrounds.</i>  |
| Cultural Humility      | Reshaping a privileged mindset to adopt a posture of cultural humility, similar to Christ. | <i>As each individual comes to me, they all have their own stories. I will not let my story shape my perspective, rather I will love as God loves and support them as they are entering the rehabilitation process which can be both painful and frustrating on some days.</i>   |
| Cultural Humility      | Reshaping a privileged mindset to adopt a posture of cultural humility, similar to Christ. | <i>I learned what good teamwork is and how much that can impact the project. The fact that we knew our [projects] were going to be used by real people also had an impact on how we worked on it. We had to create ways to portray information that was easily understood, which is how I improved my professional language skills. I had never had to create something that was going to be used in real life. So, this course was eye opening and I learned so much about how to talk and appeal to real people, something no other class has offered so far in my college career.</i> |
| Knowledge of Community | Realizing the importance of knowing the people served and their distinct needs.            | <i>I was humbled by how much I didn’t know but I was very surprised at how much others in our class didn’t know about the community that we were about to serve. It was seriously eye opening how much an average Christian college kid (including myself) doesn’t know about their local community that is struggling. It caused me to reflect</i>  |

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|                                  |  |   |
|----------------------------------|--|---|
|                                  |  | <i>on what I am involved with and what the real purpose behind those things is.</i>   |
| Knowledge of Community           | Realizing the importance of knowing the people served and their distinct needs.  | <i>As a class, we had established a community that saw the BHA as not something we needed to conquer, instead, we needed to join forces, form a partnership and seek positive change together.</i>  |
| Faith and vocational application | Understanding the importance of a Christian mission and calling and applying these concepts through authentic service to others. | <i>When I think about the people in community surrounding/supporting BHA, I'm able to see different parts of the body of Christ work together. Our class is just one part of the body, which is focused on physical health. Some BHA staff were another part of the body, focused on childcare. Other BHA staff were another part, focused on finances. Then other parts of the body were leaders – kind of like joints in the body connecting one moving piece to another. It was cool to see how all these different parts of wholeness were expressed through different parts of the community to serve alongside BHA, and how beautiful it was for them to all come together.</i> |
| Faith and vocational application | Understanding the importance of a Christian mission and calling and applying these concepts through authentic service to others. | <i>Community means recognition of difference, while simultaneously loving and affirming the group or individual. If only we could all see the world from the point of view of the Father. Imagine viewing every single individual as a carefully crafted &amp; wonderfully made individual. To me, this is the community of the kingdom.</i>  |

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In addition to the qualitative data, end-of-course evaluations were used to triangulate the data (Table 2). Creswell and Miller (2000) define triangulation as “a validity procedure where researchers search for convergence among multiple and different sources of information to form themes or categories in a study” (p. 126). Examining student satisfaction with the course helped to determine the validity of the student reflections. By participating in an anonymous survey, students were able to indicate their honest perception of the course effectiveness. Students responded to a 5-point Likert scale survey indicating their agreement to course effectiveness in accomplishing course objectives.

**Table 2.** Student Perceptions of APHS 2020 Course Effectiveness (N = 25)

| Course Effectiveness Factors   | Mean | Standard Deviation |
|--|------|--------------------|
| Helped students to interpret subject matter from diverse perspectives  | 4.9  | 0.27               |
| Encouraged students to reflect on and evaluate what they have learned  | 4.9  | 0.27               |
| Demonstrated the importance and significance of the subject matter   | 4.9  | 0.27               |
| Formed teams or groups to facilitate learning  | 5.0  | 0.0                |
| Related course material to real life situations  | 4.9  | 0.27               |
| Created opportunities for students to apply course content outside the classroom                                 | 4.9  | 0.32               |
| Involved students in hands-on projects such as research, case studies, or real-life activities                   | 5.0  | 0.2                |
| Asked students to share ideas and experiences with others whose backgrounds and viewpoints differ from their own | 4.6  | 0.56               |
| Overall, excellent course  | 4.9  | 0.27               |

Note. 100% response rate, Likert scale, 5 = strongly agree.

### Community Partner Reflections

Once the APHS 220 course was completed, one of the research team members who did not have a previous relationship with the community partner and who did not work for Messiah University conducted an in-depth interview with the program director of the Brethren Housing Association. The purpose of this interview was to explore the perceived impact of the community-university collaboration. The program director shared that the Harrisburg area “has a lot of resources such as food pantries, but there is no education on how to do meal planning” (M. Bellesfield, personal communication, August 17, 2020). She went on to describe the importance of learning about the families first and how they feel about nutrition. This was a positive confirmation to the use of an assessment survey before the project even started. In addition, the director shared that the agency does not want to “showcase” the families or make them feel like they are on display, so students

must read the feedback from the needs assessment survey carefully and listen well to the feedback from the survey and community partner. When asked how the local community perceives Messiah University students, she responded that they “connect with people, have an understanding of empathy, incredible character, are dependable, and are high-level students” (M. Bellesfield, personal communication, August 17, 2020). Many of the characteristics described by the community partner aligned with the themes derived from the student reflections.

## Implications

While the residential campus of Messiah University is rural, Harrisburg, PA is an urban community located less than 20 minutes from campus. Many students within APHS 220 had never been to Harrisburg, and most had not spent any time in the Allison Hill neighborhood where Brethren Housing Association is located. Embedding service within a course gave students an extended opportunity to serve their community and allowed the BHA to build off of the work that had been done in prior semesters. As the director of BHA shared, “The [students] provided me with tools, such as the menu planner, that help on a daily basis. This was very educational for the women, and never had anyone talked to them about this” (M. Bellesfield, personal communication, August 17, 2020). Students were able to practice authentic professional skills in small group collaboration and by creating wellness support tools. They engaged in listening to the stories of others, both inside the classroom and through their interactions at BHA. Students found commonalities among people who have had different life experiences than their own. By engaging their local urban community, students experienced long-lasting effects through faith and vocational applications as well as compassion for the community. Creative collaboration led to opportunities to provide holistic support for student learning and growth, as well as sustaining partnerships with community neighbors. BHA “depends on volunteers” to accomplish their mission to serve Harrisburg residents (M. Bellesfield, personal communication, August 17, 2020), and they continue to welcome Messiah faculty and students to partner in service to the community.

## Challenges and Lessons Learned for Future Practice

There are several challenges and lessons that were learned throughout the semester. First and foremost, there is greater faculty effectiveness with an emphasis on community partnerships, not just projects. When students saw the staff and families at the Brethren Housing Association as people from whom they can learn and walk alongside, their classwork was more authentic and the implications were longer lasting. When the emphasis is simply on creating a project to “serve” others, there is risk in creating an unhealthy hierarchy between “us” and “them.”

Each student responds to course experiences in different ways, and it is essential to support the individual journeys. In APHS 220, some students completed the coursework, but did not pursue additional engagement beyond what was required. In contrast, there were other students who

chose to volunteer at BHA on a weekly basis and became deeply involved in the lives of the families who live and work there. As educators, our job is to encourage personal and professional growth, but to also recognize the unique ways these will be expressed for each student.

Reflection must be ongoing and formative, not only summative at the conclusion of a semester. Students need opportunities to think deeply about their own experiences and views and have opportunities to consider ways in which perspective can change throughout the course. Eyler, Giles, and Schmiede (1996) indicate that reflection should be continuous, connected, challenging, and contextualized for students to gain the most meaning from their service-learning. At its best, reflection should support growth in self-awareness regarding faith, relationships, and vocation. It should also provide opportunities for students to ask questions without easy answers and challenge systems related to social justice. Jacoby (2014) emphasizes critical reflection as “the process of analyzing, reconsidering and questioning one’s experiences within a broad context of issues and content knowledge” (p. 26).

Authentic service assumes that each person comes to the partnership with a common understanding and purpose of the issues they seek to address, and the change needed to bring about a solution. “Only through such praxis, in which those who help and those who are being helped help each other simultaneously, can the act of helping become free from the distortion in which the helper dominates the helped” (Dewar, 1998, p. 54). Students must, therefore, be encouraged to develop the practice of listening well. McEwen, Herman, and Himes (2016) indicate, “authentic dialogue requires active listening on the part of each participant with a deep respect for each other’s opinions—even if they differ from one’s own” (p. 313). University–community partnerships are a conditional response to social, political, and historical contexts. All stakeholders involved in establishing these partnerships have their own priorities that emerge as the collaborative efforts take place. As such, it is important to understand that current practices are predicated on past experiences. When partners choose to ignore social, political, and historical contexts, the possibility of working together toward equitable outcomes is lost (Miller & Hafner, 2008).

## Conclusion

Faith-based anchor institutions are well-positioned to meet the needs of their local and regional communities as a place-based entity, with a vast network of knowledge and resources, and a commitment to service as a priority. When we think about the role HEI’s play in helping to positively transform communities, we have to consider both the individual and institutional commitment to this work. Students should have an opportunity to consider their biases, develop a sense of cultural humility, and connect their faith to their actions. Faculty need to assist students in exploring these aspects of their personal and social development through creating a curriculum

that aligns with these priorities. Similarly, faculty must be supported through professional development opportunities and be encouraged to seek out community partnerships to enhance the learning outcomes of their courses. At the institutional level, administrators have to lead by example and demonstrate the value of forging cross-sector collaboration by encouraging faculty and staff at all levels to leverage the strengths of the university to meet the challenges we face as a collective community. At the center of effective outreach are community partners who most often articulate the needs of the community and model collaboration. Most importantly, it is the community members—people who, time and time again, serve as the educators. Faith-based anchor institutions have the potential to be most effective when they are willing to authentically listen to and learn from those they serve.

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