



Community Service-Learning in Graduate Planning Education

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Abstract

Community service-learning (CSL) has gained popularity over the past decades in universities across North America. Although planning programs tend to involve more graduate-level community-engaged learning than other professional disciplines, learning outcomes have not been sufficiently examined. Based on a review of existing literature and analysis from four years of a CSL course at the University of Toronto's Department of Geography and Planning, this article describes the implications of CSL for graduate planning education. We argue that CSL in graduate planning programs has a series of unique characteristics and thus requires distinctive pedagogical approaches.

Keywords

community service-learning, citizen engagement, community development, graduate planning education, social justice

Community service-learning (CSL) has gained popularity over the past decades on university campuses across North America. For many universities, CSL responds to a growing public demand to provide students with relevant knowledge and skills for employment and experiences of active citizenship along with more direct community engagement (Barnett 2007; Webb and Burgin 2009). CSL is different from typical field-based social science and professional courses, such as internships and field studies. CSL is unique in its “intention to equally benefit the provider and the recipient of the service as well as to ensure equal focus on both the service being provided and the learning that is occurring” (Furco 1996, 5). For community-based practitioners, CSL can provide access to new ideas and approaches, valuable university resources and enhanced organizational capacity (Carpenter 2011; Lucas, Sherman, and Fischer 2013). These benefits of CSL are well rehearsed within scholarly literature (Logsdon and Ford 1998; Lu and Lambright 2010; Lucas, Sherman, and Fisher 2013).¹

Graduate planning programs have a long history of community-engaged forms of learning, both in terms of formal CSL and less formal community-engaged partnerships through studio courses and practicums; however, the learning outcomes of these courses have not been sufficiently examined. This is significant, because our research and experiences suggest that CSL in graduate planning programs is different from other disciplines and thus requires distinctive pedagogical approaches.

Graduate planning curriculums typically focus on a combination of theoretical, methodological, and practical specializations because they are influenced by a series of professional competencies as mandated by accreditation

bodies, including practice-based teaching requirements (Fischler 2012). Graduate students are subject to higher levels of scrutiny and competition through advanced program admission requirements, and thus, have already successfully developed and demonstrated academic knowledge and skills, and in many cases, some professional capability. The combination of graduate planning program competencies and students' proven academic ability together with their additional experience contributes to a distinct set of opportunities and challenges for graduate-level CSL courses.

To address these features, we explore the role of community-engaged learning in graduate planning education along with the subsequent opportunities and limitations for CSL. More specifically, we focus on learning outcomes and how CSL at the graduate level can best be delivered using different pedagogical approaches. Our research is based on a review of the existing literature and an investigation of Planning for Change (PFC). PFC is an eight-month graduate-level CSL

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course taught in the Department of Geography and Planning at the University of Toronto and focused on the integration of theory and practice through civic engagement. Community building is an underlying focus of PFC with an aim to make contributions to practices and policies that are “sensitive to the particularities of place, build and sustain social capital, promote community participation, and strengthen families and neighborhoods” (Blackwell and Colmenar 2000). While this discussion is relevant to other related disciplines, this article focuses on the graduate planning curriculum.

In the following section, we provide an overview of the literature documenting benefits and limitations of CSL, while pointing to a gap around the learning outcomes in graduate studies, with a focus on planning education. We then present our case study of PFC based on four years of surveys and semi-structured interviews with students and community partners. We demonstrate that CSL offers graduate students a way to enhance their proficiency in planning and work with community-partners to contribute to civic engagement and community development initiatives. We identify three categories of learning outcomes from the PFC course: engaging theory and practice in the community and the university, developing professional and community-based competencies, and contributing to real-world projects through the production of practical outputs.

While there are many examples of community-engaged learning in graduate planning education, we argue that the qualities of graduate CSL have some specific characteristics that must be acknowledged and incorporated into course design and implementation. We conclude with a series of reflections and recommendations for instructors and departments focusing on classroom design, working with community partners and navigating the university system.

An Overview of Community Service-Learning

CSL is a pedagogical approach linking in-class instruction with structured community-based work through ongoing reflection (Allen 2005). Bringle and Hatcher’s (1995, 112) well-accepted definition states that CSL is a

course-based, credit-bearing education experience in which students (a) participate in organized service activity that meets identified community needs and (b) reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and enhanced sense of civic responsibility.

Research on CSL demonstrates benefits to students related to a range of social and cognitive outcomes (Eyler and Giles 1999; Eyler 2010; Taylor et al. 2015). For example, studies show that CSL can contribute to academic and life skills (Astin and Sax 1998) and enhance a sense of civic responsibility and personal efficacy (Astin et al. 2000).

While CSL does not directly affect factual knowledge, CSL students often perform better than their peers on higher-order critical thinking tasks (Ash, Clayton, and Atkinson 2005; Felten and Clayton 2011). Eyler and Giles (1999, 75) note, “participation in well-integrated and highly reflective service-learning courses was a predictor of increased complexity in analysis of both causes and solutions to social problems.” Studies also show that many students from middle- and upper-class backgrounds are forced to confront their privilege when working in marginalized communities (Muzak 2011). Structured critical reflection exercises and exposure to diverse communities and perspectives can lead to greater engagement in social action (Hurtado et al. 2002) and sustained dialogue across differences (Keen and Hall 2009). Further, community partners have identified student contributions having positive impacts on the capacity to fulfill their missions and increasing economic and social benefits to the communities involved (Edwards, Mooney, and Heald 2001; Gelmon 2003; Littlepage, Gazley, and Bennett 2012). Despite these advantages of CSL, many community groups report that taking on students also requires time-consuming training and oversight (Edwards, Mooney, and Heald 2001; Basinger and Bartholomew 2006; Littlepage, Gazley, and Bennett 2012).

Many students come to CSL courses with little knowledge about social context or community development and have limited time to invest into their placement. This is particularly apparent in some undergraduate CSL experiences or in disciplines with less focus on community engagement. Given the emphasis placed on publications and deadline-driven results, faculty also have limited time to invest in student support. As a result, community partners are often wary about investing in student training (Cushman 2002; Bortolin 2011). Further, Mihail (2006) shows that the four months of a typical course is rarely enough time for students to learn the necessary skills to be useful to a community partner. Aside from these logistical concerns, there is significant disagreement among scholars regarding whether CSL can actually provide students with the necessary elements of social justice learning (Meens 2014). For example, working in marginalized communities can reinforce power dynamics and reproduce dominant social dynamics rather than encourage students to question the structures that lead to inequality and marginalization (Mitchell 2008).

In planning education, CSL is viewed as a way to integrate foundational knowledge, practical skills, and civic engagement by connecting students with community partner organizations. Sen et al. (2016, 4) suggest, “service learning can be a powerful vehicle through which to convey both the knowledge and firsthand experience of planning for diversity and social justice.” CSL can also help students to understand the ways that power works in society (Harwood and Zapata 2014) and gain cultural competency with people from diverse backgrounds (Sen et al. 2016). Likewise, Porter (2015) argues that CSL has contributed significantly to

positive outcomes as well as teaching, learning, research, and practice within planning. Indeed, this approach to engaged learning represents an “appropriate strategy for applied disciplines such as planning because effective professional practice involves more than a conceptual understanding of the knowledge and skills; it also requires an operational understanding” (Roakes and Norris-Tirrell 2000, 109). CSL also has the potential to engender reciprocal learning for students, universities, and communities, as well as to promote a more nuanced understanding of planning education (Angotti, Doble, and Horrigan 2011).

While there is a wealth of research on CSL, there has been little examination of the particular learning outcomes for graduate planning education. Literature describing CSL experiences illuminate the nature of this pedagogical approach in general; however, existing studies suggest that the impacts of CSL in graduate planning education are distinct (Lucas, Sherman, and Fisher 2013). CSL in graduate courses can take advantage of students’ preexisting knowledge, experience, commitment to continued education and relative maturity (O’Meara 2008; Lu and Lambright 2010; Levkoe, Brail, and Daniere 2014). This is important since adults learn new knowledge and skills best when they are able to relate it to their life experience (Whitaker and Berner 2004). A study of graduate CSL in public administration found that there was significant improvement in graduate students’ interpersonal and professional skills and, in turn, that graduate students influenced the direction of projects through a deeper and longer-term engagement with community partners (Lu and Lambright 2010). Embedding course work in real-world problems has been identified as particularly important for graduate education. For example, McLaughlin (2010) and Clinton and Thomas (2011) demonstrated that the benefits of CSL for students included development of professional skills required by both university and industry. A study conducted by Lucas, Sherman, and Fisher (2013) found that graduate students were better able to critically analyze academic literature and build on previous learning through collaboration with professionals with a more accurate picture of future employment. Further, a study of graduate public health students found that CSL outcomes included life-changing experiences, teamwork that stimulated active learning, better internalized course objectives and increased confidence and self-awareness (Hou 2009).

In graduate planning education, community-engaged learning is highly valued as a component of teaching, learning, and knowledge production (Angotti, Doble, and Horrigan 2011; Forsyth, Lu, and McGirr 2000; Porter 2015). This is based on a desire to graduate more reflective practitioners capable of dealing with real-world complexities (Schön 1987; Balassiano 2011; Winkler 2013). For example, Sletto (2010, 411) finds that by providing a more reflective understanding of their position within a politicized planning process, CSL can “help students appreciate the need for flexibility and adaptability in their engagements with ‘multiple publics’ and

thus, from a pragmatic perspective, provide them with important tools to be effective in such complex encounters.” According to Roakes and Norris-Tirrell (2000), the advantage of CSL in graduate planning curricula is based on the complexity and uncertainty of practice situations that is unlikely to be duplicated in traditional classrooms, and the enhanced academic learning gained while benefiting students and partners. Sandercock (2003) shows how CSL helped planning students understand multiple ways of knowing, highlighting that all students come from diverse backgrounds and bring different experiences to each project.

Existing literature suggests that graduate planning programs have been quite successful at providing a range of community-engaged forms of learning. Further, understanding learning outcomes can provide new insight into ways that CSL in graduate planning education may require different pedagogical approaches. Better understanding the experiences of those involved can shed light on how CSL should be designed and delivered to meet the needs of participants and have greater impact on the community and the graduate planning curriculum. To better understand these differences, we turn to our case study of PFC to illuminate key learning outcomes as well as opportunities and limitations in the graduate planning context.

PFC: Graduate Community Service-Learning in Planning Education

PFC is an eight-month (two-semester) graduate CSL course coordinated by two instructors with community-based research backgrounds and experience working in the public and non-profit sectors. The seminar met weekly and students also worked directly with community partners to design and implement substantial research-related projects. At the time of writing this article, the course has been offered four times since September 2011 and is open to master’s- and PhD-level students in planning and a range of other graduate programs across the university. Since its inception, more than seventy-two students worked with thirty-six different community partners. Approximately half of the community partners were based in the City Planning Division (e.g., the Office of the Chief Planner, Strategic Initiatives, Policy and Analysis, Community Planning, Waterfront, Environment, Transportation) and were directly engaged in community-based projects. The other community partners were nonprofit organizations with an explicit mandate toward civic engagement and community development. In most cases, community partners were recruited based on their previous relationships with the instructors, which helped to establish trust. Further, the majority of the community partners were involved in the course over multiple years, enabling them to shape the projects to be achievable and mutually beneficial.

PFC aims to provide graduate students with professional experiences, research skills, and analytical tools that connect critical theory to community-engaged work. The course objectives are to enable students to gain practical experience,

assist community organizations to design and implement projects identified by the organizations themselves, reflect critically on their education and their role as a student and citizen, and build longer-term commitments to communities and neighborhoods throughout the city. In the first class meeting every year, community partners introduce their organization and general project ideas. Paired with assigned readings and seminar discussions in the beginning of the course, this meeting provides an opportunity for students to understand the history and culture of the organizations and the broader community where they will be working. Through one-on-one interviews during the first week with the instructors, students have an opportunity to describe their previous experiences and specific interests for the placement. For the instructors, the interviews provide a chance to assess where students' skills and interests align with community partner's needs and to establish a mutually beneficial partnership. The projects are then developed collaboratively based on the needs of the partners and the student. The instructors maintain regular contact with the partners to support communication and inform ongoing course development.

The specific projects and the methodological approaches change each year depending on the needs of the particular group of community partners and students involved in the course. In some cases, students offer technical assistance and in others they are involved in participatory action research focusing on community empowerment. Depending on the needs of the community partner and student interests, some work is done individually and some in teams of two or three. In the 2015–2016 course, there were fifteen community partners that included projects such as working with a provincial network of nonprofit organizations, government departments, and small businesses to establish an online resource sharing platform to support sustainable food and farming initiatives; engaging with a national network of student organizations to develop position papers and evaluation criteria to encourage a shift in university budgets toward community-based, fair, and ecologically sound food procurement; partnering with a governmental organization to measure the social impact of public spaces on the city's waterfront; working with the Chief Planners Office to develop a guide to evaluating public participation in planning; analyzing city records and databases to better understand the resource and service needs of licensed rooming houses; and conducting in-person interviews analyzing the social and environmental barriers of commuter cycling to rail stations.

Weekly seminars utilize a range of pedagogical tools that address core concepts of CSL, civic engagement, and community development and provide the history and context of the urban environment where the projects take place. Discussions, lectures, readings, films, and assignments provide students with an understanding of CSL pedagogy and a critical perspective of the planning profession. Core course topics include the planning context, community development and the third sector, cultural and racial diversity in the city,

democracy and participation in planning, and community-based action research. The content of the seminars were adapted each year to address the needs of the specific projects. The seminars provide an opportunity for students to share experiences and put them into conversation with their classmates and with the broader course concepts.

Reflection assignments are submitted on a regular basis in a variety of forms (e.g., essays, poetry, drawings, and photographs). The seminars are also a space for regular check-ins and reflections about the CSL placements. During the second semester of the course, the weekly class themes are chosen and led by the students introducing new ideas, readings, and teaching modes each year. Student evaluation is based on the quality of the reflections, assignments submitted throughout the course (e.g., a project proposal, work plan and progress report, reflections, and a final report that meets academic requirements and the needs of the project), and input from the community partners.

Methods

The description of the graduate CSL learning outcomes in planning education presented in this article are based on an analysis of qualitative data collected over four years of the PFC course (between 2011 and 2016). The research consisted of two online surveys distributed each year by e-mail to all students and community partners, completed anonymously during the second week of class and after final grades were submitted. For students, the first survey included a series of demographic questions as well as questions about their decision to participate in a CSL course, expectations, and potential concerns. The second survey asked for reflections on their overall experience including the knowledge and skills attained, drawbacks of the course, as well as how they might use the CSL experiences in future scholarship or employment. For community partners, the first survey asked about the decision to participate, expectations for working with students and faculty, possible resources to contribute and potential concerns. In the second survey, they were asked to reflect on how the experience changed over the eight-month period, specific benefits and drawbacks, whether the university provided adequate supports, the impact of the student's work on the organization and the community, and challenges they faced. Students and community partners were invited to provide narrative responses and encouraged to give examples and overall ratings of their experience on a five-point Likert scale. Over the four years, the survey was completed by 75% of students ($n = 54$ of 72) and 90% of community partners ($n = 32$ of 36) participating in PFC.

In addition, a third-party researcher conducted semistructured interviews in the final weeks of the 2013–2014 academic year with students ($n = 8$) and community partners ($n = 6$) to collect additional details about their experiences. Funding for the interviews was received through a partnership with the Community First: Impacts of Community Engagement

(CFICE) project to evaluate the PFC course (see <https://carleton.ca/communityfirst>). To conduct this research, we obtained approval from the University of Toronto's Research Ethics Board, which included employing procedures to obtain full and informed consent from all participants and avoid teacher–researcher conflicts of interest. The survey and interview data were reviewed each year (in part to improve the PFC course) and coded by the course instructors for recurrent themes as a complete data set. These findings are presented below in the form of a synthesized discussion with quotes from the students and community partners. In the following subsections, we identify three categories of learning outcomes that emerged from the PFC course.

Planning for Change Learning Outcomes

Engaging Theory and Practice in the Community and the University

First, feedback from PFC indicated that graduate students demonstrated an ability to bridge academic knowledge with practical experience directly related to core proficiencies in the planning curriculum (e.g., history, theory, criticism, methods, and skills). Bridging knowledge and experience is a significant learning outcome because it highlights the ways that, when done well, CSL is more than the sum of its parts (i.e., theory and practice). Reflection is an important tool for bridging that is best learned through scaffolding student learning (Coulson and Harvey 2012). This is relevant to planning education because planners require a diverse range of conceptual and applied social, environmental, and economic proficiencies. Beyond understanding what planning is and what planners do, PFC students had the opportunity to apply theoretical knowledge to real-world projects.

Students gained insight into the pedagogical possibilities of CSL, relevant critical theory, and sector-specific applications. For example, many applied theories of NGOization (Choudry and Kapoor 2013), urban culture and racial diversity (Leslie and Catungal 2012), and the right to the city (Purcell 2002) to their placements. From the survey, students reported that critical theory had a profound influence on the direction of their projects. In a number of cases, students engaged in community-based planning projects, were able to better understand the social and political context they were working within and raised important questions about the role of the municipality and the broader public in community development work.

Graduate students also expressed that CSL was an opportunity to critically reflect on their work outside the university and to take planning theories into their professional life. Barry (2015, 433) notes that community-engaged learning can unsettle traditional planning practices, norms, and values by encouraging “students [to] ask deep, challenging questions of themselves and of the profession they will soon

be members of.” Students noted value in “going out of your comfort zone” and being “thrown into a situation where things are really happening on the ground where there [are] actual needs to be met.” In one case, two students placed with a community development organization surveying undocumented sex workers’ access to basic health services returned to class shaken by what they had learned. The students used the opportunity to tackle issues of injustice in a way that they had never imagined before. Through independent and group reflection activities, the students were able to process their experiences and understand the broader social and political context, to apply their learning to the project and assist the organization to develop supports for the women involved.

Community partners also identified the importance of engaging both theory and practice in PFC. Just as students were able to apply their learning outside the university, community partners were able to work with graduate students to take a step back from their daily activities. When asked why they chose to participate in PFC, one partner responded, “It is our desire to continue building stronger relationships with the University as both a conduit for knowledge and shared learning, but also as an [academic] partner in the work we are doing.” Another partner commented, “We have developed some ‘real world’ problems to solve and hope to leverage the university resources to help answer them, to both provide meaningful experience to those involved and have well researched and advised outcomes to enrich our programs.” Because many of the projects involved high-level research, data analysis, report writing, and theoretical knowledge, graduate students often brought a novel set of ideas to the partnership and the practical problems being addressed.

Developing Professional and Community-Based Competencies

A second learning outcome of CSL in PFC was that students acquired context-specific work experience and professional development at a level targeted for graduate planning students. As Winkler (2013) notes, community-engaged learning courses in planning can offer students employment training in complex and dynamic contexts. While the majority of graduate students had previous experience working outside of the university, many noted limited connections between their previous programs of study and their practical experience. One student commented, “After completing a theoretically-heavy undergraduate program, I entered into an internship position and realized I lacked the practical skills needed to fulfil my position. . . . PFC complemented my past experiences and imparted knowledge through my placement and class discussions.” Students identified a series of practical and technical skills they acquired working with a community partner as well as experience working with a team, an understanding of working culture within a municipality, and increased knowledge about the public and nonprofit sectors.

For example, students identified an increased understanding of policy development and implementation, public sector governance, and community engagement techniques. They also identified valuable team work skills in a professional environment such as relationship building, collaboration, communication, negotiation, and patience. Others noted that they learned about “planning procedures and . . . about community consultation,” “organizational culture in the city planning department,” “knowledge of provincial and federal food policy,” and “about the challenges of being an under-resourced social movement organization.”

A related experience valued by graduate students was the professional relationships and sector-specific networks they would not otherwise have the opportunity to develop. For example, students working in the City Planning Division worked closely with senior planners on high-level projects. Through applying preexisting knowledge and skills to the placements, students indicated that they were not just volunteers completing mundane tasks but that they were able to make valuable contributions through their work. Based on this contribution, the community partners viewed graduate students as experts in a particular subject area.

Most of the PFC community partners participated in the CSL course for multiple years, and those that chose to return appreciated the ongoing relationship with the instructors. This included outcomes from the projects and from playing a role in training a new generation of professionals and community advocates. As one partner stated, “We appreciate the opportunity to work with bright young students, and hopefully have some impact on the next generation of planners and other stakeholders.” Another partner commented,

[We now have] another person in Canada who is engaged with our work. . . . So now she’s a person who has a level of expertise that is not really that common [in our field]. . . . And because she will have a position of influence, that kind of background and knowledge is going to be beneficial to the overall movement if not directly to our organization.

Other feedback reinforced the value community partners perceived from contributing to the training of graduate planning students as part of a common mandate among PFC partners to work toward the economic, social, and environmental vitality of the city.

Producing Practical Outputs

A third learning outcome of PFC was that students were able to contribute to real-world projects and take a leadership role producing practical outputs with community partners. This speaks directly to the desire of community-engaged learning in planning education to address the disconnect between university education and real-world practice (Kotval 2003; McLaughlin 2010). As Saija (2015) argues, an engaged approach to planning education is what makes

transformative change possible. While being trained as experts in planning theory and policy, graduate students noted that there were few opportunities to contribute to the field of planning and the broader community. For example, one student explained, “I do not simply want a degree that will get me a job, but a degree that will enable me to become an involved member of society.” Through PFC, CSL enabled students to share their knowledge and skills outside the university and contribute practical outputs to civic engagement and community development initiatives. While community partners had significant knowledge and experience, graduate students brought additional resources and capacity to complete projects for underresourced organizations and provided the fresh perspective of an informed outsider. In one example, a team of graduate students working in transportation planning went beyond the requests of the community partner and created a piece of videography that was extremely well received. The video reviewed some of the key locations that the planning department is working to improve using an eloquent narrative and music to great effect. It clearly expressed how well the students had come to know the city and demonstrated what a public agency can do in a creative and accessible manner. The following year, the community partner requested that students contribute to a new video about the planning act. Other placements yielded similar high-level reports, evaluations and public outreach materials community partners identified as beyond their capability and/or capacity. Other examples of practical outputs included producing research reports, contributions to the City Planning Annual Report, and coordinating and reporting on public consultation sessions.

A common expression from community partners in the survey related to the high-quality outputs produced by the graduate students. Many of the partners that had experience working with undergraduate students noted that graduate students were able to take on self-directed projects that did not require as much oversight. When asked about their reasons for participating in PFC, community partners noted the value of having knowledgeable and skilled support. For example, one partner commented, “We certainly appreciate the ability to recruit some skilled help” while another noted, “We can use the extra hands, but more importantly the new energy, experience and insight brought by graduate students to our research and evaluation strategy and programming.”

The graduate students came to their placements with pre-existing interests, which played a major role in shaping the initial details of each project. Community partners referred to students’ contributions that, as one community partner noted, “infuse our study with innovative thinking, new approaches and the energy only graduate students can bring.” Another partner commented,

I was excited for the opportunity to work with a placement student that had some experience under their belt to assist with the work. Although most placement students can learn

to be very helpful, I often find myself micro-managing and hand holding with younger students. It's refreshing to collaborate with a student that can provide feedback, critical thinking and has a better understanding of the way things work.

As a result, many of the community partners were extremely impressed by the high quality outputs the students completed as well as the contributions of new perspectives from their graduate training. One partner commented,

It was good to have a graduate student because they had some knowledge already of the planning work we were doing that was related to their research. . . . I found that with the graduate planning students, it was more beneficial for us because they came in with more experience and knowledge and they were here for a longer period of time. So, that really helped us in terms of giving them something that they could take away and work on substantively and actually have something that's useful for us as well.

As suggested by this quote, many of the PFC students had a solid handle on programs and policies in Toronto and were able to bring this knowledge into their work and translate it into valuable outputs. Others were able to bring professional research and analytical skills to their projects as well as a critical perspective that encouraged organizations to reflect on their work in relation to the broader social context.

Challenges of Graduate Community Service-Learning

Despite the positive learning outcomes, there were a number of challenges identified within the graduate planning CSL experience that may be typical of a pedagogy that pushes traditional boundaries. One challenge was the high demand on student's time, including the difficulty of balancing the placement and heavy in-class workload with other courses, jobs and family responsibilities. Many of the graduate students had significant constraints on their time. This was compounded by the deep commitment students often had to their work. Despite running the course over an eight-month period, students expressed that there was not enough time to fully understand the organizational context and engage in a project. One student commented,

It was really time consuming for me but it's because I allowed it to be. I was really invested in this project and I really wanted to do the absolute best I could. When I'm writing for someone else, like a community partner, I feel like there's an added pressure, because I have this other audience and I really want to do my best.

Students also raised concerns with the in-class portion of the course. Some felt there could have been more structure, that

there were too many students to engage the entire group, and that the diverse interests made it difficult to focus conversations. One student noted that there were a lot of differences between the placements, presenting clear challenges: "Everyone's working at their own pace and all the projects were very different so you can't really compare them and that was one of the harder things." As for other graduate courses, budgetary pressures put additional demands on PFC to increase registration numbers and reduce costs.

Given the students' weekly commitments to their placements, some felt that there were too many reflection assignments, an ongoing tension with the instructors, who felt the assignments were an essential part of the CSL experience. For students completing their own fieldwork for a thesis or a professional capstone project, negotiating time commitments were difficult. In short, balancing the in-class demands with the community-based work was an ongoing struggle for the graduate students. In addition, there were specific challenges identified with certain placements, such as not being challenging enough, inadequate feedback, or a lack of clarity about the goals of the placement. For placements where students worked as a team, some of the challenges involved coordinating schedules, negotiating different levels of investment and struggling to align skillsets. These critical comments point to the high levels of engagement among graduate planning students who come to a CSL course with very specific goals and expectations.

The community partners also identified limitations working with graduate planning students. Despite the longer time frame of the course, a number of community partners noted it was still not long enough. The quality and depth of work the graduate students were able to complete left many community partners hoping for more. Many comments pointed to the enhanced capacity graduate students brought to their placements and that if resources were available, partners would have hired the students for additional hours or in the longer term (and some were able to offer employment). This posed a significant barrier because there was anticipation of more senior-level positions and higher compensation for graduate students with increased skills and experience.

Community partners also felt that some students resisted completing "menial" day-to-day tasks. This was noted as a problem of working with graduate students who were interested in taking on higher-level projects and working independently. Community partners felt compelled to accommodate these interests and some struggled to find adequate work to keep students satisfied, especially when their project was completed before the end of the placement. Even when students took primary responsibility for developing projects, supervision was still required that demanded significant time and energy. One partner commented, "It was a challenge to keep [the student's] enthusiasm focused in the right direction." At times, this became a difficult balance for most organizations that appreciated student contributions but were stretched beyond capacity.

Reflections and Recommendations

As evidenced through PFC, employing CSL within graduate planning education greatly enhanced students' experiences and the impact for community partners in the public and non-profit sectors. Our research on the key learning outcomes from the PFC course demonstrates that graduate planning students were engaged in high-level theory and practice in the community and the university, developed specific professional and community-based experience, and made significant contributions to real-world projects, producing practical outputs. The reflections from participants demonstrate that students contributed their skills and knowledge to projects involving research, evaluation, and/or pilot testing that enhanced community partners' ability to create new policy, programing, and advocacy. Through PFC, the focused training and expertise of graduate planners applied through eight-month community placements produced valuable outputs for participants and offer lessons for planning education more broadly. Our findings suggest it is worthwhile to invest university and faculty resources into CSL in graduate planning programs and that different pedagogical approaches are required. Drawing on our discussion of the benefits and ensuing challenges, we conclude with a series of reflections and recommendations for course design and implementation of graduate-level CSL for planning education.

Classroom Design

Most graduate planning students have completed previous postsecondary study and typically expect specialized levels of education. Thus, the syllabus of graduate CSL courses must include relevant themes for in-class sessions and establish the culture of the classroom. To take full advantage of the in-class time with students, instructors must respond to student's expectations but also push the boundaries of traditional ideals of planning to address critical issues at the foundation of civic engagement and community development. These might include, for example, the complexity and uncertainty of situations required by professional planners, or the ways that power and privilege are produced and reproduced in urban spaces and the university's role in such reproduction. CSL can be unsettling to graduate students with particular ideas of what planners do and who are uncomfortable with a lack of concrete marking rubrics, evolving syllabi and sometimes unpleasant or challenging encounters in the workplace. For these reasons, we recommend that instructors formally introduce CSL pedagogical theory and practice into the classroom at the outset, modeling critical approaches on adult education to enable students to understand the rationale for the course design and the various components of the syllabus. PFC was designed to introduce graduate students to pedagogical rationales and critiques of CSL as a teaching method as well as creating a nonhierarchical classroom where students take explicit responsibility for their own

learning (hooks 1994). Students are exposed to the complexities inherent in CSL and working with community partners as well as more fully informed about the nature of the commitment they are making when they enrol in the course. Further, it enables students to exercise more agency in their learning, ensuring the placements, seminars, readings, and assignments all meet their needs.

Before embarking on such an initiative, faculty should also anticipate that initially it might be difficult to convince students and administration to support an eight-month CSL course and that it will require more time in terms of preparedness, communication, and nimbleness to respond to the unexpected. It is to be expected that students will initially be quite anxious and uncertain about participating in a classroom with professors who refrain from professing and require the students to initiate conversations and suggest topics to explore in depth. Making a commitment to a year-long course is concerning to some students given that there are no guarantees that they will like their placement, and most are unfamiliar with the course structure and approach. Many faculty are similarly reluctant to take on a two-semester responsibility that requires them to work outside of the conventional seminar model, create linkages with community groups, revise syllabi as the year progresses, and deal with matters outside their areas of expertise (e.g., insurance issues, human resource problems, and travel logistics). Embracing these complications, and a different approach to the classroom and the nature of graduate instruction, is a crucial element in successful graduate CSL.

CSL also provides an opportunity to engage with a range of theoretical literature relating to student placements. For graduate planning students, the intellectual bar can be set relatively high so that they feel challenged and motivated to think outside of the traditional view of the classroom and assignments. This includes providing multiple opportunities for feedback and communication with students and community partners. The in-class seminars can be an excellent opportunity to provide space for peer-to-peer reflection and research support. These kinds of engagements can also introduce and/or reinforce interdisciplinary and/or discipline-specific related subject matter and graduate level knowledge and skills such as planning theory, project management, independent research and work skills, methods training, critical thinking and academic and popular writing.

Working with Community Partners

A second set of reflections relate to the careful selection and maintenance of relationships with community partners for CSL in graduate planning education. It is important that community partners understand and appreciate the realities of working with graduate planning students and that they are prepared for the responsibilities this entails. Our experience demonstrates that graduate CSL courses are seen as extremely desirable by community partners because of the high-quality

contributions from the students as well as the potential to motivate and educate future planners and community advocates around their causes and missions. The idea most important for planning education is that the university, community partner, and graduate student find mutual benefit from the partnership producing what Porter (2015, 411) refers to as a “beautiful messiness” in the way that such relationships disrupt who is learning and who is teaching.

From the perspective of graduate students, working with partners can be extremely rewarding, even if students are initially reluctant to be placed with specific partners. It is not uncommon for a student to be wary of a particular placement only to realize they greatly enjoyed and benefited from what they initially perceived to be an inadequate opportunity. For example, surveys showed that planning students placed with the City often envied their peers placed with nonprofit organizations, despite having requested to avoid such placements at the onset. We found that the scope for intervention and creativity, in many cases, was greater in less structured environments. An important pedagogical innovation of PFC was that instructors were able to assess opportunities for excellence through carefully matching students and partners, at times, contrary to student’s expressed preferences.

When selecting partners, we recommend instructors ensure they understand that CSL must be a mutually beneficial partnership and that they are open to working with graduate students to develop projects collaboratively. It is also important that partners are able to offer projects that take advantage of student’s existing knowledge and skills while also challenging them to widen their perspectives and engage in new experiences. This does not always have to be with city planning divisions. Our experience has shown that graduate planners working with nonprofit organizations involved in community development work can offer equally, if not more rewarding experiences to graduate planners. In addition, we suggest instructors endeavor to work with community partners over the long term. For us, this involved beginning with organizations where we had preexisting connections and approaching partnerships as long-term relationships. As a related benefit, our experience with CSL has also proved to be a valuable terrain for pedagogical as well as community-based research opportunities. Unlike internships or studio courses where planning students are simply completing tasks for a client, graduate CSL works best when there is mutual investment in the processes and outcomes.

Navigating University Systems

The eight-month commitment to PFC was important since it enabled students to make a significant contribution to the resources and activities of their community partner. The longer-term commitment also allowed partners the time to train students as a valuable addition to their staff. Further, having two instructors with complementary expertise and experience enabled an equitable division of labor and a more

enriching experience for students. However, an eight-month course with two instructors is not typical of graduate planning education. Faculty are hesitant to consider undertaking a two-term course and, for many students, it reduces their flexibility to take other electives. We recommend that when possible, instructors should design and implement graduate CSL over longer periods of time to gain maximum benefit for students and partners. However, where possible, finding ways to allow students to meet other requirements of their planning program with a CSL course might release some pressure. For example, we have secured permission for PFC to substitute for the internship requirement in the planning program. We are also exploring the possibility of PFC substituting for other methods and field courses available through the department. In addition, we recommend that graduate students be encouraged to use the CSL experience to build relationships with community groups and explore issues that might eventually translate into their final project or current issues paper.

While undergraduate CSL is now widespread and receives administrative and community support at many postsecondary institutions, graduate CSL has yet to become a core commitment at universities in North America. This could be because most public universities face increasing pressures on financial resources, which implies the need to resort to larger class sizes and fewer opportunities for individual-focused instruction. Further, many faculty members are concerned that the additional time required to design and implement such courses will not be recognized by their academic departments and some face resistance to the additional costs and administration required to manage graduate students in a variety of individual community-based placements. Initially, PFC was taught on unpaid overload by one of the instructors and only six students signed on to take the course. Demand from the graduate students in subsequent years resulted in the department fully funding the course and using it as a recruitment tool on the program website, student conferences and open houses.

Most universities do not explicitly recognize the significant time requirements associated with mounting a successful CSL course. It is imperative that CSL courses be given special recognition in terms of promotion and review when it comes time to evaluate faculty performance. A simple way to acknowledge the work put in by instructors could be to create an award that honors their commitment, hold a reception that recognizes CSL partners and faculty once a year and/or create a small research fund for teaching innovative CSL courses. Explicit recognition of adopting an innovative approach to pedagogy that has so many unanticipated benefits for the university and its local community can help motivate change.

While universities have limited experiences developing and implementing graduate CSL courses, doing so is a way to promote institutional change and pave the way for future opportunities. We suggest that instructors seek out and take

advantage of the resources offered by their university to support relationships with community partners. When relevant, we also recommend that courses be designed in collaboration with other faculty members. This might include working with community-based and/or university brokering organizations, applying for internal or external grant opportunities, taking advantage of the wealth of existing CSL resources, tools and networks, and sharing successes and challenges of graduate CSL courses.

Conclusions

In this article, we have built on the existing research of community-engaged learning in graduate planning education by describing key features and implications of CSL for students, instructors and community partners. Based on a study of PFC, we have described key learning outcomes along with the need to consider different pedagogical approaches. We encourage other faculty to experiment with and reflect on their own experiences designing and teaching graduate-level CSL as a way to make planning education more relevant to students, community partners, and to the public interest.

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Note

1. There is a substantial literature on CSL in secondary school education; however, a review of this literature is beyond the scope of this article.

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