

**Racializing Service (Learning): A Critical Content Analysis of Service
Learning Syllabi**

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Abstract

This study examines service learning pedagogy and its use of racialized terms to frame service. Through a critical content analysis using 270 syllabi from 193 four-year institutions with the Community Engagement Classification from the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, this study explores how the language used in service learning syllabi perpetuates and sustains racialized hierarchies in community engagement experiences.

Keywords: service learning and community engagement, higher education, racialization, critical content analysis, syllabi

Racializing Service (Learning): A Critical Content Analysis of Service Learning Syllabi

Service learning proliferated as a popular strategy for civic and democratic engagement across U.S. higher education throughout the 1990s as a result of the National and Community Service Act of 1990 and the National and Community Service Trust Act of 1993. Through these legislative initiatives, the Corporation for National and Community Service was created and national service initiatives, such as Learn and Serve America, provided significant funding to develop and institutionalize community service programs on college and university campuses. As a result of these efforts and others, service learning and other forms of community engagement has come to be near ubiquitous across higher education today (Butin, 2006).¹

Since the pedagogy combines work in the community with academic learning, service placements, typically schools and nonprofit organizations, become sites for student learning. Undoubtedly, engagements with race and racism are present in these service placements. However, the pedagogy often does not take up the racial realities of the communities where students are placed. Given that service learning has historically been implemented by White faculty who send predominantly White, middle-class students into low-income Communities of Color (Banerjee & Hausafus, 2007; Butin, 2006; Green, 2001, 2003), scholars have suggested that the pedagogy fails to note the systemic oppression undergirding conditions of need that require service in the first place

¹ It is noteworthy that this study is explicit in examining service learning and community engagement within the U.S. higher education context and not abroad. Despite similarities between the U.S. and other countries' approaches to service learning, emerging literature has critiqued the U.S. approach to the pedagogy and practice, suggesting that it is not necessarily transferable to international contexts (Regina & Ferrara, 2017).

(Veloria, 2015). Instead of recognizing and addressing these racial realities, service learning often sends students into communities with a rhetoric of political neutrality (Hyatt, 2001), deficit-based thinking and discourse (Cann & McCloskey, 2017; Endres & Gould, 2009; Houshmand et al., 2014; Mitchell et al., 2012; Rougeaux Shabazz & Cooks, 2014; Vaccaro, 2009), and color-blind racism (Becker & Paul, 2015; Mitchell et al., 2012). These ways of knowing, thinking, and being can position students to approach their community placements with a charitable or white savior mentality (Cann & McCloskey, 2017; Endres & Gould, 2009; Mitchell et al., 2012).

The way service learning does or does not recognize, discuss, and address race and racism becomes critical to what is learned about systemic oppression, particularly as students carry their own stereotypes about Communities of Color before, and after, their community engagement experiences. Prior research suggests that White students tend to enter communities with little awareness of their own race and return to campuses where they likely do not have to think about race (Endres & Gould, 2009; Mitchell et al., 2012). Therefore, service learning simultaneously becomes “an enactment and a masking of power and privilege” (Endres & Gould, 2009, p. 419). When racial realities are not recognized, community issues are presented as a result of individual deficiencies rather than larger societal issues. Through this racialization of community engagement, service learning perpetuates and sustains racialized hierarchies, harming the very communities the pedagogy purports to “serve” and “help.”

Given the minimal attention to issues of race and racism, this study aimed to examine the ways higher education service learning courses have racialized service in communities. Using a critical content analysis of 270 syllabi from 193 United States (U.S.) four-year institutions that have received the Community Engagement Classification from the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, this study considered racially coded language to explore this

racialization in practice. As a result of the proliferation of service learning across higher education, examining syllabi creates opportunities to uncover and understand the racialization of service through community engagement experiences, and also to consider the implications for equity. The guiding question for this study was: How do service learning syllabi from Carnegie Community Engagement classified institutions communicate issues of race and racism?²

Theoretical Framework

Butin (2006) argued, “service learning may ultimately come to be viewed as the ‘Whitest of the White’ enclave of postsecondary education” (p. 482). Despite a consistent increase in the participation of Students of Color in service learning (Harper, 2009; Hutson & Williford, 2018; Wheatle & BrckaLorenz, 2015), the pedagogy remains predominantly White (Banerjee & Hausafus, 2007; Butin, 2006; Green, 2001, 2003). Scholars posit that in addition to perpetuating harmful racist practices, the current form of service learning reinforces white privilege and white supremacy (Cann & McCloskey, 2017; Endres & Gould, 2009; Green, 2003; Mitchell et al., 2012; Rost-Banik, 2018), upholds racial capitalism (Irwin & Foste, 2021), and, ultimately, serves as a pedagogy of whiteness (Mitchell et al., 2012).

Critical Race Theory (CRT) operates on a central premise that racism is “ordinary, not aberrational” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 7). Therefore, the reproduction of a service learning pedagogy that continues to affirm the “goodness” of charitable work that does little to challenge persistent inequality (Stoecker, 2016) is a “product of racist systems designed to meet white needs” (Sleeter, 2017, p. 157). We applied CRT to this review of service learning syllabi

² This research was funded by the Grant-in-Aid of Research, Artistry, and Scholarship Program at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities.

to, as Smith-Maddox and Solórzano (2002) suggested, challenge “claims of...neutrality, objectivity, and colorblindness” (p. 71). Thus, this study drew on CRT to examine the ways service learning courses reify whiteness and racialized hierarchies through the conscious or unconscious reinforcement of “norms and privileges developed by, and for the benefit of, White people” (Mitchell et al., 2012, p. 613).

Though “racial considerations shade almost everything in America,” (Bonilla-Silva, 2018, p. 2), colleges and universities send students into communities with little or no experience working with individuals who are “different” from themselves. Melamed (2011) argued that through higher education, students are taught racialized codes for exploiting communities. Racialized codes work by conjuring mental associations by using language that “invokes race without explicit mention” (Bennett & Walker, 2018, p. 690). Racialized discourse in service learning is situated through notions of “social capital” and “capacity building” (Hyatt, 2001, p. 8) in effort to support “urban youth” and “inner city schools” (Mitchell et al., 2012, p. 616). These abstractions suggest “that damaged communities can be rebuilt wholly from within if only enough good will and volunteer labour is made available” (Hyatt, 2001, p. 8).

While Tuck (2009) warned about the “hidden costs” of initiatives that frame communities as “depleted” (p. 409) and “broken” (p. 412), CRT creates opportunities to challenge the ahistoricism that allows for this practice (Tate, 1997) and to avoid these “pathologizing analyses” (Tuck, 2009, p. 415). Yet, this theory is rarely invoked in service learning practice or research. Accordingly, CRT became necessary to examine the ways service learning syllabi communicate issues of race and racism.

Methodology

Content analysis is used to analyze, describe, and interpret written text (White & Marsh, 2006). The methodology reflects “the characteristics of

language with attention to the content or contextual meaning of the text” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1278). Thus, content analysis of syllabi can be a “methodology for evaluating the philosophies, topics, and pedagogic approaches of programs across universities” (Steiner & Watson, 2006, p. 427). Aiming to uncover and understand how racialized hierarchies are reified through service learning syllabi, this study employed a critical approach to content analysis (Beach et al., 2009; Botelho & Rudman, 2009; Short & Worlds of Words Community, 2017) to challenge conditions of inequality within service learning.

Short and Worlds of Words Community (2017) posited that adding the word “critical” to content analysis “signals a political stance...in searching for and using research tools to examine inequalities” (p. 4). Similarly, CRT “contains an activist dimension. It not only tries to understand our social situation but to change it” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 3). We viewed the syllabi text as “reflective of larger power structures and dominant discussion” and useful to “understanding how such courses are conceptualized, framed, and implemented” (Mehrotra et al., 2017, p. 220). This study applied a critical lens to textual analyses to uncover and understand the impacts and implications of the racialization of service learning as communicated through syllabi. In doing so, our aim is to challenge service learning practitioners to recognize the entrenchment of race and racism in the pedagogy and to work actively to shift practice to better respond to the racial realities shaping society (and, inherently, community engagement in higher education).

Syllabi as a Unit of Analysis

As a cultural artifact (Dowd & Bensimon, 2015), syllabi are consistent among all courses (Graves et al., 2010), offer a lasting account of a class and are increasingly used as a unit of analysis for empirical study (Ishiyama & Hartlaub, 2002). As “a central part of teaching,” syllabi clarify course expectations and support class socialization by “serving as a contract” (Ishiyama & Hartlaub, p.

567). Likewise, Dowd and Bensimon (2015) argued that syllabi do more than identify the subject of study and modes of assessment, they “communicate the role of different actors in the activity settings of the classroom, the course, and the curriculum” (p. 69).

Since “syllabi are an excellent source of information about what is being taught...and how it is being taught” (Priester et al., 2008, p. 29), this study analyzed post-2010 service learning syllabi from four-year institutions.³ This study drew on syllabi from institutions with the Community Engagement Classification as these campuses have engaged in significant self-study and national panel review to qualify for this recognition. The Community Engagement Classification reflects an institution’s commitment to community engagement to “enrich scholarship, research, and creative activity; enhance curriculum, teaching and learning; prepare educated, engaged citizens; strengthen democratic values and civic responsibility; address critical societal issues; and contribute to the public good” (Carnegie Elective Classifications, 2022).

“Given the ease in sending an existing syllabus and the fact that syllabi are considered a public document,” syllabi were collected electronically (e.g., Microsoft Word, PDF, URLs of course sites) because they generally “result in a higher return rate than lengthy surveys” (Priester et al., 2008, p. 29). Institutions’ primary service learning staff or faculty member(s) (n=332) were asked to share one current “exemplary” service learning syllabus. Our call defined “exemplary” as “syllabi that institutions would share with faculty who were interested in developing courses that integrate community centered work or a syllabus from a faculty member who has been recognized for their community engaged teaching.”

³ We acknowledge that there are two-year institutions that have received the Community Engagement Classification from the Carnegie Foundation. Our focus on four-year institutions was a parameter set within the grant that funded this study.

Our call for syllabi resulted in an institution response rate of 58% (n=193). Of the institutions represented in this study, 58% (n=112) were public and 42% (n=81) were private not-for-profit. The sample also included 48 (25%) federally recognized Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs). Of these, 50% (n=24) were solely Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institutions (AANAPISIs), 21% (n=10) were solely Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs), and 27% (n=13) were federally recognized as both AANAPISIs and HSIs. One institution was federally recognized as a Historically Black College and University (HBCU). None of the responding institutions were a Tribal College. The institution response by region of the country was comparable with 25% (n=49) from the Midwest, 28% (n=54) from the Northeast, 27% (n=52) from the South, and 20% (n=38) from the West.

Though the project sought to acquire one to two syllabi per institution, some institutions chose to send more resulting in a data corpus of 270 syllabi and 24 syllabi addendums (n=294 total documents). Addendums included additional course communications, such as course calendars and weekly reading schedules as well as service site descriptions and assignment or project instructions. The documents totaled 2,587 pages of text.

Of the 270 syllabi, 13% (n=35) were from the Applied Sciences (e.g., engineering, nursing), 1% (n=3) from the Formal Sciences (e.g., mathematics, computer science), 14% (n=38) from the Humanities (e.g., English, philosophy), 16% (n=42) were Interdisciplinary Studies syllabi (e.g., Women and Gender Studies, Justice and Peace Studies), 4% (n=12) were from the Natural Sciences (e.g., biology, chemistry), 39% (n=105) from the Social Sciences (e.g., sociology, political science, and included career-oriented studies like education and social work), and 13% (n=35) were from specialized courses for service or First Year Seminars (e.g., “Figures of Service and Justice,” “Foundations of Civic Engagement”).

Data Analysis

Since syllabi were collected electronically, NVivo, a qualitative analysis software program, was used to aid the analysis. We analyzed the syllabi for explicit usage of the terms race and racism as well as racially coded terminology. Our focus on racially coded language aimed to identify “neutral sounding comments” (Bennett & Walker, 2018, p. 690) with “racial undertones” (Haney-Lopez, 2014, p. 4) that inevitably encourage mental associations with particular racial groups (e.g., Black and Latinx people) without naming them.

Specifically, we ran a “text search” query of selected words and phrases in NVivo based on our reading of each syllabus and further informed by the theoretical framework and service learning literature. Conducting text searches allowed us to not only track the occurrences of particular terms, but also to examine the “coding context” of those terms to better understand the context in which the words were being used. In some instances, our text searches led to query results, such as “black board,” the “inclusion” of a title page or reference page as being required for written assignments, and references to factors that would place students “at risk” of a point deduction, such as “poor attendance” or “poor performance.” Because we identified terms, such as “at risk” and “poor” as being racially coded, analyzing the “coding context” allowed us to “uncode” certain terms that were not related to issues of race and racism. Finally, we ran several cross-tabulate or “crosstab” queries in NVivo, which enabled us to explore the intersections between various terms used across the syllabi and potentially relevant contexts, including institution type, geographic location, and academic discipline. Through these analyses, we sought to understand how syllabi from Community Engagement classified institutions communicate issues of race and racism.

Findings

Our findings are organized to explore several different themes. First, the use of diversity language, explicit race terms, and racially coded terminology are examined across all documents (n=294 syllabi and syllabi addendums). Next, we disaggregated the syllabi (n=270) by institutional characteristics, including institution type, geographic location, and discipline to reveal where these terms appeared the most. Finally, we present narrative examples of racially coded terminology to further reveal how race-neutral terms used throughout syllabi perpetuate the racialization of need and service through service learning.

Diversity Language Across All Documents

Though many colleges and universities portray themselves as equity-conscious through the use of anti-oppressive discourses, language, such as diversity, equity, inclusion, and social justice, often portray race as non-existent (Dowd & Bensimon, 2015; Wagner & Yee, 2011). For example, in a content analysis of syllabi to explore equity-mindedness and cultural inclusivity, Dowd and Bensimon (2015) found that “diversity” language in syllabi can take “the form of paternalistic exhortations, for instance, encouraging students to serve their communities” (p. 72). Thus, Dowd and Bensimon (2015) argued that diversity language in syllabi can be interpreted as both respectful to and pitying toward students as well as Communities of Color. As such, we first examined the frequency of anti-oppressive terms in the syllabi, including diversity, equity, inclusion, and social justice. Within the total documents:

- Diversity appeared 300 times across 34% of the total documents (n=99);
- Equity appeared 63 times across 11% of the total documents (n=33);
- Inclusion appeared 29 times across 7% of the total documents (n=21); and
- Justice, including social justice, appeared 700 times across 32% of the total documents (n=93).

If we explore this invocation for “patterns of thought and meaning” (Gorski, 2009, p. 309), we might conclude that service learning imagines itself as a practice that foregrounds justice. Indeed, much of the early literature on service learning made claims of inherent connections between service learning and social justice (Delve et al., 1990; Jacoby, 1996; Rosenberger, 2000; Wade, 2000; 2001; Warren, 1998). Yet, the discrepancy noted between the use of equity and inclusion compared to justice raises questions about how justice is understood and whether equity and inclusion are constructs that inform that understanding.

Ahmed (2006) warned that “speech acts that commit the university to equality,” which we argue includes language in syllabi, are “nonperformative;” in essence, working “by not bringing about the effects that they name” (p. 105). The suggestion that diversity and justice are essential to community engagement strategies through their invocation in syllabi coupled with literature that continually raises concerns about the lack of attention to antiracist or justice-centered practice in the implementation of community engagement can also be seen as a kind of virtue signaling that may or may not inform practice.

Aggregated Findings Across All Documents

Explicit Race Terms Across All Documents

To understand the explicit usage of race terms across all documents, analyses were conducted to examine the following terms: race, racism, racial, racialized, and racist. As opposed to the kinds of racially coded language that seeks to stoke racial imaginations without expressed naming, as previously discussed, we first wanted to track the appearances of language that intentionally calls to the racialized experience of service learning. Explicit race terms appeared in 38% (n=112) of the documents (443 references).

We also coded for race and ethnic groups including: “American Indian or Native American or Alaska Native,” “Asian or Asian American,” “Black or African American,” “Chicano/a/x/@,” “Hispanic,” “Indigenous,” “Latino/a/x/@,”

Mexican,” “Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander,” and “Communities or People or Students of Color.” These racial and ethnic group terms appeared across 24% (n=72) of the documents (360 references) with “multiracial” appearing in one syllabus (one reference).

Racially Coded Terminology Across All Documents

Bonilla-Silva (2018) argued that “‘new racism’—reproduces racial domination mostly through subtle and covert practices that are often institutionalized, defended with coded language (‘those urban people’), and bonded by the racial ideology of color-blind racism” (p. 206). Drawing on prior work from Bonilla-Silva, as well as other scholars, Dowd and Bensimon’s (2015) research found that color-blind practices were at play throughout syllabi, which limit considerations for equity-mindedness and cultural inclusivity in higher education. As such, Dowd and Bensimon (2015) concluded, “Deeply held ideological values have emotional intensity; yet the views engendered by ideological values are seen as normal and therefore go unexamined” (p. 84). Thus, Dowd and Bensimon (2015) asserted that “rather than engaging in the ‘deconstruction’ and ‘reconstruction’ of racial inequalities in educational settings,” syllabi often use language promoting diversity for all and “justice,” as highlighted in the previous section, coupled with the inclusion of race-neutral terms (p. 78).

Service learning scholars have identified racially coded discourse, such as “urban youth” and “inner city schools” (Mitchell et al., 2012, p. 616), as well as other racial and politically neutral terms (Hyatt, 2001), as reifying color-blind racism through service learning. Given that racialized discourse appears throughout syllabi and, specifically, through service learning, we drew on the CRT and service learning literature to identify and analyze racially coded terms throughout the documents. Racially coded terminology includes terms: at risk or high risk, capacity building, damaged communities, disadvantaged, disparities,

high needs, literacy or illiterate, inner city, low income, marginalized, minority or minoritized, poor, poverty, rebuilt or rebuilding, refugee, social capital, underrepresented, underserved, undocumented, urban (including urban youth), and vulnerable. Racially coded terminology appeared across 46% (n=136) of the documents (1,034 references).

The aggregated findings demonstrate that racially coded language (46%, n=136, 1,034 references) appeared far more frequently in syllabi and syllabi addendums than the usage of explicit race terms (38%, n=112, 443 references). Bennett and Walker (2018) warned that coded language often “disregards systemic structural racism” leaving real the possibility for students to wrongly attribute individual difference or deficiency rather than larger structural inequality for the issues centered in service placements (p. 706). Furthermore, we must note that 40% (n=118) of the total documents included no references to race (either explicit or coded). This finding further corroborates our assertion that service learning too often ignores or avoids issues of race and racism inherent within its implementation.

Disaggregating the Syllabi by Institutional Characteristics

Explicit Race Terms Across Syllabi

The percentage of syllabi with and number of references to explicit race terms appeared more in syllabi from private not-for-profit institutions (57%; n=46, 259 references) than public institutions (52%; n=58, 167 references). The percentage of syllabi with explicit race terms appeared most in syllabi from institutions that were not federally recognized as an MSI (58%; n=84; 362 references). Finally, the percentage of syllabi with explicit race terms appeared most in syllabi from the West (68%; n=26) and Midwest (67%; n=33) compared to the Northeast (46%; n=25) and South (38%; n=20). However, the largest number of references to explicit race terms appeared in syllabi from the Northeast (n=154).

With regard to academic discipline, the largest number of references to explicit race terms appeared in syllabi from the Social Sciences (43%; n=45; 220 references). This is not surprising given that syllabi from the Social Sciences were the largest aspect of our sample (39%; n=105). However, the highest percentage of explicit race terms appeared in syllabi from Interdisciplinary Studies (67%; n=28; 97 references). While the percentages of explicit race terms were similar across syllabi from other academic disciplines, the total number of references across varied: Formal Sciences (33%; n=1; 1 reference); Humanities (32%; n=12; 40 references); and specialized courses for service or First Year Seminars (31%; n=11; 50 references). Syllabi from the Applied Sciences (14%; n=5; 16 references) and Natural Sciences (17%; n=2; 2 references) had lower percentages of and fewer references to explicit race terms.

Racially Coded Terminology Across Syllabi

The percentage of syllabi with racially coded terminology appeared more in syllabi from private not-for-profit institutions (75%; n=61) than public institutions (58%; n=65). However, the number of racially coded terminology references across private not-for-profit and public institutions were relatively evenly distributed (471 and 491 references respectively). The percentage of syllabi with racially coded terminology appeared most in syllabi from institutions not federally recognized as an MSI (65%; n=94; 650 references). Finally, the percentage of syllabi with racially coded terminology appeared most in syllabi from the West (71%; n=27). The percentage of syllabi with racially coded terminology were relatively evenly distributed across other geographic regions: Midwest (63%; n=31), Northeast (63%; n=34), and South (65%; n=34). However, the number of racially coded terminology references varied across geographic regions: Midwest (n=214); Northeast (n=253); South (n=197); and West (n=298).

With regard to academic discipline, the largest number of references to racially coded terminology appeared in syllabi from the Social Sciences (45%;

n=47; 431 references). However, the highest percentages of racially coded terminology appeared in syllabi from Interdisciplinary Studies (67%; n=28; 208 references) and specialized courses for service or First Year Seminars (49%; n=17; 107 references). The large presence of racially coded and explicit race terms in Social Sciences syllabi is expected not only because syllabi from these disciplines were the largest aspect of our sample, but also because Social Sciences courses are more likely to engage concepts related to race and racism, inequality, and social stratification. For example, Social Science courses often use students' service learning experiences to illuminate such concepts. While the percentages of racially coded terminology were similar across syllabi from other academic disciplines, the total number of references across other academic disciplines varied: Applied Sciences (40%; n=14; 85 references); Humanities (39%; n=15; 102 references); and Natural Sciences (42%; n=5; 29 references). Syllabi from the Formal Sciences (n=3) did not include any references to racially coded terminology.

The percentages of and references to explicit race terms and racially coded terminology may appear a cursory examination. Yet, it is important to remember that syllabi (and the language used within them) serve as a critical orienting tool and frame of reference for students and other audiences about a course experience (e.g., students review syllabi to decide if they will enroll in a course; instructors share syllabi to help colleagues prepare for a similar course or develop new courses). We understand that the syllabus may not reflect the specific experience of a course that will also include lectures, assignments, discussions, and other activities. However, because syllabi serve as contract, record, and communication device between students and instructors, the language used within them publicize beliefs, values, attitudes, assumptions, biases, and expectations of an instructor and/or an institution. What a syllabus contains (or does not) is not only critical for students to reference when deciding whether to take a course, but also for

understanding what the course is about and why the outlined experiences and activities are necessary to meet course objectives. Racially coded terminology most often will not provide the greatest clarity as to the purpose and intentions of the service learning project.

Narrative Examples of Racially Coded Terminology Across All Documents

Narrative examples further demonstrate how racially coded terminology are used across different institution types, geographic locations, and disciplines. These examples provide additional context for how racially coded terms perpetuate the racialization of need and service. Narrative examples range from descriptions of service learning and community engagement to how students are asked to reflect on their experiences. However, racially coded terminology was most often invoked to describe where service experiences take place and who community partners serve. We emphasize the racially coded language that appears in these documents.

For example, the following narrative examples from three different private non-for-profit institutions demonstrate the use of racially coded terminology to describe where service experiences take place and who community partners serve. One document from an Interdisciplinary Studies course at an institution in the Northeast defined the community engagement requirement as follows:

This course is a community-based learning (CBL) course. CBL is an academic course-based pedagogy that involves student work with *marginalized* and *underserved* individuals and groups (or organizations that work with and for such individuals and groups) that is structured to meet community-defined needs.

A syllabus from an Applied Science course in the Midwest included a handout of “General Safety Tips” for service learning students.” One tip recommended, “Avoid unannounced or late afternoon visits in a *‘high risk’* area. If you must go unannounced or in later afternoon, consider taking a second [student] with you.

Try to visit *'high risk'* areas in the a.m.” Similarly, a specialized course for service at an institution in the West explained that “students will complete 18 hours of community-engaged learning volunteering for [community partner] in [neighborhood], two of the most *socioeconomically disadvantaged* parts of [city].”

In these three examples, syllabi tell students where their service will take place and who they will be “serving” using racially coded terms, including “marginalized and underserved individuals and groups,” “high risk” areas,” and “the most socioeconomically disadvantaged parts of [the city].” This terminology serves to invoke a particular image of the community that may invite fear and strong reactions (Bennett & Walker, 2018; Haney-Lopez, 2014). Not only does this language position students to enter communities with a deficit-based framework and hierarchical mindset of making “them” more like “us” (Mitchell et al., 2012, p. 616), but it also can prime students to believe that “the community” is a dangerous place before they ever arrive at their service placement (Bennett & Walker, 2018; Haney-López, 2014).

Additional narrative examples also demonstrate how syllabi invoke racially coded language to describe who community partners serve and, in turn, who college students are purporting to “help” through their community engagement experiences. One syllabus from a specialized course for service at a public institution in the West described the community partners served: “Each student is required to complete 70 hours of service at an approved [university] community placement serving *high needs* youth or adult[s].” Likewise, three different Social Science syllabi further demonstrate how syllabi invoke racially coded language to describe who community partners serve. One syllabus from a Social Science course at a private not-for-profit institution in the Northeast described the community of focus as a “high needs” population. Another syllabus from a Social Science course at a private not-for-profit institution in the Midwest

described students as working in groups and assigned to a community agency to “serve *vulnerable or underserved* groups.” Additionally, one syllabus from a Social Science course at a public institution in the Northeast described students completing “community service at an agency that serves *disadvantaged* groups.”

Aside from the terminology of “high needs,” “vulnerable,” “underserved,” and “disadvantaged,” syllabi also described constituent communities through discourses of literacy. A specialized course for service at a public institution in the Northeast federally recognized as both an AANAPISI and HSI described those to be “served” as “*literacy learners and makers*.” Another syllabus from a Social Science course at a private not-for-profit institution in the South described the service placement and those served at that location as “*high-poverty schools*” with “*dual language learners*.” Bennett and Walker (2018) showed that language referencing poverty is frequently racialized and “coded as black” (p. 706). Dual language learners are also racialized invoking immigration which is typically coded Latinx (Bennett & Walker, 2018). Literacy is similarly taken as a racialized code with linkages between (il)literacy and race frequently assumed (Willis, 2015). This invocation of racially coded language leads to attitudes that ignore structural concerns and, instead, insinuate individual deficiency in ways that may limit the ability of students to take in accurate information about the communities where they are serving or to generate attitudes that challenge the broken narrative suggested by the syllabi.

Overall, there were few specifics presented in the syllabi regarding where service experiences take place and who community partners serve. Because service placements are regularly located in low-income Communities of Color (Butin, 2006; Green, 2001, 2003), there is a need to offer the racialized contexts of community placements in syllabi (e.g., who the partners are, where service takes place, and who partnering organizations serve) in order to avoid the ahistoricism that unfortunately shapes much of the construction of service in U.S.

society which too often focuses on immediate short-term responses instead of long-term structural change.

Narrative examples also demonstrate how syllabi also used racially coded language when asking students to reflect on their community experiences. For example, a Social Science course from a private not-for-profit institution in the Northeast included the following reflection prompt on the course calendar: “Describe your thoughts and feelings about working with *culturally-diverse recipients* in an *urban* public school?” These kinds of questions invoke racial imagery while also discouraging students from explicitly engaging with issues of race and racism. Rather than considering biases held, prejudicial attitudes, or even moments of pride or affinity, the neutral terms of “culturally-diverse recipients” and “urban public school” offer neither connection nor specificity.

The use of racially coded language to define service learning and community engagement, to describe service placements and who is served there, and to frame reflection questions reveal not only how these terms are invoked in service learning syllabi, but also how this language neutralizes conversations about race while simultaneously racializing service. Mitchell et al. (2012) argued that “Language like ‘urban youth’ and ‘inner city schools,’ for instance, serve as code for talking about race without naming it” (p. 616). We advance this argument with additional language, such as “high risk,” “high needs,” “vulnerable,” “underserved,” and “disadvantaged” as well as “culturally-diverse” as codes for talking about race without naming it.

Further, terms that reference poverty, such as “socioeconomically disadvantaged parts of [a city]” are often used as code in place of explicitly naming race. This phenomenon has previously been analyzed in scholarship. Specifically, studies have found that White service learning students tend to avoid discussing issues of race and racism and, instead, identify class as the primary issue they observe at their community placements (Becker & Paul, 2015; Green,

2003; Houshmand et al., 2014; Wetzel et al., 2011). The focus on class further contributes to the ahistoricism that shapes the construction of service in U.S. society, ignoring the structural and systemic root causes of social problems that require the need for service in the first place.

Taken together, our findings uphold and advance the literature that asserts that the current form of service learning often perpetuates political neutrality (Hyatt, 2001), deficit-based thinking and discourse (Cann & McCloskey, 2017; Endres & Gould, 2009; Houshmand et al., 2014; Mitchell et al., 2012; Rougeaux Shabazz & Cooks, 2014; Vaccaro, 2009), and color-blind racism (Becker & Paul, 2015; Mitchell et al., 2012). Facilitators of service learning experiences should strive to be explicit in naming the racial realities of community placements to ensure that the pervasiveness of racism and the structural concerns that shape community work are known, understood, and regularly discussed in order to bring appropriate context to students' service learning experiences.

Limitations

This study expands consideration of the syllabus as an empirical unit of analysis for research on teaching and learning. Though this study detailed the prevalence of racially coded language in service learning syllabi, it also engaged a more interpretive understanding of the syllabi. Specifically, this study allowed for engagement with a larger sample to examine a ubiquitous practice within higher education like service learning. Our interpretive understanding of the syllabi, however, is not without limitations.

First, while literature supports syllabi as a unit of analysis (Dowd & Bensimon, 2015; Graves et al., 2010; Ishiyama & Hartlaub, 2002; Priester, et al., 2008; Steiner & Rozen, 2004), we recognize that syllabi can be an imperfect proxy of the service learning experience. As Gorski (2009) intimated, "It is reasonable to believe that some people teaching the courses engaged a more critical approach than outlined in the syllabus while others engaged a less critical

approach” (p. 309). Likewise, there can be multiple readings and interpretations of syllabi depending on the lenses with which the syllabi are examined.

We also recognize that institutional constraints and politics may limit what is and is not included in the text of syllabi (Steiner & Watson, 2006). For example, we heard from service learning scholars and practitioners across the country that there are often issues of power between individual instructors, academic departments, and campuses, which may lead instructors to include vague descriptions of service learning and coded language in syllabi to “please” departments. In addition to “pleasing” departments, instructors of various academic appointments (e.g., tenure-track faculty, contingent instructors) and embodiments—in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religion, and other social identities—may face various pressures at the local, state, and national level relevant to what kind of language appears in a syllabus (see Finley et al., 2018; Martin et al., 2019). These power dynamics have been heightened in the post-2020 timeframe—a time of white supremacist backlash and proposed anti-CRT laws across higher education (and K–12 education). Thus, the syllabus has become a contested space that reflects power dynamics both within institutions and in the larger sociopolitical context.

“It is reasonable to believe” Gorski (2009) wrote, “that some professors or instructors consciously used depoliticized language in course descriptions, despite their intention to engage deeply politicized frames once their students were before them” (p. 309). Correspondingly, some instructors have shared that their syllabi (not included in our sample) do not fully reflect their enactments of service learning. In other words, it is plausible that critical service learning instructors might exclude certain language from their syllabus because they are aware of the consequences of such language in the partisan polarization that shapes our society at present. These reasons offer insight as to why syllabi are an underdeveloped and underutilized unit of analysis. However, as a contract between instructors and

students (Ishiyama & Hartlaub, 2002), we still found syllabi valuable for exploring service learning pedagogy.

This study aims to understand how racially coded terms are taken up in service learning through examination of syllabi deemed exemplary by their institutions. We acknowledge that our use of critical content analysis was highly interpretive, and we recognize that we made inferences based on the syllabi text and do not benefit from being able to query those instructors about their practices and methods of implementing service learning. Our intention was not to study individual instructor practice but instead to explore how race and racism are codified or ignored within syllabi and what that suggests about service learning practice in higher education.

Because of the large corpus of data (2,587 pages of text across the 294 documents), we chose to focus our analysis on the percentages of and references to specific terms (diversity language, explicit race terms, racially coded terminology) and did not examine the specific context(s) in which each reference occurred. A next step in this analysis might include looking more closely at how these terms are used across different locations of the syllabus (e.g., course descriptions, learning outcomes, readings and assignments, etc.). In doing so, we will be able to deepen the analysis presented in this study to account for patterns in where and how racially coded terms appear throughout syllabi. In addition, we will be able to analyze what the location of such terms might mean for what the syllabus communicates to students and other audiences. A future direction for our work also may include case studies of individual campuses where we not only analyze syllabi, but also interview instructors to better understand how service learning is enacted as well as how issues of race and racism are communicated in their courses.

Centering Race and Racial Realities in Service Learning Practice

This research used syllabi to reveal how language perpetuates and sustains racialized hierarchies in community engagement experiences. Given the findings of this study and the racial realities that shape our society, it feels both important and urgent for service learning scholars and practitioners to engage fully with and in the racial contexts that are part of the fabric of community engaged teaching and learning. While social justice often is assumed to be an inherent aim of service learning (Delve et al., 1990; Jacoby, 1996; Rosenberger, 2000; Wade, 2000; 2001; Warren, 1998), our findings reveal how the language in service learning syllabi reify racialized hierarchies and default to presumptions of nonperformative diversity by ignoring issues of race and racism. Thus, we call on community engagement scholars and practitioners to take up this work in their own service learning practice.

Specifically, we call on individual instructors, programs, centers, and departments to interrogate their service learning syllabi to better understand and to challenge “claims of...neutrality, objectivity, and colorblindness” that may be present in syllabus language and, therefore, in course instruction (Smith-Maddox & Solórzano, 2002, p. 71). Instructors can begin this work by considering the ways in which issues of race and racism are (or are not) communicated—and how they are represented—in their syllabi. A beginning set of questions to guide this work might include: How does the syllabus name, address, discuss, and/or recognize the racialized contexts of service learning and specifically community placements? How are community placements identified and described? What racially coded terminology appear in syllabi and how are they used? Where do these terms appear (e.g., course descriptions, learning outcomes, descriptions of community placements, assignment instructions) and what purpose do they serve? Instructors also should consider the ways in which diversity language is used in syllabi (e.g., diversity, equity, inclusion, justice) and, if used, whether those terms

are defined. By engaging this set of questions and considerations, among others, instructors can begin to identify where they need to be more explicit in naming the racial contexts that undoubtedly undergird service learning and begin to bring appropriate context to students' community experiences.

While this type of syllabus audit is aligned with calls to decolonize syllabi (see Ahadi & Guerrero, 2020), the work is only one mechanism to imagine more equitable possibilities for service learning. Though this research focused on syllabi and the language used to invoke race and racism, this work must extend beyond the pages of the syllabus to consider how racially coded language is enacted in instructional practices. Instructors cannot simply remove racially coded terminology without changing how they teach. The interactions and enactments in the classroom and community, including assignment instructions, online and in-class discussion prompts, and class activities are important spaces for reconsideration and revision that can lead to more intentional and explicit reckoning with the racial realities of service learning.

As this research identified the need to offer the racialized contexts of community placements in service learning syllabi, instructors must reflect on their choices regarding the community work expected, how "the community" is addressed and discussed in and out of the classroom, and ways students are prompted to reflect on their community engaged experiences. In order to be effective in service, and ensure community partner organizations receive more than college students' assumptions and deficit notions in their interactions (Boyle-Baise, 1998; Endres & Gould, 2009; Rougeaux Shabazz & Cooks, 2014), service learning courses need to be explicit about naming the structural inequities that make and sustain the circumstances college students will encounter in their community placements. Recognizing that communities are not monolithic, instructors should make time to outline community demographics as well as to explore the cultures, languages, histories, and experiences of the different

populations served by partnering organizations that are community sites for service learning. In other words, the language in the syllabus matters, but so do the ways in which instruction situates the localized contexts (social, cultural, political, economic, and historical) of the places where students will engage.

Instructors can begin this work by including a range of readings, videos, podcasts, and other course materials that teach students about structural inequities—what Irwin and Foste (2021) situated as “centering life making” (p. 438)—but also through centering the knowledges and expertise of community members and leaders for students to learn from and alongside. Instructional choices like holding class sessions at community sites, hiring community members as co-instructors, engaging students in asset mapping and power mapping assignments, including community site visits and neighborhood walking tours with appropriately compensated community leaders can move beyond syllabus language to a service learning practice that (potentially) decenters racialized hierarchies. These practices focus less on students “serving” (and risking the possibility for increased racialized harm in community settings) and more on students coming to know, understand, and see themselves and their campuses as part of the communities where their colleges are located.

Alongside interrogating their syllabi, as well as their interactions and enactments in the classroom and community, instructors should interrogate their personal beliefs, values, attitudes, assumptions, and biases, and situate them within a systemic analysis. Viewing the syllabus as a contract and instructors as promisors to the expectations outlined within, students are told what—and who—is and is not valued as well as what instructors assume and believe through the language used in their syllabi. As instructors identify a community as “vulnerable,” “underserved,” or “disadvantaged,” they must acknowledge the conscious or unconscious (mis)understandings that drive those characterizations. Thus, instructors must become attentive not only to the syllabus for all that it

communicates, but also to their own ways of thinking, knowing, and being that resulted in the use of racially coded language in the first place. This work becomes necessary given how individual instructors can translate their personal beliefs, values, attitudes, assumptions, and biases about the racialized contexts of service learning, including community placements, to their students through both syllabus language and their interactions and enactments in the classroom and community.

We are encouraging a critical reflexive praxis that is layered, ongoing, and iterative and engages a process of unlearning regarding race and racism (Montoya, 2020). While this requires individual effort, it is also collective and collaborative—engaging networks, affinity groups, or learning communities for support and accountability. These efforts seek to strengthen service learning in higher education by attending to the realities of race and racism so that our practice may respond appropriately to the structural concerns that buttress service opportunities.

Conclusion

The findings in this research elevate the syllabus as a tool for understanding how service learning positions the communities considered “in need” of service and disguises issues of race and racism despite their prevalence in the locations often identified as service placements. Examining syllabi creates opportunities to uncover and understand the impacts and implications of the racialization of community engagement. Accordingly, our findings raise pertinent questions and invite scholars and practitioners to engage fully with and in the racial contexts that are critical to community engaged teaching and learning in higher education.

Critical Race Theory reminds us that how public concerns are named influences how they are interpreted (Tate, 1997). Therefore, service learning pedagogy must explicitly engage issues of race and racism, acknowledge its

endemic properties, and include historical analyses of structural concerns. This work must be informed by the experiential and epistemic knowledges of the community members most impacted by and invested in the opportunities introduced as service placements in order to support a service learning practice that most accurately engages with and accounts for racism as an underlying construct for many social concerns explored through the pedagogy.

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