

Community Engaged Learning

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Community Engaged Learning (CEL) at Mississippi State University (MSU), in collaboration with the Carnegie Elective Classification for Community Engagement, is defined as "...collaboration between MSU and partnering communities for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity while fulfilling MSU's mission of scholarly teaching, research, and service" (<https://www.ccel.msstate.edu/about/whatis/>). As early as 2010, MSU has been recognized by The Carnegie Foundation for its commitment to community engagement, which soon was followed by the establishment of Mississippi State University's Community Engagement Committee in 2011. Since then, MSU has worked to provide various collaborative initiatives to students, staff, faculty and community members.

One such initiative established in the summer of 2018 was the Community Engaged Learning Fellows. Funded by the Provost Office, members spent 3 weeks learning how to incorporate community-engaged learning into current or new courses (to learn more visit: <https://www.ccel.msstate.edu/faculty/workshops/>). As a member of this inaugural class of Fellows which consisted of 15 members from disciplines around the University,



I began to develop a community-engaged course entitled "Gender, Food and Culture." Each Fellow received a \$1000 stipend and applied to have their courses designated as CEL.

At the end of the three-weeks, I was prepared to teach "Gender, Food and Culture" in the Spring of 2019 – or so I thought. Given the nature of community-engaged courses, I had to be prepared that even despite my best efforts to plan and prepare for any circumstance that things might not always go according to plan. Often times as Faculty, our syllabi are our guide for how the semester will be organized. In a community-engaged class, you have to be prepared for changes throughout. While it can be chaotic and, at times, frustrating, to have your schedule thrown-off, I felt that as long as I consistently communicated to my students that there were going to be changes throughout that they felt comfortable to manage those ebbs and flows in the semester.



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One of the major components to “Gender, Food and Culture” is to partner with two community organizations, both addressing food insecurity in Mississippi. The first partnership is with the Mississippi Food Insecurity Project (MFIP). MFIP is made up of faculty and staff from a variety of disciplines at MSU – all working together to research and addressing food insecurity. In partnership, the class assisted MFIP in collecting data for what is called Mapping the Mississippi Food Environment. In groups of two, students were sent out to various communities in Starkville, to survey community members about their food environments. This exercise provided multiple benefits to the students and the community. Students gained the experience of surveying and collecting data which may be valuable in their future careers, while the data collected may potential benefit the community with an improved food environment.

The second partnership is with the Oktibbeha Food Policy Council (OFPC), which is made up of local community members who are interested in addressing hunger in Oktibbeha County, MS. Members include local farmers, health care practitioners, public servants and members of the university. In class, students visited two different local food pantries to volunteer and observe which items were being distributed. Based on those observations, students constructed recipes based on the various food items that were distributed. The goal was for the students and OFPC to create a community cookbook based on those recipes. The idea is that these cookbooks could be distributed to local community members who may attend a food pantry in our area. Thus, they could get inspired and gain the knowledge of creating healthy meals.

At the conclusion of this first semester (Spring 2019), I believe students gain many valuable skills while participating in the course. Outside of traditional classes, students in a CEL class learned to work in teams, work during stressful situations, problem-solve, and how to give-back to their communities in various ways – as well as other countless skills. One former student expressed to me that their experience in the course “caught them valuable skills and lessons that I wouldn’t have gotten in a traditional classroom. I hope to continue to pay what I’ve learned forward to my communities”. After the success of this initial cohort of students, I offered the class again this semester (Spring 2020). While we have only begun, I can already see the excitement the students have for making a positive difference in their communities.

If you are interested in teaching a community-engaged class, there are many resources available. We are fortunate to have a supportive administration and the institutional support through our Center for Community-Engaged Learning, which has been a huge resource. If your college or university doesn’t necessarily have the institutional support such as the development of such courses there are plenty of ways to still incorporate community-engagement into your courses. I’ve seen faculty incorporate volunteer opportunities, small-group projects, or observational hours. There are a variety of options and I would encourage anyone who is even slightly interested in community-engaged learning to give it a shot. I am also available to answer any questions at adv102@msstate.edu.

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Students working in their groups for the Mapping the Food Environment project in collaboration with Mississippi Food Insecurity Project (MFIP) (which is mentioned in the write-up)



Students listening to the director of a local food pantry describe the pantry and their clients



Students observing the stock-room of a local food pantry