Emerging from the Covid 19 Pandemic: The Evolution of Community Engagement at Penn State Berks

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Introduction

In March 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic forced the immediate cessation of all in-person community engagement projects. Internships and study abroad programs were cancelled, volunteers were recalled from their posts, and businesses, schools, and universities were shut down. Like all schools, Penn State Berks was forced to make an immediate transition to remote education, but questions remained. Would the university be able to fulfill its engagement commitments and if so, how could this be accomplished? This paper answers those questions by presenting the evolution of community engagement at Penn State Berks that arose from the pandemic. It will discuss the steps taken by CACE (the Center for Academic Community Engagement) to ensure that community engagement remained relevant during the quarantine; illustrate the conversion of in-person programs to virtual formats; and finally, discuss how the experience gained from the crisis will enrich community engagement as the world returns to in-person interactions. Highlighted in this paper are projects involving several different segments of society ranging from civic, educational, historical, and cultural concerns, as well as programs of compassion necessitated by an unprecedented health and social crisis.

Informing the Campus and the Community
Since the abrupt shut-down of programs occurred approximately one month before the end of the Penn State 2019-2020 academic year, several community engagement projects were already in their final phase. Schools, teachers, students, and parents were so busy adjusting to the new dynamics and modalities of learning and creating new work and school spaces at home that cutting programs short was not an immediate concern. But the end of the academic year, it was clear that pandemic did not erase community needs, it only exacerbated them. Thus began the process of rethinking community engagement so that is remained mutually beneficial to both students and community members. CACE started by revamping its website, writing an online handbook, and forming a community of the TEAMS computer program.
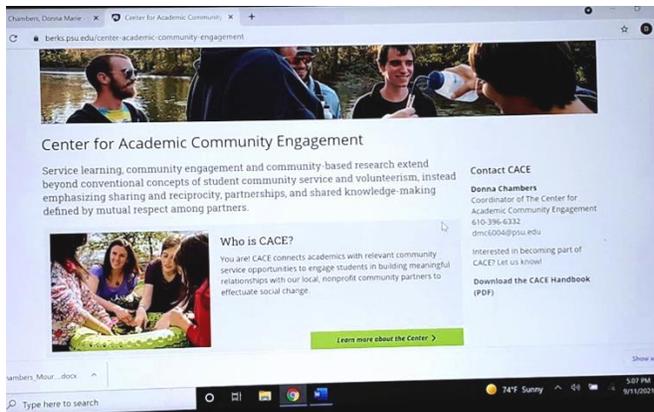
CACE website (https://berks.psu.edu/center-academic-community-engagement) was redesigned so that any student, faculty, staff and/or community member can easily click on the section that applies to them. Each section contains online forms offering so that communication with the Center is immediate. Posted to the site is a handbook that details the basic components of community engagement, along with a list of local, state, and national projects that could be implemented virtually. Community members can post their needs to the site and request Penn State collaboration on projects.

Whereas the CACE website serves as a solid starting point, CACE offers a more dynamic connection over zoom with its Experience Exchange (EE) program. For each EE zoom call, CACE selects guest speakers who have successfully implemented service-learning projects to tell their stories. Participants hear first-hand the details and logistics of the project, and more importantly, can ask questions and offer suggestions, engaging in a real-time discussion about the experience.

The Transition to Virtual Engagement

Educational Programs

The transition to virtual engagement was demanding, but not entirely impossible; each project presented its own set of challenges concerning permissions, logistics, and of course, technical prowess. In this presentation, we focus on the following projects:
- The Migrant Education After School Tutoring Program
- Bilingual Story Telling Program
- Breaking Barriers, Building Bridges
- Baer Park and Schuylkill River Trail Clean Up Project
- Reading and Mount Penn Aulenbach's Cemetery Project
- Digital Marketing and Social Media Marketing at the Penn State Berks LaunchBox
- Penn State Berks Service-Learning Collaboration with The University of Split
- Operation Smilegram

Migrant Education After School Tutoring Program could no longer function as it did in-person. Tutoring could no longer be offered because of district restrictions placed on the use of one-on-one zoom sessions. To continue a relationship with this program, Penn State Berks created a Virtual Bilingual Storytelling Program in its place. Students selected short and simple readings readily available in both English and Spanish on the Internet, rehearsed them, and recorded themselves performing a dramatized reading of the story. Other students collected those individual readings and merged them onto one continuous video. They wrote an introduction to the video that provided context for what the children would be watching. The video was then made available on a YouTube channel, accessible to anyone with an Internet connection.

For the 2020-2021 academic year, tutoring continued at Penn State Berks but with a different population, its own. Since students could no longer offer their services to the outside community, their did so for their own campus community. In the Spanish program, members of the National Collegiate Honor Society Sigma Delta Pi, tutored students in all levels of Spanish in an on-line exchange. Both tutors and tutees were positively impacted by this experience as evidenced by the surveys administered at the end of each semester.

Breaking Barriers, Building Bridges is an annual, collaborative project between Penn State Berks, the Reading School District, and Latino artists from the Reading Community that utilizes the arts and humanities to explore themes of discrimination, cultural poverty, health, and community re-entry. It is a semester long project that culminates in an evening celebration of multicultural dance performances, live music, spoken word, child created art, and live portrait painting. This program was rather difficult to replicate in a remote environment. However, students involved with the program fashioned an alternative. They contacted several Latino community leaders and asked them to participate in a series of public service videos that could be broadcast to the campus and community alike. In fall of 2020, they created and recorded bilingual videos such as Voter Registration Information, Dominican Cooking Demonstrations, Caribbean Dance Lessons, and a Post- Election Reflection. The videos afforded both an educational and cultural experience for the creators and for their audience.

Civic Programs

Another program that had to recreate itself to function in a virtual format is the Baer Park and Schuylkill River Trail Clean Up Project. Instead of the in-person cleanups, festivals, and fairs, that normally accompany this yearly project, students now provide important translation services to the city of Reading. They translate pamphlets into Spanish on issues

ranging from sanitation to public health. The pamphlets are then distribute to the public through the municipal offices, the post office, and the local library.

Community based projects that worked extremely well in a virtual format emerged from classes such as Technical Writing, Digital Marketing, Social Media Marketing, and Instructional Technology. In spring 2021, as part of a community outreach project, the Technical Writing class engaged in the Reading and Mount Penn Aulenbach's Cemetery Project. Local citizens had long sought to research and record the stories of the people buried in their cemetery. In cooperation with support from CACE, Thun Library, and the Center for Learning & Teaching, 95 Penn State Berks students applied the research and web design skills they learned in class to create profiles of the lives of many of the individuals buried at the cemetery. As they worked through the project, students learned about the local history of the community and worked to preserve it for future researchers on the cemetery's website. The profiles they wrote were added to a new WordPress web site, now owned and managed by the cemetery.


The Digital Marketing and Social Media Marketing students work with start-up companies or with their fellow students in entrepreneurship classes to develop digital marketing plans through The Penn State Berks LaunchBox. The Launch Box owns a 3D printer and offers entrepreneurs space to develop their business plans and products. The Instructional Technology classes work with established non-profit, charitable organizations to design and implement web sites. They also assist with IT infrastructure which involves designing an office network, desktop and laptop machines, servers, software, etc. Organizations that benefit from these collaborations include churches, local theaters, and support groups for cancer, the deaf and hard of Hearing, Keystone Military Families and the Centro Hispano.

International Programs

Internationalism is at the core of several of Penn State Berks' community engagement opportunities. The successful implementation of domestic and international projects depends on the understanding and application of cultural competencies. Thus, Penn State University and the University of Split have been collaborating in service-learning since 2018. Prior to the pandemic Penn State Berks had travelled to Split to implement a service-learning program and establish a cooperative community engagement research partnership. The hope was that the students and faculty from Split would travel to Penn State the following year and that both institutions would travel together and jointly present at community engagement conferences. Although the pandemic put those in-person plans on hold, both institutions continue to collaborate through virtual conferences. Most recently, students and faculty from Penn State Berks and the University of Split co-presented at an international conference that reflected on the creation and fulfillment of high-impact projects, specifically those that focus on the Sustainable Development Goals established by the United Nations. The relationship between the two universities endures today.

A Program of Compassion
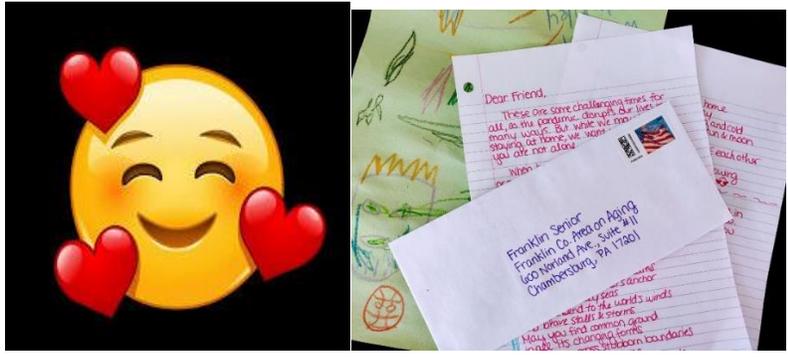
A new program born out of the pandemic is Operation Smilegram. The initial idea was intended for students to write weekly letters to local residents in our senior living communities who had become completed isolated on account of the pandemic. It was a simple gesture intended to give the residents something to look forward to every week and to put a smile on their face. Within two weeks, the program spread from our local community to senior resident communities in Berks and Lancaster counties. Not only are students writing letters, but faculty and staff are writing letters as well. Furthermore, they did not stop at sending letters to residents. They also send letters to frontline health care workers. In addition to letters, participants are also creating puzzles and activities for their recipients to enjoy. One education student extended the project into her elementary school

and is now having her 1st grade students create arts and crafts to send to the senior residents.

Conclusion

The community engagement projects described herein have been employed at Penn State Berks for the past five years and will continue to be offered for as long as student and community interest exists. Based on students' enthusiastic willingness to convert the programs to virtual platforms, it is reasonable to conclude they provide the meaningful and relevant experiences that today's students seek in applying classroom content to real life situations. Motivated students are productive students, and these programs attest that Penn State Berks students have become more civic minded and culturally sensitive. The pandemic awakened students to the needs of others around them. It created a desire for them to take control and change the world for the better, one community at time.