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Uncertainty and unrest: A collaborative pedagogical response to pandemics, protests, and policy

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ABSTRACT

This article presents the pedagogical, observational, and empirical findings from a social equity centered team-taught course that served as an effective learning approach for both students and faculty during a time of great uncertainty and unrest in 2020. The article begins by describing the context for why this course was offered, outlining the need to use a collaborative teaching approach that centers social equity and interdisciplinary expertise when issues such as a global pandemic and racial injustice arise. The authors then describe the methodology and findings associated with surveying students and faculty members who were engaged with the course and share four themes that emerged from the research. The authors conclude by sharing lessons learned, recommendations, and a call to action to scholars and practitioners to use a collaborative pedagogical approach that centers social equity and interdisciplinary expertise when addressing complex and timely issues in public administration.

KEYWORDS

COVID-19, public administration, social equity, team-teaching

In 1982, the late H. George Frederickson wrote about societal divisions and challenges to our institutions, noting that “something is wrong” and calling for a “recovery of civism

in public administration” (Frederickson, 1982, p. 501) among educators. In 2020, the world experienced tectonic upheavals, which were certainly the result of long-standing divisions reflecting Frederickson’s words nearly four decades ago. In 2020, we witnessed the start of a pandemic of a particular deadly coronavirus, COVID-19, which caused authorities to shut down borders, issue stay-at-home orders, and halt many aspects of public life by March 2020. We witnessed protests, some of which turned violent, in the wake of the killing of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer. Protests in some cities, like Portland, featured the introduction of federal police officers dressed in full body armor, and nearly indistinguishable from military special forces personnel. In Washington, D.C. protestors at the White House were cleared away with tear gas so that then-President Trump could walk to the grounds of St. John’s church to display a Bible.

Amid these events, federal, state, tribal, and local governments devised legislation, policy, and executive actions to address the effects of the pandemic and the virus itself. For example, Congress showed bipartisanship in its passage of several pieces of legislation designed to bring economic stimulus and protection for individuals and businesses. More Americans voted in November 2020 than in any previous U.S. election and voter turnout was the highest in over a century, but the election was fraught with legal challenges. Encouraged by support from the federal government, pharmaceutical companies developed vaccines, demonstrating potential for protecting people from getting and transmitting the virus.

Governments worked to respond to the pandemic, but their efforts seemed disjointed in ways that made federalism look clumsy and ineffective. Despite the strides made toward understanding the virus itself, it seemingly continued to spin out of control, as most of the world had not adequately prepared or had experience with a virus breakout of this scale. In addition, police responses to protests seemed fraught with the entire history of entrenched structural racism within U.S. institutions.

As instructors and scholars of public administration, we sought to respond to the reality that “something is wrong,” as Frederickson noted decades earlier. We saw it as our responsibility as faculty members to bring together collective expertise and develop a course for public administration graduate students designed in a way that: 1) provided space for students to reflect upon and discuss the challenges associated with the pandemic, protests for racial justice, and policy responses; 2) introduced a team-taught pedagogical model where faculty could lead with their scholarly expertise during a turbulent time; 3) invited students, faculty, and community leaders to center social equity and collectively engage with these issues in real time; and 4) left students ready to take action while also understanding that complex social problems require awareness and knowledge of intersecting perspectives and solutions.

This article presents the pedagogical, observational, and empirical findings from a social equity centered team-taught course that served as an effective learning approach for students and faculty during a time of great uncertainty and unrest. We served as co-instructors¹ for this course, called “Pandemics, Protests, and Policy,” which we taught alongside seven other faculty members and over a dozen community leaders in the fall of 2020. The title of the course itself aligned with a statement put out by the University of Nebraska Omaha about our school’s commitment to anti-racism following the killing of George Floyd.

This article makes three contributions to the public affairs education literature. First, studies of team-teaching are limited, especially in the field of public administration, where only one article related to this topic was found in a review of the *Journal of Public Affairs Education’s* 27 volumes (Bernstein et al., [2003](#)). Collaborative teaching is more common in fields such as the health sciences, and is shown to lead to increased student success, learning, and satisfaction (Brown & Cox, [2021](#)), as well as increased positive learning, diversity of perspectives, confidence, and approachability (Whitburn et al., [2021](#)). Understanding the potential for the team-teaching approach is beneficial for those considering this method. Second, our course was taught in “real time” as the pandemic, protests, and issues related to policing and racial justice were ongoing. This presented opportunities to discuss these issues as they unfolded, revisit them throughout the semester, and grapple with the emotional burdens and realities that these issues presented. Third, this course presented ways to incorporate social equity and cultural competence more directly into the Master of Public Administration (MPA) curriculum, as suggested by Berry-James et al. ([2021](#), p. 12):

As we combat the pandemics of COVID-19, racism, police killings, and more, the need for social equity curricula has never been more acute and necessary. Let us heed the call and fully enshrine social equity and social justice in public affairs education.

The article begins by describing the context for why this course was offered, outlining the need to use a collaborative teaching approach that centers social equity and interdisciplinary expertise when issues such as a global pandemic and racial injustice arise. Next, we describe the methodology and findings associated with surveying students and faculty members who were engaged with the course and share four themes that emerged from our research. We conclude by sharing lessons learned, recommendations, and a call to action to scholars and practitioners to use a collaborative pedagogical approach that centers social equity and interdisciplinary expertise when addressing complex and timely issues in public administration.

Uncertainty and unrest: A response to the pandemic and racial injustice

The pandemic and protests

On January 21, 2020, the first known U.S. case of COVID-19 was confirmed in Washington State. Five months later, on May 28, 2020, the United States surpassed 100,000 deaths and by June 10, 2020, more than two million cases of the disease had been confirmed. By the end of 2020, the death toll in the United States tripled to 346,000 and the number of confirmed cases had reached 20 million (AJMC Staff, [2021](#)). The extraordinary speed at which COVID-19 spread throughout the United States was set against a backdrop of conflicting and misleading information from various levels of government, and the prevalence of social media platforms that did not stop the dissemination of false information until late into 2020. This led to confusion and uncertainty about where to look for factual information about COVID-19 and how to address challenges on a national, state, local, and individual level. Hazen ([2020](#)) stated that current events can provide opportunities to help students learn how to judge “the pros and cons of different sources of information (and misinformation), as well as how society generates knowledge” (p. 33), but the rhetoric and divisiveness from many elected officials combined with the lack of reliable, trustworthy, accessible information created a situation where it can be difficult for students to understand how to contextualize and learn from current events.

Globally, the spillover effects of the COVID-19 virus quickly upended everyday life. In March 2020, schools began closing, unemployment started rising, and shortages of everyday essentials were occurring. Directive Health Measures (DHMs) – which were at the discretion of state and local governments – were being recommended, adopted, and implemented at varying levels of enactment and enforcement. Wearing masks and maintaining sufficient space between people in public spaces became standard practice as the world tried to slow the spread of the virus. Further, the virus was frequently weaponized for political gain, as DHMs were criticized as being too restrictive which violated people’s constitutional freedoms. Some people revolted against the DHMs by refusing to participate in established protective measures.

The global political spotlight on inequities was illuminated and amplified by the pandemic, but COVID-19 was not the only event to upend life in 2020. On May 25, 2020, George Floyd was murdered in Minneapolis, Minnesota by a police officer while in police custody. The following day began months of protests across the U.S. and globally demanding justice for George Floyd, and reignited attention to the unequal treatment of Black people in the U.S. Processes that have historically fostered unjust racist policies in America were amplified and aggravated by evident police brutality and murder of unarmed Black men and women. Failed federal mitigation, preparedness, and pandemic responses resulted in unacceptably high mortality and morbidity from COVID-

19, and aggravated federal-local relations such as among Native American tribal nations.

The confluence of global, national, and local events and policies significantly disrupted, shifted, and altered how people lived, worked, played, and interacted with others, including in higher education. Many undergraduate and graduate programs in public administration across the world shifted from the traditional brick-and-mortar learning and engagement model to a predominantly distanced and virtual process. Teaching and learning modalities leapt onto virtual platforms within a compressed timeframe, transforming the way universities do business, engage students in learning, and foster community engagement. Many universities also felt a sense of responsibility and obligation to support students, faculty, staff, and community members in grappling with the physical and mental health consequences of the pandemic and protests.

The responsibility of public administration to innovatively respond

As a metropolitan university, the University of Nebraska Omaha identifies itself as providing academic value and community engagement ethos geared toward transforming lives at a local, national, and international level. In operationalizing this stated value and commitment, the university ecosystem is strategic about bridging community-engaged efforts with pedagogical pursuits. As public administration scholars and educators, we strive to connect theory and practice in ways that create a “community of practice” comprising scholars, students, learners, and practitioners (Kapucu, 2012, p. 585). Though we assume different roles in different contexts, we all strive to be part of this community, particularly during times of upheaval.

Despite these community-centered goals, public administration education faces competing interests. Bryer (2014) suggests that there are at least four interests of higher education, which are often seen to be in competition, but can work in collaboration: developing citizens, creating and disseminating knowledge, training workers, and creating jobs (p. 238). While these interests are often seen as ends, Bryer argues that the real end of higher education is to create “empowered individuals” who “build communities” (p. 249). However, training in technical knowledge and skills have proven inadequate especially in light of the emotional toll of the COVID-19 pandemic on public service professionals (Guy, 2020; Vogel, 2021). Guy (2020) and Vogel (2021) argue for a care-centered approach to public affairs education that integrates empathy and other emotive components into the curriculum. The authors contend that the affective approach will help students navigate uncertain environments. Moreover, as noted by Evans et al. (2019), we live in “turbulent times” in which higher education institutions are losing relevance because they are ill-prepared to confront the times. In

the public sector especially, “the fast-moving, turbulent arenas of governance that await our newly trained students require policy schools to update the content of their public affairs curricula” (p. 287). While public affairs, policy, and administration programs do strive to update curricula in a variety of ways by featuring opportunities for service-learning, internships, and other activities that connect theory and theoreticians with practice and practitioners, from time to time, the field should find ways to do more. We cannot afford to be static in our course offerings and modalities, even though the hurdles of administration and bureaucracy can challenge our agility.

The times in which we live serve to remind us that public administration faces grand challenges that are “large in scope, [that is, they are] interagency, inter-sectoral, intergovernmental, and multidisciplinary” [and they] require paradigm shifts in thinking” (Gerton & Mitchell, [2019](#), p. 435). If this is the case, the challenge at a graduate school of public administration is to be agile enough to realize when typical classroom techniques are insufficient, and when we should quickly shift modalities to meet the times (McDonald, [2021](#)).

Creating a collaborative and equity-centered learning community

Team-taught course design

Team-teaching is an established pedagogical approach and is defined as “an involved, cooperative effort of instructors with different specialty areas, who are jointly responsible for providing students with a strong educational background” (Chandra & Sottile, [2005](#), p. 58). As a collaborative approach, team-teaching invites opportunities for delivering substantive instruction to diverse students using a shared space and with the goal of achieving what one professional would not have done single-handedly (Bacharach, Heck, & Dahlberg, [2007](#); Wenzlaff et al., [2002](#)). While the practice is a recommended teaching technique within and across university disciplines (Ferguson & Wilson, [2011](#)), the phenomenon is minimally practiced or studied beyond the special education domain; Ferguson & Wilson, [2011](#)). There are numerous documented benefits of this approach for student learning useful to our context, including fostering multiple points of view while also providing a “collective voice” about issues of diversity, improving student problem solving by offering diverse perspectives, and enhancing cognitive development in students (Chandra & Sottile, [2005](#); Garran et al., [2015](#); Little & Hoel, [2011](#)).

The modality of the Pandemics, Protest, and Policy course was aimed at taking advantage of the community of public administration scholars and practitioners. Given the expansive impacts of the pandemic, protests, and policy change, we intentionally moved away from the traditional one instructor model and opted instead to offer students a broad perspective from multiple areas of expertise and from different sectors. This versatility and the existence of a multi-disciplinary pool of faculty and community

partners with capacity and expertise on salient content made it possible to not only staff a class, but also offer direct linkage to community leaders involved in the dynamics of living and working through a pandemic, protests, and policy shifts at personal and institutional levels.

As a first step in structuring the class, two faculty members reached out via e-mail to colleagues and invited them to participate in the course by sharing a topic they would like to teach. Each willing faculty member was assigned one synchronous evening class session to prepare for and teach virtually. Each week, a faculty member provided a combination of a short lecture and/or panel of external community or scholarly experts; assigned relevant materials for the week; and provided weekly reflection prompts based on the class session topic that each instructor graded. In all, 13 public administration faculty members taught in the course.

Because a different topic was taught each week by a different faculty member, we ensured that each class session built on the preceding session(s) so that students were able to make connections between classes. For example, we began the class with a history of pandemics, social vulnerability, and discussions of power. We then discussed the way these issues may apply to local government, nonprofit, and philanthropic settings, which revealed inequities in the practices and processes undergirding these activities (see Appendix A for a full list of course topics). In addition, we chose to offer this course as a credit/no credit course to provide more flexibility for students, encourage more risk-taking by students in their reflections, and to minimize potential conflict about differing grading criteria across multiple faculty members.

With so many faculty members teaching the course, it was important to have a consistent presence in the classroom. This “consistent presence” was cultivated in two ways. First, two faculty members acted as course coordinators, and they attended all class sessions. These faculty members were the point of contact for students with questions about course policies, absences, and general course logistics. Course coordinators also served student learning by making connections across the different class sessions (Bondos & Phillips, 2008). Second, and arguably more important, the students cultivated a learning community together. Students built trust and rapport among each other that was present across class sessions.

Centering equity and cultural responsiveness

One part of the American Society for Public Administration’s (ASPA’s) code of ethics is focused on strengthening social equity, which includes treating “all persons with fairness, justice, and equality and respect for individual differences, rights, and freedoms” and promoting “affirmative action and other initiatives to reduce unfairness, injustice, and inequality in society” (American Society for Public Administration, n.d.).

The Pandemics, Protest, and Policy course helped to bring the content of this ethic into focus through the topics that were chosen for this class, the inclusion of faculty with expertise on the topics, and guest speakers that brought lived experiences to the class meetings. We stressed one aspect of a consideration of the “high road” of ethical thought. Rohr notes that in public service, the “low road ... emphasizes adherence to formal rules [while] the high road ... stresses social equity” (Rohr, [1989](#), p. 60). The course was an example of “curriculum integration” (King et al., [2021](#), p. 180); the ethic of social equity, which as public administration educators, we say we believe in, should be integrated into our curricula. Making that connection was an important goal of this course.

The time-sensitive and equity-centered topics required faculty members to practice culturally responsive teaching (CRT), a concept hinged on the use of “cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference and performance styles of ethnically diverse students” to make learning encounters more relatable (Gay, [2010](#)). Ellis ([2001](#)) and Gardner ([2008](#)) posit that teaching about inclusive social encounters has positive outcomes for degree completion among marginalized student groups. Research also shows that complex public administration challenges are best resolved through leadership committed to multi-actor collaborations “ ... that help mobilize valuable resources, spur innovation and build common ownership over joint solutions” (Ansell et al., [2020](#)). In developing a class where content was curated around the relevance of global events, we began to address complex realities that require global and nationally cohesive policies and strategies.

Methodology

Because this course was designed with such pedagogical and topical intent, we sought feedback to understand how faculty and students felt about the course after completing it and what should be considered if this course were offered in public affairs classrooms in the future. To understand and center student and faculty experiences of the course, we conducted a student survey and a faculty questionnaire in March 2021 asking them to reflect on and evaluate key elements of the course.²

Student survey

The student survey invited students to describe how different features of the course contributed to their learning. All students were sent e-mails inviting them to participate in the survey and the main objectives of this study were provided to the students. Ten of the twelve students from the course completed the survey, for a response rate of 83.3%. Participants were assured their responses would be anonymous and they received no compensation for their time.

The survey itself focused on our variables of interest, but as much as possible we encouraged participants to describe their experiences in depth. A key feature of the survey was that we used both closed- and open-ended questions, to assess overall impressions as well as to explore how or why different elements of the course influenced their learning. We were also conscious of the possibility of students providing overly positive responses given the faculty who taught the course are involved in this study. As much as possible, we hope the two-step question format helped provide students with the space to provide critical feedback, but it is important to acknowledge these concerns might be impossible to eliminate entirely.

We were particularly interested in understanding what influenced students' decision to take the course, how different elements of the course influenced their learning, and whether the course provided them with networking opportunities. Further, we encouraged students to reflect on the key themes of the course, how the discussion of current events in the course influenced their learning, whether the course developed their skills and knowledge, and whether the course improved their understanding of current events. Given the small number of potential respondents, we avoided collecting any demographic information to preserve students' anonymity.

Faculty questionnaire

All of the faculty members who taught the course who are not coauthors of this article were asked to respond to ten questions. Responses were received from all six of these instructors. The questions related to their reasons for participating, experiences with the course, perceptions of the learning experience for students, and the influence of the course on their teaching.

Analysis

To make sense of the data, all authors met as a team to discuss the results of both the student survey and the faculty questionnaire, and whether there were any themes or ideas that permeated the collected responses from both data sources. As we discussed the data, it became apparent that there were four key themes that emerged through our qualitative data analysis. In the next section, we organize our presentation of the findings around these key ideas.

Given the nature of the data, our analysis consists of simple figures illustrating variation in the closed-ended questions in our survey, and descriptive presentation of open-ended questions around the four themes identified in our collective discussions of the data. Where possible, our approach is to "show" rather than "tell" what the responses illustrated, so we present responses to critical questions in full to preserve their meaning in the article.³

Findings

Four themes emerged through our analysis, which focused on the real-time nature of the course, the team-taught approach used to teach the course, the skills and knowledge developed through the course, and lessons learned from the course. Woven within each of these four themes were issues of social equity and justice that emerged through pedagogical processes, class structure, and course content. We describe these four themes below.

Real-time nature of the course centered equity and provided space for collective sensemaking

For most students, the contemporary, real-time events around the pandemic, protests, and policymaking contributed to their interest in and decision to enroll in the course. As seen in [Figure 1](#), the most important factor influencing the students' decision to take the course included the events taking place in real time, followed by the team of faculty, and the credit/no credit structure of the course.

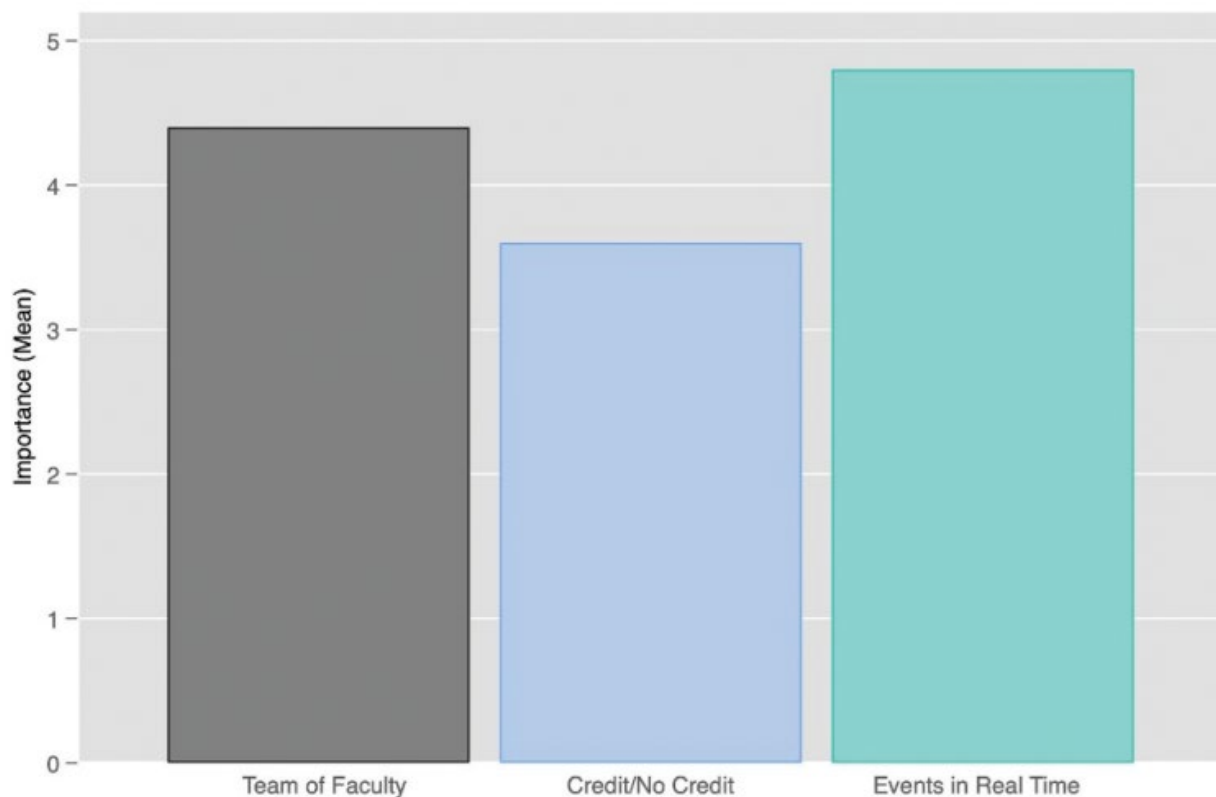


Figure 1. The importance of different factors in students' decision to participate in the class.

One student explained that it was important for them to be better informed and knowledgeable about the national and local events because “they’re not going anywhere, so the opportunity to participate in this class was a great opportunity to engage in thoughtful discussion and create a foundation for these kinds of events.” Another student noted that this course was one of the first times they were able to take a course that was directly focused on real-time events, including courses in a public administration program that have an explicit focus – even in a title – on protests. One student said that they had “never seen a class addressing protests at this level; usually, it’s a subheading or a chapter or in the timeline.” Here, the course served as a gateway to topics that were not being discussed anywhere else, and the topic of protests alongside policymaking was not tangential, but the focus of the course.

The course covered several topics that called on each student to grapple with inequities at multiple levels. For example, during the discussion of philanthropy and racial justice, students heard from scholars and local philanthropic leaders about the ways philanthropic practices perpetuate inequities in communities of color. The week on the social determinants of health during the pandemic revealed the social factors that likely contributed to the racial and ethnic disparities in COVID-19 cases and deaths. In a lesson on COVID-19 from a comparative international perspective, students saw examples of COVID-19 responses in countries such as New Zealand, Kenya, and Taiwan, which varied drastically from those in the United States. The week on civic engagement and inequities took place on the Thursday following the November 2020 election, when ballots were still being counted, which led to a discussion about voter suppression in the U.S.

For some students, the class and the events tied to the pandemic and protests in 2020 offered their first exposure to specific systems and practices in public administration that result in racial, social, and economic inequities. One student said:

Prior to this year I observed protests distantly through the news. The emotional impact was so much stronger when I saw these protests happening in my own neighborhood, when I heard police helicopters in the air above my house at night, when I saw friends getting hurt as they tried to speak out.

For other students, the inequities discussed in the class were familiar because they or their clients had experienced them. One student noted that the course’s consistent focus on social equity and racial injustice provided space for White students to see and understand what People of Color experience on a daily basis. The student said:

I felt this class allowed for me to vent, process, and challenge my thoughts and thoughts of the status quo. It allowed for me to take a slight break of having to explain what POC [People of Color] go through, because for once my peers were

able to see and understand what People of Color have been experiencing for years and have been voicing for years through present day events because of media coverage and it happening locally and across the world.

Other students had been previously involved in the state's pandemic response and/or racial justice work, which drew them to a class with this focus. One student explained that they had been "heavily involved in the Black Lives Matter movement for several years and I take classes like this because it helps me understand the deeper history and background to the social justice issues I advocate for."

Students also sought to be a part of a learning community to collectively process what was happening across the world, and the course offered space for critical dialogue, learning, and sensemaking. For example, several students who were working as employees in the nonprofit and public sectors noted that the class offered a "deeper dive" into topics that often emerged in their workplaces, but through an academic lens. Other students were able to use the class as a "safe space to discuss heated topics," which was important for "grappling" with and "making sense" of events occurring in real time. One student said that it allowed them "space to work through and process real-time events though there wasn't much room for analysis since we were still in the middle of everything." Another student noted that "it was surreal especially at the time of the election but it helped so much to process the events with a learning community."

It was, however, clear from faculty members that students were responsible for creating a welcoming, open, and supportive learning community. Students built rapport with each other, and this spilled over into the trust and class norms. Since students spent each week together, they set the tone for class each week, and faculty members picked up on the learning community that was being created and cultivated over the course of the semester. This reciprocal exchange of learning and knowledge sharing allowed for knowledge creation, processing, and growth.

The learning community was particularly important for both students and faculty as they individually and collectively grappled with the emotional toll of the events surrounding the pandemic and protests. These events frequently intersected with course topics and affected both students and faculty members alike. For example, while some students found the class and reflection assignments to be therapeutic, others found the topics stressful and depleting. Several students noted that they underestimated their own emotional processing capacity given the heaviness and weight of the unraveling events and timeliness of the course topics, especially when it came to the weekly reflection assignments. One student explained:

My feelings and thoughts were raw and unfiltered which was overwhelming when it came to reflections, however I do not think I would want to change that. It definitely

put me outside of my comfort zone. I also think it made you want to be more connected in real time and understand if you are not directly connected to the issues.

Faculty members were also sensitive to the fact that they were facilitating conversations on topics where students had strong personal emotions and experiences, requiring the practice of culturally responsive teaching. One faculty member said: “I didn’t know how to approach the students so that I would not open up the existing wounds of the moment. I found them engaged, but some of their comments made me feel like they were also quite raw.”

Team-taught approach invited interdisciplinary expertise and provided academic value

Students valued the team-taught approach because of the opportunity to get to know a wide variety of faculty members who teach in the MPA program. One student stated that “The wide range of the topics and the expertise of the instructors are the elements that I liked the most,” and [Figure 2](#) shows that students found the team-teaching pedagogy and course discussions as the most beneficial components of student learning in the course, followed by guest speakers and weekly reflection assignments.

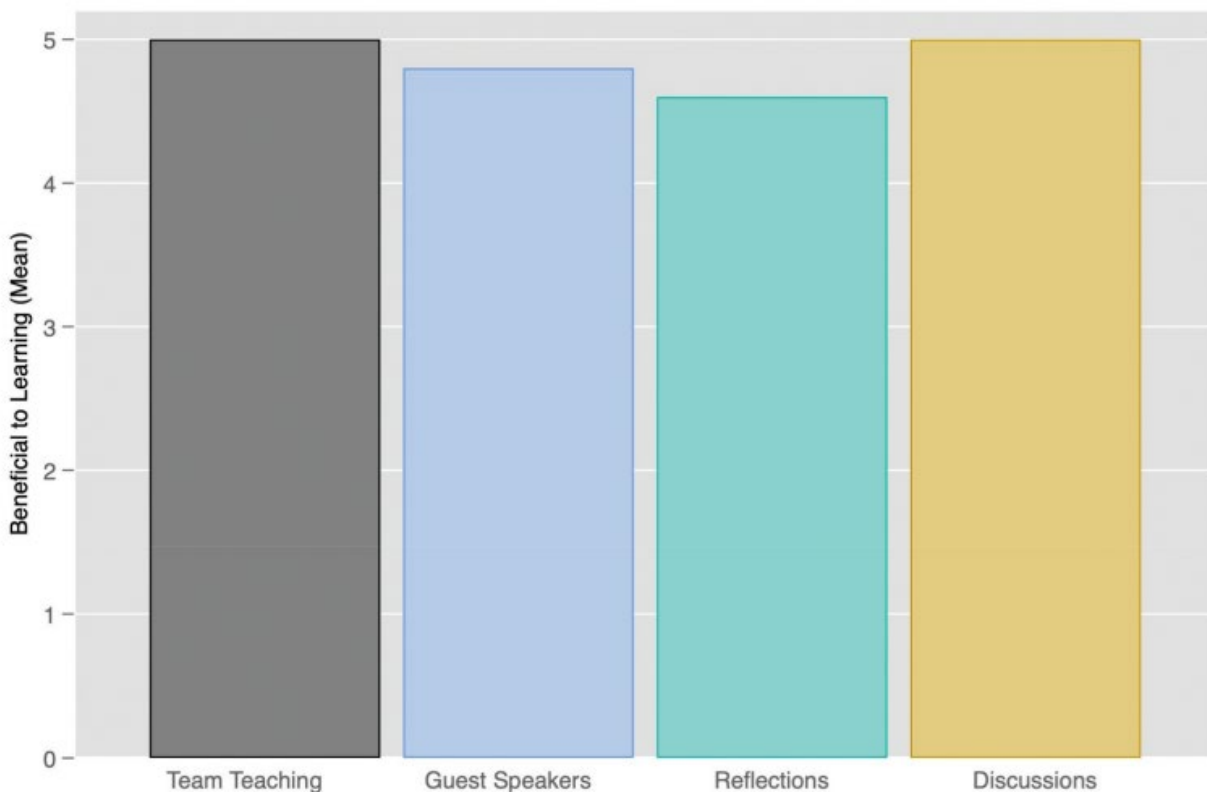


Figure 2. The benefits of different elements of the course in students' learning.

In particular, students valued learning about issues and topics from multiple perspectives and becoming familiar with academic literature that they may not have otherwise encountered in graduate school. One student said: “I want to have facts when I am experiencing current events. This class provided me experts on subjects to distill what was happening in real time, which was such a privilege.” In all of the surveys, students acknowledged the ways topics of social equity and inequality showed up differently but consistently throughout the course, as each instructor introduced these topics in different ways given their own disciplinary training and expertise.

However, since the course was being taught on topics that were rapidly evolving, several faculty members felt that it was more difficult to rely on traditional course materials such as textbooks and journal articles. One faculty member said: “It was challenging to find updated academic literature on COVID-19 and racial disparities; therefore, I also relied on non-academic/peer-reviewed pieces such as news and academic blogs.” Similarly, instructors also found it challenging to fully set up each module early in the semester. One faculty member said: “Because events were unfolding, we were constantly learning new things about what I was teaching about. So, I had to hold off on posting some of the papers I wanted students to read so they could get the most timely information possible.”

Students also recognized that the large-scale challenges that were taking place required interconnected solutions, and they thought the pedagogical approach befittingly covered multiple intersecting and timely issues. One student said: “It helped me understand public administration as a practice and greater understanding of the complexity of social problems which are not always communicated well when looking at case studies.” Because of the complexity of the issues discussed in class, students acknowledged the value of expertise provided by faculty and community members. As one student stated: “This is something that does not happen in ordinary classes. Having a broad scope of professors helped students look for where the expertise is in the field.” As seen in [Figure 3](#), students perceived professors to be the most beneficial when it came to networking, followed by classmates and guest speakers.

For faculty members, the ability to collaborate with colleagues was a draw for participating in the course. Faculty members enjoyed learning from each other about their areas of expertise and appreciated the collaborative nature of the course. One faculty member stated: “It was nice to see what others are working on and to try to build on that work.” Several faculty members said that observing new instructional and classroom management techniques from colleagues informed how they structured future courses. One faculty member said: “Participating in the course gave me a chance to learn more from my colleagues about more effective ways to structure lecture activities, reading materials, and in-class discussion as well as the structure of each course module.” Others noted that they used this experience to incorporate more

current events coverage in their other courses, and to learn more about the ways their colleagues were approaching social equity in their own research.

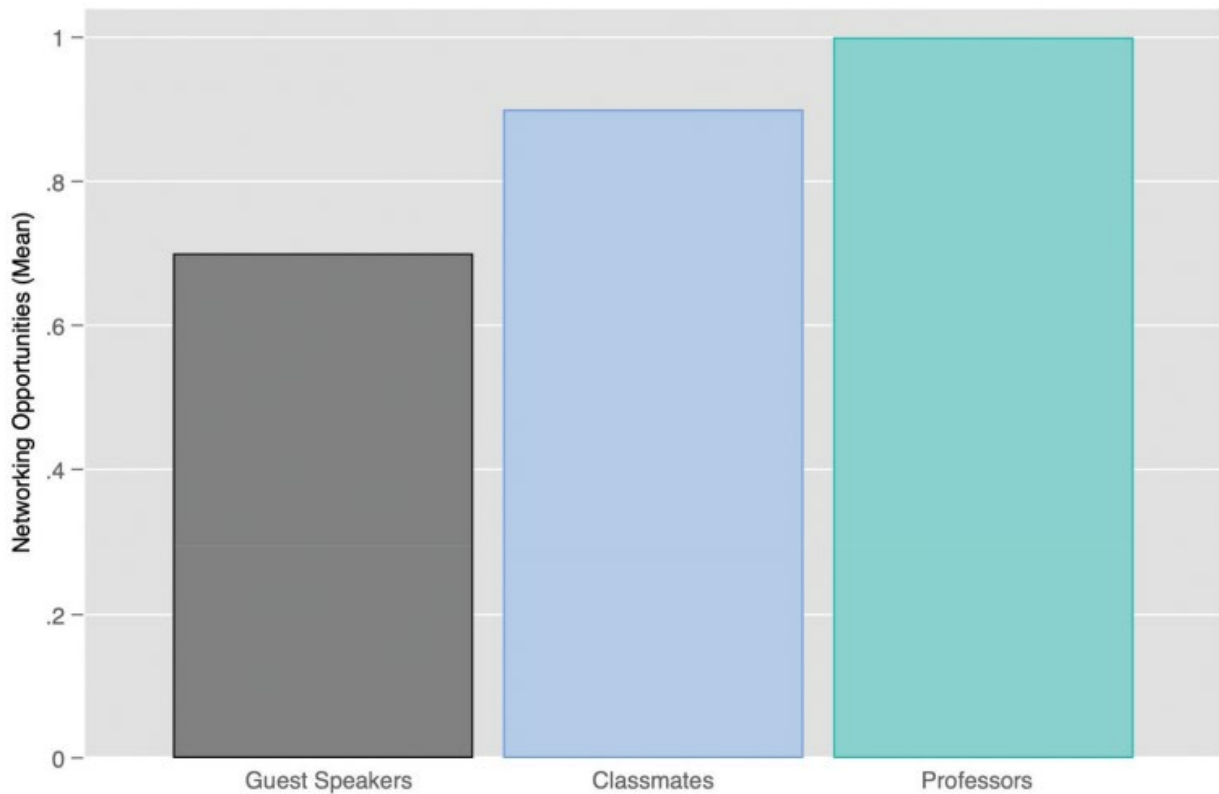


Figure 3. Students' perceptions of networking opportunities from the course.

Due to conflicting teaching schedules and other commitments, most faculty members were not able to attend many of the class sessions. To some extent, this affected their ability to connect with the students. One faculty member noted: "It was difficult for me to know the background and interests of the students since I only met them once." Faculty members did, however, appreciate the way the course was structured and organized, and particularly noted the importance of the two faculty members who took the lead and were a continual presence throughout the semester.

All instructors indicated interest in participating in a collaborative course again in the future and felt that it was a good model. As stated by one faculty member:

Sometimes we get too siloed in our own areas. This allows people to understand the holistic viewpoint. I think it will be a more effective way, if we can structure future classes this way, to share all our expertise and generate more discussion that acknowledges the complex environment of public administration.

Course provided skills and knowledge to further work in public administration and democracy

A third theme that emerged from the student survey and faculty questionnaire was that the course developed skills and knowledge that are critical for public administrators and members of civic society. In the student survey, all participants reported that the course provided them with skills and knowledge that would be beneficial to their work and/or further study in public administration. Reflecting on how the course performed this function in open-ended responses, several responses alluded to three items: 1) newfound insights and practical policy responses for nonprofits, 2) background information that provided context for contemporary events, and 3) knowledge that will be critical in improving public administration to become more equitable. To this end, one student said:

Understanding that public administration field is built for the status quo and if I step into that realm to know I need to come with my experiences and not feel obliged to conform because I will have to assist in changing the narrative and structure to create equity.

Another student shared:

A lot of what is happening now has been a long time coming and a result of government oversight and failures. Seeing topics presented from different perspectives will allow me to tackle important things in my career to try and be a part of the solution.

This explicit interest in creating more equitable systems and structures in the field of public administration is reflective of the intentional focus on social and racial equity in the course. Students recognized that the inability to comprehensively address inequity is attributable to the failure to center community-based solutions essential to minimizing and eradicating equity gaps.

Further, all students surveyed indicated that the course helped them understand current events as a member of a democratic and diverse society. When asked to elaborate on how the course developed this understanding, common threads included: developing a historical perspective about pandemics, protests, and policy; learning about different perspectives; and through a safe, inclusive classroom that encouraged everyone to contribute. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, several responses centered on action – how the course developed an understanding of what people are doing to make a difference, and how they themselves can serve their communities. One student shared that the course:

Reminded us the importance of when we come together there is power in numbers and that there are partners and allies that care about humanity and the improvement of our society. I think we began to appreciate voting and understanding the

importance of our voices and rights and protecting those rights not just for myself but for others.

Similarly, all faculty perceived that students developed skills and knowledge in the course. It was striking how many of the themes identified by faculty matched those highlighted by students. For instance, faculty also perceived the collaborative approach enabled the students to better understand the underlying context and interconnectedness of these topics and their relationship to other courses. One faculty member said, “It seemed like they were getting a big wide overview, the type that MPA programs are in a great position to provide.” Another said, “It was interesting to see everyone understand how all of this fit together – emergency management, social determinants of health – you could see how those played out.”

In addition, faculty participants indicated the group discussions in class enhanced students’ learning experience. Students were not just “pupils” but “citizens” engaged in problem solving on a range of topics in real time. A faculty member said, “It allowed them to reflect on things that were affecting their lives ... I also think it allowed them to vent about particular issues they had been experiencing.” Finally, faculty participants highlighted the interaction between faculty, guest speakers, and students as being beneficial, and one faculty member noted that she has continued to stay in touch with two of the students she met during a seminar – another tangible result of the course.

Learning through continual student and faculty feedback

While students and faculty had very positive opinions about the course, they also raised several issues and provided suggestions for future courses. Students were asked what they would change if they could change any aspect of the course. The most common response related to the weekly reflection assignment. One noted that “it got a bit tedious doing the same thing each week,” while others thought that it was difficult to keep up with this weekly requirement, particularly because of the “heaviness” of many of the equity-centered topics, and the weekly writing “increased the intensity” of the course. In addition, one student mentioned that the inconsistent style and variety of feedback from instructors on the reflections was sometimes confusing.

Several other comments were made by students. One mentioned a guest speaker who had a reputation among nonprofit organizations as being “inflammatory” and suggested being more “discerning” when inviting guest speakers. Another student, on the other hand, appreciated hearing from people in the community but thought it would be “powerful” to also hear from individuals who were “on the ground” such as doctors dealing with COVID-19. Another suggestion was to schedule each topic in two-week modules instead of one to “allow for a slightly more in-depth review.” Finally, one

student would like to have “more interaction between students and time to discuss what we learned with each other.”

Faculty members also had several suggestions. First, it would be helpful to schedule a team-taught course at a time that does not conflict with other courses so that faculty members could attend more class sessions. Second, instructors did not receive individual feedback from students on the sessions that they led, and one faculty member said that “Getting feedback from the students would have been personally helpful to improve my pedagogical skills.” Third, some variation in assignments might be helpful, as one faculty member did not think reflection was the “best way to engage in the material from the class session I taught.” Fourth, it would be helpful to incorporate this into regular faculty teaching load “as opposed to being ‘extra,’ especially for the main organizers/coordinators.”

Moving forward: A call to action for public administration programs

In 1982, Frederickson said, “something is wrong.” In 2020, we also knew that something was wrong, and that sense prompted us to offer a course to address a pandemic, protests, civil unrest in the United States, and a hotly contested presidential election. For centuries, the U.S. has attempted to reckon with racism and white supremacy in its social mores and institutions including higher education. Despite some advances in achieving equity, the COVID-19 pandemic has illuminated real inequity, injustices, and disinvestment among Black and Brown people and Indigenous communities who have borne the heaviest burdens in the pandemic. The Pandemics, Protest, and Policy course offered a platform through which students and faculty could discuss the events, society’s reaction to the events, government’s reaction to the events, and possible policy solutions. While this course was designed to focus on the events surrounding the pandemic, protests, and policy decisions of 2020, this course structure could also bring a community of learners together around other timely issues and topics. [Table 1](#) provides a summary of the course themes, responses, impacts, and lessons learned from teaching this type of course.

Table 1. Summary table of core themes, responses, impacts, and lessons learned from the course ([Table view](#))

Theme	Response	Impact	Lessons Learned
Real-time nature of the course focusing on issues of equity (pandemics, protest, policy)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provided space and assignments for students to understand and 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creation of a learning community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Variation in course assignments due to the heaviness and emotions that came from some of the

Theme	Response	Impact	Lessons Learned
	reflect on timely and real-time topics	Course topics were often emotionally laden and heavy	equity-centered topics
	Centered equity and culturally responsive teaching	Reveals inequalities across various public institutions and demographics Reveals the systemic failures and power dynamics at play	Students approach equity differently based on their own lived experiences and exposure to topics
		Students created a learning community and set the tone for faculty each week	
Team-taught approach	Invited multiple faculty members to teach in the course	Networking and collaboration opportunities between students, faculty, and guest speakers	Find a date/time for the course that does not conflict with other courses so that more students and faculty can participate
	Needed to provide multiple forms of expertise	Introduced students to multiple ways of understanding equity and inequality	
	Ensured at least two faculty members were constants in the course each week	Faculty members learned from each other about course structure and content	Find a way for both students and instructors to give and receive feedback
			Incorporate into faculty teaching load
			Be open to syllabus changes as events evolve
Skills and knowledge to further work in public	Provided students with a range of public	Students sought to take action and recognized that	One semester was not enough

Theme	Response	Impact	Lessons Learned
administration and democracy	administration topics	comprehensive solutions are necessary for addressing equity issues Background information that provided context for contemporary events Knowledge that will be critical in improving public administration and making it more equitable	MPA programs are in a good position to offer these types of courses • Interaction between faculty, students, and guest speakers was beneficial

Although team-teaching in public affairs classrooms may not be a common practice, we show through our findings that this pedagogical approach, when centering social equity and multi-disciplinary approaches, holds promise for addressing evolving and complex realities. In addition, we find there were important learning outcomes for faculty about course structure, content, and equity that can influence their future course design and implementation. Taken together, this study suggests collaborative teaching approaches can be an effective learning tool for both students and faculty, particularly during times of uncertainty. However, the reality of these issues come with emotional labor and costs on faculty and students. Both faculty and students experienced emotional responses to the pandemic and protests, and these shared experiences removed boundaries and invited students and faculty to discuss these issues as peers.

Moving forward, to fulfill our obligations to prepare public servants for contemporary challenges, we suggest that public affairs, policy, and administration programs ask questions such as:

- As faculty, are we agile enough to sense when the times in which we live provide us an opportunity to design and offer an innovative course? An important element of the success of this course was the real-time nature of the course and focusing on our perceptions of what was going wrong. Developing means of capturing this ability to flex and offer courses that enable us to do this is vital.
- How do lessons learned from organizing a course around a topic such as the 2020 pandemic and protests affect the development of traditional courses in a curriculum? That is, how do individual professors and instructors structure

courses to insert our societal times into subject matter? This is more than being flexible as faculty. It involves seeing the world as public service practitioners who understand how the environment in which we live alters the terms of our service. In community with other scholars and practitioners, we need to give ourselves room to explore.

- How do we create support systems for students during times of significant uncertainty and change? The toll of the pandemic on the mental health of students is significant, especially because of the increased isolation that was required (Yaghi, 2021). Our findings indicate the learning community created through the course helped negate the sense of isolation felt by students. What are other equity-focused and collaborative strategies that can support students and foster a greater sense of connectedness?
- Are there other opportunities and venues available to us to encourage free exchange of ideas between faculty and students, opportunities and venues that do not always look like a class? This question reminds us that our program serves mostly very busy in-service professionals. How do we structure co-curricular and other non-classroom opportunities? Ultimately, we are a community that bolsters our democracy. We should continue to seek ways to do that strengthening.
- From a pedagogical perspective, how does the use of remote technologies provide opportunities to advance open discussion opportunities? Technology is one of our greatest allies. Too often faculty members feel they should understand and do all the technological innovating. How do we continue to approach this in collaborative and team-oriented ways?
- Finally, if we notice the same things that Frederickson noticed in 1982, is it not a fact that we almost always “live in interesting times?” How do we respond to them by using and building upon social equity frameworks in our field? What does a community of public administration practitioners and scholars look like? What is our responsibility to this community?

At the time of this writing, the pandemic continues, though now we are trying to determine the efficacy of an ongoing vaccination program as new variants of the COVID-19 virus continue to emerge. Derek Chauvin was found guilty on all charges for the death of George Floyd, yet three police officers must still face trial. The election seems not to have gone away, as many state legislatures have passed, or are considering passing, restrictive voting laws. The corporate protest and the resultant calls for boycotts, based on new Georgia voting laws, are evidence that we do not agree on how elections should be conducted. Anti-Asian racism and violence has increased in

our cities, sparked at least in part by the belief that the COVID-19 virus was intentionally manufactured in China.

We can talk about these things in our classes. We all live in the same world. However, we also have a responsibility to address the response of the public administration community. A large percentage of our student body is composed of in-service professionals, which is not unique for an urban metropolitan university. Our students have very different professional backgrounds and perspectives. Some of our students are police officers, while others organize or participate in protests. We have students who are elected state and local officials, active-duty military or national guard members, and leaders of nonprofits that advocate for issues such as more equitable access to voting. In the same class, it would not be unusual to find a student who works as a staff member of a U.S. Senator from one political party, and a student working on the campaign of a candidate from the other party.

Yet, despite these differences, our experience reiterates the potential for higher education to encourage critical thinking, dialogue, and learning from a variety of different perspectives and enhance our understanding of a period of global uncertainty and unrest. And at the end of the course, all students left with a sense of responsibility and recognized that they needed to harness and leverage this new knowledge into action. We believe that the future of public administration education is one in which faculty and students find new ways to collaborate and learn. We do not educate, send students on their way, and move on. We build community. We would not profess to have arrived, nor should any university. Our job is truly never complete, but we should commit to continued self-examination, improvement of our pedagogy, awareness of our environment, and building the community of public administration practitioners and scholars.

Notes

1. One coauthor was a student in the course.
2. Because we sought to evaluate a graduate course with the plan to write this article, the Office of Regulatory Affairs (ORA) at the University of Nebraska Omaha determined this project does not constitute human subject research as defined at 45CFR46.102.
3. Replication data and materials for both the student surveys and the faculty questionnaire can be accessed at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/G4Q192>.

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Appendix A

List of Pandemics, Protest, and Policy Course Topics

- Week 1: Welcome and Introduction to the Course (all instructors)
- Week 2: History of Pandemics, Social Vulnerability, and Social Capital
- Week 3: Legal Power, Racist Power, and Power to the People
- Week 4: Local Government and Fiscal Distress During COVID-19
- Week 5: Nonprofit Responses and Action During COVID-19
- Week 6: Philanthropy and Racial Justice
- Week 7: Social Determinants of Health and Racial Inequalities During COVID-19
- Week 8: COVID-19 From a Comparative International Perspective
- Week 9: Police Reforms, Oversight, and De-Funding
- Week 10: U.S. Armed Forces as Law Enforcement
- Week 11: Civic Engagement and Inequities During COVID-19
- Week 12: Public Safety in Aviation During COVID-19
- Week 13: Food Insecurity and COVID-19
- Week 14: Thanksgiving Break
- Week 15: Course Wrap-Up and Final Reflections (all instructors)