



## Place-Making, Identity, and Service Learning Among First-Year College Students

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# Place-Making, Identity, and Service Learning Among First-Year College Students

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## Abstract

Place-making is the set of social, political and material processes by which people create and recreate experienced geographies. In the case of immigrant experience, the physical space provides an environment in which memories, traditions, and evolution of identity can occur. In this case study, I examine the results of a service-learning project with first-year Honors students in a public, regional university. In the course design, community-engaged activities, and assignments, I shaped the experiences of the students as if they were translocals and the college campus were the receiving community. Although not explicitly detailed to the students, their project was framed as an immigrant community that had the opportunity to transform space for the betterment of both groups. The assignment -- to improve access and quality of the campus food pantry -- created new socio-spatial relationships and enabled the student to remain connected to places left behind while forging new place ties. As they explored the data about food insecurity among college students, institutional structure, and interacted with diverse groups on campus, they formed new social and cultural connections, resulting in a hybrid identity and a sense of agency in their new community.

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## Introduction

Due to the disruptions related to the COVID-19 pandemic, including remote learning and social isolation, the secondary school and, accordingly, first-year college experience of students changed radically (Hsieh et al., 2021; Jones et al., 2022; Rao & Rao, 2021). Incoming students do not have the high school experiences that laid the foundation to foster connectedness in the post-secondary learning environment and build persistence toward graduation. The significant interruptions to the routine and structure of the students' lives prior to college resulted in concerns about how to address the adverse mental health consequences while building skills for college success. In order to reduce disengagement and facilitate the transition process, studies about the first-year university experience have forefronted the "importance of self-efficacy, belonging, emotions and wellbeing as interwoven pathways" that are "contextual and dynamic" (Kahu et al., 2019, p. 657). In the post-pandemic context, a shared discontinuity in the educational interface is the physical and psychosocial displacement caused by school closings, social distancing, and quarantine. The altered, limited, or absent relationship with a physical learning space impaired the students' capacity to establish a stable place identity.

Place-making is the set of social, political, and material processes by which people create and recreate experienced geographies. In the university setting, the first-year experience courses formulate, deliver, and guide place-making steps especially for at-risk students. Instruction includes navigating the campus space – arriving to classroom or laboratory, locating the office of a professor or advisor, meeting classmates in a lounge, or attending a theater production – and mediates the relationship between structure and agency. Students understand and can reflect upon available environments thus exercising agency and increasing self-efficacy. In the pre-pandemic period, particular place frames were structurally familiar and the transitional process to relationship place-making was foregrounded: the familiar classroom space became a place for civil debate, the librarian replaced an internet search, and the nurse’s office was exchanged for a wellness center to request contraceptives or confidential counseling. Now, beyond the actual classwork, students face new obstacles to adjusting to life on campus. “After nearly two years of an altered learning environment, they are having to relearn how to interact in a physical classroom, how to socialize, and how to manage the expectations of being a college student at the same time” (Sanchez, 2022).

For vulnerable students, any additional barrier to access such as spatial discomfort dims their prospects for success. But, even for academically-capable students, the nature of what is “baseline” or “normal” has changed in terms of place-making and raises concerns about possible inequities. This case study reports the results of purposeful integration of the process of place-making into a first-year experience course as a response to pandemic learning. The findings indicate that place-conscious education has the potential to bridge sociological distances and influence the production of resilient place identity, an identity that can safely evolve to meet the challenges encountered during the college experience.

## **Methodology**

This study of place-conscious education and service learning in the first-year experience (FYE) was conducted from August to December 2022. The sixteen-week Honors Freshman Seminar is a required course for students admitted to the university Honors Program. During the semester, in keeping with the course topic of “Self-Awareness for Effective Leadership: What a Student Needs”, they completed assignments that engaged the five dimensions of place as defined by David A. Gruenewald (2003). The service-learning partnership with the campus food pantry framed the five dimensions through the lens of food insecurity on college campuses. The aim of the course design was to influence ethical place-making that developed understanding of the educational space, forged commitment to the diverse community of students on our campus, and fostered a sense of agency toward the learning space.

The Honors Program has over 360 students on a campus of about 4,000 students. The acceptance data shows that they enter the program with a 3.83 cumulative GPA and 37% of the students identify as ethnic minorities. Of the 27 students in the course section in this study, there were 17 females and 10 males, and 10 identified as minorities. Seventeen students were entering freshman. Five of the first-year students were ranked as sophomores because they had earned college credits through dual enrollment coursework or Advanced Placement exams. Two of the first-year students were upper-classmen: one due to credits through military training while another had attended

community college and was returning to the classroom after raising a family. The remaining students started post-secondary studies during the pandemic and were sophomores or juniors but had hesitated to apply to the Honors Program, prompted by concerns of course rigor and the required service-learning hours. All members of this group, despite their academic progress, had not defined an identity in relation to this space nor its community; that is, they had not made a place of our campus.

An essential component of the Honors Seminar is an exploration leadership, primarily the qualities humility, decision-making, accountability, communication, innovation, confidence, and empathy. If these dis-placed individuals were to imagine themselves as future leaders, they should first understand how they achieved a position of privilege as Honors students within the educational structure. These qualities were included in prompts about place identity.

Research findings are based on responses to graded and ungraded assignments, anonymous responses to spontaneous prompts in the classroom and anonymous submissions made outside of the classroom, and comments on the anonymous course evaluation. The results indicate the effectiveness of place-based education as an approach to help students think critically about places of engagement and reflect on place identity. Due to the pandemic, many college students are not only less prepared but are also re-learning how to be students. Focused place-based activities can serve to further that process in a supportive way.

### **The Five Dimensions of Place and Living with Intention**

In “Foundations of Place: A Multidisciplinary Framework for Place-Conscious Education” (2003), David A. Gruenewald draws “on insights from phenomenology, critical geography, bioregionalism, ecofeminism, and other place-conscious traditions” to posit place-conscious pedagogy (619). The author takes issue with the divisive and isolating practices that exist within formal schooling, practices that separate academic achievement from the complex community that surrounds it. Gruenewald calls for “an educational revolution of reengagement with the cultural and ecological contexts of human and nonhuman existence” and challenges educators to critically reflect on “the consequences of school-centric curriculum that ignores the pedagogical significance of experience with familiar and forgotten places outside schools” (645-646). He defines five interrelated dimensions: the 1) perceptual; 2) sociological; 3) ideological; 4) political; and 5) ecological.

During the semester, students did not directly examine Gruenewald’s theories that “places are pedagogical” and his interrogation of the disconnect “between the places we call schools and the places where we live our lives” (623). I surmised that the students could easily describe isolating experiences that they had in educational spaces as a result of institutional practices, especially during the pandemic. Certainly, an academic approach of the dimensions of place and place-based education would bring these unconscious places to consciousness and be a challenging intellectual exercise. But such an exercise could not be separated from pandemic disruptions that extended beyond the classroom. Recent research underscored the adverse effects on the mental health of adolescents and young adults, and overt discussions about specific negative experiences would reopen fresh wounds. One goal of the course design was to enact the process of place-making in the educational space rather

than better cope with distressful memories about the learning environment.

I devised a way to emphasize the benefits and individualize the process of place-making while engaging Gruenewald's five dimensions of place. As a requirement of the course, students read *An Intentional Life: Five Foundations of Authenticity & Purpose* by the psychologist Lisa Kentgen. Using layman's terms, the author describes the five building blocks of an intentional life as actions or states of being. These core areas are succinctly explained, then the author gives examples of her patients that evolved their authentic self through improved consciousness of their thoughts and actions. In addition, Kentgen includes practices for each of the areas that can be applied to common, daily activities. The building blocks are not mutually exclusive categories but similar to Gruenewald's dimensions, each can be taken "as a separate object of inquiry and practice" (Kentgen, 2018, p. 16). I had discovered a self-help book about place consciousness.

Kentgen introduces awareness as a first step toward living with intention. Awareness is an active process that brings consciousness to "how you receive the outside world as it comes to you through all your senses", a concept which aligns with Gruenewald's perceptual dimension. The next step is reflection especially about relationships and personal interactions, a practice applicable to the sociological dimension. According to Kentgen, "choosing" is the third foundation of an intentional life and requires assessment of the conditions that exert influence over our decisions, that is, facing the ideological dimension that impedes our willingness to risk. The fourth building block synthesizes awareness, reflection, and choosing to determine how and when to act. Acting includes restraint, being proactive rather than reactive, and employing intentional practices "to build the kind of life and world you want to see." A deeper understanding of marginality, community, and the power of acting on one's beliefs and sense of purpose is a political practice. Finally, Kentgen posits "allowing" as a radical act. We have been conditioned to disallow, to expend energy on blocking out what should not belong in our space; we are "hard-wired" not to let go, fearing that allowing is a passive act. Although Gruenewald's critique of the ecological dimension focuses on destructive ecological and socio-ecological traditions that have led to resource depletion and erosion of diversity, I framed "allowing" as a respect and openness to the learning environment. This perspective granted students to accept the abundant goods and services offered on campus without judgement. The correlations of Awareness-Perceptual, Reflection-Sociological, Choosing-Ideological, Acting-Political, Allowing-Ecological can be graphed in this way:

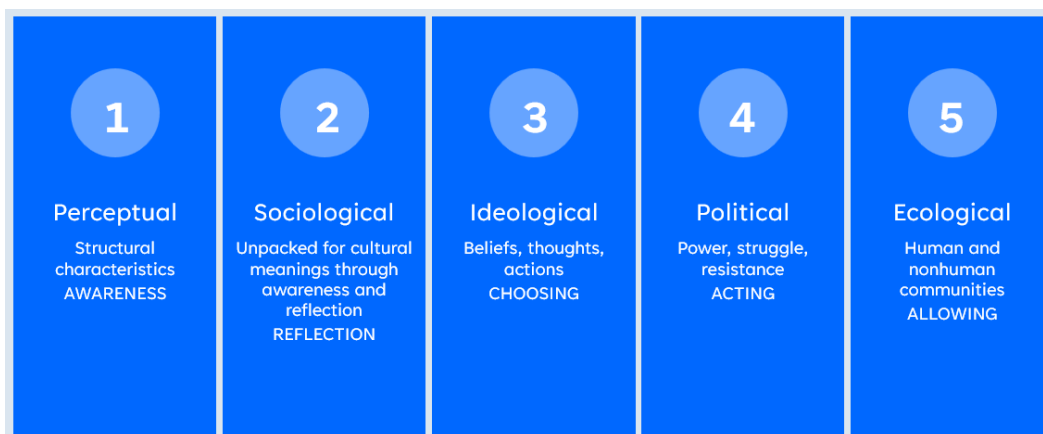


Figure 1. Five Dimensions of Place and Living with Intention

### **The Perceptual Dimension of Place**

The human-made structures that regulate our geographical experiences – such as school buildings – can shape our connections to peoples and places inside and outside of the space. We are trained not to maintain active awareness of our learning space. In order to excel, students are trained to have the space, the classroom, recede from consciousness during moments of academic performance. Students that are unable to block out the educational space are eligible for accommodation for testing and learning in a distraction-reduced environment. Usually, we are taught to develop an unreflective, unconscious attitude toward this social and physical landscape. Heightened awareness is only necessary for physical safety. Knowledge of fire exits, tornado shelters, and active shooter lockdown locations reinforce the dangers of this space.

School buildings are designed to efficiently separate groups and individuals. Administrative offices, laboratories, welding shops, and football fields are material cultural formations that have become natural parts of the educational system. As Gruenewald points out, if we are to raise consciousness about the human-place relationship, we “must first acknowledge that places themselves have something to say” (624). On our campus, the Honors Program has a large, dedicated lounge within the administration building. The open area is furnished with several tables and booths, including pub seating. Also in the seating and collaboration area is the desk of the program intern, who can readily answer questions and help students complete forms needed to maintain their Honors’ designation. A small separate room houses a refrigerator and mini-pantry with beverages and snacks. The offices of the director and assistant director of the program face this space, separated only by attractive glass windows and office doors. Thus, key administrative services – dedicated staff, financial aid, disability support, bookstore, etc. – are easily accessible from the Honors Program lounge.

In the first section of Kentgen’s book there is an exercise to foster awareness. It requires making a list of activities that cultivate a personal sense of well-being. In her instructions, she explains that the finished list should then be kept in plain sight. The items on the list should be as specific as possible, including location (the spa, the park, the gym). Most importantly, the list should not include activities that originate from a sense of embarrassment or deprivation (“I should go to the gym to lose weight and not be so self-conscious”) (36). As I designed an assignment to practice awareness in the perceptual dimension, it was essential that the spatial exploration was safe, individualized, and relevant. In addition, the students had to connect these physical interactions to pleasant feelings. Among the Honors students, I observed that they had fused the concepts of well-being and academic achievement. First and foremost, they anxiously protected their course grade. The moment that I began discussing course requirements, it was clear that there was a very low tolerance of ambiguity. As I worded it to one of my colleagues, “they are wound so tightly”. Students quickly questioned the word count of each submission, possible point deductions if submitted late, and asked if I would read drafts and they could make corrections before I assigned a grade. For them, school was a placeless institution, a space where human interaction was ultimately transactional. How could I foster positive, conscious attitudes about physical space?

In “Making sense of ‘place’: Reflections on pluralism and positionality in place research”, Daniel R. Williams draws attention to the complexity of place meaning: “Places are, by definition, unique such that their meanings

need not fall neatly into some categorical inventory or generalize across people, other places, or time” (Williams, 2014, p.78). The traditional campus tour or map assignment (visit the library, take a selfie at the bridge, bring a flyer from the wellness center) would perpetuate the utilitarian structural characteristics of the university space, perpetuating the institutional pattern of isolating activities and persons based on purpose. In response, I required students to perform a non-Western practice: Shisa Kanko from Japan.

Shisa Kanko, Pointing and Calling, is a safety practice developed in Japan to prevent human error. It is most prominently used in the Japanese rail industry to ensure that proper operating procedures are being followed. Modern pointing and calling protocol is now deemed a “Non-Technical Skill (NTS), a cognitive, social, or personal skill that improves safety by supporting technical skills”. The method requires co-action and co-reaction among the brain, eyes, hands, mouth, and ears as the person points to the place or object and calls out the operation to be informed. Shisa Kanko turns off the auto pilot: it is cognitive task switching that increases brain activity in the prefrontal and visual cortex (Violato et al., 2022, p. 87). Christopher Roosen, a psychologist that works with product useability, says that pointing and calling “both reorient and activate our attention towards a target for future action. Even when carrying out a familiar task, the visual and auditory activation makes it easier for us to both *remember to act* and to *choose the right course of action*”. The result is that when “we take *actions out of our heads* and *embed action in the world*, we suddenly have extra sources of information to guide us. By embedding our behaviour in the world, we reduce the burden on memory, relying on new information about our tasks to guide ongoing action” (Roosen, 2020).

During the first two weeks of the semester, students were required to Point and Call while they were on campus, spontaneously naming the place and an associated activity. They were not required to provide rationale for the activity that they chose, ask others about the space, nor provide facts about its function. Overwhelmingly, students reported an awareness of attractive spaces on campus that provided academic and personal benefits. Some of the spaces and activities were

art gallery	look at pottery
Starbucks	drink latte
maker’s space	print anime stickers
riverwalk	photograph ducks
library study corner	take a nap

While sharing their findings, it became evident that making sense of a physical space was an individual process. Some students balked at the price of a Starbucks’ beverage. Another admitted she was frightened by the geese near the river. And, while I would not have pointed it out during a campus tour, several students agreed that the library provided a comfortable nap site.

Kentgen closes the section about physical awareness in the perceptual dimension with a discussion about “the body’s intelligent animal nature”. Unconscious physical states which she calls “openness” and “constriction” are reminders that the mind is embodied. The author warns that pushing negative thoughts away or ignoring when we

withdraw from physical discomfort will thwart our capacity to resolve our conflicts (63-64). I problematized but did not threaten the safety of the students' perceptual space by indicating the location of the campus food pantry. After a mere several steps along the walkway that leads from a parking area, a student is offered two choices from the same point in space: turn right into one of the newest buildings on campus in which our class was held or turn left into an old building and through a storage corridor to the food pantry. The food pantry became an unavoidable place in their perceptual dimension and a single point on the sidewalk required that they interrogate their reactions. They were challenged with cultivating a more open state about the proximity of food pantry to Honors seminar and to reflect on other academic moments of constrictions and openness such as answering incorrectly in class or feeling confident during an exam. How did the students' beliefs and expectations about the place contribute to these reactions? How could someone change the quality of their constrictions? Discussing these questions furthered our examination of the five dimensions of place.

### **The Sociological Dimension of Place**

When I was contacted and offered the opportunity to teach an Honors Seminar, I was given a very short time period to create the course. The administrator addressed my hesitation by emphasizing that these students were "the best and the brightest...and...a joy to teach." I would be "working with some of the most dedicated students on campus." (N. Karakatsanis, personal communication, June 22, 2022) Unlike other intentional first-year experiences, this FYE would not need to foreground the common concerns for which the high-impact practice is designed: support an academically diverse student population, build persistence toward graduation through a better understanding of classroom expectations, and establish basic practical skills for college success. The identity of the students and their proven success in the classroom would result in a more pleasant social interaction during the semester.

First, I must make it clear that, without a doubt, the director of the Honors Program actively supports an inclusive and equitable learning experience for all our students. The remarks of the email serve to assert that places are social constructions, and an Honors Program fosters a culturally shared identity. In the case of the Honors students, sociological place-making is organized through the program. They regularly participate in service-learning projects that enhance the campus image in the community. There are many Honors outings and events for which they earn hours to maintain their standing in the program. The newsletter provides information and opportunities to foster connections among this student population. These students can socialize without shouldering the responsibility of place makers. Our expectations and experiences of places are mediated by culture, education, and personal perspectives but it is not feasible to ask an adolescent or young adult during the first year of college to analyze their interaction in the social landscape. Any obviously socially constructed space – interstate highway, giant shopping mall, or university campus – is designed to limit and guide social interaction. These places are accompanied by the background noise of unconscious thought similar to the background music in a store. Unpacking schooling's experiences and becoming conscious of the quantity, quality, and impact of one's thoughts may take years.

Additional obstacles to increased consciousness about the sociological space were social isolation and emotional



turmoil caused by the pandemic as well as recent racial/ethnic and political conflicts in the United States. I did not want to risk hypersensitive reactions while we examined the sociological dimension of place and how, through repeated experience, it is invested with meaning. Therefore, I focused on the fundamental notion that a socially-constructed product is an expression of culture and represents the outcome of human choices and decisions (Gruenewald, p. 627).

In the section of her book about reflecting, Kentgen recommends observing and naming one's thoughts as a first step toward meaningful reflection. She explains that she trains clinicians and asks her clients to use the question, "What's happening right now?", instead of "How are you feeling?" (90). The first question prompts a more dispassionate stance but also requires awareness of space, people, and emotional state for a detailed response. I again turned to a non-Western practice to provide the students with a tool to recognize participatory moments in the place-making process by requiring that they name and bring to consciousness unexpected moments of beneficial social interaction in the learning environment. Students were asked to catalog moments of 'Pura Vida'.

Pura Vida, life is good or a good life, is a common utterance throughout Costa Rica. If your hands are full and someone opens a door for you, Pura Vida, the universe has placed this wonderful stranger in your space. The phrase is a verbal device that illustrates an interpersonal connection and "is used when the speaker believes that he or she is in the presence of someone who shares his/her cultural experience". Thus, it socially maintains relationships and builds identity. Since it occurs abundantly in speech, it is both easy to observe and exists below the level of consciousness (Trester, 2003). By using this device, students would consciously align themselves with positive social interaction in this culturally-constructed dimension of place. Students were limited to human-human interaction as the basis for the assignment and could not report on a natural bit of luck (the rain stopped).

Within two weeks, students had submitted dozens of examples of Pura Vida interactions. Many of the examples were instances in which students could quickly or efficiently finish a task. Saving time as a fortunate occurrence seemed intuitive to both Western habits of mind and the demands of college life. In these cases, a classmate or fellow student had needed school supplies (pens, blank paper, a copy of the textbook) or money. But when pressed to report on instances that were less critical or seemed to make minimal demands on the giver, one student happily sighed and said that she was grateful for the crushed granola bar that a classmate had in his backpack. Her desire for a quick snack could have been resolved in a different way but the small act meant that further decision was unnecessary. More than gratitude, the Pura Vida moment was one of solidarity. Within a few weeks, a new perceptual and sociological awareness was developing. Students were more fully conscious of the non-classroom spaces they occupied and acknowledged the mutually beneficial interactions with others that shared that space.

### **The Ideological Dimension of Place**

Our first class visit to the food pantry was a stark reminder that place is not space. A food pantry is a loaded signifier. A few students physically held back, not wanting to enter, clearly in a state of constriction to use Kentgen's terminology. Some students had volunteered for food drives and at food banks but expressed their discomfort with the proximity of the pantry to our classroom. They did not discredit the need for the resources or

suggest that any action be taken toward the students that might need the aid. However, free and equal access to food, hygiene products, and cleaning supplies seemed at odds with the academic identity that an Honors student sought to create.

Shortly after our group visit, the sociological and ideological dimensions of our classroom underwent a transformation. Students would regularly arrive for the afternoon seminar with snacks or beverages after a quick stop at the nearby campus food pantry. Some classmates admonished their fellow students, citing concern that those few items would deprive others that might have urgent need of them. However, this rationale was unfounded. We had visited the pantry and viewed the abundance of available items. On several occasions, especially before the weekend, four or five students including the students in active military and the adult with family would have multiple bags of supplies. The presence of food pantry utilization in the Honors classroom disrupted the socioeconomic hegemony of the space and provided an opportunity to interrogate our beliefs with regard to the campus resource. To engage with the ideological dimension of place, I drew on Kentgen's foundation of 'choosing' and positioned the students as translocals in a welcoming community.

The food pantry staff does not check student identification nor require signatures, and clients do not have to provide proof of need. There is no proven correlation between academic aptitude and use of the campus food pantry, nor is the issue a concern for institutional research. As an institution, the university has detached shared food rights and community food security from measures of self-reliance and academic progress in order to reduce the stigma associated with the food pantry.

In class, the history of the campus pantry was contextualized through national findings about food insecurity on college campuses and the stigma associated with food pantries (El Zein et al., 2018; Neff, 2019) and students researched recent college hunger statistics (*College Student Hunger Statistics and Research*. Feeding America, n.d.). They readily comprehended the barriers to academic success presented through food insecurity studies and could accurately provide details from the data. However, text comprehension does not imply evolution of attitudes. It seemed that if students needed to utilize food pantry resources due to sufficient economic need or self indulgence, they could do so discreetly without bringing that evidence into the shared space of the classroom.

I pivoted the focus of our conversations to Kentgen's discussion about choosing. The author differentiates managing life's details and completing necessary tasks from the act of conscious decision-making. "When people have a high cognitive load, or a lot going on, they choose the status quo or what is familiar. Since our lives are more hectic and distracting than ever, this isn't promising for making intentional decisions" (110). I placed students in groups and asked them to share silly, funny, or even embarrassing choices or slips they had made as a consequence of their busy schedules. The examples that were anonymously written on the whiteboard included wearing clothes out of the dirty laundry hamper, nearly running out of gas instead of filling the tank, packing the wrong food and so not having lunch, and even forgetting to pick up a younger sibling from school. I then asked that they reconsider the ideological dimension of the learning environment: what if an important function of the university were to help students reduce the amount of choice to be made so that they could be intentional decision-makers?

Time and energy are important assets for academic success. All students in the class were able to give examples of how they routinized decisions to consciously reduce the number of choices they would have to make. They chose what they would wear and make meal plans according to work and class schedules, arranged gym time or self care routines, and even designated spaces for items needed on different days of the week. From color coding to text reminders, as a group, the Honors students knew how to simplify choices and declutter the day-to-day management of their lives. But they also acknowledged that they were overwhelmed by the homework demands in college and struggled to meet deadlines. Many of them blamed themselves and questioned their ability as students. They had not imagined that the university could have a different ideological dimension, that it could be a different cultural product, than their earlier school experiences.

Kentgen's exercise on the decision-making hierarchy begins by placing value-inspired goals at the top. I adapted the author's exercise and had students write their degree and projected year of graduation to start the list. Students were reminded that this was a critical step toward living an intentional life, and currently this goal was the most important use of their time and energy. They then listed choices and decisions that they made during the past week, and noted tasks or decisions that they considered a waste of time or of low importance related to their graduation goal. They discussed which choices would have been easier or less time consuming if there was help available at the moment of decision. Finally, they explained why or why not they would have accepted help. In many cases, students felt it necessary to maintain an appearance of self-reliance or independence and would have only accepted help from a trusted source, from a person that would not threaten that identity. I posited that the university is a place that is committed to helping students reach their goals and that a function of its resources – including the food pantry -- is to help students practice intentional choice. Kentgen warns that unproductive tendencies or biases keep people engaged in activities that they do not consciously choose. I asked that students address their bias and try to shift the role of the food pantry from the margins to the essential network of places that comprise the university.

Translocality “illustrates a new character of relations. Translocal relations connect and influence different localities and people at the same time. That means conditions or events at one place have an immediate impact on other connected places”. A translocal is a migrant that has not suffered irreparable rupture, uprootedness, nor a definitive shift in social space. Translocal communities are networks comprised of individuals that have place identities in different spaces. Through these identities and networks, translocals do not remain outsiders in a welcoming community. Instead, there are “high degrees of social embeddedness of migrants in both the place of origin and the place of destination” (Peth, 2021). “Mobilities” scholarship in the last two decades underscore that place identities “are more fluid, boundless, and indeed performative in nature” (Daniels et al., 2015, p. 26). This means that newly arrived translocals can utilize support and information provided through a network to function within geographically distanced places; as well, they can quickly adapt and contribute to the network, inserting themselves into changing space relations. In addition, seeking hegemony would cut connections and resources. The diversity of the network is beneficial. I challenged students to position themselves as translocals. They did not need to construct a relationship with every migrant (student) but it is hoped, if they have the means, that they support the network of goods and services for fellow migrants. They would engage this challenge through a service-learning project with the campus food pantry.

### **The Political Dimension of Place**

“While individuals may experience particular place-frames prior to political engagement, these frames are best understood as *latent*. As competing discourses about places are contested (and, in their contestation, shaped and adopted by others), they become constitutive of new, shared place identities” (Pierce et al., 2010, p. 55). In the area of political geography, research is concerned with the context of power, struggle, and resistance within a space. The language of power relations in education includes rich geographical metaphors: closing the achievement gap, centering student retention, bridging marginality through inclusive practice. Through place-conscious education, students become more conscious of the spatial dimensions of social relationships, forms of oppression, and possibilities for resistance (Gruenewald, 2003, p. 633).

The service-learning project in the Honors seminar course was designed to demystify academic culture and discourses while fostering consciousness of food insecurity as a barrier to success in the college environment. The students in class were enthusiastic about completing their required service hours through partnership with the campus food pantry. All students had volunteered in projects such as canned food drives, stocking shelves at a food pantry, creating food baskets at church, or serving meals at a community kitchen. Their experiences shaped their expectations. They would simply transfer what they had done in the past to the new space. The class passively awaited, expecting that I would distribute schedules, sign up sheets, and choices of tasks.

They were surprised by the first step in the project. I required that they submit a resume and short cover letter to apply for a leadership position on a service-learning team. We minimized our definition of leadership to a quality that changes the status quo. Thus, a leader could organize efficiently, build consensus, or provide needed information for task completion. Students chose a proven trait that they possessed and explained why it would contribute to their leadership abilities. More importantly, the cover letter had to express their authentic self. I required that the submission demonstrate reflection instead of research, being instead of doing. The submissions resulted in discussion about the importance of team diversity. The student that responded as “organized” and “sociable” recognized the benefits of collaborating with another who was “patient” or “passionate”. They kept these qualities in mind as we formed the teams.

Students were not assigned to teams. They could choose a team but, once committed, they could not change groups. During one class period, they examined the different group tasks and could interact with classmates to weigh the pros and cons of the required activities in light of their skills and leadership qualities. Students were encouraged to consider challenges as opportunities for growth and were assured that I would seek appropriate resources as needed. One student clearly hesitated and was not engaged in the exploration exercise. When queried, he confessed that he didn’t care what he did “to get his hours” but he wanted to be in a group with certain classmates and not others. He was waiting to see how the groups were formed. The students immediately responded, explaining that the point of this exercise was to choose differently than in previous settings. They offered examples of how they were prioritizing their decision making and expressed their concerns about their skills, but they also demonstrated an understanding that the process was as important as the product and they were in a safe space to risk making changes. They described the fundamentals of place-making.

Kentgen distinguishes between doing and acting. Doing is necessary to fulfill the mundane tasks of life as well as, in the case of Honors students, completing assignments to maximize the course grade. Such students are trained to seek advantageous choices and have cultivated characteristic habits of mind that run counter to living intentionally. While they completed their team projects, I assumed the role of influencer. I would lead ideas but not the people. Each team had to develop its action plan, division of labor, deadlines, and quality of the deliverables. I regularly intervened to remind students about the reason for these efforts: the assignment was to intentionally act in a way that engaged the power, struggle, and resistance embodied by the food pantry. Students that need this resource to succeed in college were in a struggle with the place of education.

Buttons and flyers appeared on campus that encouraged students to stop by the pantry for food, hygiene items, and cleaning supplies. A feature article about the importance of the resource was published in the college newspaper -- passionately co-authored by the student that had been waiting for the groups to be formed before making his decision. The maker's space on campus became a meeting place for the teams that designed, decorated, and placed bins that resulted in a successful food drive. One team collaborated with the media production center and a high-quality, student-made video was delivered to the pantry administrators. It is now a centerpiece of the pantry's social media. The food pantry reported that there was an unprecedented number of individual client visits to the food pantry in the single month of November alone. The students themselves made sense of place, of place meaning, and place making. Spontaneous descriptions of the pantry became "our pantry", "our students", and "we" instead of "them". The students were so preoccupied with expressing intention and choice, that when it was announced the class had earned a campus service award, it caught all of us off guard.

At the end of semester, each team presented information about its planning and process, and evaluated the outcomes. I closed our exploration of place-making with a reminder that these achievements and place ties were contingent and relational. The term will conclude, and the place constructed in this specific class will end. However, they carry with them the capacity to shape the space of learning through awareness, reflecting, intentional choices, and committed action. But now, it was time to let go.

### **The Ecological Dimension of Place**

Gruenewald's ecological dimension of place encourages consciousness of the connection between human and nonhuman communities, and an understanding of ecological limits and the features of places. Thus, we ended our food insecurity discussion with an exploration of food distribution, food rescue, and food waste. The university food pantry is the last stop for the items donated by grocery stores, local chefs, and even Trader Joe's. If this food is not distributed to our campus community, it ends up in a landfill. The pantry, as a place, has a decidedly ecological dimension. A few students admitted that they had initially refused to use the pantry but began to utilize it after learning about the process of food disposal. After all, if we were just going to throw the food away, they would be willing to form a place identity or a place attachment that aligned with their environmental concerns. This was the dimension that resonated with their willingness to be place-makers.

"The fifth foundation of an intentional life is allowing, which is the act of letting be; letting experience unfold

without interfering” (Kentgen, P. 173). The final reflection paper assigned in class was not a synthesis of course content nor an analysis of campus food pantry utilization. The essay had two prompts that each student had to address about their service-learning experience: 1) I didn’t know what I didn’t know and 2) Learning is not a zero sum game. The first prompt gave them the opportunity to express their vulnerabilities, process of self discovery, and growing consciousness about the educational space. The second prompt encouraged them to reflect on how they had gauged their worthiness in school, on whether the “win or lose” approach serves their life purpose, and about the value of team building and the consequent learning process. The essays were deeply insightful and revealed the positive impact of the place-making approach.

## Conclusion

Whether through probationary admissions or Honors program scholarship, college students encounter new challenges in the post-pandemic learning environment. Not all of these can be addressed in a first-year experience course. But the learning space does not need to operate pedagogically beneath a conscious level. This case study indicates that students can be actively supported to become place-makers and forge a place identity that can contribute to belongingness and possibly persistence. In this context the question was not what sorts of meanings are attached to a place but to understand conceptually or empirically how first-year students fashion their world into places. Since the point of becoming more conscious of places and education is to extend our notions of pedagogy and accountability outward, similar to the objectives of service learning and community engagement, place-conscious education can play a role in developing future leaders.

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