

Returning What was Lost:

Reengaging and Reconnecting Students through Community Engagement

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<p>ABSTRACT</p> <p>Humanistic geographers have referred to the theory of sense of place as a personal connection with place, built-up over both years of residence and involvement in the community (Hay, 1988).</p> <p>Community engagement activities such as the SFA Stone Fort Museum’s “Esperanza’s Night Out” provided a venue for the students to belong to a place after the pandemic. Students were able to reconnect and reengage through a collaborative event with the university and the local community.</p>	<p>THEORETICAL APPROACH</p> <p>Community engagement strategies are crucial for building and nurturing customers, users and/or fans. Each community has its own values and interests; there is not a one-size-fits-all solution.</p> <p>The most important element of any community is – unsurprisingly – its’ members. A community engagement strategy that gives community members a place to express themselves is beneficial.</p> <p>Keep in mind when employing this strategy that a successful community is almost entirely about them, not about you. People love to talk to each other about things that matter to them, and this is something that should always be encouraged. Make it easy for members to tell their stories, share their experiences and grow their passions (Harrower, 2021).</p>	<p>IMPLICATIONS</p> <p>The abrupt shutdowns caused by the COVID-19 pandemic caused students to feel separated from their university communities. The extended nature of the isolation, and uncertainties of campus re-openings and returns, added to student disconnectedness. Students working alongside university faculty and staff to produce Stone Fort Museum’s “Esperanza’s Night Out” were able to re-establish their place in the SFA and Nacogdoches, Texas communities through a transformational learning experience</p>
<p>STONE FORT MUSEUM</p> <p>Housed on the SFA campus, the Stone Fort Museum celebrates early East Texas history with stories about the people remembered or forgotten, places cherished or destroyed, things made or used, and challenges faced.</p>		<p>REFERENCES</p> <p>Harrower, M. (2021, April 23). Community engagement. <i>Disciple</i>. https://www.disciplemedia.com/engaging-your-community/community-engagement-strategies/</p> <p>Hay, R. B. (1988). Toward a theory of sense of place. <i>Trumpeter</i>, 5(4). 159-164.</p>

STUDENT LEARNING

“Working within a theme, we created a story through our food and learning activities. This helped us to refine skills that we have learned in class, including teamwork, communication and attention to detail. We embraced new, diverse perspectives through food and culture, and successfully shared those forward.”



STUDENT REFLECTION

“Since COVID, I have taken many classes online or via zoom, which made it difficult to nurture relationships with professors and classmates. When I came back to campus, I wasn’t connected. Service learning led to so many opportunities; it has helped me feel like I am an important part of SFA and Nacogdoches.”

