



SERVICE LEARNING AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT THROUGH HIGHER EDUCATION

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### STUDENT EMPOWERMENT STRATEGIES FOR STUDENT SUCCESS THROUGH COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND BUILDING BRIDGES WITH NON-PROFIT PARTNERS

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#### ABSTRACT:

For the past 16 years, the Principles of Public Relations course has integrated Service Learning in the classroom and build meaningful partnerships with nonprofits and the external community. By working directly with these organizations, students not only apply classroom knowledge, but also develop essential skills in public relations, public speaking, teamwork, and critical thinking.

Research and student outcomes consistently show that Service Learning in this course encourages deeper engagement and plays a vital role in student success. It bridges theory and practice while fostering positive outcomes such as stronger academic performance, enhanced writing abilities, and greater cognitive development. Beyond academics, Service Learning also contributes to improved self-esteem, self-efficacy, and leadership skills. Most importantly, it deepens community engagement and raises awareness of pressing social issues.

#### THEMATIC FOCUS:

**Shifting Foundations: Modern fundamental changes in how communities form, change, and represent themselves.**

**Convergence and Intersections: How increasing or decreasing hyperconnectivity can impact community engagement.**

#### BIO(S):

Dr. Zeenat Mitha is a Senior Lecturer at the University of Houston-Downtown (UHD) and has incorporated Service Learning and Community Engagement in her courses, since her first semester at UHD 16 years ago. She understood that academic, critical thinking skills, civic engagement, and cultural awareness would enrich learning for students. Dr. Mitha creates and teaches courses in Strategic Public Relations, Mass Media, and Communications.

An undergraduate student, Nora Villasana, will co-present with me on their Service Learning project with me. Ms. Villasana will go over their meeting with the nonprofit organization, learning about Public Relations (PR) from the course lectures with instructor, and incorporating PR when putting their presentation together, and working in teams, and then going to an external community to present.