International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

Volume 8 | Number 1 Article 9

1-23-2014

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Recommended Citation
Brammer, Leila R. and Morton, Anna (2014) "Course-based Civic Engagement: Understanding Student Perspectives and Outcomes," *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*: Vol. 8: No. 1, Article 9.
Available at: http://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/ij-sotl/vol8/iss1/9

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Course-based Civic Engagement: Understanding Student Perspectives and Outcomes

Abstract
Student reflections on course-based civic engagement provide insights into their experiences and can be a useful foundation for crafting assignments to meet student needs. Rich student narratives emerged from of an immersive semester-long community-based project in a public advocacy course. Although a number of interesting findings, including insights about student learning, personal growth, and empowerment, are embedded in the reflections, this paper focuses on how students described civic engagement, both their experiences and general conclusions about the nature of productive community involvement. Students identified five factors—research, collaboration, effort, passion, and responsibility—as useful and imperative for civic engagement.

Keywords
civic engagement, student perceptions, social responsibility, public discourse

Cover Page Footnote
This research was supported by a Presidential Faculty-Student Collaboration Grant from Gustavus Adolphus College.

This research article is available in International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning:
http://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/ij-sotl/vol8/iss1/9

Renewed calls for civic engagement have echoed through society and higher education. Robert Putnam's (1999) *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* played a role in increased attention and calls for civic engagement in undergraduate curriculum and student life. Since then, the American Association of Colleges and Universities, through their Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP) essential learning outcomes and high-impact educational practices, delivered a definitive call for "personal and social responsibility," "civic knowledge and engagement," and "community-based learning" among other related outcomes and practices (National Task Force, 2012). Many others, including academics, have led the charge or echoed the appeals for increased civic engagement in the college experience (Boyte & Hollander, 1999; Colby, Beaumont, Ehrlich, & Corngold 2007; Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont, & Stephens, 2003; Ehrlich, 2000; Jacoby, 2009).

Undergraduate experiences and curricula have reflected the move to include civic engagement. The AAC&U (2012), the American Democracy Project (2012), the National Conference on Citizenship (2012) as well as individual scholars (e.g. Gotlieb & Robinson 2002; Stokamer 2011) have identified key practices for engaging students effectively and productively in communities. A 2012 analysis of core competencies in civic engagement found in the United States 68 active majors, minors, or certificate programs in civic or community engagement (Brammer et al., 2012). Twenty-three of those programs provided learning outcomes, all of which included civic knowledge and civic skills as foundations of the programs (Brammer et al., 2012).

The explosion of programs and individual courses focused on civic engagement has resulted in research on outcomes. Beyond practice-oriented scholarship, studies have focused on student involvement in civic engagement (Lopez & Keissa, 2009) and on overall issues/concerns in civic engagement courses and curriculum (Lucas, 2009; Musil, 2009; Wallace 2009). Research on specific practices exists, but the literature does not reflect an examination of the student perceptions as a result of their civic engagement experiences. While any such specific study will be limited in scope to a specific course or practice, initiating such research can lead to additional studies and increased focus on

the student experience. After extensive assessment of a program that has a significant civic engagement project at its core, the researchers determined that student voices reflecting perceptions of their civic engagement[1] experiences and learning were an important avenue for research.

The Course in Civic Engagement

In the final reflection paper, one student wrote, "This semester in Public Discourse I have grown immensely as a person and seen the true potential each person can reach when they become passionate about a situation. I learned that individuals are capable of much more than I ever imagined." The growth and motivation expressed by this student reflect the experience of many students after completing an intensive civic engagement project in a course in public advocacy. Students clearly articulate the importance and benefits of engaging in their communities and an understanding of the influence one person can have in a community when they invest in a project to benefit others. Students' participation in the course expanded their views of civic engagement and their civic responsibility to their communities.

In the fall of 2007, the Department of Communication Studies at Gustavus Adolphus College[2] implemented Public Discourse, a class in applied public advocacy with a practicum in civic engagement (for detailed course description see Brammer & Wolter, 2009). As a requirement for the communication studies major and a general education elective, the course enrolls mostly first-year students. As a replacement for public speaking, the course emphasizes oral communication, writing, critical thinking, persuasion, and research, and its main objectives are to provide knowledge and skills in argument and advocacy and to prepare students for meaningful civic life. The course material is applied through a semester-long, concentrated civic engagement project, which requires each student to directly engage with a community.

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[1] The researchers chose to focus on the concept of "civic engagement" as it has garnered a great deal of recent attention and is foundational to the objectives of the course.
[2] Gustavus Adolphus College is a private four-year liberal arts institution located in St. Peter, Minnesota.

For the project, students choose an issue in a community of which they are a part, research it fully, determine the best way to address it, and take action to involve the community in tackling the issue.[3] In two extensive research reports, students are required to complete thorough research prior to determining how to best address the issue. On the basis of that research, students complete a number of assignments to help them thoroughly consider and reflect upon their work, including two significant in-class speeches, an action proposal that provides a rationale for the best way to address the issue in the community. As part of the requirements, students also take direct action in the community to address the issue and reflect on their action and their growth during the course. Projects for the semester studied included developing a fitness trail in a local community, reimagining a high school program to encourage student volunteer activity, advocating for a local community to adopt a domestic partnership registration, developing a summer community theatre, and collecting new immigrant narratives to foster community-wide appreciation and understanding of new immigrants and their cultures.

Past research on Public Discourse focused on skill development. In a comparison study of Public Discourse to Public Speaking (the course it replaced), students in Public Discourse showed significant gains in argument skills and enhanced interest in future civic engagement (Brammer & Wolter, 2008). Other research found that Public Discourse students significantly reduced communication apprehension and developed leadership skills in comparison to a control group of peers not enrolled in the course (Brammer & Wolter, 2010a,

[3] Public Discourse utilizes community-based learning. The project was intentionally created to emphasize students acting as individual citizens within communities of which they are a part. Students individually identify an issue in the community, work with community members to research it fully and determine ways to address the issue, and take action in concert with other community members. As students individually identify issues within their communities and create their own network of community connections, it does not fit most definitions of the "service" component of service-learning (e.g. Furco, 1996; Jacoby, 1996; Jeavons, 1995).

2010b). In response to the civic engagement project, rich student narratives about their learning, growth, and perspectives on civic engagement emerged in papers, class discussion, and course assessment, including focus groups, surveys, and instructor evaluations. Based on the power of the narratives and their previously unstudied viewpoint, the researchers considered how to best study these narratives in order to better understand the course outcomes and the student experience.

With the goal of understanding how students perceive civic engagement and their experiences in the community, this study examines final papers and class discussions regarding civic engagement and student learning. Although several important themes arose, students articulated five prominent components of civic engagement—research, collaboration, effort, passion, and responsibility. These five elements comprise the foundation of civic engagement and provide a basis for understanding students' experience in the course and planned future involvement in their communities.

Method

Thirty-eight students in two sections of Public Discourse completed assignments and participated in small group and full class discussions.[4] Toward the end of the semester, students engaged in in-class conversations regarding the nature of civic engagement—what it is and what can be done to increase it. The discussions began in small groups and later incorporated the class as a whole. On the last day of the semester, a full class discussion began with reports from each student on his/her action in the community and finished with an overall assessment of what the students had learned from the semester. The researchers transcribed the small group and class discussions and entered them into Dedoose.[5] The artifacts for analysis also

[4] Twenty-seven of the students were first-year students; the other students included five sophomores, one junior, and five seniors. Twenty-eight of the students were female, and ten were male. All students signed an informed consent to allow their papers and oral comments to be used in this research.
[5] Dedoose is an Internet-based, subscription data-analysis program that provides the capacity to search, excerpt, and organize key terms and ideas and easily allows researchers to share data and analysis remotely.

included two written end-of-the-semester student assignments—Action Review and Final Reflection Paper. The Action Review required students to evaluate the effectiveness of their community action, reflect upon why it was or was not effective, and discuss what they would do differently. The Final Reflection Paper asked students to discuss what they learned, identify areas for further improvement, and plan how they intend to pursue these improvements after the semester (classes, activities, readings, and so forth). These written assignments were also entered into Dedoose. The researchers assigned each student a random number and tracked student comments across the assignments and the small group discussions.

After reading the assembled materials, the researchers determined a coding scheme based on the ideas expressed within the student work and discussions. The researchers initially identified 28 key terms and ideas that were frequently repeated across the data set. These terms were synthesized to a coding scheme that emphasized main terms and ideas that occurred across the data. After comparing analyses of several artifacts, the researchers coded all the documents and the discussions using the coding scheme. This analysis produced pages of excerpts from the data, which the researchers further analyzed and organized. Through this multi-step process, the most significant themes regarding how students understand civic engagement and how they perceive themselves in relationship to their communities emerged.

After their time in Public Discourse, student work and conversation reflected powerful statements about the nature of civic engagement and their commitment to remain engaged in their communities. Students described civic engagement as an art with specific core components.

The Art of Civic Engagement

In assignments and class discussions, as students discussed their community-based projects and civic engagement as a whole, they focused on five central topics—research, collaboration, effort, passion, and responsibility.

Research

The Public Discourse civic engagement project requires substantial research, and students frequently commented on

improvements in research skills, benefits of research, and understanding the importance of research. Students recognized the significance of their research efforts and acknowledged an appreciation for the process. A student noted, "This is the first class I had that really placed an emphasis on getting quality research." Another student summarized the research process:

> What is most fascinating is the ability I, and the entirety of my class, gained in becoming an expert on a topic. This is true growth. I recall the research phase in the library; spending hours in class and on my own time searching and digging for credible sources to my topic that honestly wasn't very popular in our library sites. At the time, this seemed tedious and like it would result in no progress. Looking back now, I have impressed myself at my skills of searching for the most credible and prominent sources around. Also, I have advanced immensely in the skill area of compiling information. While reading articles, journals, and interviews, I was left with scattered information that all needed to come together to create a strong display of information. This course, more than any other class in my educational career, has developed my skills in this region.

Beyond the increase in skills, students wrote and spoke extensively about thorough research as an imperative first step to civic engagement. Student statements reflected a nuanced view of research and recognized it as a process to ensure credibility and include multiple perspectives.

As a result of the research process, students acknowledged that they "knew what they were talking about" and linked that knowledge to establishing credibility. A student explained, "To even be credible you need to have thoroughly researched your topic and you need to be an expert in the field." Another student expanded on the importance of credibility in community action: "I learned that [civic engagement] takes a lot of research and time and how both are necessary because credibility is so important in influencing change."

The high stakes of the community project encouraged the student focus on research, evidence, and credibility. Concerns about grades on papers or speeches were subsumed by their investment in and passion for the project and fear of being

embarrassed in front of an audience of community members. Both components motivated students to continue their research and preparation throughout the semester. Student reflections explained this motivation: "It would be extremely embarrassing stating 'facts' only to be told that they were not real in the first place…. You must prove that statement as being true by finding it in multiple places," and "Doing a lot of research and being prepared to answer any question regarding one's project is the most important thing. One must be prepared and appear credible."

Connected with credibility, students also discussed consulting multiple sources and viewpoints. They discovered the need for "various different ways" to gather information and learned the importance of considering different perspectives. Students understood research as a process of discovery and discernment; for example, "During the research process, I found it is advantageous to keep an open mind and consider multiple sources when examining a given topic." Another student explained that including diverse viewpoints "helps you to focus on the problem from multiple angles. It helps you to be complete in your research."

In a related vein, students also wrote extensively about the relationship between research, strong arguments, and success. One student commented:

> Specifically, an individual must acquire substantial information and be knowledgeable about the issue they choose to address in order to be viewed as credible. After obtaining information, it is necessary to always cite sources and give credit when necessary. This also increases one's credibility and strengthens the argument that is being made.

Another student observed about the class, "In class, there were so many people that didn't think their projects would work, but, with their research and time, they have made their projects successful."

Students discovered research to be a deliberative process, important in establishing credibility and understanding different perspectives. Their statements revealed an understanding of

research as an important component of an overall collaborative process that is necessary for effective civic engagement.

Collaboration

A critical part of students' research relied upon gathering information from community members and experts. Through their existing and new connections, students learned the importance of professional support, which encouraged them to surmount their insecurities about contacting and working with "adults." Students concluded that collaboration is a key to successful civic engagement.

The majority of students talked explicitly about finding experts and working with them to explore ways to address the issues they identified. In a class discussion reflecting on the semester, a student listed the important skills learned: "First would be networking, getting to know people, and learning what those people's strengths are so they can help you accomplish your goal."

Finding the "correct [people or organizations] to contact" proved imperative and sometimes challenging. Students commented on the value of connecting with people who are passionate about their topics: "I've learned that it's really important that you get connected with people that are also passionate about what you're trying to do and the purpose of it," and "I was fortunate to find a teacher who was passionate about helping out the students in District 709 and was willing to put in a large amount of effort into the start up of the in-school food shelf."

Pre-existing connections benefitted many students. In a class discussion, a student noted, "I think it's…important to, as a citizen, be aware of connections you have because that can really help with a problem or an issue. You can't really get anywhere without help." Many students successfully utilized previous connections; however, not every student worked with people he or she already knew. One student identified an effective program at a hometown nursing home and decided to explore a similar issue with a nursing home in the town in which the college is located. Reflecting on the project, the student knew that "it was integral to my success that I built trust" with

people in that community. The same student summed up the practice of investing in people:

> I think it's about establishing ties in whatever environment you end up in or whatever community you end up in. Being engaged in the [college] community, but then maintaining those ties after you've left. But also creating new ones where you go to grad school or [where] you start teaching straight out of college, making sure you're involved in that community as well.

Through their collaborative experiences, students came to better understand the value of expert support and knowledge. A teacher offered his support and presence for a student's final presentation to the local school board advocating for adopting a program to encourage students of color to attend college. Before the meeting, the student noted, "By having someone on board [I will be] more confident during my actual presentation because it will show the school board that I…am credible." This student felt more confident having the support of a teacher who could continue to advocate for the program in the future. Other students also noted the benefits of support: "It definitely helps to have numbers on your side when you're trying to present your issue to an even larger audience. It can add to your credibility and the validity of your issue," and "Knowing that I had my classmates' support it was also easier to perform my action." The support of peers and experts proved invaluable for every student.

Students were not always successful in implementing the change they had hoped to initiate; however, one student, who saw his project as a general failure, contended that good still came out of the project because of his increased understanding of the local community and connections made during the project. Another student whose project was not fully realized by the end of the semester wrote, "One reason why [my project] was successful is because I got the chance to develop a relationship with those involved in the local Hispanic community." Both of these students, and others, found the connections they made through their projects to be a powerful and worthwhile outcome of working in their communities.

Several students initially expressed fear or insecurity about contacting community members, but, as they took initiative, students gained confidence: "At first it's kind of nerve-racking talking to adults or emailing them but after you do it, you feel good, talking to people you normally wouldn't." Often, students' first contact went unreciprocated. Students then chose to change their method of communication or to contact a different community member or expert. This initiative and persistence in communicating with others allowed many students to accomplish their project goals.

Collaboration in the form of making connections and finding support from experts and authorities was vital to every civic engagement project, but connections and support amongst peers and the community at-large was valued as well. One student acknowledged the importance of community to success: "I believe that my action worked because people wanted to help the homeless, they wanted to help me out, and they wanted to do something to help out the high school." A first-year student found, "Many people are willing to help. The entire community cared about solving a problem." A student summarized the value of peer-support, "I think sometimes [our] greatest allies are our peers and classmates and we don't even realize it."

Similarly, a student expressed a correlation between support and success, "I've realized how important support can be to the success of a project, so I will strive to always support my peers." While discussing ways to increase civic engagement, a student suggested taking every opportunity to "nudge a group of people in a direction of doing something that they care about, and activating people." Another student recommended involving family and friends with the hope that they will in turn spread the word: "When others see you being involved and working on things that you care about, it may inspire them to do something they care about."

Civic engagement stipulates collaboration. According to students, to be civically engaged is to be "actively involved in your community and caring about those around you in a way that you want to inspire change in order to help them," and it requires "effort and time and connection." These students captured the essence of civic engagement in its function of

serving the community. As individuals invested in the community, they also created community. This fueled students' drive and willingness to put forth effort into their communities. As a student reiterated, "Little acts at the bottom have the potential to create a big change once an individual reaches the top. Especially as people make their effort multiply into a team effort."

Effort

In order to have effective teamwork, students learned each individual action must first be intentional and committed. Students in Public Discourse talked about different levels of effort and involvement in their communities, and even students who had less successful projects commented on the value of the effort they expended on their projects.

Students agreed that civic engagement requires an intentional long-term effort by individuals seeking to improve their communities. One student voiced the consensus of her classmates when she said civic engagement is "an intentional effort to involve yourself." Similarly another student observed, "you just need to do the work and put the time and effort in, and you can make something happen."

Purposefully putting effort into a project is not enough; students commented on the determination that civically engaged citizens should possess regardless of setbacks. In a discussion with a few classmates, a student suggested that civic engagement projects "are not just a one- or two-day or even a one-week experience. I think civic engagement in its most committed form is a more extended thing. It's one that you carry through." Others agreed that the benefits to the community and to the engaged individual increase as the investment from the individual increases.

Students developed differing ideas of how much effort is required to be civically engaged. Some found it easy and natural: "I've always known that it doesn't take a lot to get involved and be active and this course has showed me that yet again," and "I learned that civic engagement really isn't that hard to do…. Anyone can be civically engaged in their community if they just put their minds to it." "We talked about how [civic engagement] can be really small or really big. I think even if

you have a busy schedule you can go for thirty minutes to help at a homeless shelter. It's not that hard," said a student referencing volunteer experiences in high school.

Others argued that civic engagement is difficult and complex. When talking about her Public Discourse project one student admitted, "The path to completing this action step was a challenging one." In a discussion about the goal of making a difference in a community, a student noted, "I learned that it is harder than it seems." However, another student commented, "Overall this class was a lot of work, but if you set your mind to it, it was easy work." Because she was determined to finish her project and because she chose a topic she loved, she saw the many hours she spent in the library or on the phone as well invested.

In class discussions, students reconciled the beliefs that civic engagement can be both difficult and easy with statements such as, "It doesn't really matter how big or small [one's civic engagement] is as long as it benefits someone or you're helping someone else [a person or a group] in one way or another." The universal focus for civic engagement remained the betterment of the community.

For their own projects, students did expend a significant amount of time, energy, and thought to improve their communities. At the end of the semester, success remained unattainable for some, but these students determined their efforts of trying to improve their communities were valuable nonetheless because of the connections made and lessons learned. One student acknowledged and regretted that lack of effort hindered the success of the project, "If I would have put in more effort, I could have accomplished way more. I could have got more homeless people fed and also could have brought in more money and volunteers to the food shelters."

Effort alone cannot ensure the success or failure of an initiative, but it is a critical component of civic engagement. A student summarized the semester by writing,

> I learned from Public Discourse that civic engagement is both challenging and rewarding. It takes significant time, effort, and a commitment to follow through…. The skills

and lessons that I learned are invaluable and will be carried with me for the rest of my life.

Passion

As identified by students, the fourth major component of civic engagement was passion. Students said passion was expressed in their personal values, was visible to others, and motivated them to continue their involvement.

When they chose their project topics for the course, students considered passion a key element. One student said that in order to choose a project that involved passion, the first step was to reflect on personal values. A first-year student expressed the elements of the project that were important: "My project was something I really cared about, because as a potential Economics major I think allocating resources from those who have plenty to those who need it is very important." These students and many others "identified a situation [they] wanted to help fix" because they were passionate about and invested in their community. A sophomore student explained that after high school many interests were left behind, but, through being civically engaged and invested in a community, college students "can be passionate about something." Students realized the issues that are important to them were relevant in their communities as well.

Because they were interested in their topics, students did not consider the amount of effort the project demanded to be arduous. Students explained, "I had expected it to be next to impossible to do and to have a topic that I really didn't care about. I however quickly learned that the requirements were fairly easy to complete because I had picked a topic I was passionate about," and "Initially, the project seemed like a daunting task. However, bit-by-bit you become more enthralled with the issue and want to make a difference." As students became increasingly knowledgeable and invested in their project and community, they recognized the importance of passion and commitment: "You really need to be able to have a passion for the project in order to go through those barriers that you might find yourself running into."

This passion was often evident to those around them. A student reported that the director of the partnering organization

said he "had never heard an undergraduate with so much motivation for this topic." The student continued, "I learned that I was very good at just talking to people about what I cared for versus giving a speech to others who could potentially not care for such a topic."

This student was not the only one to realize an ability to speak well and with passion about their projects. Some examples are: "Whenever I had the chance to talk to someone about this topic I became really excited to share what I have discovered about the issue of how media affect teens," and "Once I knew how serious the problem was, I also felt a strong responsibility to do something about it. This class taught me that with passion and thorough research, I have the ability to convince people to join my cause."

Not only did students witness the centrality of passion in sharing the vision of their projects, but also they connected passion with personal success and growth: "I have…seen the true potential each person can reach when they become passionate about a situation." At first, many students doubted their abilities and their likelihood of success, but, by the end of the semester, every student reflected on a positive experience.

This positive outlook on their project was due in part to feelings of empowerment expressed by every student. Empowerment was the most dominant category during coding; student statements on almost every theme reflected it. Students felt empowered in terms of self-confidence, leadership, and ability: "It can be hard to think that you can accomplish anything due to a number of factors, especially when the issue is on a large scale, however if you believe in yourself that can go a long way," "Prior to this class, I did not see my role in the community as significant or containing power. I did not see my full potential as someone that could influence change," and "In one semester I found that I can truly create change and that it only takes one voice taking action to make a difference in the lives of many."

Empowerment coupled with passion fueled the students' beliefs about themselves and their communities. As they became emboldened to assist their communities, students realized they could continue their investment after they

submitted their final papers for the course. Previous research found that over two-thirds of Public Discourse students continue their projects past the semester (Brammer & Wolter, 2009).

Responsibility

The combination of the first four elements—research, collaboration, effort, and passion—gave students a sense of responsibility to their communities. Their learning in the course inspired them to continue civic engagement after the semester ended and developed in them an obligation to do so.

Because the students were deeply invested in their topics and empowered to make change, the semester-long projects became more about the community itself than about completing criteria for a class. Even students who had enrolled in the course only to fulfill a graduation requirement were pleased to find that, as one student stated, "I'm leaving doing this project because I want to do it now and I'm glad that I'm doing it." Not surprisingly from their statements about confidence and ability, most students reported a desire to continue to be meaningfully engaged in their communities and even provided lengthy and specific plans for continuing their projects beyond the semester. For some, continuing the project meant following up with a meeting that they had been unable to schedule because of distance, others planned another action to continue to work toward change, and still others planned on expanding their projects, in scope, depth, or location. Other students discussed their projected careers and had specific plans for community engagement.

Most striking, students enthusiastically discussed their readiness and desire to take action. Many observed an expansion in awareness of problems and desire to help, such as, "Every time someone brings something else up you're like 'Oh, let me do something about that.'" Similarly, students acknowledged a desire to continue to be engaged, even to the point of seeking out future opportunities: "Having this class, you feel very involved and you want to get out into the world and do all these great things," and "I for sure plan on looking for opportunities, seeing ways to help the communities I'm involved with grow." A student summarized her desire to be a positive catalyst in her communities with,

> I have realized that I want to make a difference in the world. I do not want to go though life with acceptance of all the negative things happening around me. It is my goal to make a difference through large and small civic engagement projects. I want to better the lives of the less fortunate, myself, and for someday my children.

Their civic engagement experiences in and out of the classroom broadened and shaped the students' understanding of what it means to be civically engaged. Students expressed their newfound beliefs: "It's easier to be civically engaged if you find something that you care about." One student took this idea a step further, explaining the connection passion has to civic engagement: "I think that when everyone finds their own specific passions that they want to do, that will keep them going and being civically engaged."

For some students, future involvement in the community was framed as an obligation, one that most came to understand better through their project experiences. One student stated, "I learned much about creating change. I am responsible for identifying real problems and working to build real solutions." For many students, reflections about their projects and their learning fostered their understanding of general principles of citizenship and privilege; for example, "We can really have a great impact on our community; we just need to step forward and say something and stand up for ideas and we can accomplish great things." In class discussion, another student rebuked the idea of inaction, with "If you see a problem, try to fix it instead of just complaining about it. You want to make something better? Do something about it."

Responsibility is a component students discussed as a life lesson. Just as research, collaboration, effort, and passion have become core foci of students' understanding and expectation of civic engagement, they also learned that as engaged citizens they have the responsibility and the privilege to be civically engaged.

The Civic Engagement Experience

As students reflected on the nature of civic engagement and their newfound roles as citizens, they universally cited course learning through their individual projects as the impetus

for their new beliefs and understanding. Students reported that the course and the project were an entirely new experience and observed that they were challenged, found the experience rewarding, and learned from their peers.

Many students described the project as "daunting" and discussed how they were forced outside of their "comfort zones." Yet, in their statements, a number of students expressed appreciation for the experience and awe for engaging in something "bigger than myself." This civic engagement experience gave them a "sense of meaning" and motivation for continuing actions in the future.

In the same vein, student descriptions of their experiences frequently used the terms "rewarding," "successful," and "positive." Some students reflected on the relationship between the personal rewards and the benefits to the community; as one student observed, "When you are engaged and committed to something, you yourself get so much more out of it, you give so much more so other people can receive it. So it's a win-win when you actually commit to something." The connection between personal rewards and community benefits indicates an understanding of the intrinsic and extrinsic benefits of community involvement.

As discussed earlier, students contrasted previous volunteer experiences with their project experience. Students appreciated working directly with a community, taking a lead on a project involving a specific issue, and practicing effective research and advocacy. Overall, students declared the experience more significant, useful, and empowering than their previous volunteer-oriented work in communities.

Looking beyond their individual experiences, students appreciated and found inspiration in the work of their classmates. Even those whose projects were not particularly successful or those who did not put the necessary time into their projects to have desired results reported that they had learned much from and were inspired by their peers. In one course section, papers and class discussions repeatedly referenced a classmate who was able to secure additional iPads for her sister's autistic classroom. One student wrote, "She found an issue that most people would look over in her sister's school. Through her

efforts, within a few months,…her project was more successful than she ever thought possible and has been an inspiration to me." In more general terms, another student stated, "What I learned from the other projects that other people did, it is possible to make a change in your community." Students in both sections referred to their collective experience and recognized the support, inspiration, and learning shared by their classmates.

Overall, students clearly articulated course and project experiences and credited them with skill development, personal growth, and increased understanding and enthusiasm for civic engagement. Their nuanced understanding of the research process, civic engagement, and their personal growth is profound proof of their investment in their projects, communities, and the course. Despite their own (and others') concerns about their ability to effectively engage with a community, they were successful. Students, regardless of the success of their projects, transformed their beliefs about themselves and civic engagement, developed important skills, and began working toward lasting change.

Conclusion

In written and oral discussions of their projects, future civic engagement plans, and civic engagement in general, students identified five components as imperative for productive civic engagement. The emergence of these five strong themes indicates that students (including first-year college students) are capable of engaging their communities directly and deeply and of developing nuanced and knowledgeable reflections on the nature of civic engagement. Student perspectives on a significant, individual civic engagement project encourage expanding efforts to immerse and equip students to engage productively and deeply in their communities.

Examining student narratives of their experiences and views on civic engagement proved insightful in informing teaching methods and course assignments for Public Discourse and other departmental courses. Even after five years of teaching the course and extensive assessment efforts, professors found the themes, especially the quantity and intensity of the student responses, surprising. The findings were used in refining

assignments, project guidelines, and student assessment of their projects. The results also shaped chapters, exercises, and examples in a text written to support the course. For example, student perspectives and specific examples of student research and projects are central in the chapter on research, and collaboration has become even more prominent throughout the text. The study also yielded some specific assignment assessment data that resulted in further refinements of the final reflection paper and the action review. Finally, the small group and whole class discussions of civic engagement have become a standard part of the course.

In the data, empowerment, specific skills to enact change, and desire for continued involvement were significant personal growth themes and will be the subject of additional research. Longitudinal research exploring student reflections overtime is necessary to productively frame their enthusiastic comments as they complete this significant growth experience. An important next step for this research is to examine whether their enthusiasm, belief in their new skills, and desire to engage deeply in their communities endure past the semester or their time in college. Alumni surveys and focus groups about the long-term influences of course-related civic engagement experiences are an enticing area for future research on the influence of undergraduate civic engagement experiences. Further, studies that collect and compare student perceptions across a variety of curricular civic engagement experiences are necessary to understand student responses to civic engagement practices and to evaluate best practices in engaging students. These studies, as well, need to have longitudinal components to explore the influence of instructional practices over time. This combination of research will increase understanding of student experiences and outcomes as a result of a significant civic engagement project and provide practices and avenues for student learning.

Course-related civic engagement is an important practice in student academic and personal development. While educators need to ensure that the best and most ethical practices are used in placing students within the community as part of their classroom experience, this research and other research on Public

Discourse demonstrates that students, even first-year students, are capable of student-led projects in communities and that the learning that results from their individual passion and initiative is invaluable. Student interest in civic engagement and ability for sophisticated performance and reflection presents an opportunity for us as educators to provide students with experiences and training to ensure that they are well-equipped for fulfilling lives that benefit the communities of which they are a part.

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