

# Reviving and Revising the Civic Mission: A Radical Re-Imagining of “Civic Engagement”

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## Abstract

*Drawing on literature in the field and the author’s own research, this paper argues that civic engagement is critical to the success of students and universities and should be enacted at all levels of educational policy and practices. Yet, it must be facilitated in a way that ensures that equity, justice, and an appreciation of diverse value systems and perspectives are included in the development of civic actors, civic learning, and shared projects of social change in local communities.*

Since their inception, institutions of higher education have had the dual aims of fostering the intellectual and civic development of both our society at large and our young people in particular. There is nothing new today about the movement of community-engaged teaching, learning, research, and service, as most every college and university has articulated in its original charter the importance of contributing to civic responsibility. As Shirley Mullen notes, “Civic responsibility has been understood to be one of the appropriate ends of education, and education has been assumed to be necessary for civic responsibility to be well stewarded” (Mullen 2012, xi). Yet, as Mullen goes on to question, along with fellow contributors in the *Bringing Theory to Practice Civic Provocations* monograph and other scholars in this rapidly expanding movement of civic engagement, the fact that exactly *who* decides the values undergirding what makes a “civil society” and who has the power to determine, govern, and operate the bodies that will maintain this civility has traditionally been afforded to the elite few. This paper argues that civic engagement is critical to the success of students and universities, and that in reviving our original civic missions to ensure they are enacted at all levels of our educational policy and practices, we must also radically re-imagine them. Their revision is necessary to ensure that equity, justice, and an appreciation of diverse value systems and perspectives are included in our development of civic actors, civic learning, and shared projects of social change in our local communities.

Despite the common missions of civic engagement of most institutions, the majority of academic research and teaching have historically remained within the confines of the university setting. Nonetheless, as I have noted elsewhere (Peterson 2009), exceptions to the exclusive trend of academia have erupted at different points in our history, revealing the existence of some version of community-based education dating back to the land grant colleges instituted with the Homestead Act of the late nineteenth century. The practice was also evident in the early history of formal education during the cooperative education movement and the beginning of John Dewey’s work on

experiential education in the early twentieth century. Other examples were seen through the work of the Civilian Conservation Corps and the Experiment in International Living programs of the 1930s, as well as the student involvement in fighting Jim Crow and other socio-political issues during the Civil Rights era between 1954-1974 (Stanton, Giles, and Cruz 1999; Calderon 2007).

Many scholars identify the beginning of an era wherein academia moved to truly value, seek, and institutionalize civic responsibility and community-based education in college curriculum and culture with the charge offered in 1994 by renowned scholar Ernest Boyer. Boyer described how a shift toward a cross-disciplinary focus on social issues would return universities to their “historic commitment to service” and “would enrich the campus, renew the communities, and give new dignity and status to the scholarship of service....Undergraduates at the college would participate in field projects, relating ideas to real life. Classrooms and laboratories would be extended to include health clinics, youth centers, schools, and government offices. Faculty members would build partners with practitioners who would, in turn, come to campus as lecturers and student advisors” (Zlotkowski 1998, 1).

Community engagement activities are the result of mutually articulated interests and seek mutually beneficial outcomes for the college and community partners. Therefore, because these activities address and respond to concerns and needs arising from communities beyond the college campus (as well as from faculty’s own research and teaching interests), community engagement simultaneously exemplifies and manifests the social responsibility and civic engagement missions of colleges. Furthermore, community-engaged scholarship, education, and service activities are critical to advancing and implementing core learning objectives and values of schools that relate to such topics as social responsibility and justice, intercultural understanding, interdisciplinary learning, breadth and depth of critical thinking, student engagement, and environmental sustainability (Pitzer College Community Engagement Center Steering Committee 2009).

## **Impacts of Community Engagement**

Today, the majority of universities and colleges across the country promote and institutionalize some form of civic engagement from community-based, participatory research to service-learning that results in a range of academic, professional, civic, and personal impacts. While each faculty member, course, and distinct community collaboration/project will achieve different outcomes, the literature around learning outcomes and impact on each of the involved constituents in community engagement collaborations highlights the possibility of multiple levels of achievement. Holistically evaluating students’ academic and personal development is best achieved by utilizing a multipronged approach to assessment, including student surveys (self-reporting), direct assessment (of written work), focus groups, interviews, and third-party assessments (i.e., evaluations from teachers or collaborating community partners). An active field of scholars and teachers have worked diligently to create meaningful learning and growth opportunities for students, measurable learning outcomes, and effective

strategies of assessment (Ash and Clayton 2009; Driscoll et al. 1998; Eyler, Giles, and Braxton 1997; Eyler et al. 2001; Ferrari and Worrall 2000; Galura et al. 2004; Gelmon et al. 1998; Glass, Doberneck, and Schweitzer 2008; Gray et al. 1999; Honnet and Poulsen 1989; Markus, Howard, and King 1993; Miron and Moely 2006; Myers-Lipton 1998; Polin and Keene 2010; Sandy 2007; Sax and Astin 1997; Shapiro 2012; Shavelson 2007; Strage 2007; Strand et al. 2003; Vernon and Ward 1999). Drawing on these assessment efforts and my own evaluation research at my home university (Hicks 2009), I have found that primary student learning outcomes resulting from participation in community engagement typically include the following:

- *Civic knowledge*: articulating a heightened sense of personal responsibility to community issues; exposure or commitment to social responsibility, including relationships with school, city, partner organizations, and neighbors; political involvement and policy reform actions; the ability to analyze systems in order to plan and engage in public action; and the moral and political courage to take risks to achieve a greater public good (Astin and Sax 1998; Eyler and Giles 1996; Eyler and Giles 1999; Eyler, Giles, and Braxton 1997; Strage 2004; Markus, Howard, and King 1993; Mitchell 2008; The National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement 2012).
- *Community knowledge*: recognizing the needs and strengths of a community, as defined through the lens and experience of that community, building critical and reflexive relationships with community partners; integrating community organizing skills in collaborative projects (Calderon 2007; Kivel 2007; Lewis 2004; Kretzmann and McKnight 1993; Marullo and Edwards 2000; Ward and Wolf-Wendel 2000).
- *Social justice knowledge*: understanding the structural, political, social, economic and/or environmental conditions that have resulted in injustice and the need for community engagement work, as well as a commitment to explore the benefits and potential pitfalls of community-campus partnerships (Calderon 2007; Kivel 2007; Haley 2007; Lewis 2004; Kretzmann and McKnight 1993).
- *Intercultural understanding*: ability to appreciate and cross cultural boundaries and engage diverse perspectives; skills, awareness, and commitment to cultural immersion, reciprocity, local social issues, perception of others, potential bias, diverse perspectives, and communication skills; and rigorous professional and ethical conduct in community relationships (Astin and Sax 1998; Eyler and Giles 1996; Gray et al. 1999; Markus, Howard, and King 1993; Stanton 1990);
- *Academic and career development*: indicating a reciprocal application of learning to/from field and class, development of tools and theories on service, research and evaluation; attaining leadership, teamwork, and problem-solving skills; enhancing analysis/critical thinking abilities; attaining exposure to and experience within potential career tracks (Boss 1994; Eyler and Giles 1999; Gelmon et al. 1998; Gray et al. 1999; Jacoby 2003; Kendrick 1996; Markus, Howard, and King 1993; Stanton, Giles, and Cruz 1999; Strand et al. 2003).

- *Personal knowledge*: indicating an awareness of personal capacities, skills, and values; identity and self-development, self-realization and purposefulness, positionality and power dynamics with others, moral and ethical reasoning, and improved relationships with peers, faculty, and the local community (Astin and Sax 1998; Bringing Theory to Practice 2013; Eyler and Giles 1999; Eyler, Giles, and Braxton 1997; Gray et al. 1999; Kendrick 1996; Switzer and King 2014).

As this list reveals, the collective impacts on students engaged in community-based education, research, and service touch on their academic, civic, personal, political, moral, and professional development. In general, community engagement poses generative ethical, political, disciplinary, interdisciplinary, and conceptual questions to both students *and* faculty involved together in community-based education courses. As the subsequent data will demonstrate, the research also uncovered powerful impacts on faculty who are involved with community-based teaching, research, and service. Generally, it was demonstrated that community engagement can generate new and creative pedagogical approaches and modalities as well as novel and productive lines and types of research. Involved faculty also reported that this practice spurred useful self-reflexivity regarding issues of methodology, research questions, and the social implications of knowledge production, authorship, and distribution (Pitzer College Community Engagement Center Steering Committee 2009). My own research and that of others in the field indicate that as a result of community engagement and activist scholarship, faculty may also

- Improve relationships with students, including deepening existing relationships, getting traditionally uninvolved students to become engaged, and appreciating the quality of demonstrated student learning (Astin and Sax 1998; Eyler and Giles 1999; Gelmon et al. 1998; Gray et al. 1999; Moely, Furco, and Reed 2008);
- Establish or improve relationships with community partners, while also recognizing tensions of involvement due to differing norms and goals between the cultures of academia and that of many local communities (Bacon 2002; Calderon 2007; Hale 2008; Jorge 2003; Steinman 2011; Stoecker 2005);
- Alter their pedagogy toward a more liberating and community-based model (Calderon 2007; Hale 2008; Shor 1992; Steinberg and Kincheloe 1998);
- Negotiate institutional support for the time, energy, and skills necessary for successful community engagement and activist scholarship to develop, and seek ways these endeavors will be recognized and valued by academic peers and reviewers (Calderon 2007; Hale 2008; Ellison and Eatman 2008; Jacoby 2003; Kezar and Rhoades 2001; Stanton, Giles, and Cruz 1999; Strand et al. 2003).

While the impact on community members and community partner agencies and institutions varies greatly based on the type of collaborative research, education, or service, there are some general findings we can speak to that often result from

community-campus partnerships. Generally speaking, community engagement activities have the potential to lend disciplinary/ inter-disciplinary expertise to help groups or organizations (re)conceptualize issues, solve problems, facilitate change, or develop and enhance community assets. Faculty also may serve in a more traditional professional capacity by consulting, offering clinical services, participating on boards, or serving as an expert witness (Community Engagement Center Steering Committee, APT Proposal 2009). As revealed previously, faculty benefit in many ways as a result of this involvement. Likewise, community members also have reported that these partnerships have impact on their personal lives and capacities, their education and skill set, and their access to resources. In my own study, and echoed by others in the field, community members reported experiencing

- Increased esteem of education, inspiration, hope, and sense of being valued from an academic perspective (which brought with it a sense of legitimacy) (Calderon 2007; Jorge 2003; Kretzmann and McKnight 1993; Sandy 2007; Stoecker 2005);
- Feelings of empowerment, self-development, and interpersonal relationship development in the community and academy (Calderon 2007; Jorge 2003; Kretzmann and McKnight 1993; Sandy 2007; Stoecker 2005);
- An increased sense of personal value as a result of being seen as knowledge producer and teacher in their community (Bacon 2002; Calderon 2007; Dorado and Giles 2004; Jacoby 2003; Jorge 2003; Ferrari and Worrall 2000; Marullo and Edwards 2000; Sandy 2007; Schmidt and Robby 2002);
- The development of self-expression, an exercising of rights, increased participation in advocacy, and civic engagement themselves (Bringing Theory to Practice 2013; Calderon 2007; Sandy 2007; Stoecker 2005; Strand et al. 2003);
- Exposure to other cultures, expanded world view, and the achievement of skills in art, language, writing, research, public speaking, and critical thinking (Calderon 2007; Cruz and Giles 2000; Jacoby 2003; Sandy 2007);
- Increased levels of access to resources, such as the college libraries, meeting spaces, dining halls, art supplies, and health care as well as greater exposure to and connection with the college, in general, and fellow activists and students, in particular (Gelmon et al. 1998; Kretzman and McKnight 1998; Miron and Moely 2006).

Similarly, the staff of the partnering community organizations also reported impact from their participation in these partnerships, including:

- Gaining new energy and ideas from student interns that inspired change in programs and approach to the communities they serve (Stoecker 2005).
- The opportunity to meet new people and to learn how to manage/supervise college students, organize interns/projects (which resulted in increased organizing and

management skills) (Bacon 2002; Dorado and Giles 2004; Ferrari and Worrall 2000; Jacoby 2003; Partnership Forum 2008; Sandy 2007);

- Career or educational development as a result of these partnerships (Cruz and Giles 2000; Gelmon et al. 1998; Vernon and Ward 1999);
- Increased exposure to higher education (and for some, the opportunity to become college students themselves) (Eyler et al. 2001; Ferrari and Worrall 2000; Gelmon et al. 1998).

Obviously, the effects of community-campus partnerships vary, depending on the length and depth of engagement, the capacity of all partners, the nature of collaborative projects and the approach of those in leadership positions; nonetheless, these findings demonstrate the most common impacts of community engagement that I and others have found to be most significant.

## **Community Engagement for Social Justice**

While the aforementioned impacts are substantial, it is incumbent upon higher education institutions to investigate *how* engagement with communities occurs and explore the limits and potential hazards of town/gown charity and service models. Promising practices must move beyond simply developing civic-mindedness in students (and faculty) to encouraging critical thinking about how civic responsibility is understood and enacted per the cultural, economic, racial, and gendered lens of the practitioner. Such practices also explore what a move might look like beyond charity models of service into models of organizing, advocacy, community-based research, and other collaborations that create structural shifts in the systemic inequalities of local and global communities. It is in this shift of our perception and implementation of renewed civic literacy that participants are encouraged to examine the ethical and political implications of knowledge and action, integrating interdisciplinary learning with effective student engagement. The data suggests that reclaiming our civic missions and situating them within a more critical and social justice-oriented framework at the center of our institution, the “high-impact practice” of community engagement can have greater impact in the context of social change, as well as student learning. Carefully and critically imagined shifts that support innovative, progressive and applied tactics for teaching, learning, and research can transform not only individuals, but also communities and institutions, allowing us to not only reinvigorate but improve upon our original civic-minded missions.

Many scholars (Bacon 2002; Calderon 2007; Kivel 2007; Lewis 2004; Kretzmann and McKnight 1993; Oden and Casey 2007; Moely, Furco, and Reed 2008; Morton 1995; Mitchell 2008; Miron and Moley 2006; Marullo and Edwards 2000; Peterson 2010; Steinman 2011; Ward and Wolf-Wendel 2000) have wrestled with how to recognize our interconnectedness with local communities and the importance of community-campus collaborations, while underscoring the potential damage done in hierarchical service partnerships that only cement student or faculty “savior-behavior” or maintain

the status quo that created the service needs to begin with. Activist scholar Paul Kivel (2007) summarizes well some key tensions:

Taking care of those in need is valuable and honorable work, and most people do it with generosity and good intentions. But it also serves to mask the inequitable distribution of jobs, food, housing, and other valuable resources. When temporary shelter becomes a substitute for permanent housing, emergency food a substitute for a decent job, tutoring a substitute for adequate public schools, and free clinics a substitute for universal health care, we have shifted our attention from the redistribution of wealth to the temporary provision of social services that keep people alive (135) . . . . The problem is not with providing social services. Many radical groups, such as the Black Panthers and the Zapatistas, have provided social services as a tool for organizing. The problem comes when all our time and energy is diverted toward social services to the detriment of long-term social change. . . . Activists working within the NPIC [nonprofit industrial complex] should be mindful of thinking about whether we are empowering people to work for social change at the same time we are providing them with social services (142).

As such, I believe university administrators, faculty, and students involved in community-campus partnerships must ask a series of critical questions of their civic engagement models and how they are integrated in school policy and programming. These include the following: How involved are local community members in co-navigating community engagement courses, research, projects, funding, policies, and governance? How do we and how do they access the accountability of the university in this regard? Is the agenda for the partnership made in collaboration between college partners and the primary community partners within a framework that honors reciprocal, respectful, and ethical collaboration? Is the community seen and treated as an equal partner, while also recognizing unequal power dynamics where they may exist? Does the partnership build on self-identified assets of the community, while also addressing what the community and past projects have identified as problems in order to negotiate shared responsibility for mobilizing relevant solutions? How can we ensure that it is not solely the student, faculty, and/or service providers that garner greater capacity and success instead of the community members themselves? Are service-providing programs (and our involvement in them) uprooting unjust social circumstances that have necessitated these services or simply making the unjust circumstances more tolerable?

Likewise, to stretch, expand, and “radicalize” our traditional civic missions, we must ask if we are educating the community-engaged student on foundational tenets of social justice that may undergird the development of the community needs they attend through service internships. For instance, are engaged students acquiring the theoretical knowledge that underscores their civic or service engagement around social (in)justice issues related to race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, gender identity, immigration status, nationality, sovereignty, ability status, environmental justice, and/or religion? Are they gaining knowledge and sensitivity to the ethical and political

implications of injustice, such as notions of social stratification, the interdependence and intersection of systems of oppression, interpersonal and structural discrimination, and the unequal distribution and access to power and resources? Are students personally reflecting on how they are (either wittingly or unwillingly) implicated in realities of injustice, and thus recognizing their responsibility in forwarding joint projects of social change? Do service-learning course readings and discussions challenge hegemonic structures and practices that further social injustice and oppression as well as ignite student understanding of strategies to disrupt or remove systemic barriers to equality and inclusiveness? Do community engagement actions address the structural, political, social, economic, and/or environmental conditions (and any other root causes) that have resulted in the need for their community engagement and explore the benefits and potential pitfalls of community-campus service partnerships? Finally, as we situate this practice at the heart of our institutions, we need to ask whether faculty are recognized and valued in reviews and promotions for their willingness to prioritize engaged scholarship and teaching, utilizing critical pedagogy, experiential learning strategies, and community-based research methodologies, so that students may explore and apply the praxis of subject matters in both their on-campus and off-campus communities.

These are some of the queries, recognizable tensions, and areas of scrutiny that institutions of higher education that would like to revitalize their civic mission should consider. Radically re-imagining the meaning, purpose, goals, and potential impact of civic engagement efforts so that they are situated in a social-justice framework positions urban and metropolitan colleges and universities to intentionally address the social problems and inequities that often plague neighboring communities.

Like all community-based education, the answers to these tough questions are neither tidy nor always self-evident in real time, much less readily achievable in a semester's timeframe. Yet, in some ways, we address the critiques of this civic engagement practice in the very act of raising the questions, amongst ourselves at the college and with our partners in the community. In so doing, we often find that we move slowly together into the solutions (sometimes deliberately so, and sometimes, quite clumsily and by accident). As German poet Rainer Maria Rilke reminds us, sometimes the most important part of our journey is learning to "live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer" (1903). And so it is through our community engagement *praxis* (the iterative process of engaging in action, theoretical analysis, and critical reflection) that we "live our way into the answers" that surround the complex practice of a social justice-oriented civic literacy.

## **Conclusion**

These diverse efforts in community engagement cannot be successful as "high-impact practices" if there does not exist the institutional support for the students and faculty who wish to collaborate in these shared partnerships for social change. Each unique institution must assess its own particular mission, set of values, learning objectives,

and faculty review policies in order to determine what already exists and what is necessary to create in order to foster a sustainable, supported, and critical space for community-based teaching, learning, and scholarship to take place. We must ask how much is already ingrained in the founding mission and structure, and to what extent there exists the capacity, infrastructure, policy, and skilled practitioners necessary to situate this work at the center of the college. Aligning core values of the campus with core issues plaguing the community and educating students to be thoughtful, reflective, and critical civic actors in and with their local community partners may just be the most radical and “high-impact practice” that urban and metropolitan colleges and universities can make today.

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