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Using a Critical Service-Learning Approach to Facilitate Civic Identity Development

This article highlights elements of civic engagement programs that have the rich potential to facilitate civic identity development. Focusing on research with alumni, the study examines 3 civic engagement programs, the approaches of which are guided by critical service-learning. It explores elements of the experiences that alumni name as influential to their learning, development, and present commitments to understand the ways that civic engagement programs based in a critical service-learning approach can encourage them to develop commitments to active citizenship as exemplified by Knefelkamp's (2008) vision of a mature sense of civic identity.

CIVIC LEARNING and democratic engagement initiatives are often implemented with the goal of creating what Musil (2003) termed "generative citizens." The central aim of this research was to understand the programmatic and curricular elements of civic engagement programs that lead to civic identity development. Through research with alumni, the study

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examined elements of three civic engagement programs the approach of which was guided by critical service-learning (Mitchell, 2008). It explored elements of the experiences that alumni named as influential to their learning, development, and present commitments to understand the ways civic engagement programs based in a critical service-learning approach can encourage them to develop commitments to active citizenship as exemplified by Knefelkamp's (2008) vision of a mature sense of civic identity. These alumni, to use the words of Knefelkamp, "see their role in life as contributing to the long-term greater good ... [and] have the courage to act" in service of that goal (p. 3).

Critical service-learning is an approach to civic learning that is attentive to social change, works to redistribute power, and strives to

develop authentic relationships. In fact, "critical service-learning programs encourage students to see themselves as agents of social change, and use the experience of service to address and respond to injustice in communities" (Mitchell, 2008, p. 51). With this orientation toward critical service-learning, program leaders embrace the political nature of community work and ensure that systemic injustices are identified, problematized, and negotiated. Readings, assignments, dialogue, and reflection are selected to highlight multiple perspectives, to critically analyze issues, and to promote action. Through prolonged community engagement, active learning, and self-reflection, authenticity becomes an important feature of how participants (students, faculty, and community members) engage with one another.

Civic identity is a multifaceted and dynamic notion of the self as belonging to, and responsible for, a community or communities (Atkins & Hart, 2003; Kirshner, 2009; Rubin, 2007). Atkins and Hart (2003) asserted that civic identity develops "as a result of (a) the experience of participation in one's community, (b) the acquisition of knowledge about the community, and (c) adoption of fundamental democratic principles" (p. 157). With these ideas, this study illuminates how civic engagement programs experienced by undergraduate students who are now alumni spurred the development of their civic identity. It inquires into whether the participation, knowledge, and principles encouraged by the programs and shaped by critical service-learning principles lead to citizens who "seek the well-being of the whole" and act in accordance with those commitments (Musil, 2003, p. 7).

Creating experiences where students can practice and develop civic identity requires "opportunities for agency and industry, for social relatedness, and for the development of political-moral understandings" (Kahne & Sporte, 2008, p. 742). Data from this study suggested that the curricular civic engagement programs studied provide the environment, structure, and impetus to engender a developed civic identity.

Context and Methods

This study of alumni focused on three multiterm civic engagement programs at three institutions of higher education. Each campus program recruited students to participate; required them to move through elements of the program together; and had a curricular framework that provided opportunity for dialogue, reflection, values clarification, and knowledge acquisition. All of the programs required community participation and had requirements ranging from students' developing an honors thesis on a community issue to working with a community organization over multiple semesters.

The selection of texts that value multiple perspectives, the experiences of shared facilitation and of community voice in the classroom, and the requirement of prolonged engagement in community settings reflect the critical service-learning approach that shaped these programs. Students conducted research or implemented projects that aimed to facilitate meaningful change regarding the issue central to their community work. These projects required an understanding of the community, its constituents, and the social and political systems at play; therefore, students were oriented toward social change. They learned to recognize systems of power at work and how they might be reconfigured, and they developed authentic relationships with peers and community members impacted by the issues central to their projects.

The three programs differed in their institutional home (i.e., a private research intensive university, a large public university, and a small private Catholic college), but all shared deep connections to the campus office for community engagement and service-learning. The programs differed in length—1 year, 2 years, and 4 years—but students took several courses together "to develop ideas and ways of thinking helpful to human beings in their capacity as co-creators of their worlds" (Soltan, 2014, p. 9).

A mixed-methods approach (Creswell, 2009) best describes the research design employed for this study. Working with each campus, a database of almost 400 alumni across the three programs

was generated. Using a purposeful sample to ensure race, gender, and cohort diversity, 33 alumni (11 from each program) were interviewed using a loosely structured protocol. Preliminary analysis of the interview data led to the construction of a survey where alumni were invited via e-mail to respond. The survey had a 49% response rate ($n = 192$), which is strong for online survey research (Nulty, 2008; Sax, Gilmartin, & Bryant 2003; Yun & Trumbo, 2000).

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using the constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Transcripts were coded and codes were compared across transcripts to produce categories. Survey data were compared against the categories produced from the qualitative analysis to assist in the interpretation (Creswell, 2009). Interview participants graduated between 1995 and 2008; survey respondents had graduated as recently as 2011 and as far back as 1995.

The survey data revealed that 65% of the alumni were currently working in public service careers (i.e., jobs that serve the common good including nonprofit management, social work, K–12 teaching or administration) and 57% of those alumni credited the program with influencing their career choices. Further, political engagement (97.2% of respondents registered to vote; 96% of respondents planned to vote in the 2012 national election) and community engagement (82.1% of respondents participated in community service in the past 12 months) responses indicated an enduring influence of the programs in participants' lives after graduation.

Common Influential Experiences

The three programs engaged students in the processes that Atkins and Hart (2003) suggested are necessary to developing a civic identity—students participated in the local community, developed knowledge about the community, and worked to build commitments to values fundamental to a thriving democracy. These experiences reflected a critical service-learning pedagogy because they brought attention to social change, worked to redistribute power, and developed authentic relationships. Through these tasks, students came to see themselves as belonging to, and responsible for, the community, developing a civic identity that persists long after graduation.

Two experiences central to the programs afforded students the means to engage in the tasks necessary to develop civic identity. First, the programs required work with the community through service and other activities. Second, the programs' members functioned as a cohort where a learning community was formed and sustained. These experiences were essential to the programs' efforts to build civic identity in their members.

Community Engagement

Community engagement was a required element of participants in these programs. A civic engagement program serves to support civic identity development by creating opportunities for students to work on issues in increasingly complex roles; to invest deeply in an issue that creates connection and a sense of belonging; and to create community on and off campus that builds critical awareness necessary to take action in constructive ways. The ways that students engaged with community through these programs built experiences that allowed them to understand the institutional sources of community concerns while also participating in work that served to address immediate needs. It offered the provision of time and space to develop relationships that supported authentic engagement and inspired possibilities for transformative action. In these programs, community engagement shifted among observational contexts, direct service, and data gathering processes. In most instances, students were placed in a service role with a community organization for 60 hours or more in a semester, and for a year or longer depending on the institution. Service roles varied and included tutoring, mentoring, afterschool activity coordination, soup kitchen staff, rape crisis counseling, administrative office staff,

grant research, and coordinating and training volunteers.

Community engagement requires participation in the local community, facilitates learning about the local community, and creates space to consider and commit to the values fundamental to responsible and responsive membership in a community. It also fosters opportunities to be attentive to social change, to question the distribution of power, and to develop authentic relationships. In the interviews, alumni referenced experiences in the community that contributed to their civic identity. Sharing specific instances of engagement that have continued to influence their current commitments to community speaks to the enduring influence of community engagement. Speaking to the importance of participation, an alumna of the 4-year program shared, "There was real work happening; there was this real-life experience fieldwork, and you were actually doing something, which … kept me engaged, and I really, really feel like I graduated ahead of my peers because of that." Because of her experiences participating in the community, this alumna believed that she better understood how to work across differences, which made her more effective in professional situations and future community service work. Similarly, for an alumnus of the 1-year program, the required community engagement ignited his commitment to community work. He explained:

> My service biography really just sort of started at [the university], getting involved in some tutoring work in [the local community]. It wasn't something that I was raised with. It wasn't a value that I was raised with, nor was it something that started being nurtured in high school.

The experience of participation in community began in the program, and inspired a commitment to public service that extended into professional work and civic action.

Community engagement facilitated opportunities to develop knowledge about the local community. An alumnus of the 4-year program spoke to his engagement experience as a space to get "to know [the] city, as a community." He

added that the program did "an effective job of getting their students outside of the borders of the campus. … And obviously they do that through having community service sites that you partner with." An alumnus of the 2-year program also reflected on the knowledge developed about the community through his ongoing service with a leadership program for young men of color. He explained, "The project helped me be more aware of what was happening with boys and men in our community. I worked hard and learned how to always be aware of where our folks are at and where they wanna go."

Interactions with community members through service allowed alumni to consider values important to responsible community membership. An alumna of the 2-year program recalled an experience where she was not fully present in her community engagement placement at a homeless shelter. The interaction led her to be more authentic in her community relationships. She reflected:

> I remember one day I was passing someone I knew fairly well, and I said, "Hey, how are you doing?" and kept walking and he was like, "Whoa! You didn't even pause to hear my answer." You know what I mean? And it's the smallest things, but I can remember what an important moment it was for me at the time, to have someone stop me and tell me I wasn't being present and wasn't able to listen or be authentic with them.

An alumna of the 1-year program spoke to her experience in the program helping her to clarify values regarding her role in the community. She began:

> There was this personal difficulty that I felt with kind of going into a community that I wasn't historically a part of, doing interviewing, archival work, writing about it, but I wasn't historically a member of that community. Who am I to be doing this, right?

Through her experiences working with undocumented immigrants, she came to see how her

outsider status could benefit the community: "I've come to appreciate that, oftentimes, one can offer things as an outsider that people that are within a certain environment are oftentimes not able to do." Community engagement experiences created spaces that left the alumna uncomfortable and questioning her place, but also allowed her to commit to using her privilege to benefit the local community.

Community engagement through a critical service-learning approach requires organizing experiences that "make power relationships visible and work to develop relationships that are more mutual and egalitarian" (Catlett & Proweller, 2011, p. 41). The multiple terms that comprised these experiences afforded the opportunity for sustained engagement so that attention could be paid to the conditions that might serve to facilitate or prohibit social change. Issues of power and privilege were recognized, questioned, resisted, and navigated, leading participants to more complex understandings of themselves, the community, and the sites where their service occurred. Through the community engagement experiences required by the programs, connections were developed that helped participants realize their responsibility to create more equitable conditions for the people with whom they worked. An alumnus of the 2-year program, who continues to live and work in the community, explained, "This community invested in my leadership, and I'm doing my best to make sure that investment pays off for them."

Developing a civic identity that results in a commitment to leadership and active citizenship is a process that takes time and requires persistent engagement (Knefelkamp, 2008; Roholt, Hildreth, & Baizerman, 2009; Youniss, McLellan, & Yates, 1997). The accumulation of experiences through a sustained process of engagement is believed to have a lasting effect on identity (Bronfenbrenner, 1993), and the programs studied require 1 to 4 years of involvement in the community. The task of community engagement honors the environment, relationships, and learning opportunities that influence identity construction (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998) by providing continuity while integrating new

knowledge, challenges, and more complexity in ways that foster identity development (Bronfenbrenner, 1995; Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Renn, 2004). Community engagement, as required by the programs studied, facilitated civic identity development through opportunities for participation, knowledge acquisition, and commitment to values fundamental to responsible community membership.

Cohort

Civic identity can best be described as making sense of how to live every day to best contribute to the world (Knefelkamp, 2008; Roholt et al., 2009). This process of making sense is never isolated. Sense-making is inherently social, shaped and reshaped by one's interactions with others and the perspectives they exchange (Bronfenbrenner, 1993; Weick, 1995; Youniss et al., 1997). The cohort model that guided the civic engagement programs studied establishes a community wherein students developed respect and trust. The relationships provided spaces for students to take risks in a supportive environment (Roholt et al., 2009).

The cohort represented a space internal to the campus where students developed a sense of belonging to, and responsibility for, the community—a peer group with whom they shared the experience of program membership. In the communities forged via membership in the three programs, the students participated, developed knowledge, and committed to values. They participated as a learning community—working together in the classroom to explore processes of community development and unpack theories. They developed knowledge and new understandings about ways they could function as a community, based on their identities as members of their community. In addition, they functioned together as a community by committing to shared values that guided their membership in the cohort and their future commitments to civic responsibility. The cohort became a community of practice, or, in the words of an alumna of the 4-year program, a "safe space to figure out how we want to be in the world."

The experience of the cohort was key to the development of authentic relationships important to a critical service-learning approach. The cohort experience created space for students to experiment with shared facilitation, take up various roles, and raise challenges that served to redistribute power relative to the traditional structure of most classrooms (e.g., students determining readings, grading each other, and making decisions by consensus). The cohort also brought attention to social change as students figured out how to create space for each other, to recognize the external factors that might limit engagement and participation, and to work through theories, case studies, and other assigned materials together in ways that facilitated greater understanding of social issues and concerns.

In the survey, 58% of respondents identified the cohort as "extremely important to [their] learning." Interviewees referenced the importance of the cohort to their participation, knowledge, and values during the programs. They also acknowledged that the courses associated with their civic engagement programs were "vastly more participatory than most other college courses" (2-year program alumna). Recognizing that their learning was dependent on one another, program members were encouraged to be more responsive and responsible to the material in the class. An alumna of the 2-year program shared, "If you didn't have an opinion or an analysis, if you hadn't done your homework, it was going to be pretty evident."

A 4-year program alumnus shared, "[The cohort], just its very nature, instills a sense of being part of a collective in a community" and that made it unique for program members. According to another alumna of the 2-year program, "Every other form of education in our society is you go through this on your own and eventually you get a job and then you make money on your own." This same person continued, "And I think that that's the opposite of learning how to operate within a cooperative collective environment. So that, to me, I think just that experience is really powerful." The cohort created a sense of belonging and collective responsibility that spoke to the aims of partici-

pation Atkins and Hart (2003) acknowledged as important to developing a civic identity.

The cohort facilitated opportunities to develop knowledge about the local community on two levels. The first was knowledge about the local community (the city, town, or region where the campus is located and where participants are working). Opportunities throughout the program for participants to share their experiences working in and with community created space for them to deepen their knowledge about the community by hearing about the experiences of fellow cohort members.

The second level was fostered by the membership and longevity of the cohort. Fifty-one percent (51%) of survey respondents found that the "different perspectives to challenge thinking" were extremely important to their learning. An alumnus of the 1-year program offered, "Different perspectives and backgrounds, different interests and different biases to the conversation. ... People who are in this for different reasons; it makes for lively conversation." Similarly, an alumna of the 2-year program explained, "Sometimes we had more prior knowledge than other people in the room, and just within the cohort model helped to—it helped to push your thinking further when you were discussing something."

Fifty-nine percent (59%) of survey respondents felt it extremely important that cohort members were able to "teach and learn from each other" and 63% credited the cohort structure with helping members to "trust enough to honestly share opinions and concerns." An alumna from the 2-year program shared, "So I guess, in providing a safe space, it allowed me to push my learning further. It allowed me to go deeper and to talk about things that are difficult to talk about."

The continuity of the program afforded a very different experience for program members relative to their peers in other academic spaces. For instance, a 2-year program alumnus asserted, "I think that, like, with each semester it felt like the learning was building on something before and not just because I personally understood how it was building, but like that we were all moving

in a certain direction." An alumnus of the 4-year program described how membership in the cohort supported his learning: "By the time—actually it didn't even take to junior year— sophomore year, we were really challenging each other and diving into some of the issues we were talking about in class." He went on to state:

> I think also think we really held each other accountable whereas, again, in a class in another subject area, … I can hide out or if I didn't get to this reading, I'm just not going to raise my hand in class. … I couldn't do that [in the program].

The commitment to values fundamental to a responsible civic identity was also facilitated by the experience of the cohort. An alumnus of the 1-year program credited the opportunity to see the commitment of his peers to their work in the community as influential to values development. Additionally, program participants' experience of the cohort as a safe space to "explore," "struggle," or "grapple" with values important to them proved to be essential for values clarification. An alumna of the 4-year program described her cohort as "allies in a community" and "found [having them] to be really key" in her development. Similarly, alumni of all three programs mentioned the importance of accountability. Being able to "challenge one another on whether our values showed up in our approach was huge," explained an alumna of the 1-year program.

Just as the diversity of perspectives, viewpoints, and experiences present in the membership of the cohort was important to developing knowledge, it also proved important to values. An alumna of the 1-year program offered, "I think that the diversity of people's interests and backgrounds was very—it allowed a lot of convergence because people were coming to a similar topic from very different perspectives, but having similar goals within it." An alumnus of this same program highlighted diversity and the importance of his cohort in helping him expand his understanding of what he valued as service: "Just realizing how many different ways there are

to be of service and … respecting them. It was a very powerful thing. And, so I think that was a very important part of it." Speaking to a similar process, an alumna of the 2-year program reflected:

> I remember having just an hour-long conversation once after we got done with this [service] plunge … and I think we challenged each other in ways that I think could have never imagined challenging each other in a different classroom setting. It really got down to our core values.

Because of the trust established in the cohort, alumni saw the programs as spaces where they could test and challenge themselves and each other as they clarified their values. An alumna of the 4-year program believed, "I also just like that idea that you do have a sense of shared mission, shared values with other people and, for good or for bad, you are going to learn from one another."

Student communities are an important influence on identity development (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Participants learn from one another's experiences and perspectives challenging each other to think differently, act with more intention, and question the circumstances that create social problems (Mitchell, 2007). The cohort experience best fosters identity development when the students meet regularly, when the membership is diverse, when opportunities exist for collaboration and teamwork, and when they persist long enough to serve as a "reference group" for one another (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 277). Values clarification and congruence are key tasks fundamental to establishing identity (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Evans et al., 1998). It is this process that confirms identity, allowing students to develop purpose that can guide their actions in service to others or the greater good.

The experience of the cohort as part of the civic engagement programs provided some of the most intentional spaces for a critical service-learning approach. The relationships formed through the multiple terms of the programs allowed for authentic relationships as participants

are challenged and encouraged to share all aspects of their experiences—successes and challenges, breakthroughs and stumbling blocks—as they worked through the curriculum and the community experience. Because of the comfort and trust developed, participants felt able to, as one alumnus noted, "call each other out," a practice that supported an investigation of power and privilege. Attention to social change was facilitated by the transformative conversations that happened as participants learned about and from one another in the cohort.

The cohort experience continually reinforced the values fundamental to a developed civic identity by providing an internal community to develop and practice the skills that embody commitments to diversity, solidarity, and justice before and after engaging with community outside the university. The safety net created by the cohort experience ensures that participants do not test their ideas alone, but act in concert with others who are learning together what it means to be an active and engaged community member.

Conclusion

With national calls for civic learning and democratic engagement (National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, 2012; U.S. Department of Education, 2012) spurring higher education institutions to deepen opportunities for students to connect to community issues, the question of long-term impact and efficacy presents a gap in the literature. To understand the long-term impact of civic engagement programs in higher education, this study focused on the experiences of alumni. Research on alumni of higher education institutions has been narrow in focus, but is especially significant to education research (Pettit & Litten, 1999).

Through this investigation of alumni experiences, common experiences of the civic engagement programs that participants name as influential to their civic identity are better understood. Longitudinal studies that reveal the long-term impacts of civic engagement practice

is important for scholars and practitioners seeking to develop experiences that build civic identity in their participants.

The three programs studied were civic engagement experiences that utilized a critical service-learning pedagogy and endeavored to develop engaged scholars and actors working for a better world. The data revealed that the community engagement and cohort experiences of the three programs were important to students' learning and experience. Further, the alumni continued to point to and reflect on these influential experiences for many years after the conclusion of the civic engagement program.

As institutions of higher education work to consider the types of interventions that serve to support the development of civic identity, a focus on the types of experiences that afford participation, knowledge acquisition, and values clarification is essential. This research demonstrated that those processes are effectively supported through a critical service-learning pedagogy that utilizes community engagement and a cohort structure for program membership.

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