



# Bridging the Gap Between Service, Activism, and Politics

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## The Bonner Community Engagement Curriculum

**BWBR Description:** *Bonner Curriculum workshop teaches participants to combine their understanding of service, activism and politics into a more comprehensive and effective worldview.*

**Overview:**

In most recent years, participation in community service by young adults is at an all-time high, yet voting and other forms of political participation have fallen to their lowest levels since 1971, when American citizens 18 and over received the right to vote. Even the past several years of voter registration did not net huge gains in the voting rate of youth, although recent data indicates that college students did vote in high proportion (75%) in the 2004 election. Research suggests that those involved in service often see it as a form of politics. On the other hand, since September 11, 2001, college freshmen describe themselves as more patriotic and also have participated in protests at higher levels. How to bridge all these avenues? This workshop is designed to assist facilitators in bringing together students interested in and involved in community service with their counterparts involved in activism and in politics to discuss ways their work can support each other and even create collaboration. Note that the session requires participation by students who can consider or represent both avenues.

**Category:**

Civic engagement; political engagement; activism; philosophies behind service; dialogue; collaboration; coalition building

**Level:**

Suitable for all levels, but assuming prior participation in community service, activism, and politics



## **Recommended**

**Bonner Sequence:** This training is recommended for Bonner students as a way to expand their notion of civic engagement. It is a good training in conjunction with the baseline intention of Personal and Civic Values (junior year) or at other times when the program wants to encourage students to consider the interconnections of service with other forms of civic involvement.

## **Learning Outcomes:**

- Participants will engage in a range of activities to consider the importance and pitfalls of service, politics, and activism.
- Participants will engage in dialogue around service, politics, and activism, uncovering and sharing some of their own experiences, preconceptions, stereotypes, and hopes.
- Participants will begin to appreciate the complementary and valuable work that each strategy attempts to make social change and build some agreements for how to better coordinate their work in a campus or community context.

## **Materials:**

- Flip chart paper
- Markers
- Copies of attached handouts

## **How to Prepare:**

Review the entire trainer guide and handouts. Become familiar and comfortable with the activities. Prepare any additional guidelines for your own facilitation, as this workshop relies heavily on facilitation. If you would like, consult the facilitation workshops for more tools and techniques.

Make sure you plan to have people who consider their work to be service, politics, and activism present; work hard on the recruitment of individuals for the workshop.

### **Brief Outline:**

The workshop has the following parts:

- |   |                           |
|---|---------------------------|
| 1) Warm Up: Brainstorming Activity                  | suggested time 10 minutes |
| 2) Jen Service, Joanne Politician, Juanita Activist | suggested time 15 minutes |
| 3) Advantages, Disadvantages, and More              | suggested time 10 minutes |
| 4) Community Solutions Map                          | suggested time 10 minutes |
| 5) Bridging the Gap                                 | suggested time 15 minutes |

### **Part 1) Warm Up: Brainstorming Activity**

Suggested time: 10 minutes

Begin the workshop by introducing yourself. You can also share these quotes:

“Love cannot remain by itself – it has no meaning. Love has to be put into action and that action is service.”

~ Mother Teresa (Aide to the most poor in India)

“Each time a man stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lots of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each others from a million different centers of energy and daring those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.”

~ Robert F. Kennedy (Attorney General, Statesman, Candidate for President)

“Many people fear nothing more terribly than to take a position which stands out from the prevailing opinion. The tendency of most is to adopt a view that is so ambiguous that it will include everything and so popular that it will include everybody. Not a few men who cherish lofty and noble ideals hide them under a bushel for fear of being called different.”

~ Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (Civil Rights Activist, Reverend)

Then ask the question, “Think about these sentiments and also your own experience and beliefs. Which do you see as a more effective means of creating social change – direct community service, political engagement, or activism? Ignore for a moment the overlaps that may occur to you.”

Have the participants pick one of the three types of civic engagement, at least for the purposes of the next exercise; explain that later, participants will have a chance to explore the intersections, pros, and cons of each. Have people physically move into three groups, pointing out a space for each. Have them circle up their chairs.

Then, instruct the groups to carry out a brainstorm. Explain the purpose of the brainstorm:

- This is an attempt to capture people's perceptions of community service, politics, and activism. There are, of course, heroes and villains in each, so don't think only of the most effective implementers of each, but at the same time, it's important to consider the most positive examples as well.
- So, your group's job is to write down anything that comes to mind as associated with these three types of involvement, including both positive and negative connotations.
- Each group should be given a flipchart pad and markers. Each group should brainstorm words they associate with both "community service", "politics," and "activism."

At the end of the designated time (about 10 minutes), have each group report back. A suggested way to do this is to have each group report only one of the types (their own or another, you decide). Then, have the other two groups only add on new ideas that weren't mentioned by the first group (because there will likely be overlap).

## **Part 2) Jimmy/Jen Service, Joe/Joanne Politician, Juan/Juanita Activist**

Suggested time: 15 minutes

Next, instruct the groups to reflect on all that has been said and write a biography of a fictional person:

- Have the politically-inclined group write about Juan/Juanita Activist
- Have the activist-inclined group write about Jimmy/Jen Service
- Have the service-inclined group write about Joe/Joanne Politician

Inform the groups (using flip chart) that biographies should include basic biographical information as well as information regarding the person's career path, motivations, strengths and weaknesses. The moderator should encourage the groups to be creative and have fun with this activity.

At the end of designated time (about 5 minutes) groups will read their biographies aloud. The moderator should lead a **debrief** of this activity, allowing each side to explain their fictional character. This exercise is designed to get students discussing their preconceptions, prejudices, and stereotypes regarding those involved in service and politics. So, if people build in stereotypes, it's okay — that is the point of the debrief and discussion. Some questions to ask may be:

- What stood out to you in making the fictional character?
- What preconceptions or stereotypes did you grapple with? Did you use them or discard them?
- What examples in your own experience or context did you draw on?
- What are other groups responses, especially the group to whom the character applies?

### Part 3) Exploring Advantages, Disadvantages, and More

Suggested time: 10 minutes

Now, have a big flip chart paper with a grid as below (but to scale on paper):

	Advantages	Disadvantages	Other
Community Service			
Politics			
Activism			

With everyone, have people note the advantages, disadvantages and other key factors for community service, politics, and activism — bringing together the big ideas. Here, you are pushing the group to move beyond the connotations to take note of the actual pros and cons of each approach. You can ask:

What do \_\_\_\_ (each one) accomplish?

What is a drawback to \_\_\_\_ (each one)?

Are there other factors to note.

See the attached handouts: one is blank for you to distribute for note-taking. The second has some ideas; you can either use that to add to the group's thoughts or hand

it out and review it in conclusion to their idea generation. Either way, get out some of the main ideas about the importance and pitfalls of each approach for making society better.

End by noting the similarities (from handout), which include:

- Participants in each often cite reasons of duty, altruism, commitment to country, commitment to people, justice, patriotism, and desire to contribute to society as driving factors
- All strategies have participants that see themselves as contributing to the health and welfare of society and people; all are defined around these aims.
- All have their own norms for participation, all of which also play out other societal factors (e.g., race, class, gender, culture)

## **Part 4) Community Solutions Map**

Suggested time: 10 minutes

At this point, the groups should physically merge back into one larger group. Rearrange the room so that the participants are intermixed.

Guide the group to pick a problem or issue facing the greater community. (For example, homelessness, discrimination (of some group), poor schooling, etc.)

Appoint a recorder to help you. The recorder writes the problem/issue in the center of a sheet of flipchart paper. The group brainstorms the different actions, resources, and channels that exist in the community as part of the solution to the problem. For every solution that is related to direct service or community work, the recorder writes in blue. For solutions that are achieved through political avenues, the recorder writes in red. For solutions that are achieved through activism, the recorder writes in green.

Have people even think about any groups or efforts that they represent and how their efforts could channel towards a complementary approach.

Follow this activity with more debriefing and discussion of how direct service, politics, and activism can complement each other. Also ask and identify what factors serve as barriers to the coordination of such efforts.

## **Part 5) Bridging the Gap on Campus (or in your community)**

Suggested time: 15 minutes

Now turn the focus more broadly away from the specific issue and to the notion of coordination and/or respect for all of the strategies.

Start by addressing the issue of respect:

- What can each strategy (and each of you) agree to respect about the other strategies?
- What can each strategy (and each of you) be willing to overlook about the other strategies; in other words, can you agree to disagree?

Some people will have more issues about other strategies, at least for themselves, than others; just note these ideas on paper as “agree to disagree” or “not for me, but...” and move on.

Then, turn the group’s focus on the campus or community environment. Guide participants to discuss the particular strengths and needs of the campus, for example when thinking of having an environment in which all three play powerful positive roles (as in the examples set by Mother Teresa, Robert F. Kennedy, and Martin Luther King, Jr.) Also, have participants focus on the relationships between various campus groups, placing emphasis on agreeing to opportunities for collaboration.

Again, draw on your recorders to help you visually guide the group through creating a **Campus Asset Map** that visually shows the groups and entities who work on service politics, and activism. Consider:

- Organizations
- Student government
- Chapters of national or state organizations
- Academic programs
- Faculty
- Staff or departments
- Campus events
- Student Life
- Residential Education
- Clubs
- Centers

Then, have participants generate concrete strategies for bridging the gap between service, politics, and activism on campus (and/or in the community). Consider: specific campaigns

- co-facilitated meetings
- co-sponsored events
- courses or academic work
- centers or gathering spaces

Use the **Campus Asset Map** to guide your facilitation, using lots of questions to pull out the groups' ideas.

Have the recorder add these ideas visually to the map, or make a list on a poster.

Then, turn the group's focus to **Next Steps**. Ask them to focus in, determining just a few concrete next steps that they are willing to pursue. They should assign a leader or point person, if possible.

Restate the main points to move forward, and your role (if any) in guiding that. Close the workshop with some general discussion and reflection, as well as an evaluation.



## Advantages, Disadvantages, Other

	Advantages	Disadvantages	Other
Community Service			
Politics/ Political Engagement			

Activism			
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## Advantages, Disadvantages, Other

	Advantages	Disadvantages	Other
Community Service	<p>Directly working to address a problem by providing a need (e.g., serving food, giving health care, etc.)</p> <p>Personal and direct contact/interaction</p> <p>Immediacy of change</p> <p>Value by society; perceived good; fit with American culture</p>	<p>Perception that work fails to address systematic or root causes; may be perceived as “band-aid” solutions</p> <p>Requires sustainable efforts in terms of funds, resources</p> <p>Perceived as inefficient or lacking in power or prestige (e.g., soft)</p>	<p>Can be seen as the “common ground” or bringing people together across politics and issues</p> <p>Institutionalization and sustained efforts can increase measurable impact and can be sustained</p>
Politics	<p>Working to address problem through political systems, rules, and structures (e.g., taxation, distribution of wealth, legality, etc.)</p> <p>Potential magnitude of impact (e.g., change societal structures)</p> <p>Generally valued by society, though politics may be charged by party or other issues</p>	<p>Perception of politics as corrupt or tainted by power, money, privilege</p> <p>Perception of politics as noninclusive, especially to minority groups (such as women, people of color)</p> <p>Perceived barriers to entry such as money or class access</p> <p>Requires orientation toward power, winning</p>	<p>Politics and activism, while sharing many attributes, may be distinguished by the idea of “working from within” (politics) or “working from outside” (activism) the system; some may reject this distinction, but it is helpful to draw out issues</p> <p>Largest gender and ethnic underrepresentation (e.g., demographics are largely white and male) in this area</p>

Activism	<p>Working to address problem or issue by applying pressure or resistance to political and social structures (e.g., protesting, picketing, refusing to participate, etc.)</p> <p>Potential magnitude of impact (e.g., change societal structures)</p> <p>Sometimes seen as in opposition to mainstream values or practices</p>	<p>Perception of activism as negative in terms of social status (e.g., sloppy, illegal, disorganized, violent, outside mainstream, fringe)</p> <p>Perception of activism as dangerous (e.g., go to jail, be tracked by FBI, get assassinated)</p> <p>Requires sustainable efforts in terms of funds, resources</p>	<p>Historically tied to many excellent examples of effective strategies for social change, including Women's Movement, Civil Rights Movement, environmental movement, etc.</p>
ALL	<p>Participants in each often cite reasons of duty, altruism, commitment to country, commitment to people, justice, patriotism, and desire to contribute to society as driving factors</p> <p>All strategies have participants that see themselves as contributing to the health and welfare of society and people; all are defined around these aims.</p> <p>All have their own norms for participation, all of which also play out other societal factors (e.g., race, class, gender, culture)</p>		