

**Civic Learning and Democratic Engagements:
A Review of the Literature on Civic Engagement in Post-Secondary Education**

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Introduction

“Much of the discourse as to *why* and *how* institutions should be involved in preparing individuals for civic engagement is philosophical in nature, but there is also empirical evidence that higher education does indeed impact students’ civic engagement” (cited in Vogelgesang & Astin 2005: 1).¹

What civic engagement is, how students should go about it, and what it should do for them after the fact is both a philosophical debate and a research divide. Even a cursory review of the literature would demonstrate that we know the most about the empirical effects of civic engagement through the lens of service-learning. Moreover, this research has produced a convincing amount of evidence on the positive effects of service-learning across a range of student-centered outcomes, including gains in learning, and aspects of personal and social development. But is service-learning *really* civic engagement? A number of scholars have argued that most forms of service-learning (or other forms of apolitical community engagement) fail to intentionally engage students in the activities and processes central to democratic building (i.e. deliberative dialogue, collaborative work, problem-solving within diverse groups). In essence, these scholars argue it is not enough for students to engage in the community; they must also engage in the skills, values, and knowledge development that educate them to be better citizens.

Central to the divisions within the civic engagement literature is the lack of a common definition of, or conceptual language for “civic engagement.” As Jacoby (2009: 5) notes “there are probably as many definitions of civic engagement as there are scholars and practitioners

¹ For additional resources on the philosophy of civic engagement, see Astin, 1997; Boyte & Hollander, 1999; Dewey, 1944; and Saltmarsh, 1996.

who are concerned with it.” Complicating the issue further is that the terms and concepts, often used interchangeably to connote “civic engagement” (e.g. democratic participation, citizenship, community engagement), tend to be conflated with campus programs and initiatives that fall under the headings of “community-based learning” and “service-learning.” “Several colleges and universities have renamed their community service or service-learning offices ‘civic engagement’ but have not changed the programs or services they offer” (Jacoby, 2009: 7).

Service-learning is essentially an umbrella term under which many activities and programs can fall, rather than a narrowly defined practice with associated outcomes. The following definitions represent common perspectives on the orientation to and practice of service-learning on campuses:

“The implementation of service-learning in a curricular setting provides a real and experience-based opportunity for students to become immersed in critical thinking while applying course curricula to a local problem.” (Pragman & Flannery, 2008: 217)

“[Service-learning] is a form of active learning that involves service to one’s community.” (Rama, Ravenscroft, Wolcroft, & Zlotkowski, 2000: 658)

The range of experiences typically involved in service-learning courses, programs, or modules often do not entail the same directed or sustained engagement in democracy that many scholars advocate as civic engagement. Prentice (2007) argues that civic engagement can be represented through service-learning activities *if* the concept of civic engagement is expanded to include non-political engagement with the community. “When researchers define civic engagement as behavior changes around political involvement, service learning does not

appear to play a role...(but) [w]hen the definition is expanded to include nonpolitical community involvement...a connection between the two begins to emerge. It is in this expanded definition that socially just citizenship surfaces” (ibid: 267).

The inclusion of *non-political* (or *apolitical*) engagement with community as a form of civic engagement is a crucial caveat for reviewing the spectrum of research and evidence related to this field. The wealth of empirical research on civic engagement has largely focused upon activities connected with service-learning. Although service-learning by definition engages students’ in a community, that engagement *may* or *may not* be politically-oriented or intentionally structured to deepen the specific knowledge or skills associated with developing democratic participation or citizenship.

In practice, many post-secondary institutions adhere to the following, all-inclusive approach to defining and labeling the practice of civic engagement on their campus:

“Campuses have used a variety of terms to describe their civic engagement activities and the ways these activities link to learning. Some of the most widely used are service-learning, community engagement, community-based research, civic education, community experiences, community-based learning, democratic practice, and philanthropy education, not to mention a variety of co-curricular offerings for students. Regardless of the term used, if part of the purpose of the activity is to educate or enhance students’ understanding of civic life, the work generally can be referred to as civic engagement.” (Cress, Burack, Giles, Elkins, & Stevens, 2010: 4)

While helpful for bridging the myriad terms for civic engagement on campuses, this approach also suggests the civic mission of higher education is only to provide students with an “understanding of civic life,” as opposed to *also* providing students with the skills and values needed to actively participate in and influence that civic life.

The limitation of civic engagement that is apolitical or divorced from civic processes or aims is that it is too focused on the individual student. Because these experiences are not sufficiently or substantially connected to a student's role within a larger community or processes of negotiation (i.e. dialogue and deliberation), apolitical experiences encourage students to focus reflection inward on their individual experience, rather than outward to the relevance of that experience to a societal big picture. "We...believe that an educational ethos of unencumbered individualism has a very high cost in the neglect and diminishment of democratic society" (Knefelkamp & Schneider, 1997: 333). To do the latter necessitates undertaking actions and practices in higher education that more intentionally frame civic participation as politically and democratically-centered (Boyte 2008; Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont, & Stephens 2003; Thomas, 2011). The argument advanced by these scholars is that the original, historic mission of American universities focused on the engagement of students in the actions, skills, and value-building directly related to living within a diverse democratic society. Thus, true civic engagement goes beyond apolitical involvement in community (i.e. service-learning, volunteerism, community-based learning) and intentionally fosters forms of democratic skill- building.

The imperative to focus on civic values and democratic skill-building within higher education is also closely tied to the well-documented decline in civic engagement in American society, particularly among its youth and college-age citizenry (Colby et al. 2003; Putnam, 1995).

"It is not just the voting booth that has been increasingly deserted by Americans. [S]ince 1973 the number of Americans who report that 'in the past year' they have 'attended a

public meeting on town or school affairs' has fallen by more than a third (from 22 percent in 1973 to 13 percent in 1993). Similar (or even greater) relative declines are evident in responses to questions about attending a political rally or speech, serving on a committee of some local organization, and working for a political party. By almost every measure, Americans' direct engagement in politics and government has fallen steadily and sharply over the last generation, despite the fact that average levels of education – the best individual-level predictor of political participation – have risen sharply throughout this period.”(Putnam 1995: 67-68)

Notably, young people with a college degree or who have some college experience have higher rates of voter participation than their peers who have not attended college (Marcelo, 2007). But while college alone is regarded as one of the best, if not *the* best, predictor of certain forms of civic participation (e.g. voting), it is not fully understood what it is about college that yields these effects (Jarvis, Montoya, & Mulvoy, 2005). It may be the fostering of civic skills and political knowledge that engages young people in the democratic process *or* it may be that college provides a means through which people can connect with similar others, encouraging them to mobilize and pursue political action (ibid: 14). Regardless of which it is, voter turnout and other forms of political participation among young people continues to be consistently low, suggesting rates of volunteerism or community engagement alone should *not* be used to presume their political engagement.

Soule (2001) has argued that the primary correlates of low political participation are high levels of 1) government frustration, 2) social and political distrust, and 3) emphasis on wealth and financial security – all of which have steadily increased among America’s youth over the past several decades (see pp 15-16). These same correlates are in many ways addressed by the practical, campus-based programs of politically-centered civic engagement through which students develop dialogue skills, collaborative problem-solving, and diversity training (see

Deliberative Democracy Consortium, 2008; Diaz & Gilchrist, 2010; Hurtado 2009; Mayhew & Fernández, 2007; South, 2010; Stitzlein, 2010; and Difficult Dialogues Initiative). All three of which are relevant to mending social and political distrust. Additionally, these campus models emphasize the role of public work (see for example Boyte & Kari, 1996) in students' learning and community engagement through action-based research and democratic participation, including forms of activism (see for example Cunningham & McKinney, 2010; Harriger, 2010; Peters, Merrill, Cotter, & Ragland, 2002).

From service-learning to intergroup dialogue, the landscape of civic engagement literature is vast, containing multiple pathways to explore models of campus practice and associated effects on knowledge, values, and skills. While quite a lot is known about this discussion and a good deal about what campuses are doing to advance different types of civic engagement, the scope of empirical evidence for these various practices and models is varied. Because the most developed area of empirical research on the impact of civic engagement in higher education has focused on students' service-learning activities and experiences, a significant portion of this review is dedicated to service-learning research. Following this section, however, is a discussion of the extant research on civic engagement beyond service-learning. This scholarship intentionally frames civic engagement as politically centered, in which students' community work is intended to foster civic knowledge and values and to assist in the development of their democratic skills.

What is the scope of civic engagement on campuses?

Overall trends of participation among college students in civic engagement is high, as defined by involvement in service or community activities or experiences at some point in their college years. A study of over 12,000 college students in 2000 found more than 75% had participated in some form of civic engagement during college, with 30% having been involved in course-based service learning and 46% participating in some other form of community service (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000). Among a random sample of 384 students drawn from aggregate National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) data, 83% of graduating seniors report being engaged in some form of community service during college (2009). There is also evidence that the level of civic participation in college matters. A 2009 report on the comparative levels of participation of 20-29 year olds across ten areas of civic life (i.e. read a newspaper, trust others, group member, religious attendance, self-reported voting), showed respondents who had gone to college had higher levels of participation in every area of civic engagement than their non-college going peers (Flanagan, Levine, & Settersten, 2009).

National estimates of the level of participation in civic engagement, or civically-oriented activities, in post-secondary education by race are difficult to find. In 1997, 72% of service-learning students were white, English only students (Grassi, Hanley, & Liston, 2004). Findings from the NSSE on participation rates in certain types of “high-impact” or engaged pedagogies (i.e. service-learning, study abroad) suggest rates in civically-oriented activities are roughly equal across racial categories. In 2007, rates of participation in service-learning for white

students was 36% versus 40% and 36% for African-American and Hispanic students, respectively (see NSSE 2007 Annual Report).

The report cautions, however, that “the variance *between* groups of students, such as men and women or African Americans and Latinos, is almost certainly going to be less than *within* the groups. That is, while it may appear that on average students in one group seem to benefit more from certain practices or experiences, it is also the case that *among students in the group that appears to have the advantage, some students benefit less than the average student in lower-performing groups*” (ibid: 9, emphasis in original). Thus, to fully understand differences in access to and engagement in practices connected with civic engagement, such as service-learning, attention must be given not only to large group distinctions (e.g. race) but also to sub-group distinctions *within* these categories. For example, the rates of participation among students of color who are *also* transfer or first-generation students.

What do we know about the effects of civic engagement on student learning and retention?

“[S]ervice learning is a *smart* choice for institutions of higher education because it enhances student achievement of core educational outcomes.” (see Bringle & Hatcher, 2000: 274, emphasis in the original)

“What makes service learning different from volunteering is its explicit academic component: like any test, paper, or research project, the service learning experience must be integral to the syllabus and advance the student’s knowledge of the course content.” (Jay, 2008:255)

Institutional assessments of student success are commonly measured in terms of *retention* – rates of entering students versus returning students from fall to fall semesters – and also *completion* (graduation rates). The positive effect of service-learning has been connected with both of these outcomes (Astin & Sax, 1998; Gallini & Moelly, 2003; Roose, Daphne, Miller,

Norris, Peacock, White, & White, 1997; Vogelgesang, Ikeda, Gilmartin, & Keup, 2002).

Additionally, some fifteen studies suggest service-learning has a positive impact on career development (Eyler et al., 2001: 4) and satisfaction with college (Astin & Sax, 1998; Berson & Younkin 1998; Gray et al 1998). Service-learning has also been shown to have a positive impact on deepening students' connections with faculty (Astin & Sax, 1998; Gray et al. 1998; Eyler & Giles, 1999). Moreover, students' closeness with faculty has been shown to a key factor in increasing their college success (Astin, 1993) and persistence (Pascarella & Terenzini 2005). Additional studies suggest fostering connections with faculty may be especially critical for the success of students of color and students from underrepresented populations (see Cress, 2008; Hurtado, Carter, & Spuler, 1996; Nagda, Gergerman, Jonides, von Hippel, & Lerner, 1998).

While this is encouraging data for colleges and universities, the evidence regarding the impact of service-learning on students' grades or GPA is mixed. Some studies report a positive effect of community service or service learning on students' GPA (see Astin & Sax, 1998; Gray et al., 1998; Markus, Howard, & King, 1993; Strage, 2000; Tartter, 1996; Vogelgesang & Astin, 2005; Wisconsin Campus Compact, 2010), whereas other research has found no difference in the effect on GPA between service-learning and non-service-learning students (see Boss, 1994; Hudson, 1996; Kendrick, 1996; Miller, 1994; Parker-Gwin & Mabry, 1998). However, it has been suggested that because service-learning involves higher-order thinking, grades or GPA are likely to be inappropriate outcomes for measuring the cognitive effects of service-learning experiences (see Rama, Ravenscroft, Wolcroft, & Zlotkowski, 2000).

A number of studies have looked beyond GPA and grades to focus on the assessment of service-learning outcomes related to students' development of skills and tasks, such as critical

thinking, problem solving, and citizenship skills. In a comprehensive review of the service-learning literature conducted in 2001 by Eyler, Giles, Stenson, and Gray, 31 studies and dissertations were identified that connected service-learning with positive effects on student learning. Specifically, Eyler et al. (2001) identified evidence across 18 studies that service-learning “improves students’ ability to apply what they have learned to the ‘real world’” (3). Additionally, a handful of studies have connected service-learning with positive effects on learning outcomes associated with “complexity of understanding, problem analysis, critical thinking, and cognitive development” (Eyler et al., 2001: 4; see specifically Batchelder & Root, 1994; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Eyler, Root & Giles, 1998; Osborne, Hammerich, & Hensley, 1998).

Additionally, a meta-analysis of courses incorporating a service-learning component found that students in a course with service-learning had an average increase of 43 points between pre and posttest measures on academic outcomes (Conway, Amel, & Gerwein, 2009).² Similarly, a meta-analysis conducted by Novak, Markey, and Allen (2007) showed that across 9 studies the addition of a service-learning component produced an overall increase of 53% on learning outcomes attainment for students in these courses compared to students not engaged in service-learning.

What are the effects of civic engagement on students’ personal and social development?

Beyond learning gains, the literature suggests students’ participation in civically-oriented activities, such as service-learning, has a significant impact on their intrapersonal and social development. For example, Eyler et al. (2001) cite 33 articles and dissertations that have

² Gains in academic outcomes were primarily the result in changes in academic motivation, knowledge, GPA and grades (see Conway, et al. 2009).

connected service-learning with increasing “student personal development such as sense of personal efficacy, personal identity, spiritual growth, and moral development” (1). Additionally, a meta-analysis of 58 service-learning studies found an average increase of 21 points between pre and posttest evaluations in personal outcomes for students engaged in service-learning activities (Conway et al., 2009).³ Similarly, Kezar’s (2002) review of multiple studies found consistent positive connections between service-learning and outcomes associated with cultural awareness, tolerance for diversity, altruistic attitudes, moral development, sensitivity and reasoning, and self-esteem (16). Finally, Eyler et al. (2001) cite 32 studies and dissertations linking service-learning with “reducing stereotypes and facilitating cultural and racial understanding” (pg. 1).

Consistent linkages have been drawn between service-learning and increasing students’ social awareness or sense of efficacy. “Service-learning places teaching and learning in a social context, facilitating socially responsible knowledge” (Conway et al., 2009: 233). For example, Eyler et. al. (2001) identify 23 studies linking service-learning with an increase in students’ “sense of social responsibility and citizenship skills”⁴ and 26 studies suggesting service-learning positively impacts students’ “commitment to service” (2). A range of studies have also found that service-learning has “a positive effect on interpersonal development and the ability to work well with others, leadership and communication skills” (Eyler et al., 2001: 1; see also

³ Personal gains were measured in terms of self-evaluation, volunteer motivations, moral development, well-being, career development (see Conway, et al. 2009).

⁴ Gains in these areas were associated with outcomes such as religious and racial tolerance, prosocial decision-making, awareness and involvement in community, and changes in standardized scales (i.e. Social and Personal Responsibility Scale and Defining Issues Test) (see Eyler et al. 2001 for specific studies).

Cress, Astin, Zimmerman-Oster, & Burkhardt, 2001; Moely, McFarland, Miron, Mercer, & Illustre, 2002).

Studies have also connected students' engagement in service-learning and their sense of being able to effect change in their community (see Eyler & Giles, 1994; Gallini & Moely, 2003; Moely et al., 2002; Rockquemore & Schaffer, 2000). A meta-analysis of 55 quantitative studies found that service-learning experiences corresponded with a small mean increase on outcomes related to citizenship, with an average increase of 17 points between pretest to posttest means (Conway et al., 2009).⁵ Finally, results from a study of 209 institutions with a sample of over 12,000 student found, after controlling for level of civic engagement *prior* to college, students' engagement in volunteer service during college was significantly linked with positive cognitive and affective outcomes after graduation, such as frequency of socializing with diverse people, promotion of racial understanding, developing a meaningful philosophy of life, and participating in community action programs (Astin, Sax, & Avalos, 1999).

Beyond service-learning: What are the effects of politically-oriented models of civic engagement on democratic skill building?

“We need to redirect our focus...to researching individual civic transformation and the development of a sense of civic and personal efficacy. We also need to better understand the developmental experiences and interactions that influence the efficacy of civic teaching and learning. This requires a more holistic look at what experiences in K-12 schools, colleges, and students' lives are shaping their civic engagement.” (Cress, et al. 2010: 19-20).

⁵ Citizenship outcomes encompassed measures of personally responsible citizenship, participatory citizenship, justice-oriented citizenship, and combined citizenship types (see Conway, et al. 2009).

The preceding quote highlights the struggle in the literature to not only fully define civic engagement, but also to fully identify the relevant outcomes attached to what it *means to be civic*. Scholars advancing this dialogue suggest greater attention needs to be given to the role of post-secondary education in training students in the skills of democracy – such as dialogue creation, collaboration, and reflection (Colby et al., 2003; Colby, Beaumont, Ehrlich, & Corngold, 2007; Scobey, 2010; Thomas, 2011; see also Long, 2002). As Scobey (2010) argues, “U.S. colleges have long promoted education for the public good as a core value of their mission statements, and they have fitfully included civics courses as core components of their curricula...Yet, as the courses, community projects, issue briefs and reflection journals...underscore [it is]...[t]he campus and the curriculum [that] have come to be regarded as consequential arenas for the making of a citizen” (187).

This argument, and others like it, posits that civic engagement is best considered as a continuum of practice, among which service-learning is one form capable of advancing civic outcomes but as an isolated, unreflective, or unintentional experience is insufficient.⁶ Broadly, a civic continuum that encompasses outcomes related to “intentional participation in the democratic process, public policy, and direct service” (Keen & Hall, 2008: 2) can be defined as a range of practice that fosters what Checkoway (2009, 1998) refers to as “quality engagement.” “Quality engagement is when people influence a decision or affect an outcome” (Checkoway, 2009: 42). How should citizens gain the skills, knowledge and values to influence decision-making? The answer is a return of colleges and universities to their civic missions, specifically

⁶ See Butin (2010) for a comprehensive review of the impacts of service-learning as a practice, its limitations and potential for advancing civic learning.

through the facilitation of “civic learning” (see Checkoway, 1999; Musil, 1994). “Civic learning is rooted in respect for community-based knowledge, grounded in experiential and reflective modes of teaching and learning, aimed at active participation in American democracy, and aligned with institutional change efforts to improve student learning” (Saltmarsh, 2005: 53). Furthermore, it has been argued in white papers and prominently in the *Wingspread Declaration on Renewing the Civic Mission of the American Research University* (Boyte & Hollander, 1999) that the degree of civic *disengagement* in the United States, particularly among youth and college age citizens, has created a new and timely imperative for colleges and universities to pursue civic learning on campuses (see Saltmarsh, Hartley, & Clayton, 2009 for NERCHE; and Checkoway 1999).

Relative to the amount of research on service-learning, however, the amount of empirical work connecting practices to civic learning and democratic and politically-centered community engagement with civic outcomes (skills, knowledge and values) is comparatively small. “Some democratic theorists have argued that greater participation begets greater participation because having developed the skills to participate—and having discovered the pleasures that participation provides—citizens will return for more opportunities...While this view is plausible and provocative, few scholars have tested its empirical assumptions”(Elder, Seligsohn, & Hofrenning, 2007: 194-195). Additionally, existing research is often restricted to small case studies, selective samples, or small samples (of students and/or numbers of courses surveyed) that compromise the ability to generalize conclusions. Nevertheless, this research is highly suggestive of the range of effects on students’ civic knowledge, skills, and values that

may be developed through interventions that specifically integrate intentional, politically-centered, and democratically-guided forms of civic engagement.

For example, in a study of 21 courses and programs with high levels of intentionality to foster “political learning” among students, Colby (2008) reported students engaged in these experiences exhibited “significant increases - usually substantial - along many dimensions of political understanding, skills and motivation” (p. 5; see also Colby et al., 2007). Political learning connotes both high frequency of involvement and high quality participation where quality is defined as the employment of students’ “wise judgment” pertaining to political knowledge, skills, understanding of when and how to deploy such skills, motivation and resilience to setback (see Colby, 2008: 5). A similar multi-course analysis suggested the positive effect of intentional course design on the development of skills related to social justice, measured by increased understanding of racial diversity and discrimination, and culturally specific critical thinking (Mayhew & Fernández, 2007). The five course study showed that among the different pedagogical approaches employed, the practices that mattered most in improving social justice outcomes were participation in a combined intergroup dialogue and service-learning course, participation in a course taught with a significant emphasis on systemic social issues/oppression, and discussions about diversity and opportunities for reflection (ibid).

Additional research has also indicated that politically-centered civic engagement can also be effective when done as part of the co-curriculum, suggesting the potential in linking both curricular and co-curricular efforts. For example, a four-year longitudinal study of a “democracy fellows” program that coupled classroom and local community engagement found

that upon graduation, program students demonstrated gains in a range of civic outcomes such as speaking and thinking communally, ability to imagine possibilities and applications for deliberation, awareness of civic responsibilities, confidence in their ability to make a difference, and ability to critique political processes (Harringer & McMillan, 2007). Additionally, a multi-cohort study of Bonner student scholars— a selective scholarship program through which students engage in extensive co-curricular service experiences throughout college – from first to senior years found significant growth in students’ opportunity to engage in dialogue and significant development between their junior and senior years in the employment of effective dialogue skills (i.e. listening, helping to overcome difference, understanding difference, effective community service skills) (Keen & Hall, 2009:66). Notably, growth in Bonner students’ opportunities for dialogue and opportunities for service was not correlated with their engagement in service-learning courses; thus isolating these effects to their co-curricular civic engagement (Keen & Hall, 2009).

The impact of students’ political and democratic engagement has also been captured by studying more “organic” or grass-roots activities. A case study of archival and interview data from a long-term protest by a student workers’ union against university officials identified the emergence of civic skills among not only the protesters, but also by the institution officials (in listening to the protesters), and the larger student body (through their heightened awareness of campus labor issues) (Biddix, Somers, & Polman, 2009). Biddix et al. (2009) further noted that the protest had fostered the opportunity for student workers and university officials to recognize opposing viewpoints, to find mutual agreement in resolving disputes, and to imbue the student body with a sense of collective community.

Another significant area of research with regard to politically-centered civic engagement and democratic skill development pertains to interventions, courses, and/or programs aimed at providing students with greater opportunities for dialogue and engagement with diverse perspectives. This work is often specifically oriented toward group problem-solving or collaborative work. A significant branch of this research pertains to interventions focused on intergroup dialogue and similar “deliberative dialogue” programs. Intergroup dialogue is defined as “an educational endeavor that brings together students from two or more social identity groups to build relationships across cultural and power differences, to raise consciousness of inequalities, to explore the similarities and differences in experiences across identity groups, and to strengthen individual and collective capacities to promote social justice” (Nagda & Gurin, 2007). Most basically, intergroup dialogue represents one of a few practices that “seek to foster conversation about contentious issues in collaborative ways” (ASHE, 2006a). Other common practices of this type are “Study Circles” and “Sustained Dialogue” (see ASHE, 2006a).

In a comprehensive review of the literature on intergroup dialogue from ASHE (2006b), a range of positive effects related to civic outcomes were found to be consistently connected with intergroup dialogue activities. Among the outcomes cited as important preparation for democratic participation were engagement in diverse settings, development of perspective-taking skills, ability to work in dissonant or unequal environments, and development of a sense of pluralism (see ASHE, 2006b). Specifically, studies have demonstrated that the more students are able to engage in diverse interactions on campus, inside and outside of the class, the more

likely they are to confront notions of prejudice, be inclusive of views different from their own, and embrace social justice (see for example Hurtado, 2009; Zuniga, Williams, & Berger, 2005).

Researchers from HERI (Higher Education Research Institute) explored the impact of college experiences similar to engagement in intergroup dialogue (i.e. cross-racial interaction) in addition to service-learning experiences on rates of future volunteerism among college graduates. Linking data 1994/1998 CIRP (Cooperative Institutional Research Project) data with a 2004 post-college follow-up survey on volunteerism activities, the researchers found students' engagement in cross-racial interaction and service both exhibited unique and significant positive effects on rates of future volunteerism among post-graduates (Yamamura & Denson, 2005). CIRP data also "reveals the long-term effects of college interactions across race/ethnicity on learning, democratic dispositions, and job skills" (Hurtado, 2009: 2).

What do we know about effective practices in civic engagement?

Ultimately the central challenge in the study of civic engagement, both within the extant literature and for future research, is internal validity. With so many conceptual and working definitions of what it means to be civically engaged, the confidence in being able to accurately (or validly) assess the meaning of this concept is compromised. Without shared language and or labels for civic engagement in higher education, it cannot be expected that students are responding to the same set of conceptual ideas when taking a survey, writing a journal, or responding to an interview. In this sense, the evaluation of civic engagement may be more accurately identified through the practices that accompany it than by identification through a single name or program label.

The continuum of civic experiences or activities in higher education has produced a significant amount of scholarship on best practices connected with increasing the quality and transformative nature of these experiences for students. Three practices are cited most often across case studies, programmatic reviews and summaries of empirical research: reflection, high levels of interaction, duration and intensity of the experience with opportunities for real world application.

The importance of reflection for deepening the learning experience is not a new concept. Dewey was an early advocate of encouraging students to reflect on their experiences as a way to transform the “experiential into learning” (Dewey, 1944). Subsequently, scholars have echoed the relevance of reflective exercises as part of students’ civic engagement experience (Bowen, 2010; Cress et al., 2010; Eyler et al., 2001; Conway et al., 2009). Because civic experiences can often be jarring for students who are forced to confront their perceptions and stereotypes when engaging in community work, reflection provides an opportunity for students to work through feelings and insights. Reflection also provides space for students to connect course material to community experiences through an unstructured medium (e.g. journal, issue paper) that is open-ended and unguided, helping to foster both creative and critical thinking. In a meta-analysis of the impact of service-learning experiences on outcomes related to academic, personal, social, and civic outcomes, the incorporation of reflection component in the experience was associated with net increases between pre and posttest measures for each of the outcome categories (Conway et al., 2009).

Also important for effective civic engagement interventions are the duration and intensity of the experiences throughout the course, program, or curriculum. In a paper

published by Campus Compact, Cress et al. (2010) noted in their review of civic engagement programs, “The 300-hour service requirement provides continual contact and support for the Fellows that cannot be achieved in a one-shot service program.” Additional research has similarly concluded that students’ engagement in civic work must be sustained on a consistent level throughout the intervention rather than sporadically inserted, front(or end)-loaded at the beginning or end of the program, or in small quantities (Eyler et al. 2001, Gallini & Moelly, 2003; see also Kuh 2008). Also critical to effective programming, and an elemental part of what duration and intensity provide to students is the consistent opportunity to apply learning to real-world experiences (Bowen, 2010; Eyler et al., 2001).

Finally scholars have noted the essential role of interaction within civic engagement interventions (Bringle & Hatcher, 2000; Chickering & Gamson, 1999; Keeling, 2004). Moreover, students’ engagement in various *types* of interactions has also been identified as important. For example, Cress et al. (2010) noted the use of peer mentors as an effective tool for engaging students, in addition to cohort models, where students work consistently with the same group of peers over time (see also Teitel, 1997). Included within high levels of interaction is the importance of students’ ability to interact with diverse groups (Eyler et al., 2001; Hurtado 2009) and to collaborate (Bowen, 2010; Cress et al., 2010).

Conclusion

In sum, three main conclusions emerge from reviewing the literature on civic engagement in American higher education. First, civic engagement is a term that lacks a cohesive definition within higher education. On many campuses it is viewed primarily through

the lens of service-learning and other apolitical forms of community involvement. But an emergent strand of scholarship, discourse and campus practice has advocated the standpoint of civic engagement as a set of skills essential for democracy-building and as an activity that is fundamentally politically-oriented. Second, the practice of civic engagement on campuses is as multi-form and disparate as its definition. Even among those campuses engaging in service-learning, this model can have various degrees of intensity, involvement within community, interaction with peers and community members, and depths of reflection. Third, empirical evidence of the effects of these practices is largely confined to service-learning experiences.

Aristotle believed “that man is by nature a political animal.” John Dewey said “the purpose of education [is] to create, in our students and in ourselves, the capacity for associative living.” The challenge for higher education is how best to educate students to attain some measure of sensibility for both – the political and the communal – natures of democratic life. Attentiveness to language, practice, and assessment will be essential in addressing this challenge on campuses and across higher education.

Author's Note

Anyone who undertakes a literature review on “civic engagement in higher education” is bound to be humbled by the breadth of discourse on this topic – as source of research, a pedagogy, a field of community practice, a history lesson, and as a call to action. The scope of available documents is equally diverse – comprehensive meta-analyses, studies of large national samples, case studies, epistemological treatises, declarations. Given such a rich and extensive world of scholarship, it was necessary to develop a set of guiding parameters to facilitate the completion of this work and to place a manageable limit on its size. The parameters that guided the development of this literature review are admittedly skewed toward traditionally academic standards of peer review, methodological rigor, and empirical findings. Nevertheless, the extensive and varied reference list suggests many other considerations were taken into account. These considerations were largely provided by a remarkable set of national reviewers – scholars, activists, policy leaders, and higher education officials – whose own breadth of civic knowledge of engagement provided invaluable guidance for this review. Because standards are only such because we say so and because knowledge is limitless, this literature review is, almost by definition, incomplete. It is offered with humility for the purpose of learning from its critique, the creation of dialogue, and the continuation of scholarship. There is still much to learn.

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