Civic Engagement and Student Success: Leveraging Multiple Degrees of Achievement

By Christine M. Cress, professor of postsecondary, adult, and continuing education at Portland State University

When making higher education investment choices in today's tough economy, students and campus executives alike struggle to balance degree and job goals with broader community improvement needs (DeGioia 2011). Bridging these seemingly competitive and contradictory educational and economic forces are curricular initiatives and cocurricular programs focused on civic engagement. Connecting academic inquiry with community service activities, civic engagement is a reliable pedagogical and epistemological strategy for developing student knowledge and skills while fostering individual and organizational collaborations to address pressing social, environmental, educational, and economic issues.

While low educational attainment is associated with poor health, job dissatisfaction, and higher unemployment and crime rates, even incremental educational achievements can have exponential personal and community benefits. For example, one economist estimated that a mere 1 percent increase in high school graduates going on to college would reap the city of Portland, Oregon, $1.6 billion dollars annually (Cortright 2010). Thus retaining, engaging, and graduating students has a direct effect on social returns and community prosperity. Furthermore, decades of research indicate that civic engagement is a robust educational tool for leveraging these gains (Finley 2012).

Yet despite an abundance of quantitative and qualitative data, critics have questioned the efficiency and effectiveness of civic engagement as a legitimate educational endeavor. While college mission statements tout allegiance to reciprocal community partnerships (Sandy and Holland 2006), academic deans and department chairs often remain skeptical of community service activities, claiming that they water down curricular content and distract faculty from scholarly productivity. Faculty admit that integrating civic engagement into the curriculum takes more time and effort than traditional forms of teaching (Cress and Donahue 2011).

Faced with these educational dilemmas, is community engagement worth it? What is the evidence? And are postsecondary institutions appropriately directing their resources to meet campus and community objectives?

College presidents posed these questions at the 2010 Campus Compact Presidents Leadership Summit. To set the stage for lively debate and discussion, Campus Compact prepared a monograph titled *A Promising Connection: Increasing College Access and Success through Civic Engagement* (Cress et al. 2010). The full text is available on the Campus Compact website, www.compact.org.

While not an exhaustive review of the research literature or meta-analysis of statistical findings, the publication examines the different terminology (for example, service learning, community-based learning, and civic engagement) and disparate methodological designs and data collection techniques used on campuses. In doing so, it portrays the richly-hued fabric of campus–community connections, an exquisite tapestry in which civic engagement and student success are clearly inextricably interwoven. Below are highlights from the publication, focusing on the educational outcomes of civic engagement, promising practices for increasing student success, and potential action steps for implementation.

Educational Outcomes

As a strategic educational approach, civic engagement works. Thoughtful and purposefully designed civic engagement activities yield greater learning and increased graduation rates in K–12 schools, community colleges, and four-year institutions (Astin and Vogelgesang 2006; Bridgeland, DiIulio, and Morison 2006; Prentice and Robinson 2010). In fact, Gent (2007) has argued that civic engagement is one way to ensure that no student is left behind.

Why is civic engagement so educationally effective? First and foremost, students who participate in civic engagement *learn more academic content* (Gallini and Moely 2003). Through academic praxis (application of theoretical concepts to action), students shift from being knowledge receivers to idea creators. Abstract concepts come into relief against the

background of situation and context as students consider, apply, test, assess, and reevaluate multiple disciplinary approaches to solving an array of human, mechanical, and environmental challenges.

Second, civically engaged students *learn higher-order skills*—including critical thinking, writing, communication, mathematics, and technology—at more advanced levels of aptitude (Cress 2004). In efforts to create socially equitable communities, they encounter opportunities to hone innovative approaches that such engagement work requires. By conjoining the academic knowledge and skills necessary to address community needs, students deepen and extend their learning.

Third, *civic engagement increases students' emotional intelligence and motivates them toward conscientious community action* (Bernacki and Jaeger 2008). Students who participate in civic engagement gain interpersonal effectiveness, the ability to collaborate across diverse perspectives, and a sense of self-efficacy for positively impacting individuals, organizations, and communities. Through civic engagement, knowledge and insight no longer exist in the life of the mind; they become coalesced in mindful and caring community involvement.

On the whole, researchers have found a consistent and statistically significant relationship between civic engagement and academic engagement (Hurtado and DeAngelo 2012). Students who are actively engaged with classmates and community tend to remain on strong academic paths and fulfill educational pursuits. They stay in school, earn their degrees, more frequently pursue higher levels of postsecondary education, and often become future community volunteers (Kraft and Wheeler 2003). In addition to showing positive impacts on students, civic engagement yields various direct effects on faculty scholarship productivity and community partner ability to address neighborhood improvement (Stoecker and Tryon 2009).

Thus, community excellence is dependent upon academic excellence. Civic engagement is a powerful fulcrum for leveraging multiple degrees of achievement across spectra of people and places. In sum, the research reveals a simple but elegant educational formula: academic learning + civic engagement = student and community success.

But with respect to access and educational attainment, what kinds of civic engagement practices manifest the most potential? What models hold the most promise? How can educators maximize the effects of civic engagement?

Promising Practices

To be effective, civic engagement must be intentionally integrated into curricular and cocurricular learning goals. Indeed, students who are forced to volunteer or provide service can become resentful (Sylvester 2011), blame community members for their own predicaments (Boesch 2011), and maintain entrenched stereotypes about individuals and communities (Reitenauer, Cress, and Bennett 2005). Facilitated opportunities for students to examine social, political, and organizational antecedents that reinforce inequities of power and privilege within communities are key to civic engagement's educational potential (Yep 2011).

High-impact educational practices (Kuh 2008) that enhance student success are frequently incorporated as central civic engagement experiences. These include mentoring, peer group interactions, experiential learning, supportive faculty–student relationships, and community connections reflective of familial and cultural heritage. Significantly, these practices demonstrate positive outcomes for all students but exponentially increase levels of student learning, retention, and graduation for students of color (Rendón 2009).

While a multitude of variations of civic engagement exist across the country, those statistically proven to be most effective for promoting student success have three essential elements:

Intentional campus, community, and conceptual connections. Whether curricular or cocurricular, activities are purposefully constructed to support serving *and* learning. Civic engagement objectives are mutually defined by campus and community partners, aligned with students' service and reflection experiences, and assessed for future iterative improvement.

Collaborative learning relationships between instructors, students, and community participants. Effective partnerships encourage culturally considerate interactions that foster personal and community empowerment. Instead of directing expertise solely from campus to community, roles and responsibilities provide shared learning opportunities for all.

Integration into educational expectations and organizational performance. Institutional proclamations regarding civic preparation of students are realized through multiple opportunities for engagement. Infrastructures facilitate long-term, reciprocal campus–community partnerships and the development of civically engaged courses across disciplines. Promotion and advancement policies stimulate and honor wide-ranging student, administrator, and faculty involvement.

As the data indicate, a strong and compelling case exists for the efficacy of civic engagement as a student success strategy. What, then, might be the next steps for postsecondary institutions interested in moving from an ethos of engagement to one of action?

Potential Action Steps

Civic engagement is not a panacea for societal ills or weak academic performance. Civic engagement opportunities that are poorly crafted or treated as tacked-on assignments are more likely to have subtractive rather than transformational effects. Furthermore, extensive future inquiry is needed to ascertain the variable impact of different curricular and cocurricular models (Fitzgerald, Burack, and Seifer 2010).

Still, institutions can create a culture of campus–community engagement that ensures the quality of civic engagement as a strategy for improving student success by

1. connecting organizational mission statements to actionable curricular and cocurricular activities across academic affairs, student affairs, and community partnerships;
2. proliferating prudently the number of available civic engagement opportunities (recognizing that not all courses or activities are appropriate venues for civic engagement);
3. aligning disciplinary and student development outcomes with serving and learning activities that integrate adequate preparation, reflection, and assessment;
4. providing logistical, technical, and professional development support for generating and sustaining campus–community partnerships that focus on teaching and learning excellence and include iterative evaluation techniques;
5. recognizing and rewarding the teaching and scholarship of engagement.

Galvanizing Student and Community Success

Individual actions are not isolated events, and collective actions can have global consequences. American higher education is uniquely poised to situate student learning, thinking, and action in the context of diverse community tribulations and possibilities. To that end, this fall, Campus Compact is hosting another Presidents Leadership Summit on developing vital and vibrant democratic communities through civic engagement. AAC&U also continues to promote civic engagement as a framework for interacting with difference and achieving excellence and equity.

Civic engagement has the potential to help students develop their capacities for understanding their role in complex social, economic, and political systems. While students may find the gravity of contemporary issues daunting, they can learn life-altering lessons by successfully effecting change through civic engagement. Institutions that advance civic connections as a form of engaged learning will enhance student knowledge, skills, and motivation, leading to academic and community success.

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