

Introduction to Special Issue on “The Future of Community Engagement in Higher Education”

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Abstract

This introduction to the special issue on “The Future of Community Engagement in Higher Education” first describes the key role of community service-learning in the civic identity development of American college students and then proposes majors, minors, and certificate programs as important and increasingly popular structures for engaging college students in community service-learning. This introduction also provides an overview of the six feature articles included in the special issue that focus on specific best practices and obstacles in the implementation of such majors, minors, and certificate programs.

American college students are currently participating in unprecedented levels of community service and community service-learning. Community service can be defined as any form of volunteerism, whereas community service-learning pairs a particular service project with coursework focused on the issues or skills related to this project (Furco, 1996). According to the Higher Education Research Institute, 65% of college freshmen reported that their respective universities offered opportunities to get involved in community service or community service-learning (Liu, Ruiz, DeAngelo, & Pryor, 2009). Moreover, a 2006 report by the Corporation for National and Community Service found that 3.3 million college students had engaged in community service or community service-learning in the past year (Dote, Cramer, Dietz, & Grimm, 2006). This figure represents over 30% of all American college students and exceeds the volunteer rate for American adults.

Yet, given these robust statistics of engagement and given that service-learning has been found to make a positive and substantial difference in both colleges and communities, it is somewhat surprising to find an ever-increasing number of critiques of such community engagement in higher education. But, indeed, a wide range of scholarship has begun to question the community impact, sustained viability, and pedagogic and conceptual legitimacy of this experiential practice (e.g., Butin, 2010; Dorn, 2011; Stewart & Webster, 2011; Stoeker, 2009; Tryon & Stoeker, 2008). Such questioning has even spilled onto the front pages of the national press, suggesting that, if nothing else, service-learning has become prominent enough to be noticed and, potentially, criticized (Fish, 2008; Strom, 2010; Wilson, 2011).

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In this special issue of the *Journal of College & Character* entitled “The Future of Community Engagement in Higher Education,” we have chosen to bring to the fore yet another fascinating and potentially important development in the service-learning field: the rise and spread of academic programs—certificates, minors, and majors—in community engagement, broadly construed. There are more than 60 such programs around the country, and we are anecdotally aware of a dozen more at different stages of development. What these programs thus potentially offer is the integration of academic norms of inquiry and rigor with the inherent power of community-based teaching, learning, and scholarship.

This integration thus seemingly leverages the value of service into the academic enterprise, for the high rates of service participation noted above among American college students are positive across a range of social, cultural, and academic outcomes. In addition to the value of the service itself to the recipients of this service—often individuals from marginalized groups such as the homeless—researchers have found that participation during the college years in community service or community service-learning is positively associated with heightened self-confidence, efficacy, commitment to equal opportunity, and feelings of responsibility for the wellbeing of others (Billig, 2000; Eyler, Giles, & Grey, 1999; Flanagan, 2004; Markus, Howard, & King, 1993; Perry & Katula, 2001; Sherrod, Flanagan, & Youniss, 2002). Other researchers have found such participation during the college years to be associated with later participation in community service as an adult (Giles & Eyler, 1994; Oesterle, Johnson, & Mortimer, 2004).

Community service and community service-learning also offers valuable spaces for college students to engage in identity exploration. Erikson (1965, 1968) famously characterized adolescence as the period in the lifespan in which individuals move beyond a blind adherence to the beliefs, values, and worldview of their parents and mentors and begin to seek out their own understandings of the world around them. Erikson labeled this exploration the adolescent “identity crisis” and characterized this process as crucial to an individual’s development of a mature adult identity.

More recently, Arnett (2000, 2004) has asserted that the period of primary identity exploration for many individuals has shifted from adolescence to emerging adulthood—the period in the lifespan from approximately 18 to 26 years old. According to Arnett and colleagues, it is this period of emerging adulthood “during which youth are [most] free to explore potential identity alternatives without having to assume permanent adult commitments” (Schwartz, Cote, & Arnett, 2005, p. 204). Likewise, Shanahan (2000) and Tanner (2006) have characterized emerging adulthood as the period of “re-centering”—a period during which self-regulation replaces a childlike dependence on parents and teachers.

The college years, of course, typically fall squarely within this period of emerging adulthood, and a robust body of scholarship has found the experience of attending college to have a significant effect upon young adults’ identity development (Chickering & Reiser, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). For emerging adults attending university, their college experience typically offers them greater independence from parents and their childhood community, exposure to a greater diversity of viewpoints from classmates and professors, and the opportunity and distance to think critically about the value systems in which they have been raised. All of these factors lead the college years to represent, for many emerging adults, an important opportunity to seek out new and different ways of understanding the world and their role in it.

Community service and community service-learning experiences represent some of the most important spaces for college students to encounter new and different understandings of the world. According to Youniss and Yates (1997), these experiences offer emerging adults powerful “participatory experiences” with both the recipients of the service as well as the professionals organizing the service experience. These experiences “can promote a heightened and broadened sense of connection to other people . . . [and] encourage reflections on moral and political questions” (Yates & Youniss, 1996, p. 87). Moreover, the organizations through which college students engage

in service often approach this service with a particular ideological orientation that the participating college students can consider, reject, or incorporate into their own developing worldviews.

As noted above, college students are engaging in community service and community service-learning in record numbers. However, Campus Compact (2004) has reported that the majority of American universities do not allocate a single full-time position to community service or community service-learning efforts and, in fact, that the annual budget allocated to these efforts at nearly half of American universities is fewer than \$20,000. As a result, the vast majority of the service experiences in which college students participate are either stand-alone community service programs (i.e., not connected to a particular academic course) or part of a single course in which a university faculty member has incorporated a field-based service experience into his or her particular course requirements.

There is thus a seemingly large potential for the rise and spread of academic programs focused on community engagement. They have the ability to enhance, in a sustained and systematic fashion, all of the valuable outcomes of student engagement within a model—the academic program—less beholden to, for example, the disappearance of grant funding or administrative reorganization. In this special issue of the *Journal of College & Character*, we have thus chosen to focus upon a relatively small (but growing) number of colleges and universities that are doing exactly this kind of fascinating work.

This theme issue pragmatically arose from two annual summer institutes we have held—in 2010 and 2011 (and will continue to hold)—for university faculty and staff engaged in majors, minors and certificate programs in community service-learning. Over 200 professionals—academics, administrators, students, and community partners—have come from every corner of the United States, as well as Ireland, Canada, and South Africa, to share best practices and brainstorm common challenges related to the institutionalization of community service-learning in such academic programs. Now, in this special issue, we offer a wider readership of university faculty and student affairs professionals a lens into what we like to call “the *new* campus engagement.”

In his essay entitled “Rethinking the ‘Apprenticeship of Liberty’: The Case for Academic Programs in Community Engagement in Higher Education,” [Dan Butin](#) offers a review of his scholarship that has sounded the call for reconceptualizing community service-learning as a departmental program within the university rather than as a cocurricular activity. Next, esteemed scholar [Benjamin Barber](#) offers an excerpt from the keynote speech he delivered at the most recent June 2011 conference. In this speech entitled “Can We Teach Civic Engagement and Service-Learning in a World of Privatization, Inequality and Interdependence,” Barber shares his perspective on the six conditions in the contemporary United States and wider world that will impact the field of community engagement in the coming years.

We then offer four articles by university faculty and staff directly engaged in the work itself. In a paper entitled “Aligning Civic Engagement with the Strategic Goals of an Institution: Focus on Allegheny College,” Allegheny College faculty [Stephanie Martin](#) and [Eleanor Weisman](#) articulate how Allegheny’s minor in Values, Ethics and Social Actions (VESA) aligns with the institution’s broader strategic plan and, in so doing, serves as one of the most powerful example of the college’s mission in action. We believe that this paper perfectly illustrates the central role that majors, minors, and certificate programs in community engagement can play in the 21st century university as they both “walk the talk” of engagement and offer academic expertise and “thought leadership” to institutions attempting to make a difference in their local and global communities.

Next, in their paper entitled “Capacity Building for the Common Good: PSU’s Interdisciplinary Minor in Civic Leadership” [Masami Nishishiba](#) and [Kevin Kesckes](#) describe the philosophical foundation that serves as the structure upon which the Civic Leadership minor at Portland State University is built. We believe that university professionals committed to institutionalizing community engagement within their own colleges and universities will benefit

from this description of the particular intellectual foundation underpinning the work at Portland State as well as from Nishishiba and Kecskes's argument for the importance of beginning this work with such a foundation in place. Almost half of Portland State's 29,000 students take a service-learning course, and Portland State itself has become—as its motto “Let Knowledge Serve the City” so aptly states—a model for this new community engagement. Nishishiba and Kecskes's description of their minor makes vivid some of the internal reasons to this transformation.

The final two papers in this special issue focus on the role of infrastructure in the effective operation of a minor or certificate program in community engagement. Specifically, in their paper entitled “The Importance of Infrastructure for Support of Community Based Learning,” [Helen Rosenberg and Debra Karp](#) report on the ways in which the success of the Community-Based Learning Certificate program at University of Wisconsin–Parkside depends upon fruitful collaborations among university administration, faculty, staff, students, and external partners. These authors describe several best practices they have developed for fostering such collaboration and which we believe are of great value for other university professionals engaging or considering engaging in such work. Finally, in her paper entitled “Navigating the Institutional and Pedagogical Challenges of the Service-Learning Leadership Minor,” [Deborah Burke](#) focuses on some of the structural challenges that the Service-Learning Leadership minor at California State University–Monterey Bay faces in a period in which California's struggling economy has adversely affected the university system. In so doing, Burke introduces important questions about the role of community-based education in a world in which the priorities of American universities are increasingly driven by economic forces.

In conclusion, we have sought to offer in this special issue both an introduction to the growing number of colleges and universities featuring majors, minors, and certificate programs in community engagement as well as analyses of the favorable conditions *and* looming challenges with which such programs will contend in the coming years. Contemporary college students are engaging in greater levels of community service than any previous generation of young people, and there is an increasing recognition among university faculty and staff of the importance of aligning community service experiences with formal opportunities for inquiry and reflection. We believe that an important next step in the development of community engagement within American colleges and universities is the institutionalization of such engagement in the form of majors, minors, and certificate programs. With this special issue, we have sought to share some of the intellectual foundation and best practices of those already engaged in this important work.

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