



Sustainable Civic Engagement: Building a Culture to Meet Ongoing Needs

Civic engagement is certainly not a new term, although the Obama administration has brought it to the forefront of America's conscience with a call to volunteerism. Students at New American Colleges and Universities often exercise their civil-mindedness through service learning opportunities, as that is a core piece of the organization's mission – to integrate liberal arts, professional studies and civic engagement. Yet some relationships stand out. They go beyond simply delivering volunteers where need exists, and the relationships are not on a semester-by-semester basis. Real change is palpable and lasting – for both the community and the students.

For many, sustainable civic engagement starts in one's own backyard. For five years, The University of Scranton has run The Leahy Community Health and Family Center for residents of Lackawanna County, where the university is located. The project has dual goals – to identify and meet the health and wellness needs of underserved individuals in the greater Scranton, Penn. community and to provide students with opportunities for service, teaching, and scholarship.

The Center includes the Edward R. Leahy, Jr. Clinic for the Uninsured, the only free clinic in the county, which has served 400 patients and provided 150 immunizations to date. The Center also offers counseling for uninsured people, alleviating the six-month wait at the local counseling center. Student projects reflect the goals of the Center and academic pursuits. Many health care students provide services while gaining hands-on training in physical therapy, occupational therapy, nursing, and counseling. Health administration students study HIPAA compliance issues while communications students work on marketing. Human resources students have developed a volunteer recruitment manual, and the Latino Student Association helps with translation services and waiting room assistance.

Staying Constant, Building Trust

Wagner College in Staten Island is also focusing on underserved people in neighboring communities. For Wagner, sustainability hinges on making sure the community knows that Wagner is a reliable presence even though the students' faces are ever-changing. To ensure that meaningful work – for both students and community – continues, Wagner established a program called Civic Innovations which to date has linked each of six academic departments to single agencies on Staten Island. The program, administered through the college's Center for Leadership and Service, allows a better focus on what is needed, both for students and the agency. Faculty meets with agency representatives to discuss community needs, and those needs impact curriculum for the upcoming academic year. [See related story.](#)

Just as Wagner found it needed to facilitate community conversations through a designated center, Westminster College in Salt Lake City, Utah, founded The Sugar House Forum when it created its Center for Civic Engagement. According to Dr. Gary Daynes, associate professor of History and associate provost for Integrative Learning at Westminster, Sugar House is a very diverse commercial and residential neighborhood with a vibrant mix of economic and racial demographics. The neighborhood strives to maintain its own identity, especially when private developers have plans to gentrify the area. Although the college was respectful of the neighborhood, there was often tension if Westminster announced plans to develop property in or near Sugar House. The Forum opened the lines of communication between Westminster and Sugar House residents, business owners, and organizations.

As a result of the Forum discussions, Westminster students have engaged in service learning that directly fits the community's needs. An oral history of the Sugar House neighborhood brought together generations to preserve its rich history. A four-week intensive history course at Westminster, which discussed the creation of community centers, laid the groundwork for a day-long event known as The Legend of Hidden Hollow, a rare open space within Sugar House. The event blended history and culture with songs based on the oral history stories, dancing, painting, and storytelling. There was an environmental component – a clean-up of Hidden Hollow – and commerce was impacted with the spike in foot traffic that day. In addition, its success sparked more cultural events between the college and Sugar House.

Commerce – and making sure businesses thrive – in Sugar House is another way the college has assisted. A number of business faculty and students work with Sugar House business owners on economic development, including how to design commercial sections and how to forge partnerships.

“Although we may think of service learning as service for non-profits, in this case we needed to include for-profit businesses to make the overall project successful,” said Dr. Daynes.

Dr. Daynes admitted that before he worked with the Sugar House Forum, he had a narrow view of service learning, but said that stepping beyond the one-to-one relationship opens up many opportunities, and he now thinks of community in a more flexible way. And just as importantly, the college and the neighborhood now think of each other. Because of the way the college and its administration conduct business now, and also because of the Sugar House Forum, tensions have faded into the past. The Sugar House organizations ask the college for help in community planning, and Westminster asks its neighbors to weigh in on its development plans.

Give-and-Take

When Dr. Donald Braid, director of Butler University's Center for Citizenship and Community, talks about the university's civic engagement, he also stresses the importance of reciprocity. One of his success stories is the relationship between Butler and the Martin Luther King Community Center, about a mile off-campus, in Indianapolis. Since 1997 Butler students have worked with the Second Time Around: Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Program at the Center.



Butler students and faculty work with grandparents in the Second Time Around program

One of the biggest undertakings was the creation of a kinship care rights brochure, a need identified by Center staff and the grandparents. Many of the grandparents were raising grandchildren for various reasons but were doing so without legal guardianship. They found barriers to obtaining social services for the children and a lack of rights when making decisions about the children's schooling. Yet overall they lacked the funds to seek legal assistance. A group of political science students secured a grant to fund printing of the kinship care rights and then worked with a local attorney to outline options for grandparents who are raising grandchildren without legal guardianship rights.

Dr. Braid asserts that there is a benefit for students when they work with the grandparents. "There is a heroic quality to their [the grandparents'] choices, and they ought to be recognized," he said. "The students are not simply coming away with the satisfaction of having done a good thing, but by working with a population that has had to make these important life choices, it forces the students to re-think their own beliefs and values."

Starting Early

Civic engagement also has the ability to impact future students' beliefs and values. Since 1991 Hamline University has partnered with a local elementary school – the Hancock/Hamline University Collaborative Magnet School, the first of its kind in this country. Shared learning is the goal, so Hamline students (more than 20 percent are involved in this collaboration) provide tutoring, curriculum enrichment, and social mentoring, while grade-schoolers get a taste of college. There is a fifth grade mock trial with Hamline's law school, and kindergartners and sixth graders go on tours of the university. Together Hancock students and Hamline art students painted a mural to slow down traffic on Snelling Avenue, the busy street where both institutions are located. They also work together on an organic garden, a joint service learning project on homelessness, and KIDS VOTE which educates the younger students on the voting process and civic engagement. In fact, the Hancock motto is 'College begins in kindergarten,' and the message is catching on – the first Hancock student just enrolled as a Hamline freshman in fall 2008.



A Hamline student tutors a Hancock student

The University of Redlands also hosts programs that bring together present and potential college students. Big Buddies began in 1987 with four children and four college mentors. Children and mentors meet weekly for tutoring, organized games and activities, and free time to interact socially with mentors and other students. The program is now capped at 25 little buddies (ages 6 to 10), 25 middle buddies (ages 11 to 14), about 12 CHAMPS (high schoolers), and 50 to 70 Redlands students each year. Tony Mueller, director of Redland's Community Service Learning, called the child-centered program "a wonderful model for introducing children to college and college students to children. They both love it, and it has sustained itself to the point of becoming one of our benchmark programs of outreach."

Five years ago the University of Redlands added Jasper's Corner in response to parents citing a need for after school homework help. University students, from a range of majors, tutor about 75 children, grades K-12, from the community. When the free program began, the university was able to find many work-study students who wanted to do that type of work but lacked transportation to



A University of Redlands student offers homework help at Jasper's Corner

go off-campus. “The solution was simple,” said Mueller. “Invite community children to campus for homework help. Having children come to campus and feel comfortable in a college setting has made an impression on them at a young age.” [See related story.](#)

Community Has No Boundaries

As Dr. Daynes at Westminster now thinks about community in a more flexible way, so do faculty and students at Valparaiso University in northwest Indiana. For years Dr. Larry Baas, chair of the Political Science Department and a professor of political science at Valparaiso, had done research, sometimes with students, in the community. It was always haphazard and ad hoc, and he and a colleague dreamed of creating a center that would foster a more organized approach. In the fall of 1995 they put up a sign announcing the Community Research and Service Center (CRSC) and received more than 330 responses to a survey asking organizations in northwest Indiana about their research and service needs. Since then more than 75 projects involving more than 400 students have been completed for more than 50 different organizations in northwest Indiana.

Through partnerships and a reputation built over time the CRSC found that one project often leads to another. For example, the CRSC did a survey in the city of Valparaiso to see if business commuters would travel via train, rather than by car, to Chicago. The responses were positive, but the train's cost prohibited immediate construction. The CRSC did a follow-up survey to see if residents would commute via bus, and again the responses were positive. Now two busses travel daily between the two cities. In addition, the regional bus authority has asked the CRSC to analyze seven other cities to see if bussing is feasible for those communities.

With so many requests for projects, the CRSC must focus its efforts. Yet while the projects meet the needs of students' learning goals, the CRSC is designed to meet the (Northwest Indiana) community's need for a year-round service. There are three students working full-time throughout the summer so that the CRSC can be a constant presence.

Valparaiso's sustainable civic engagement expands well beyond its corner of Indiana, reaching to faraway corners across the globe. In 2003 VU civil engineering student Bob Yamtich, with faculty and institutional support, set the wheels in motion to combine his passions for international service and engineering. Valparaiso's interdisciplinary chapter of Engineers without Borders, a national organization, first traveled to Nakor, Kenya to assist villagers with the construction of a water supply and delivery system. Groups returned during the next two springs to implement the second and third phases of the project, leaving the residents of Nakor with the knowledge to maintain the existing water delivery systems and install new ones in their village and the surrounding area. Before Valparaiso's first trip, the lack of clean water and malnutrition meant a 40 percent infant mortality rate in the village. This spring VU students and faculty will begin a clean water project in Moshi, Tanzania.



Before and after photos from the Nakor project

Sustainable civic engagement signifies service that does not change on a semester-by-semester basis. New American Colleges and Universities have found that dedicated resources and infrastructure lead to open communication and reciprocal relationships built on trust. Forging long-term partnerships and inviting community feedback has proven to be a successful formula to building cultures of sustainable civic engagement that benefit both the students and those served.
