TEACHING AND LEARNING

The Benefits of Early Student Involvement with Civic Engagement Programs

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Political scientists have long been instrumental in establishing and promoting a campus culture that fosters civic engagement among students, faculty, and staff. While accreditors have started to incorporate civic engagement into their evaluation criteria (CLDE Coalition 2022), many institutions lack the capacity to form and maintain civic engagement programming. Students are excellent partners in this effort, not only because their presence allows for capacity-building, but also because students know how to develop programming that resonates with their peers more effectively than do faculty (Bergan, et al. 2021; Shea and Harris 2006). While extensive literature in political science has examined student participation in maintaining civic engagement programs (Howard and Posler 2012; McCartney 2006) and the benefits from student involvement in these programs (Bardwell 2011; Rank and Tylock 2018), student perspectives about their involvement in the initial process of starting to plan and develop civic engagement programs are mostly missing.

In what follows, I (Anthony) attempt to provide that perspective by describing what other students and I learned while leading a two-year project to begin a civic engagement program at Louisiana Tech University. This experience illustrates that involving students in the early stages of civic engagement program creation can provide meaningful learning opportunities and allow institutions with fewer resources to effectively make civic engagement a priority.

The project involved developing a proposal to justify the need for civic engagement programming, designing and implementing a student survey to measure current levels of civic knowledge and engagement, administering focus groups with key student constituencies, and presenting a plan to our university president to establish a university-wide committee responsible for managing civic engagement programming. Within the written proposal was a framework for a civic engagement action plan. After researching such initiatives at comparable institutions, we determined that the most efficient way to increase civic engagement was to first understand the level of civic engagement and knowledge of our student population. Therefore, the rest of the proposal included the creation of a civic engagement action plan development committee, which would analyze the results of a survey to craft and then implement a civic engagement initiative designed to meet the needs of our students. According to conversations with Dr. O'Brochta and my peers about the proposal process, writing the proposal had many positive effects on both students and faculty. First, students played

a role in assessing a workable approach to bolstering civic engagement. In other words, we incorporated a framework that placed emphasis on understanding that Louisiana Tech students lacked both civic engagement opportunities and civic knowledge. Second, we determined that innovative solutions to students' lack of civic engagement required teaching them prerequisite knowledge about local issues. We read civic engagement action plans from comparable institutions and interviewed faculty leading those programs. This research led us to conclude that civic engagement initiatives should be both informative and engaging. In our case, focusing on civic engagement opportunities within the classroom would help strengthen students' civic engagement knowledge while also ensuring that all students could participate.

A classroom dedicated to drafting a civic engagement proposal was most students' first, eye-opening experience of applying their skills to improve their community. My peer Julie Cupples, a senior political science major, described her experience like this, "It was an opportunity that was rewarding because of its implications outside of the classroom. I was able to develop sincerely meaningful and practical skills within the classroom that I could then apply directly to my community involvement."

I participated in the administration of the university-wide student civic engagement survey, the results of which showed that most students are interested in becoming more active participants in their community, but that they are unsure how to do so, defaulting to a near complete lack of involvement. We created a civic engagement survey team of students who were interested in implementing a civic engagement initiative on campus. Building a civic engagement program that emphasizes co-creation such as this cultivates a sense of investment ownership among team members. The 40 student team-members who administered the survey were able to gain practical experience by interacting with people and places in a new way. While the survey expanded my perspective on the community, the most exciting aspect of the focus groups was learning how qualitative data collection worked and understanding how, as political science majors, we have learned skills that can help to improve community understanding. By reaching out to various groups and organizations on campus, we were able to determine what exactly a collaboration between the groups might look like. In a way, we were setting a foundation for effective community-wide communication regarding civic engagement, a topic we were eager to apply our skills to. Allowing students to actively participate in the system upfront, by encouraging them to initiate projects like

focus groups, was beneficial because of its impact on deepening the student team members' education, the opportunity for diversifying classroom teaching techniques, and the presentation of reliable and informative data to university administration to aid in decision-making.

In short, my experience suggests that building civic engagement projects into classroom experiences is beneficial because of its positive impact on a student's education and the opportunity for innovative classroom design it offers to professors. I have benefited from my involvement with this project by gaining a heightened understanding of community projects, meaning that I have a more concrete understanding of the many ways in which I can participate in my community. Since this project began, my increased knowledge of civic engagement has prompted me to explore opportunities to support voter protection and civic engagement efforts outside of the classroom. The faculty involved in this project have been able to expand their view of student capabilities while exploring ways to diversify their classroom experience. Moreover, a university with scarce resources can significantly increase student involvement without excessive spending by incorporating students into initial civic engagement proposals using both in-classroom and extracurricular activities.

AUTHORS

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