

Bringing Theory to Practice: Academic Civic Engagement at St. Olaf College

Miriam Brown, Dana Goetsch, Breanna Johnson,
Isabel Peris, Joseph Schantz, Karl Turnlund
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Abstract

This project was completed in collaboration with a grant received by St. Olaf College through the Center for Experiential Learning to investigate students' development of outcomes through participation in Academic Civic Engagement (ACE) courses. Theoretical research has suggested that ACE courses aid in making students more democratically engaged and better able to apply their academic knowledge in a career situation. Specifically, St. Olaf's ACE program has a goal of developing students' civic and vocational identity. It was these facets of the ACE outcomes that became the focus of our research. After conducting 41 student interviews we found that most students did develop these outcomes, although there is a potential self-selection bias in our sample. Additionally, we propose that the benefits students received from the ACE courses are correlated with prior interest or experience with the subject matter.

Literature Review

- Past research suggests that a disconnect exists between colleges and the surrounding communities. Students are isolated and not involved with community needs.
- Theorists argue that colleges are not nurturing students as a 'whole person.' They claim that students are not graduating with the skills necessary to be fully engaged and democratic citizens.
- Increased student involvement with academic civic engagement has been offered up as a possible solution. Academic civic engagement (ACE) has the goal of making the student feel responsible to something other than their individual interest and to give them an opportunity to 'bring theory to practice.'
- St. Olaf received grant money to implement and evaluate their ACE program. Our research offers a qualitative perspective of student experiences with ACE.

Methodology

- Our research was conducted in collaboration with the Center for Experiential Learning.
- We conducted two focus groups of seven participants total and 34 face-to-face individual interviews.
- Interviews lasted from 15 to 75 minutes.

- Our sample was composed of current students who had in the past enrolled in at least one ACE course. Alumni and students currently taking their first ACE course were excluded.
- Our sample had more females than males (28 to 13), and more upperclassmen than lowerclassmen.
- We investigate how students' participation in ACE affects their development of five outcomes: civic learning, civic self- understanding, civic efficacy, civic action, and vocational integration.
- We suspect that there could have been a self-selection bias in our sample, meaning that students who participated in an interview most likely had either a very positive experience with ACE or a really negative experience.

Findings

- Overall, we found support for all of the outcomes that we investigated. However, we would like to note that although ACE is a very effective way of gaining these intended outcomes, it is not the only way. Some students also identified gaining these or similar outcomes from previous jobs, internships, or other non-ACE courses.

Civic Learning

- Defined as a student's ability to recognize how knowledge or skills gained through ACE courses can be applied to a civic or community aim.
- For students, it was easiest to reflect on theory by framing it as the building blocks for their respective experiential components. One female social work major reflects:

“We had a communication workshop in which we reviewed theories from previous (Social Work) courses; engagement and termination, strategies for creating a relationship, how to be an effective listener, being sensitive to population issues, etc. These things translated directly to our work with the elderly population.”
- Interpersonal communication skills and the ability to effectively engage someone were frequently mentioned as skills gained by interviewees whose ACE project challenged them to interview or assist community partners.

“When you're working with community partners it requires a more professional manner; your reputation and the reputation of the school are at stake. It forces you to talk to people, to get your name out there, and to practice some networking skills.”

Civic Self-Understanding

- Defined as a student's ability to be aware of, and evaluate one's own, academic knowledge and competencies. These skills may include, but are not limited to, written and oral communication, teamwork, critical and creative thinking, information literacy, and intercultural competency.
- Among the students interviewed, all were able to identify a wide range of skills and abilities that they acquired through their ACE courses. A senior female Sociology/Anthropology and Biology double major commented:

“I had to learn to communicate with a range of different people. I especially had to learn how to talk with people who are older than me. More than that, though, my teamwork and group work skills improved, also time management, and networking.”

- All the students interviewed found that the opportunity to apply their set of individual skills was enlightening and opened their minds to new leadership and volunteer opportunities they otherwise wouldn't have pursued. A Political Science and English double major noted:

“My organizational skills improved dramatically because you are accountable and responsible for a project that people in the community are already so involved in, and have already put a lot of work in to.”

Civic Efficacy

- Defined as a student's confidence in their ability to contribute effectively to civic and community endeavors.
- Many students commented on how applying the theory that they had just been taught gave them a new kind of confidence. This was especially vocalized by a junior CIS major:

“Having actually done the things [in the community] gives me a different kind of confidence than just getting feedback from professors. Having done it, you know you can do it, and you see the results of your work in the community.”
- Through her experience in ‘the real world,’ one senior female, Environmental Studies and French major, realized that her project with a sustainable farm (developing a curriculum where by juvenile delinquents could complete their community service hours) was actually implementable. She stated:

“One of the goals of ACE is to have what you're doing not be simply theoretical but also implementable. I had this epiphany halfway during our project. I said to my group: “You guys, this could actually happen!” This was a ‘real person project.’ This could actually help people and bring people from different parts of the community together. You don't get that as much with normal class-work. You can have classes where you just survey or observe Northfield; but what we were doing didn't just stay in the Northfield community.”

Civic Action

- Defined as helping students move beyond simple recognition of a given community's need and increasing their commitment to actually pursue civic, community, and work roles that foster a common good.
- Among the students interviewed, many agreed that they gained a sense of civic action from the ACE components within their course. One junior Asian Studies major, after taking a course on Asian-American immigrant issues said:

I've definitely wanted to get more involved in the multicultural community as well as with the St. Olaf community [after taking this course]. It made me more sensitive to not just the needs of the Asian American community, but also to the ways in which the Asian community

affects the Northfield community and the St. Olaf community. It's made me look for more effective ways to get the message [of equality] out."

- This trend of civic action that emerged in our research suggests that students indeed moved beyond simply recognizing their capabilities and confidence in pursuing action, but actually felt compelled to follow through to achieve a greater good for society. A senior Sociology/Anthropology and English double major stated:

"When I was using skills and applying them in the theory, I was making deeper understanding and connections in what they meant and my place in theoretical anthropology and my role in society...I guess I have always felt some sense of responsibility but it has shifted in the fact that now I also feel empowered [by her course and by the research]. My responsibility doesn't feel like a burden because I know I can be active to respond to it."

Vocational Integration

- Defined as a student's ability to articulate how to use one's knowledge and skills to contribute in personal, civic or work roles.
- Some students felt that their ACE course was directly related to vocation. A junior Philosophy and Asian Studies major reflected on her American Racial and Multicultural Studies Course by stating:

"If there was no civic engagement part in this class, the connection between what you were learning and how it relates to the world after college would be a lot less clear. Taking the civic engagement class meshes the two together and makes it immediately coherent and noticeable and shows what ways exactly the issues you study relate to people and what you can do about it."

- The key component to whether a student saw their ACE class as vocationally beneficial seemed to be their previous interest in the subject. Others seemed to find other means of identifying their vocation through real work experience or internships, as stated by a senior Sociology/Anthropology and English major:

"In my internship, I felt really confident in my writing and communicating in professional ways in the business. I gained skills sets in terms of communicating with supervisors. I felt a stronger sense of vocation because those skills are useful outside of academia. I realized I'm probably going to make an impact after graduating."

Discussion

- In courses where the ACE component was fully integrated into the curriculum, students felt as though they had effectively met any number of the listed outcomes. Students in courses that lacked integration felt there was something still to be desired in their ACE experience, citing that ACE felt like an afterthought in their particular class.
- Intentional reflection that was built into their ACE experience was a key aspect to successful outcomes of ACE. Many stated that their ability to reflect, particularly when prompted by a faculty member resulted in the ACE experience coming full

- circle and producing the outcomes, in many cases to a higher degree than in classes where the reflection component of ACE was not stressed.
- What students bring to their ACE class, meaning their individual interests in ACE and ACE principles, and their own expectations for what they hope to gain, ultimately shape the strength of the ACE outcomes. Those students with personally vested interest in ACE and their own potential to gain ACE outcomes were the ones that had the strongest fulfilled outcomes. Simultaneously, those same types of students were that ones that felt the keenest disappointment when the ACE components of a course were not well integrated, executed, or lacked meaningful reflection.