Narrative Summary of Academic Civic Engagement Assessment Findings

Authored by Nate Jacobi (CEL) on behalf of the Bringing Theory to Practice Grant Learning Community

October 1, 2011

In July of 2010 St. Olaf received a $5000 Bringing Theory to Practice grant from the American Association of Colleges & Universities to evaluate and strengthen Academic Civic Engagement (ACE), with special attention to models and practices that enhance students' civic and vocational development. St. Olaf has defined academic civic engagement (ACE) as an approach to teaching that challenges students to apply academic knowledge and tools to address community issues as an integrated component of a course. Assessment activities included a student survey administered to 239 students in fourteen courses, interviews with 41 students who had participated in ACE courses in past semesters and a faculty survey completed by 87 faculty. Although are results are not generalizable, they suggest that academic civic engagement promotes civic learning and identity development by increasing students' ability to apply academic knowledge to address community goals, sense of efficacy, self-awareness, commitment to civic action for the common good. Because we understand identity development to be a major component of psychosocial well-being, our findings suggest a positive connection between academic civic engagement and psychosocial well-being.

We found that students believe that ACE contributes to both academic and civic learning. A high percentage of the students who completed the survey (90 percent) agreed or strongly agreed that the academic civic engagement component of the course increased their understanding of course goals and concepts. Ninety-four percent reported that the ACE component of the course increased their ability to apply academic knowledge and skills to address a civic or community goal. In response to an open-ended question about what they had learned about their strengths and weaknesses, 88 percent of students could identify something they had learned as a result of the ACE component of the course.

In "Well-rounded Education for a Flat World," a paper prepared by the College Outcomes Project, identity development is referred to as the "development of the enduring self" that includes capacities such as self-awareness, self-authorship, interdependence and purpose. The learning outcomes that we labeled as *civic efficacy*, *self-awareness, vocational integration* and *civic action* are closely related to identity and vocational development, which we used as proxies for psychosocial well-being.

In our study, a very high percentage of students (88 percent) felt that the ACE component of the course increased their civic efficacy, or confidence in contributing to civic goals. One student commented, "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." We expect that increased civic efficacy is likely to be associated with higher self-regard and thus psychological flourishing.

A high percentage of students (86 percent) also felt that the ACE component of the course increased their self-awareness, which we defined as awareness of their strengths and weaknesses. When asked to describe what they learned about their strengths and weaknesses, student responses most often related to the themes of communication, community, group work and career. One student commented, "I had to learn to communicate with a range of different people. I especially had to learn how to talk to people who are older than me. More than that, though, my teamwork and group work skills improved, also time management, and networking." We expect that increased self-awareness is also likely to correlate with positive identity development.

We also found that a high percentage of students (87 percent) reported that the ACE component of the course increased their interest in pursuing civic, community or work roles that foster the common good, an outcome that we labeled as *civic action*. After taking a course that required students to conduct oral histories with local Asian immigrants a student commented, "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." We expect that there is a positive correlation between a commitment to the common good and a stronger and sense of personal identity that is connected to the well-being of others. In a recent article in *Liberal Education*, "Civic Engagement and Psychosocial Well-being in College Students," Flanagan and Bundick assert that collective civic action contributes to connectedness among individuals in a community, which helps fulfill a basic human need for belonging.

Similarly, we learned that students find a great deal of meaning in opportunities to engage with and help community members. When asked to describe the most meaningful aspect of their ACE work, 57 percent of students provided responses that related to working with, being engaged in, or building relationships with the local community and 31 percent provided responses that related to helping others. We expect that for many students increased community connectedness contributes to a sense of belonging and thus increased psychosocial well-being.

Interviews with 41 students who had participated in ACE courses in previous semesters, confirmed findings from the student survey that ACE contributes to civic learning and vocational development. Many students felt that the degree positive impact was directly related to the degree that reflection was integrated and emphasized. Additionally, the data suggested that students with a personal interest in the ACE project or activity had the strongest fulfilled outcomes.

We learned that a strong majority of the faculty at St. Olaf would be interested in incorporating ACE approaches into their teaching if they had the appropriate support and incentives. A very high percentage of faculty who have experience with ACE teaching believe that it contributes to the civic learning and identify development outcomes that we identified. One faculty member responded that "students involved with ACE projects are engaged learners and more actively participate in their education."

Finally, we learned that utilizing a faculty learning community to both lead an ACE assessment and evaluation project and consider institutional issues associated with ACE is an effective strategy for deepening faculty and institutional commitment to ACE.

There were a number of limitations to our ACE assessment project. First, we relied almost exclusively on self-report information. Second, we did not incorporate pre/post tests or comparison groups. Lastly, we aggregated student responses from courses that incorporated a wide range of ACE approaches—including courses with both very limited and very intensive community-based requirements.

This assessment project has provided a foundation of knowledge about the impact of ACE teaching on students on faculty perceptions of ACE at St. Olaf. Findings from this project will continue to inform future assessment and evaluation initiatives in the future. The process of involving faculty in the learning community and assessment project has increased their knowledge of and commitment to ACE at St. Olaf. The individuals will continue to help improve and expand the initiative in the future and it is likely that many will serve as an ACE advisory committee. We expect that conversations on strengthening and institutionalizing academic civic engagement will contribute to institutional decisions about how this initiative will be supported in the future.