

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND SERVICE-LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES FOR STUDENTS IN THE KNOWLEDGE ECONOMY

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Abstract

Today's world is living in a knowledge economy, where college students are the new creative class. They are expected to leave their universities with more than just manual and technical skills; the creative class is expected to be skilled in community awareness and they are expected to be civically engaged. The idea of the knowledge economy brings to question the academic curriculum of higher education and whether or not students are being prepared for a life of civic engagement. Research has indicated that traditional academic curriculum does not include enough service learning opportunities for students to become civically engaged in their communities. This lack of community involvement has also been demonstrated as a prime reason that students do not remain in the communities of their alma mater subsequent to their graduation. Not enough support from the local community is another reason that students choose to take their human capital and leave upon graduation. It has been shown that universities that implement service learning opportunities across their academic curriculum experience better retention rates. The collaboration between university students and community citizens maximizes community enhancement because it utilizes the skills of both the university students and the community citizens.

Keywords: Civic engagement; Service learning; Knowledge economy; Higher education; Lifelong learning

Binghamton Keywords: Catholic Charities; Retired and Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP); Binghamton University

In the age of the knowledge economy, manual and technical skills are no longer a company's most valuable asset in an employee. Today's companies are seeing knowledgeable workers who are filled with creative and entrepreneurial ideas. The creative class, as termed by Richard Florida, is now the driving force of the economy. It is an employee's work potential, as opposed to their education level that is crucial for companies (2005). Colleges and universities contain one of the largest concentrations of creativity and entrepreneurial ideas. A student's human and creative capital can greatly contribute to the economic growth and development of their neighboring cities. Students, however, are choosing to migrate away from their alma maters, in search of alternative communities where they can utilize their talents. There are several factors that influence student migration, including poor or rival job opportunities in other cities, too much distance from their hometown and the want for a lifestyle opposite of the university's local community. Still, none of these factors are as significant as the fact that

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students are not remaining in the communities of their alma maters because there is a lack of a relationship between the University, the students, and the community members.

The decreasing rates of retention after graduation has given rise to the questioning of the purposes and goals of higher education. Inquiring minds have speculated on whether colleges and universities should be preparing their students for technical training and the workforce, or if they should be preparing their students for a life of civic engagement and citizenship (Cetindamar, 2008). It has been found that students do not feel a sense of kinship with their local community and do not feel as if their talents are wanted or appreciated. Due to the fact that colleges and universities throughout the country have not adopted service learning and talent development into their curriculum, they are experiencing low retention rates. Based on recent studies and journal articles, it has become clear that when campus communities and cities encourage and expose students to a life of civic engagement, they are more inclined to remain after graduation and utilize their talents in that specific community.

History of Higher Education and the Role of the Academic Staff in Civic Engagement

Higher education has been faced with many critics, and they ponder about academic curriculum being effective enough for today's world. In one study focusing on how civic engagement can encourage citizenship, researchers Stephen C. Wilhite and Paula T. Silver examine the history of the academic curriculum in higher education in their article entitled "A False Dichotomy for Higher Education: Educating Citizens vs. Educating Technicians" (2005). Initially, in the early years of higher education in what is called the "colonial college", professors and teachers were responsible for the intellectual, moral and spiritual development of their students (2005). Religion was an integral part of the educational doctrine, thus citizenship and service benefitting others was necessary. In the middle of the 19th century, however, developing nations were in desperate need of technicians and skilled workers who could help to advance science and agricultural endeavors. The Morrill Federal Land Grant College Act of 1862 took the initiative of expanding the purposes of higher education to include technical training in the university curriculum. As a result, students were trained to work with their hands and were expected to migrate to cities that needed their skills and labor (Wilhite, 2005). It was not until the mid-1980s that universities began to implement the civic mission into higher education.

Students of the 60s and 70s actively rebelled against the social and political struggles of their day. There was no need to coerce students into civic engagement because they were taking the initiative themselves. Yet, there has been a reluctance to implement this momentum back into university students. Some believe that it is the university's sole responsibility to serve public purposes by "giving students discipline-specific competence and not... [inculcate] students with partisan views that do not promote critical thinking" (Wilhite, 2005). Others believe combining civic engagement and academics is counterproductive and biased because teachers would be presenting ideas to students based on public opinions and their own emotions. In addition, teachers may not even be equipped with enough personal experience and civic engagement themselves to convey that message to students. According to Dilek Cetindamar and Tara Hopkins, authors of "Enhancing Students' Responsibility towards Society through Civic Involvement Projects", is exactly the problem with higher education (2008). They deduce that too many educators, and even policymakers, do not realize "the immediate consequences of global ethical and social problem" and teachers have it embedded in them to avoid political issues that differ from traditional curriculum (2008).

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Many still believe in the civic mission that higher education was founded upon. It is without a doubt that social problems exist in practically every community. Not preparing students to address and understand these social issues makes them bound to continue on ignoring the issues of society (Wilhite, 2005, 48). Yet, educators have still been hesitant to enforce student participation in citizenship education and service learning. Not enforcing student participation in citizenship education and service learning has led to an age of civic disengagement and a retreat from citizenship.

Disengaged Academic and the Relationships within the Internal University Community

In the ongoing debate surrounding higher education in colleges and universities, the majority of the focus is placed upon the academics staffs' responsibility in the link between civic engagement and academics, but: What about the responsibility of the academic citizen and the role of our culture? According to Bruce Macfarlane, in his article "The Disengaged Academic: the Retreat from Citizenship", students lack the motivation to be engaged in the democratic process and in community involvement (2005). He blames the lack of their civic engagement on "the breakdown of the nuclear family, the mobility of labor, fear of crime, the pressures of modern working practices, the growth of technology resulting in 24 hour consumer society, and the mass media", which provides alternative ways to spend leisure time (2005). He also claims that youths are alienated from democratic processes, such as voting and participation in state and local governments. In 2004, there was a dramatic decline of voter turnouts amongst the youth population and there are falling levels in community volunteering (Macfarlane, 2005). Macfarlane's claims are applicable to universities because the campus community vastly differentiates from the nuclear family, attending a university (for those particularly studying away from home) becomes an extended family, and the previous structured values and moral obligations are meshed with new thoughts and ideas. Not to mention the fact that students are being recruited by top companies from all over the nation and do not feel the need to remain where they obtained their education. Most college towns vary in heritage and culture and most provide a plethora of entertaining events, but the growth of technologies and social networks are keeping students indoors and on campus.

Mass media and the technological culture are cited as some of the reasons students of higher education are isolated from their university communities and the cities they are located in. Macfarlane's research also indicates that the "arrival of mass [higher education] is one of the factors identified...as contributing to the disaggregated university" (2005). Over the years, universities have been accepting larger amounts of students than ever before, allocating more funding to appointing staff to accommodate these students, and have provided increased career mobility within the education sector. These factors were thought to be damaging the internal unity of a university, which only further inhibits a relationship with the outside community. With large amounts of information being designed to reach out across the masses, there has been a large disconnect between student's individuality and the universities. In addition, universities have been becoming more stratified in academic disciplines and offer the majority of their rewards and privileges to those in highly specialized fields, such as science, engineering, business, and technology. Students who chose to study in inter-disciplinary fields experience outsourcing of available service activities and community programs (Macfarlane, 2005). With a lack of initiative and decreased opportunities, a struggle remains in the institutions of relationships between university students and the local city community members.

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Obstacles in Civic Engagement and Relationships between Universities and Communities

In Cetindamar's study on enhancing student responsibility through civic engagement, he found that most community organizations and institutions did not wish to work with university students because of the idea that they are inexperienced and irresponsible. Some do not even have a structure for volunteers, so there is not a viable opportunity for students to build a relationship with other community members who participate in civic engagement. He believes that in order for students to discover their individual goals and contribute to the outside community, there needs to be an opportunity for them to volunteer and learn the needs of the community from first-hand encounters, as well as interact with those who are following on the same mission (2008). Community-based organizations are advocates for a civil society, yet some do not allow for students who have the same vision and desire to help work with them on their projects (2008). University students are left at a disadvantage because "college students who have service-learning experience show greater evidence of community involvement following graduation than do students who did not have such experience" (2008). Also, in the age where creativity and talent is fundamental, students play a significant role in uncovering new ways to address social justice and issues in their communities. In addition, he states that a relationship between the university and the community through community-based organizations makes students more democratic and more inclined to remain in their respective communities after graduation.

In one study, authors Laura B. Wilson and Sharon Simson, researched universities that experienced low retention rates to understand the cities and communities view on university students participating community-based organizations. In their article, "Combining Lifelong Learning with Civic Engagement: A University-Based Model", they found there is a need for universities to play a role in enhancing civic engagement not only with their students, but with the overlapping community (2003). In fact, it was also found that it is in the best interest of the universities to enhance civic responsibility in the fifty-plus population (2003). Wilson and Simson have found that the baby boomers over the age of 50 are defying previous stereotypes about aging and are seeking new meaning into their lives. Thus, they aspire to attain a higher education and want to help in developing a stronger economy, much like the new age of university students. The majority of cities, as found, have a large population of the 77 million Boomers in the U.S. It is crucial for universities to utilize their desire for lifelong learning because benefits include: encouraging life-long learning and the spirit of volunteerism in university students as they age, a better relationship with community members and their leaders, as well as the development of community-based organizations. Partnering with the fifty plus population has displayed great potential because today's economy has experienced severe pitfalls. State governments and community-based agencies could do nothing but benefit from additional volunteers, and they are easily accessible and found in university students and the retired population. Both of these types of citizens are at a stage of life where learning and civic engagement is significant and warranted (2003).

Reconceptualizing Students and the Role of Local Institutions in Civic Engagement

In a more recent study, in 2008, Matthew M. Mars discusses how the recent economic change in society is demanding that higher education administration develop a knowledge/learning regime and an entrepreneurial spirit in university curriculum. He also

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discusses how current state-institutions and community-based organizations, since Wilson and Simson's research in 2003, are more willing to accept university students into their institutions as creative capital and for the purposes of service learning. Mars claims that the knowledge economy has placed great emphasis on the value of a student's talent. In order to maximize its potential, several universities in the country need to work on fostering entrepreneurship and civic engagement (2008). In his article, "The State-Sponsored Student Entrepreneur" Mars challenges the opinions of Slaughter and Rhoades, authors of Academic Capitalism and the New Economy: Markets, State and Higher Education. Slaughter and Rhoades state that students are marginalized within the capitalist economy and cannot venture out into entrepreneurial roles in the community (2008). Mars states that students can, in fact, that students have been reconceptualized to venture out into the community and have taken the initiative to do so. Students have been introduced to a new dimension of academics where the student is an active agent of academic capitalism. His argument is that students are taking the initiative to push themselves into the role of, which he terms, State-Sponsored Student Entrepreneurs, which "recognizes and leverages the entrepreneurial environments, infrastructures, and resources of their university to their private, commercial advantage" (2008). Universities still tend to focus more on developing entrepreneurship in the areas of science and engineering, but State-Sponsored Entrepreneurs come from all disciplines and are in touch with local and state-sponsored institutions that are rewarding them for their work.

In the knowledge economy, talent and creativity are hot commodities. University students possess a multitude of human and creative capital, yet are not fully being utilized in their own communities. Retention rates after graduation are steadily decreasing because of obsolete university curriculums that do not implement service-learning technique. In addition to that, the community-based organizations and institutions and organizations of local university cities have been reluctant to offer opportunities to students. Many researchers have shown that students who are encouraged and given the opportunity to participate in civic engagement have more of an inclination to stay in their respective university communities. Based on the articles used above, such theories can be implemented in the Greater Binghamton Region. In addition, the Broome County area has an aging population who can benefit from civic engagement and lifelong learning. The majority of students are not required to complete internships or service learning in Broome County, and unless sought out, most students will not. Many community-based organizations and institutions do not have established programs and the resources for Binghamton University students to participate in as interns or volunteers, thus making it more difficult to build relationships with the community and its members. It is clear that there is an opportunity for an exchange of services that can benefit both the university and the community, being that there are already established institutions. There just needs to be a more efficient way to do so.

Best Practices: Foreign and Local Examples of Community and University Interactions

Higher education has endured severe scrutiny over the past couple of years because of the lack of a stance academic institutions take on civic engagement in their curriculums. There has also been controversy surrounding local communities and their failure to utilize the human capital of the creative class and the willingness and potential of their own community members, particularly the retired population, to meet the needs of the overall community. On both a foreign and local level, there have been successful practices that have worked to meet these

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needs. One best practice, on a foreign level, was the implementation of Civic Involvement Projects (CIP) at Sabanci University, in Istanbul, Turkey. The purpose of the civic involvement projects is to familiarize students with social responsibility and provide them with the ability to recognize the needs of their surrounding communities. The innovative service-learning project encourages students to participate democratically at the fundamental level (Cetindamar, 2008). Formally termed as the "Civic Involvement Projects" (CIP), initiatives were formally established in 1996. In 1999, Sabanci University began its formal education programs with the mission statement:

"Our mission is to develop competent and confident individuals, enriched with the ability to reflect critically and independently, combined with a strong sense of social responsibility; and, to contribute to the development of science and technology, as well as disseminating the knowledge created to the benefit of the community." (2008)

Keeping in mind the philosophy of an educational philosophy, students were challenged to create their own knowledge by finding organizations within their community to practicing citizenship within them, while tying it into an academic course. The program directors ensured that the program was student-led and provided the students with team builders and training for their specified fields. The description for the running of the course is as follows:

"All projects operate in teams, with students choosing the topic they wish to work on. Teams are led by supervisors, students who have previously completed at least one project, and have passed the application process – written application, oral interview and case study as well as recommendation from their team supervisor – to officially become part of the larger CIP Team. Team Supervisors meet with their teams once a week and join the team each week for the implementation of the project. They are responsible for keeping attendance, for overseeing the curriculum for the specific project and for creating enthusiasm for the project and the team. The Team Supervisors are overseen by the Advisory Supervisors, students who have at least three years of involvement within the program. The Advisory Supervisors are responsible for trouble-shooting, giving and being available for advice, and for ensuring that all official permission and contacts have not only been obtained but are maintained. They also implement the various training needs for the different subjects we address – bringing in experts when necessary and/or delivering the training themselves when possible. The third tier of this student-led structure is Event Supervisor, a small group of the most dedicated students who are in their senior year – or exceptional students in their junior year. They are responsible for our larger events, for being available to give training to both team members and other supervisors, for site visits to the projects, and for filling in when the Team or Advisory Supervisors (for whatever reason) are not available. With this structure, our students are empowered, empower each other, learn leadership, learn responsibility, encourage creativity and, in short, keep the program running." (2008)

Since 1999, the CIP program at Sabanci University has experienced great success, hosting over 237 civic engagement projects with over 2000 students. The most popular projects focused on children, human rights, and the environment of the Turkish community (2008). Affiliates of the CIP program have stated that student participants of the program have greatly benefited from the change in academic curriculum. Including civic engagement in their academic learning had a more proficient understanding of social issues, such as poverty and educational shortcomings, environmental concerns and the realities of the elderly and disabled

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(2008). Students were also able to identify their own personal interests through the project, thus sparking a desire in them to want to be involved civically, as well as helping them to build a better relationship with their community members.

The CIP program also maintained contact with their program alumni to test their success rates as civically engaged citizens following graduation. The majority of past CIP students ended up working in corporate fields, but still was involved in issues of social responsibility. In fact, 85% of their past students indicated that they believed the CIP program should be mandatory for all students, citing their benefits from the program as their reasoning (2008). One student even quoted, "for the first time in my life, I was 100% sure that I was doing something right, and something good, and for the first time in my life, I was proud of what I was doing" (2008). Since its inception, 18 other state universities throughout Turkey also implemented programs modeled after CIP. All of the CIP modeled programs believed that all students just need an opportunity to develop themselves, and great things will come for them and for the communities they are living within.

The CIP program has proven to be a successful implementation of what higher education can do to promote civic engagement through service learning in their academic curriculum. Yet, it does not address the other issues presented in implementing service learning projects into academic curriculum. The researchers of the CIP project mentioned that many community organizations and institutions are not receptive to student participation (2008). Additional research has also demonstrated that cities and communities do not utilize their retired population and their desire to participate in civic engagement activities (Wilson, 2003). Broome County's Catholic Charities, however, is an example of a local organization that is in fact receptive to student participation in their endeavors, and utilizes the resources of the retired population.

Catholic Charities has been an advocate for social justice in many different communities for over 65 years. The Broome County chapter, located in the city of Binghamton, has served the community throughout the years by providing programs and activities that target unmet community needs, ranging from hunger to homelessness, to pregnancy and adoption, to mental health and elderly care. Catholic Charities is a local organization that is receptive to the assets of Binghamton University Students. In speaking with Virginia Wetherbee, director of the Family Counseling sector of the organization, Catholic Charities recognizes the resources that university students can bring and actively uses Binghamton University students in their projects (personal communication, April 21, 2009). In 2007, their last intern was a student in the department of Social Work on the university's campus. Still, however, there are minor restrictions in how the Family Counseling sector of Catholic Charities can fully utilize Binghamton University students and their capital.

The Food Pantry of Catholic Charities, on the other hand, relies heavily on what talents and skills Binghamton University students can bring to their organization. According to Michelle Dow, an employee of the Food Pantry, Binghamton University students actively participate in their annual Farmer's Market. She stated that many of the students are coming from academic curriculums that require service learning, but through word of mouth, over 50% of the student volunteers come back with friends in their own free time (personal communication, April 21, 2009). Dow also spoke highly of the Retired and Senior Volunteer Program that Catholic

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Charities sponsor, which is relative to the controversy surrounding the lack of utilization of the retired population's want and need to be civically involved.

The Retired and Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP) is an affiliate group of Catholic Charities that focuses on assisting older adults in becoming civically engaged (What Matters, 2004). In the "Combining Lifelong Learning with Civic Engagement: A University-Based Model", by authors Wilson and Simson, it was found that older, retired adults are beginning to desire new meaning in their lives and are seeking out projects where they can engage in life-long learning (2003). This same concept is displayed in RSVP agency. For the past 17 years, retirees have been matched with local community service projects to help keep them civically engaged and involved; one program being the Food Pantry of Catholic Charities. Currently in April 2009, there are 46 regular senior volunteers at the Food Pantry and the number is consistently increasing. Binghamton University students are also regular volunteers at this program and whenever there is a new student volunteer from the university, they partner the student with an experienced senior volunteer. Through this interaction the opportunity becomes available for the university's creative class to become better acquainted with older population, whom of which represents 20.7% of the total Broome County population (The Older Population, 2008). In turn, the retired citizens are also benefitting from these experiences because they are able to practice life-long learning from their interaction with the university students.

The Civic Involvement Projects at Sabanci University and the Retired Senior Volunteer Program both address two of the primary obstacles facing universities and local communities; students not being able to participate in service learning opportunities or and be civically engaged within the community, and the fifty-plus population's desire for lifelong learning and community involvement. Yet, they are completely independent of one another. The University of California at Berkeley has implemented in a university office to bring together student capital and community opportunities. The Office of Community Relations has the aim to "promote mutual understanding and supportive relationships between the University of California, Berkeley, and its neighboring communities" (2008). The office provides students with public information and activities from the community, and the community with information and activities from within the university. Even more, the office provides a straightforward, understandable source for community members to participate in University activities without having to learn all of the sometimes confusing information pathways of the campus.

The Office of Community Relations at the University of California also features additional resources for community members and neighboring cities to utilize. The office provides community members with frequent updates of available jobs within the university that require no academic background. The office also features programs where university students are featured for community members to hire. The Career Center lists their students and their resumes to fill positions in the local areas. In addition, the Career Center features on-campus recruiting to benefit its students, and better acquaint the community members with the campus. The volunteer equivalent of the Career Center is the Cal Corps Public Service Center. The Cal Corps Public Service Center is a clearinghouse for student volunteerism. All campus volunteer programs are mandated to be listed through the center, so that community members can be made aware of the activities on campus. The center also features a number of service-learning courses, so that students can have access to both.

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Recommendations

Higher education has reached a new age, where technological and professional training is no longer enough to prepare students for the real world. The knowledge economy has created a creative class where civic engagement and service learning opportunities are crucial to prepare students for lives as productive, innovative and civically engaged citizens. Research has indicated that there are the two main ideas that academic curriculums need to change to meet the need of the knowledge economy: students need to be educated on being socially responsible students who can participate democratically and think analytically and community-based organizations need to become more receptive to the resources the creative class provides and the desire for participation in civic engagement from retired communities. The examples of the foreign and local practices display successful and adequate ways for academics and community involvement to merge in the knowledge economy. In Sabanci University, CIP is a great foreign example that exhibits how higher education is changing to produce more engaged students. In Broome County, Catholic Charities is a great local example of how community-based organizations are incorporating Binghamton University and the retired population through service-learning. The University of California at Berkeley's Office of Community Relations provides a gateway for community members and university students to interact with one another and be made aware of projects that are mutually beneficial.

My initial recommendation is for universities, regarding their main focus on science, business, technology, and engineering. These majors are crucial because they have direct entries into professional careers, but the knowledge economy calls for more civic engagement and community involvement. My recommendation is that these majors incorporate service-learning opportunities outside of internships at businesses and corporations. These service learning courses could act as a General Education Requirement and be implemented during the first year of study, so if students desire future service opportunities they can have an ample amount of time to participate and develop themselves as individuals. In concordance with this program, there should be one central office that acts as a liaison between the community and the campus, so that programs like RSVP can be better introduced to the student body and student service projects can be made known to willing participants from the local community. With that, my second recommendation is that Binghamton University and Broome County formulate an Office of Community relations, just like the University of California. One solidified office would aid in the community and the campus in coming together to form one program that addresses both the pitfalls in higher education curriculum and community-based organizations, as opposed to developing individual programs to meet each need. This would be beneficial because the creative class and the local city can both outsource their ideas and human capital into one fundamental office, so that the output is maximized to meet the needs of all. Furthermore, a central office that, essentially, matches student volunteer projects with community projects will help to increase the opportunities for interaction between the university members and the community members. This, in itself, helps to build more sufficient, deeper and closer bonds between the Binghamton University students and the Broome community. The impact of this relationship could potentially change the economy of Broome County because students who feel that they are needed and influential in a community will be more inclined to remain after graduation. If the creative class of Binghamton University could be retained, then the Greater Binghamton area would be more prepared for the knowledge economy.

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