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## **Importance of Civic Engagement in the Attraction and Retention of Young Professionals**

Leading from the Confluence

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### **Abstract**

Civic Engagement is a necessary component of a community. Students are encouraged to participate in community activities where they attend college. Community involvement will benefit the community by creating lasting connections between community members and the students by making them feel better about helping and impacting others. Programs established by the university can link students to resources available in their community increasing the likelihood of searching for local employment after graduation.

*Key Words:* Civic Engagement; Retention; Community Service

*Binghamton Key Words:* Center City Coordination (“C3”); Center for Civic Engagement; Broome County United Way; Binghamton University

## **Introduction**

New sets of young professionals are graduating from college and are looking to enter the work force. An ideal area to job search in is the community in which the college resides because graduating students become familiar with the community. However, organizations and university need to act together to motivate students to consider remaining after graduation. Becoming involved in local organizations and volunteering gives students a sense of purpose and a lasting connection with the area. Forming a bond between organizations and students early on will result in the retention of more students after graduation.

Students need to learn the importance of community service and outreach to realize the options available in their college’s community. Seclusion on campus can limit a student’s experience of what the community offers preventing their involvement in the area.

## **Linking Student with the Communities**

Researchers April K. Heiselt and Robert E. Wolverton examine the links between college students and their communities in West Virginia through community involvement in an article

entitled “Partners in Linking College Students and Their Communities Through Service Learning”(2008). The article states:

Higher education institutions are often described as ivory towers because their work is conducted away from what is happening in their local environments. Students who attend these institutions of higher learning are kept busy with academic coursework and may have neither time nor opportunity to learn about the surrounding community in which they live. This being the case, some students may graduate from college with a lack of understanding of the greater world in which they inhabit or even a failure to appreciate the local community (2008).

Centers of higher education can emphasize mutual benefits of student involvement in the community to increase the interest of students. Classes or volunteer programs can inform students about opportunities in the community and capture their attention from an early start. Early attraction to the community helps improve the likelihood alumni settling in their college’s region.

To acquaint students with community programs relevant to their career plans and social interests, requires other action. Examining successful programs in other communities and in the Binghamton area can improve the success of new initiatives and spark recommendations to retain and attract students to the Southern Tier.

### **Reasons to volunteer**

Students attend college to do well in school, which consists of studying, going to class, taking exams and do not have as much free time as they have hoped for. Brisbin states that

students who volunteer were born with the desire to care for others and give back (2003). For example students can mentor, volunteer and/or fundraise for charity organizations.

Consider the question, “where does this sense of civic engagement come from?” “One student commented, ‘I was raised to believe that when you live in a community you always give something back to the community’. A student leader remarked on the influence of church activities on the choice of service orientated activities in school. The student also indicated that their parents tended to be involved in community activities” (Brisbin, 2003). A background strong in community support leads to more civic engagement when a student reaches college. These students easily find resources to connect with a community service organization in which they are interested. However, other students may have difficulty without a background in community engagement and may need guidance from an educator.

### **Benefits of Students’ Early Exposure to the Community**

College students can realize the importance of involvement in a community by expanding their interactions beyond eating in local restaurants and bars and instead may help the local community in an activity. Early exposure to the community offers the greater likelihood that the student will settle in the community. A study published in The Review of High Education entitled

“Community Leaders’ Perceptions of University and College Efforts to Encourage Civic Engagement” by Richard A. Brisbin Jr. and Susan Hunter found that “[s]tudents who volunteer in the community often end up staying or coming back after they graduate because they find out they can make a difference” (2003). Thus, community involvement allows students to benefit as well as the community.

In addition, the authors found that “community leaders agreed that getting college students involved in community activities not only had short-term benefits for the community but that often their experiences led to long term gains for community life” (Brisbin, 2003). Clearly, community engagement positively affects both a student’s experience and the community in-service. Research in a report entitled “Whom Does Service Learning Really Serve? Community Based Organizations Perspectives on Service Learning” looks at a different perspective of student community involvement:

As service-learning courses become more prevalent, it is increasingly important to ensure that they are mutually beneficial to both universities and communities. One of the major selling points of service learning courses has been an implicit assumption that they enhance student learning and provide to the wider community (Blouin, 2009).

To maximize the potential for service learning to lead to more involvement in the community, teachers must strongly promote community engagement. If teachers advocate civic engagement, students will have less fear for allowing their grades to suffer if they spend time on

extracurricular. “Teaching methods that involve students’ active learning, such as undergraduate research, service learning, and workplace internships should be viewed as among the most powerful of teaching procedures, if the teaching goal is lasting learning that can be used to shape students’ lives and the world” (Brisbin 2003). Therefore, offering students opportunities to actively participate in their learning experience is an essential component to a college education.

### **Civic Engagement in the Classroom**

It is important to offer a course in each major that showcases civic opportunities. “Today many institutions now offer courses with an experimental component to socialize students in the value of civic engagement and it teaches why civic responsibility is a worthy and important value” (Brisbin 2003). Offering students the opportunity to take a class with civic engagement may not interest many students. However, mandatory civic engagement classes would benefit all students. “Experimental civic education of college and university students will enhance their commitment to civic engagement and help build social capital” (Brisbin, 2003). Clearly these education techniques affect the students and in turn, integrate them into every aspect of their lives. Hence, organizations can incorporate student participation as a permanent component of their business model and increasing openings for student volunteers and/or employment. Brisbin and Hunter reported, “public officials noted they would initiate contact with an institution of higher education either by calling its president or the state university’s extension service, but others did not know whom to contact” (2003). Hence, it is also the organization’s responsibility to find

volunteers and publicize resources to make themselves accessible to students.

### **The Present Imperative for Civic Engagement**

In a society where unemployment is high due to the financial situation, civic engagement is more important than ever before; however, there are fewer people being civically engaged.

“Despite the decline in civic engagement and recruitment of civic volunteers, the community leaders noted that the need for voluntary assistance is increasing and that so is the need for civic associations to engage more individuals in their activities” (Brisbin 2003). This is ever-present in the Binghamton community. Lack of support from the student segment of the community affects improvements of the community.

In addition civic engagement of students and permanent residents is necessary for all economic sectors. Welcoming the students will encourage them to feel more connected with the community leading to involvement to make connections within the local community. Making efforts to capture students’ interests early on will result in the highly involved students and can influence other students and future students to experiment the community.

### **What Universities Can Do to Promote Civic Engagement**

While there is a segment of the society that opines that it may not be the obligation of the university or college to make the community a better place, establishing a community in which students want to go to school can also make it a place in which the student will want to reside

after graduation. Encouraging student involvement also might spur others within the community to become more civically engaged. Since students are the future minds will create new ideas to shape communities and also to start their entrepreneur ideas.

It also might not be a case of what the organizations need from students but also what the university can provide for these organizations:

[Community leaders] would like higher educational institutions to help them by providing expert and professional services. Indeed, this patterns of comments and response suggest that college and university administrators and faculty need to do much more to consider what community leaders need from them and their students, to better inform community leaders about the services provided by the institution and its students, and to provide services to community leaders over a broader geographical expanse. (Brisbin 2003)

There is much more that goes into community involvement than simply volunteering and creating services. Communication between the institution of learning and the surrounding communities is essential; in addition there must be the establishment of an access point to make it easier for students and faculty to know exactly what the community needs and the community knows where it can find resources.

### **How Student Perspective Helps Organizations**

There are many involved students on campuses and there are organizations that recognize the hard work that students contribute to the community. “A civic leader reported finding that most student assistants had good attitudes, were eager and want to contribute and wanted to

learn. The community leaders also appeared to live with students assistance that was bound to the schedule of the school year” (Brisbin 2003). Organizations utilize students even though they might not reside there all year long. Some students might choose to stay in an area over semester breaks because of the rewarding feelings from contributing or because the volunteer work they performed has evolved into employment.

The study done by Brisbin and Hunter in West Virginia found that “[m]any survey respondents indicated that student assistance was either helpful (53.4%) or contributed modestly (34.5%) to the completion of their organizational mission” (2003). In this demographic, more than half of the respondents felt the students helped in the organization reaching its goals. This reflects positively on the student volunteers because it shows that students are striving hard to improve the organization. More students might then be recruited because the organization has a positive view of student help. “The community leaders responded that they thought a community gains most from students’ new ideas (78.9%) followed by their ability to expand organizational assistance programs (62.2%) and to help deliver the organization’s routine services (56.8%)” (Brisbin 2003).

A student’s new perspective has the most impact on an organization and the community. Creative ideas are flowing through the students of today and the young professionals of tomorrow that can influence communities of which the universities are a part of. “They reported that their organization benefitted from the youthful energy (80.4%) and the fresh perspective and

ideas of students (75.7%) more than from students skills and knowledge (52.7) or their dedication to a cause (31.1%)” (Brisbin 2003).

Students contribute greatly to an organization and it’s easy to believe that most organizations in any community would benefit in some shape or form from having a student volunteer. The thought that an organization gained more from the students’ youthful energy than from the assistance they were supplying is surprising and goes to show the importance of having a fresh mind of a college age volunteer to help promote creative thought. “Community agencies value the skills, commitment, fresh perspectives and energy of student service learners” (Blouin, 2009). Communities truly benefit from student involvement because it offers new ideas that otherwise might be overlooked if there are no young minds in the organization.

While some students are required to participate in community programs for credit, many students volunteer on their own. It was interesting to find that “[t]he community leaders perceived no significant difference between coerced volunteers (students who were filling a service requirement for a college and university course) versus walk-in student volunteers” (Brisbin, 2003). Even when students do not volunteer on their own, there is a sense of purpose and pride with the work they are accomplishing. While some students might be graded on the work they are accomplishing, they feel the work they are doing has a purpose for the greater good of the area in which they are living.

Every student has different reasons to why (s)he continues be engaged civically.

“Individual personality and interaction with others were the most important reasons for showing up and for student success in any category of volunteering” (Brisbin 2003). Students gain much from volunteering, but it seems that the fact that they get to interact with others is the main reason why students return and continue to volunteer. Connections students make create important relations in the community with the institution of higher education and might make it easier for them to stay after graduation. With connections made as volunteers, the amount of networking that can be done is immense. Civic engagement allows the student to put him or herself “out there” and become noticed by organizations and companies in the community. “Highly motivated and creative students inspire staff, offer new ideas to improve organizational operations and provide additional human resources that help community agencies expand their services” (Blouin 2009). With this direct link, the students see ideas utilized and the positive effects on the community, making them more inclined to stay after they graduate.

Sometimes it is the institution of higher education that can have drastic effects on the experience. Brisbin determined that “colleges and universities need more extensive effort at outreach and marketing the creative use of students” (2003). Universities and colleges have inventive minds that can be of use in their communities. There is a need for a link between community and college -- an organization or center that can be a mediator to better bring students into the communities and then improve the local communities. “Non-profit civic associations and governments need to be better informed about how and what office or offices to

contact at the college or university to arrange for volunteers and interns, community leadership development, and associational program support” (Brisbin 2003). At times, there is a lack of proper communication that leads many student service-learning experiences to fail. While on many campuses there are centers through which students might find the resources to become involved -- and within the community there is a great need for student involvement -- many students feel lost in the middle. “Service means that students develop emotional ownership of a community. For rural communities and communities in economic difficulty, student assistance might have the long-term effect reducing the drain of college graduates to growing urban areas” (Brisbin 2003). Through service, students become members of the community in which they attend college and need to see themselves as such in order for them to feel more inclined to want to remain in an area in which they already feel so connected. “Students seem to learn about others and about power in communities, civic leaders regard the students service experience as a form of civic engagement with the potential to build better communities” (Brisbin 2003). Students not only influence their future by being civically engaged, but also improve the communities in which they serve. “Community leaders regard the student assistance and experiential education as useful means of broadening political knowledge, expanding social capital, and appreciate civic life” (Brisbin 2003). It seems as if the community and students truly benefit from student involvement and the students.

### **Best Practices of Civic Engagement**

Nationally and on a local level, there are established programs that promote civic engagement and community involvement. A report by Curt Brungardt and Chantelle S. Arnold on “System wide Collaboration and Community Service: The Kansas Corps Experiment”, explores a statewide initiative for universities and college students to access information on areas of communities that need the most help through volunteer services (2009). The goal of developing relationships between higher education and local and state governmental agencies is at the forefront of the mission. “Kansas Corps creates a structure that requires colleges and universities to work directly with one another and with other agencies to deliver valuable community services” (Brungardt 2009). With a program like this, students have easy access to community programs that demand the assistance of students. “With a single phone call, this group of college volunteers can be mobilized to deliver social services or community development assistance” (Brungardt 2009). With the creation of the Kansas Corps, many different agencies can benefit from student involvement. Since this program is well structured, it is almost effortless for students to find agencies. A study by April K. Heiselt and Robert E. Wolverton conducted at Mississippi State University exemplifies best practices utilized to engage first year students. “The need to unite first year students with their surrounding community fueled the creation of a first-year leadership experience” (Heiselt 2008). Therefore, other communities in the nation are also inclined to see students become involved and as a result are taking steps necessary to capture the attention of students at the start of their college careers to guarantee continued involvement.

A local example in the Binghamton area is the Center City Coordination (C3) that was initially located in downtown Binghamton prior to construction of the University Downtown Center. The goal of C3 was to develop a partnership between Binghamton University and the downtown Binghamton community. “The long-term goal is to help revitalize neighborhoods and business areas within the target zone by improving the overall quality of life” (Alden 2005). By improving the quality of life in the Binghamton area, students can make decisions to further a relationship with the community because they are proud of the area and thus want to continue to see the local improvements. Since September 2003 “more than 200 BU interns provided over 23,000 hours, at least 30 students in practical have contributed over 3,600 hours and at least 6 classes have worked with C3 to accomplish class projects” (Alden 2005). Ultimately there were hundreds of students matriculated into C3, offering as a guide to construct other practices to engage more students in community involvement.

A new center will open on the main campus of Binghamton University to provide ease to students interested in civic engagement and for local organizations to have a contact within the university that is familiar with determining which students are optimally helpful. I had the privilege speaking with Professor Allison Alden, the director of the proposed center, and to discuss what the center will mean for the students and for the local community. She provided insight into what the community needs from the students and what the students are looking for in terms of becoming civically involved.

According to Professor Alden, civic engagement is much more than volunteering once or twice, it is about a continuous contact between the student and organization that establishes a relationship past graduation. The center will provide a meeting point for students and an organization of interest allowing the student to find meaning in their studies and expand their knowledge. For civic engagement to work well for the community and the student, a balance is necessary as well as a mediator to help the community access the right students and also to point the students the appropriate organization. The community benefits the most from new ideas that flow from the students because the community is more adequately prepared for change in the future. As new technologies and innovations develop, the fresh minds of students can provide a new perspective for organizations compete in today's society. Ultimately, the center will serve as a primary point of contact between Binghamton University and the community, promote civic engagement on and off campus.

Over the summer, Professor Alden plans to create a website to bring together all the resources that are available on campus as a "one-stop" place for students and organizations to put what they're looking for and get instant results. This will make it easier interested students to find the answers to their questions. Professor Alden already expects to have an increase in the amount of graduates contacting her about job prospects in Broome County as a direct result of the website and the new center (Alden, 2010).

I also spoke with Phill Ginter, the Director of Allocations for the Broome County United

Way, an organization that encourages civic engagement with local community members. The United Way mobilizes the caring power of the community and takes on a leadership role to unite organizations with a common goal to improve the city of Binghamton and Broome County. We discussed how United Way influences strategies for making the Binghamton region a better place. According to Mr. Ginter, the first step is fundraising. Annually, the United Way raises \$3,000,000.00 for local nonprofits. The second step is advocacy, which is working with community members to bring about change. The final step is volunteering; by promoting volunteering in the community United Way helps to enhance the area to attract potential new residents (Ginter 2010). Therefore, volunteering provides exposure for the area and builds relationships to give students a sense of belonging.

Currently there are not many undergraduate Binghamton University students who volunteer through United Way (Ginter 2010). However there are some volunteers from the university that are enrolled in the Social Work and Public Administration Masters Degree programs through the College of Community and Public Affairs. There are Student United Way chapters on college campuses across the country, but is not one at Binghamton University. “Student United Way is the student-led community change organization on college and university campuses that was launched in the 2008-2009 school year. Through Student United Way, students advance the common good, develop leadership skills, and join the growing United Way movement” (United Way 2010). The Student United Way is a fantastic example of a best

practice led by students across the country. For example, the chapter at the University of Florida is ensures local elementary students participating in the free lunch program receive adequate nourishment over the weekend by packing their backpacks with food (United Way 2010). Also, Harris Stowe State University in St. Louis, MO “put on their first ‘Live United’ night raising money for United Way’s work” (United Way, 2010).

These examples clearly show that students in other areas of the country are working hard to improve their college communities. Furthermore Binghamton University can model its programs after universities experiencing success in civic engagement.

## **Recommendations**

First, working with Professor Alden this summer to make certain that the Center for Civic Engagement. The Center needs to be something that every student can navigate easily and is a resource that is known campus wide as a valuable source of information for students to utilize. Organizations that will make use of the center need to be properly informed of the centers purpose to make sure it is utilized to the fullest potential. Next semester there will be a Community Service Fair held at the University Downtown Center in November, for networking and socializing among students and community organizations in need of volunteers and interns. Not only will this help while the students are still in college but also will provide contacts for postgraduate employment. While this is already in the planning stages, the Human Development Association will be helping to get students involved in the preliminary set-up and organization at

UDC. If having the community service fair is possible this year then it will be possible for years to come. Community organizations will be able to come directly into a university space and meet with students face to face about potential involvement. This promotes everything that is being worked toward with this project, bringing students and community members together for the common purpose of finding a better way of working together to improve the community in which they reside.

Finally, I recommend the organization of a Student United Way at Binghamton University. There is significant evidence of Student United Way chapters in the United States are working hard to provide their college communities with volunteers who want to achieve improvements. The United Way of Broome County would benefit greatly from having a Student United Way on campus and provide students with a “hands on” experience with community based organizations.

There are so many opportunities for students to positively impact the city of Binghamton and Broome County if exposed to proper resources and can lead to the retention of talented young professionals graduating from Binghamton University.

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