

Impact of Community Engagement on Students' College Experience

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Past research has shown student engagement with the college community provides a valuable experience during the student's college career. Community engagement not only helps make college life a more pleasant one, but could potentially help develop a more well-rounded individual. This study aims to explore the issue of engaging college students with the local community, with a focus on simple approaches to helping make stronger connections between the two sides. We adopt a real-life case study approach to explore students' experiences after they are introduced to some unique aspects of the community. Two programs, one on local business history and the other on current local businesses, were designed to familiarize students, especially new college students, with the community. The results of the study have implications for student engagement programs, acculturation of international students, students' learning experiences, and students' professional growth.

Keywords: student engagement, community engagement, college experience

INTRODUCTION

When students attend colleges and universities, they often have the desire to feel they are going to a new “home away from home”, an expression that colleges often use to describe how they hope to be perceived by their students. Researchers have realized there is indeed student demand for community-based experiences. Students attending colleges, away from their families, often feel loneliness and need the support of the new college community to get the social support and feel a sense of belong (Nicpon et al., 2006). The local community, of which the college is a part of, plays an important role in providing the social support. Engaging with the local community, therefore, is an important part of students' college experience (Stoecker and Tryon, 2009).

Students may practice community engagement either inside or outside of the classroom, with and without faculty and staff, individually, in groups (e.g., clubs, Greek organizations), through programs (e.g., academic, and co-curricular, living-learning communities), research, creative activities, and courses – when enacted collaboratively with community partners through processes that exemplify reciprocal partnerships and public purposes. There are many positive outcomes for students from well-designed community

engagement (Clayton, Bringle, and Hatcher 2013; Conway, Amel, and Gerwien 2009; Fitch et al. 2013; Warren 2012). Traditionally, research in the area of community engagement has focused on service learning projects that students can participate to help improve the local community while applying academic learning in a real-life setting (Bringle and Hatcher, 1995). Simons and Cleary (2006) summarized the dominant themes of academic service learning. Service learning adds career benefits to personal career development, helps develop connections with others, and enhances self-knowledge in the field.

However, service learning takes much planning and the implementation usually cannot be completed within a short period of time (Felton and Patti, 2011). There even are numerous inherent risks in service learning projects such as overwhelming complexity for students and student anxiety. Furthermore, poorly implemented service learning projects could potentially have damaging effects on community partners (Knight-McKenna et al., 2018). For new college students that do not yet have substantial knowledge in a subject area, service learning may be a difficult undertaking. Short on resources, colleges and universities need to figure out ways to integrate students with the local community in more efficient and effective ways early in the student's college career. Recent research has started paying attention to student engagement in their first year in college (e.g., Krause and Coates, 2008). In this study, we will present two innovative but simple programs designed to engage students with the community. Preliminary results indicate that after participating these programs, students have a better understanding of the community and show increased interest in interacting more with and even staying in the community after graduation. Furthermore, students receive other benefits such as gaining new knowledge that complements classroom learning and developing their professional networks through community interactions. Therefore, simple and efficient programs like the ones discussed in this research have the potential to help strengthen student engagement with the local community and student development.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Several studies have examined the topic of student engagement with the local community. Interactions with the local community increase students' understanding of the community, and have positive affective, behavioral, and cognitive outcomes (Knight-McKenna et al., 2018). Most of the research in this area focuses on service learning experiences and outcomes. For example, Warren (2012) concluded in his meta-analysis: "Research on service learning has shown positive effects on many aspects of students' lives including cultural awareness, social responsibility, and student cognitive learning outcomes" (pp. 59-60). Community engagement, of which service learning is one of the categories, enhances student academic performance by improving both disciplinary knowledge and critical thinking capacities (e.g., Astin et al., 2000; Clayton et al., 2013; Eyler and Giles, 1999; Warren, 2012). Knight-McKenna et al. (2018) point out that beyond academic benefits, service-learning also has cognitive outcomes related to students' developing knowledge of social issues and community settings, and service-learning students tend to become more aware of and interested in community conditions and civic-minded (Battistoni, 2013; Jones et al., 2011; Steinberg et al., 2011).

As students venture from campus to interact and learn from community members, they also make affective changes (Knight-McKenna et al., 2018). As pointed out by Knight-McKenna et al. (2018), in meta-analysis studies on service-learning, affective outcomes for students included enhanced self-efficacy and self-esteem, increased determination and persistence, deepened cultural proficiency, improved attitudes about school and community involvement, and growth in leadership and empathy (Conway et al., 2009). Hart and Wolff (2006) illustrate how to make things happen in this complex area and highlight an application of Wenger and Synder's framework of community of practice to the community – university partnership work. Their framework is rooted in a sense of place and a commitment to engage with issues of locality.

An important goal of community engagement, according to Steinberg et al. (2011), is to develop a "civic-minded graduate." Steinberg et al. (2011) argue that the public purposes of higher education require colleges and universities to prepare students to successfully navigate the intersections of academic study, personal identity and civic experiences during the undergraduate experience and throughout their lives after

graduation. In the meantime, communities where colleges and universities are located often have the desire to see graduates of these institutions choose to stay locally after they complete their studies (Massey et al., 2014). A possible approach to helping accomplish that objective is to cultivate students' interest in the local community through engaging both the community and students (Thach et al., 2018). Furthermore, when students have a good understanding about the local economy and employment opportunities, they are more likely to stay in the community and start a career there after they graduate (Massey et al., 2014).

A stream of research focuses on international students' relationship with the college community in which they reside in the United States. Since the United States is host to a substantial number of international students, college and universities often have it as a part of their strategic plan to recruit and retain international students (McFadden et al., 2012). Being separated from home, these students have a critical need for feeling being part of the community that is new to them. Creating opportunities for these students to be able to participate in local community life, therefore, is an important but often overlooked part of successful college program for them (Kusek, 2015).

METHODOLOGY

Since there is a lack of research on using short-term community engagement projects, we adopt an exploratory case study method (Yin, 2013). The overall approach could be viewed as a real-life case study approach. The authors, as university faculty members, have all been heavily involved in our university communities. One of the coauthors, at the time a faculty member at a public university in the Midwest of the United States, worked with the local community partners for a number of years to bring students and the community together. Through numerous discussions, it was felt that for students, especially those new to the town, programs with short duration but long-term impact should be prioritized. To that end, as a result of a number of brainstorming sessions that included both community partners, students, and faculty members, we developed two short-term programs to bring students and community partners together through carefully-designed community tours. The first tour, the Business Education Tour (BET), takes students on a tour of the major historical business sites in the city. Some of the sites were locations of major former businesses in the local area that have long closed doors. The people who owned and operated these businesses are household names that lived there more than 100 years ago. These people had a substantial influence on the development of the city and the surrounding area. Some of them became leaders in local and state governments. The objective of the tour is to help students develop an appreciation for the rich history and culture of the city which the university calls home. For business students, it is also hoped that they could learn a few businesses lessons through this experience by reflecting on how businesses were started and managed and the successes and failures of these businesses.

The second tour is the so-called How It's Made tour. Students are taken to several well-known, thriving local businesses on this tour. These businesses are mostly less than 20 years old, but have become well known not only in the city, but also in the surrounding areas. These companies, mostly located on the Main Street in the city, have made significant contributions to the community and helped improve the quality of life for local residents and the university population. Business owners are asked to share with students the history of their business, its operations, and lessons in leadership, management, and marketing. Students are encouraged to interact with business owners while they are in the shop of the business. They are especially encouraged to ask questions so they can learn from business practitioners. Multiple communication channels were utilized to inform students of these two events, including the university's email notification system and social media messages. The speed of students signing up was seen as an indicator of the level of student enthusiasm about these programs. The tour announcement videos on social media hit thousands of views and received positive comments from the community and parents. Dozens of students request participating in the first week after the notifications were sent out.

After both tours, students were asked to complete an exploratory, open-ended short questionnaire. We asked students to comment on their tour experiences, such as whether they liked the tour and why, what was the most interesting thing they experienced, whether the tour helped them feel more connected with the community, whether they felt the experience helped enhance their college experience, whether they

would recommend the tour to other students, among others. There is only a small variation in the questions asked for the two different tours. As noted earlier, it is important to help international students to adapt to their new college community (Kusek, 2015). Therefore, efforts are made to recruit international students to participate in these programs.

TWO COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT PROJECTS

The Business Education Tour

The Business Education Tour (BET) program provides innovative ways for intellectual experiences and community engagement opportunities between local businesses and college students. Through a partnership with the local Main Street organization and the university, the BET program provides students with insight into historical entrepreneurial ventures in the city led by a community volunteer who is also an unofficial historian with deep knowledge about the region and has tremendous experiences in giving history and culture tours in the city and the surrounding areas. Through this program, students would have the opportunity to explore the rich history of the city and foster their desire to start their careers in the local area. The local Main Street organization has been chosen as a partner for this program because of their long-standing ties with both the community and the University. The BET program consists of a 2-hour guided bus tours to explore the city and surrounding areas. Examples of the topics covered on the guided tour include:

- Territorial & early statehood business model of “Town Companies”
- The Booster Period of the city in the late 1800s and early 1900s that saw the development of the city as a trading hub of the region
- Post WWII period of industrial development
 - Following WWII and the Korean conflict, as veterans returned home with new skill sets and a desire to settle down to raise a family, the need for greater employment options became apparent to the city’s leadership.
 - The local Chamber of Commerce put together an ad hoc committee to begin a strategic plan to attract industries that would address the need for better employment opportunities for veterans and the burgeoning Baby Boom to follow. The Committee was made up of business owners and others who cared about the future of their hometown.
 - Historically, the city had three primary employing elements dating back to early statehood: regional retail trade, division point for the railroads, and education (there was once two colleges in the city). The city was well positioned as an intersection of rail and roadways which could be attractive to prospective industries.
 - The Committee found success in the development of Industrial Park #1 and securing the investments of several large companies to put down production facilities there. Also, very importantly for the city, securing the interstate highway route to include the city added to its success in the late 1950s with construction in the early 1960s.

Students eligible for the program would be any full time undergraduate/graduate student enrolled in the university. The program was advertised through various social media efforts, the campus email announcements, and a booth in the student union on campus. Since the students come from various backgrounds, the tour can also serve as a diversity and global learning initiative.

The feedback from one of the groups that participated in the BET program are given below:

“I love this tour!”

“Please do it again!”

“I would like to do that often.”

“Tour provides practical information on how the businesses grew here.”

“This was just what I needed between study sessions.”

“I got to know the stories of local businesses, which is really helpful for us to get more involved in this community.”

“I came to know about the organization with their owner and people working there.”

“I learned a lot.”

“It was super fun!”

“Thanks for organizing this kind of event.”

“It was a great experience that I would recommend”

“Hope we have more chances to do tours like this.”

“Thanks, professor, for making this happen and helping us know the community.”

“This was the first time I attended this type of tour and I like the concept of having real stories told.”

“Definitely going to get some chocolates soon.”

“It was totally amazing!”

“I am interested in expanding my interests into a business.”

“Everything was awesome. I enjoyed the tour.”

“The entrepreneurship information was of particular interest.”

“Thanks for doing this on one of my days off.”

“Great information!”

The How It's Made Program

This program is designed for university students to be organized into groups to visit various local businesses. The purpose is five-fold – to familiarize the students with the university community, especially the business community, to help students make the emotional connection to the university community, to help students start building their own professional networks, to match businesses and students for possible internship or employment opportunities, and to provide students a unique learning experience about various business topics such as entrepreneurship, leadership, retailing, and marketing communications. To obtain the best outcome, the university, the local Main Street organization, and the businesses in the community worked together in planning and implementing the tour. It is imperative that business owners see the value of this initiative and are willing to devote the effort to make it a worthwhile experience for both the students and the businesses.

The How It's Made Tour program provides innovative ways for intellectual experiences and community engagement opportunities between local businesses and students at the University. Through a

partnership with Main Street and the university, the How It's Made Tour program provides students with insight into entrepreneurial ventures in the city through the presentation by the business owners. The local Main Street organization, which is accredited by the National Main Street Organization, conducts yearly market research to help grow existing businesses and promote entrepreneurship. It maintains relationships with over 200 local businesses.

After the lead faculty member's discussion with the Main Street, it was determined that the tour would be held during a weekday evening in the middle of the semester. The rationale was that students will have just started their new semester, and giving them an opportunity to start their academic year with community knowledge would be advantageous to them. The plan was to have students sign up two weeks prior to the tour. The Main Street would work with business owners on the program details. The students would meet at the Main Street office, and then they would split into groups. From there each group would go to visit a business. During the time visiting each business, the students will hear about how the business owner(s) talking about how they got started, what their career/educational history is up until this point, what it means to be an entrepreneur, and how they run their business. The students may even see up close how a product is made. After spending about 30 minutes at each business, the students would then rotate to the next one.

In addition to enhancing the student experience while attending the university, it was hoped that this program would also help support local businesses. Many of these businesses have already supported the university in many different ways through donations, internships, and part time jobs. They also support various student organizations and the university's athletic programs. By getting to know local businesses more closely, students and their families and friends could become more regular customers of these businesses. Some examples of the participating businesses are:

- A chocolate shop where various candies, cakes, and pies are made
- A custom shirt shop where customers can design their own T-shirts or logos
- A restaurant with its own beer brewery
- A high-end bicycle shop and assembles and repair bikes
- A jewelry store
- A coffee shop

The program was advertised through various social media, campus announcements, and a booth in the student union on campus. Since the students will come from various backgrounds, including foreign countries, the tour can serve as part of the diversity and global learning initiative. After the tour, students were asked to reflect on their experience. The results show that some of the students had not visited some of the business before. However, most of the students indicated that they would visit the business again in the future. The students were impressed by the business operations and their entrepreneurial stories. The students have expressed interest in learning more about several career fields which they got to know more about and are interested in getting an internship in those fields. The reflection below about this community engagement experience written by one of the students is a good example of the students' experience in this program.

“One concept that I find relatable to my visit to both shops is the use of social media in modern marketing. Both businesses have social media pages and post frequently on them in order to communicate with their customers. This communication can consist of promotions for the business, advertisement, or simply wishing a happy weekend to their customers. Moreover, they interact with their customers online as well. The businesses respond to customer queries and messages promptly in a kind and grateful manner.

The second concept that I was reminded of during my visit is brand promotion. Both businesses promote their products or services by promoting them through coupons, promotions, and social media. The businesses often launch promotional discounts and sales to attract customers. Furthermore, they offer customers coupons to make the business more

attractive. Finally, they promote their businesses online as well by posting messages about products or services, contact information, and interacting with customers.

The third concept that I was reminded of due to the businesses' marketing activity is consumer empowerment. As I surfed through the Facebook pages of both businesses, I noticed customers leaving reviews, comments, and queries. Furthermore, the businesses responded to them by either answering their questions or being grateful for their positive comments. This highlighted the empowerment of the modern customer for me and how businesses should go the extra mile to please and retain customers. Customers have become powerful today and can promote or damage a brand very easily. Therefore, businesses should be careful and build healthy relationships with their customers in addition to supplying products and services.

I really enjoyed my visit and found it enlightening. I learned a few things from the visit and was also able to relate them to the concepts that I studied during my classes. Therefore, I think it was an exceptionally good learning experience for me.”

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The student feedback is a strong indication that several objectives were accomplished with the two programs. First, students clearly learned something new about the local community. From the history of the city to influential local businesses, students were exposed to a side of the community that they would otherwise not be aware of. More importantly, the newfound knowledge will help students get more involved in the community. Therefore, the first interaction with the local community at a deeper level will be a catalyst for further, hopefully meaningful, interactions. Second, learning took place. Students were able to see business operation firsthand. This is especially useful for business students, who consists more than half of the students that participated in the tours. Students were able to reflect on what learned in the classroom after they interact with the local businesses, thus engaging in higher-order learning. Third, students enjoyed these experiences, which help build the foundation for an overall positive college experience. For new students, the pleasant experience in the first semester will reinforce their choice of the college or university for the next 4 years as a good one and further motivate them to see themselves as part of the university community and succeed in it. Also, it is interesting to see some students who took part in the community tours expressed interest in staying in the community after graduation. One of the major concerns of this community and many communities is the difficulty of keeping students in the local area after they graduate (Massey et al., 2014). Engaging with the community with programs like the ones described in this study could help address that issue.

Since both tours expose students to past and present businesses and their owners, students got the opportunity to learn more about entrepreneurship. For some of the students, this is actually the first time they got to look at this phenomenon carefully. As negative economic downturns occur, students often turn to their entrepreneurial spirit and explore the opportunities of working for themselves. “The Great Resignation” following the COVID-19 pandemic ignited an entrepreneurial surge among the workforce, including recent and soon-to-be college graduates. How can higher education institutions foster the entrepreneurial aspirations of students? One avenue to explore is the use of programs like these for students. After participating in these programs, students were able to think about entrepreneurship as a potential career path. They not only saw interest and passion in a particular trade is important for entrepreneurs, but also the skills in various business functional areas such as human resources, logistics, marketing, etc. They also got experience interacting with business professionals and started building their own professional networks. Research has shown three areas of learning through community engagement to be considered: Social Level, Professional Level, and Curricular Level (Colby et. al, 2009). At the Social Level, students pursuing entrepreneurship can be exposed to networking and forming relationships with stakeholders in their respective communities. By becoming more comfortable with forming relationships with

professionals, students can better understand how to use social interactions to further their entrepreneurial aspirations. At the Professional Level, students, along with educators and business professionals, can supply opportunities for students to gain service learning experience in a business setting. Educators can help create bridges of opportunities, such as internships, job shadowing, practicums, etc., with local businesses. Business Professionals can work directly with students, assessing their performance, and if an opportunity arises, offer employment opportunities to students as they formulate their entrepreneurial plans. At the Curricular Level, higher education institutions can implement strategic courses and internship/practicum requirements for Business students. Educators can provide mentorship to students as they navigate service-learning ventures that best align with each student's entrepreneurial goals.

Students also had an opportunity to develop leadership skills and experience cognitive and psychosocial development. Some of the community partners that the student visited were also the leaders in the local community. Community engagement programs ideally allow students to connect with community organizations and their leaders. Professionals in leadership positions can serve as valuable resources and bases of knowledge for not only students, but higher education professionals in course development. As college Program Coordinators develop leadership courses, professionals in leadership positions are often untapped sources of knowledge. While progressing through leadership-related courses and service-learning opportunities, students can apply the knowledge and skills they get during both their college experience as well as when they enter the workforce. A crucial factor for stakeholders to consider is the factor of challenging students to work beyond their comfort levels, which allows students to learn more about their strengths and weaknesses.

Community settings provide more complicated and challenging environments than traditional classrooms for students to apply and test their learning (Knight-McKenna et al., 2018). In the community tours, especially the How It's Made tour, students closely observe how businesses run their operations, including production, logistics, marketing, human resources management, among others. They get to ask questions based on their personal experiences and what they learned in the classroom, and then reflect on the answers they got by integrating the information input from the tour and the internal knowledge they already possess. This obviously helps enhance their educational experience by moving them to a high-order learning process (Ash et. al, 2005; Moely and Ilustre, 2013). This can be viewed as an example of the positive cognitive outcomes Knight-McKenna et al. (2018) discussed.

In addition, many universities and colleges see international students as an important group of students, and integrating these students' lives with the lives of the local community is critical to make these students feel at home and develop a sense of belonging (Smith and Khawaja, 2011). Since a significant number of the participants of these two programs were international students, their feedbacks show that, indeed, they started building a connection with the community through their participation in these programs. They also seem to have developed a desire to get to know more about the community and its people. It is through these positive first interactions that a long-term relationship is built, and these positive experiences bode well for future success of the students in this university and retention of these students by the university.

Ideally, the BET program should be held during weekends, possibly on a Saturday or Sunday during the first few months of the academic year. At that point, new students just started in a new environment, and this program gives them an opportunity to start their academic year with community knowledge. In the best scenario, the How It's Made tour should follow the BET program. The rationale is with a good understanding of the local community after BET, students may be more motivated to be actively involved in the How It's Made activities, and thus benefiting more from these experiences.

Although this research uses simple tour programs to demonstrate the potential of such efficient but high-impact programs, we by no means suggest that this is the only possible approach that can achieve similar outcomes. In fact, our approach indicates the possibility to adopt a process to creatively design community engagement programs for students by focusing on several steps. First, the faculty sponsor or the administrator should work with the local community to identify possible opportunities that could help make connections between individuals and organizations in the community and students. To maximize the impact of the program, the focus should be on the unique strengths of the community that can be leveraged to assist students in adapting to the community. Community engagement is often heavily one-sided, and

engagement projects can be inundated with input from only those community members who have a strong opinion. Without other perspectives being aired, decision makers might not make the best decision for the community as a whole simply because of a minority of loud voices. For this reason, it would be beneficial to have multiple stakeholders, including students, participate in the planning stage of the projects. After the opportunity is identified, and faculty sponsor and/or the administrator need to work closely with community partners to make sure all details are covered, including anticipating possible new needs of students that may emerge in the course of interactions with community partners. After the program is implemented, there needs to be a procedure to collect feedback from both students and community partners. Future adjustments could be made based on the feedback.

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