

# Beyond Learning Communities to the Engaged Campus

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## **The Challenge to Higher Education: Civic Engagement**

Ernest Boyer, the late chair of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, argued that “colleges can find a way back to their civic mission through engaged scholarship that addresses the pressing problems of the day, makes connections across disciplines, and places special ties in larger contexts” (Boyer 1997). The American Association for Higher Education has echoed this message by challenging colleges and universities to become “engaged campuses” where values of citizenship and civic involvement are modeled by faculty and learned by students. This challenge was repeated in the 1999 Presidents’ Fourth of July Declaration on the Civic Responsibility of Higher Education released by the National Campus Compact in the statement:

We also challenge higher education to become engaged, through actions and teaching, with its communities. We have a fundamental task to renew our role as agents of democracy. This task is both urgent and long-term. There is growing evidence of disengagement of many Americans from the communal life of our society, in general, and from the responsibilities of democracy in particular. (Campus Compact 1999)

Higher education must accept the challenge to promote civic engagement and communal involvement through learning opportunities for students, and with faculty who are actively engaged in civic life. Community colleges are in a perfect position to address the need for civic engagement through their mission to take an active role in the communities they serve.

## **Answering the Challenge: Collaboration Between Programs**

Collin County Community College is addressing civic disengagement through an intentional collaboration between the nationally recognized service-learning and learning communities programs. College students nationwide report being politically disengaged, yet also report that they are actively involved in some form of community service. According to the UCLA Freshman Survey, 70 percent of students enter college having performed some type of community service in the past year (Astin 1999). Research conducted by the Harvard Institute of Politics found that 85 percent of college students prefer community volunteerism to political engagement and 92 percent say they are motivated by giving back to the community and making a difference (*Harvard Political Review* 2001).

Collin County Community College has embraced the concept of engaged scholarship as identified by Graham Spanier, president of Penn State University, and chair of the Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities. Engaged scholarship at Collin County Community College is an intentional effort to enrich student experiences by actively integrating research

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Collin County Community College District, founded in 1985, is a multi-campus district located in the suburbs of Dallas, Texas. The college academic philosophy encourages creativity and innovation in academic programs, thus promoting active inquiry and experiential knowledge construction. This focus stimulated the formation of our first learning community pairing in 1994. The learning community model adopted at Collin County integrates two or more courses around an interdisciplinary theme (see examples of course pairings and service-learning opportunities in Figure 1).

Learning communities at Collin County generally combine core courses, but some learning communities have also integrated core and elective courses. During the first six years of the initiative, learning communities combined two courses. In 2000, learning communities at Collin County Community College began to integrate three courses, linking composition classes with classes in the social sciences. Collaboration between service-learning and learning communities programs for civic engagement started in 2000.

Collin County Community College has received national recognition for efforts at engaged scholarship and collaboration between learning communities and service-learning. Collin County was presented with the Campus Compact National Center for Community Colleges award for Collaboration with Business and Industry in 2000; and received the Bellwether Award for Excellence in Instructional Programs and Services in 2001. Collin County is a founding college in the Texas Campus Compact and serves as a regional center for North Texas.

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and engagement into the curriculum, putting knowledge and expertise to work on community problems while offering students practical opportunities to prepare for the world they are about to enter. Engaged scholarship draws on this interest in community service to enhance learning community courses and create deeper learning for students, instilling values of citizenship and civic engagement. Most of these classes integrate a service-learning component into learning community themes, often in the form of a class project promoting civic involvement.

In his book *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam argues that there never has been a more opportune time for educational and political leaders to seize the moment to encourage young Americans' engagement in political and social movements, as a way of fostering greater and more productive civic participation. Collin County's leadership has decided to indeed seize the moment, seeing learning communities as a rich venue for student engagement in civic learning. An engaged campus utilizes its strengths to better its students, its faculty, and the community. At Collin County, linking these two nationally recognized initiatives has established an effective model for integrating civic engagement into the learning experience of students. The cross-disciplinary learning environment afforded students in a learning community enriches the service-learning experience. By providing students the opportunity to analyze, critically reflect, and engage in scholarly discourse through the filter of two, perhaps three disciplines, the service experience takes on a richer and deeper meaning.

### **Engaged Scholarship: Initial Efforts**

In "The Road to the White House," a learning community combining English, history, and government, students read *Democracy in America*, in which Alexis de Toqueville observed the high degree of civic engagement among Americans. After comparing Toqueville's view of civic engagement in American society in the early nineteenth century with the views of such contemporary social scientists as Robert Putnam and Seymore Martin Lipset, who note a decline in civic activism, several students embarked on a voter registration effort on one of the college's campuses. Working with the Texas Secretary of State's Office, Project Vote Smart's Youth Inclusion Project, and "Rock the Vote," these students conducted a nonpartisan voter registration drive prior to the 2000 presidential election. One month before the voter registration deadline, the students placed voter registration tables in each of the campus academic buildings and staffed the tables at different hours of the day. This experience provided students with a clear understanding of the laws and requirements of voter registration, strategies to ensure a successful voter registration drive, and the registration process. Through class discussions and reflective papers, students explored the history and trends in voter registration and turnout, and related these ideas to their personal experiences in attempting to register their fellow students to vote. Students discovered that claims in the literature were borne out among their own peers as they encountered degrees of civic apathy among fellow students. The students logged more than 150 combined hours on a campus of more than 2,500 students, yet registered fewer than 100 total voters. Their reflections at the end of the course revealed a greater awareness of political apathy among their peers.

In an anthropology and photography learning community, “Visual Anthropology,” students explored themes of social marginality and fatalism. In one service project, students produced a photo documentary of the homeless in Dallas through interviews conducted and photographs taken under one of the major interstate highways downtown. This project reinforced for the students the problems of anomie and isolation among people in lower socioeconomic conditions. Students gained the ability to visualize, through the eye of the camera, anthropological elements of human behavior while attempting to practice the photographic concepts being presented in the course. The students’ study and creative efforts heightened public awareness of those individuals often ignored by society, as the documentary was later publicly displayed in a law center gallery in Dallas.

In these kinds of experiential programs, student creativity and serendipity often collide in unexpected and powerful ways. One student’s experience in this course motivated her to examine another social problem through photojournalism. She photographed her friend’s ongoing struggle with heroin addiction. This series of photos taken in an area emergency room graphically detailed the horrific and consuming nature of heroin and its effects on the addict and the addict’s family. In this case, the addict was a young man whose mother encouraged the photo documentary in hopes it would prevent others from using the drug. The photo documentary gained national recognition when it was the cover story of *D Magazine*. Since that publication, the mother involved launched the Starfish Foundation, a national heroin prevention program. The student received a scholarship to attend college in Ohio to continue her photographic studies. This work made the problem of heroin addiction among the young more real for all of the students taking this course.

Students in a learning community integrating government and sociology were encouraged to interact with residents at a local homeless shelter as part of their service project and gain a “sociological imagination” to understand social factors contributing to homelessness. Most of the students at Collin County are from middle- and upper-class families and have learned to “blame the victim” for the plight they are in. Students became emotionally involved in this effort as they interacted with families who were homeless and they suggested to the executive director several ways to improve the home’s environment to make it more conducive to becoming a community. Their suggestions were embraced and policy changes were enacted giving residents of the shelter a stronger voice in the governance of the facility. By engaging in a community agency through direct contact, students became active participants not just in the learning process, but in a local community effort, with all of its ideals and paradoxes. These students commented to faculty that their efforts to strengthen a community program infused them with a sense of empowerment, and at the end of the course they reported an invigorated interest in the ability to make a difference in their community.

An integral part of “The Politics of Liberation: Civil Rights, Civil Liberties, & Multiculturalism in the 21st Century” learning community, combining government, history, and sociology, was the study of people with disabilities. Students in this class who participated in service-learning volunteered with a variety of

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community organizations serving persons with special needs. Many chose to work at Camp Summit, a residential, barrier-free camp for children, youth, and adults who are physically challenged, developmentally delayed, dual-sensory impaired (deaf and blind), or multi-disabled. Others volunteered their services at Equest, an equine-assisted therapy and rehabilitation for children and adults with physical, mental, emotional, and learning disabilities. Still others worked with The Angels Baseball League, providing boys and girls with disabilities the opportunity to experience the emotional development and fun of playing Little League baseball. Student “buddies” helped their challenged partners by acting as guides for sight-disabled children or pushing wheelchair-bound children around the base paths. One student volunteered her time with K-9 Friends, an organization whose members take dogs on visits to people who live in various institutions such as nursing homes, facilities for disabled or seriously ill children, hospital rehabilitation wards, special-education classes, psychiatric facilities, and juvenile detention centers. Through their reflective papers, each student discussed how he or she experienced firsthand, the challenges the disabled face in their daily lives and related these new insights back to concepts of labeling, alienation, and powerlessness studied in the course.

**Figure 1 – Examples of Course Pairings and Service-Learning Opportunities**

<b>Classes</b>	<b>Learning Community</b>	<b>Service-Learning</b>
Composition/Government/History	The Road to the White House	Voter Registration
Government + Social Problems	Exploring America’s Communities: Problems and Policies in Society	Homeless Shelter
Photography + Anthropology	Visual Anthropology: Photography Cultural Diversity	Photo Documentary
Government/History/Sociology	The Politics of Liberation: Civil Rights, Civil Liberties, & Multiculturalism in the 21st Century	Camp Summit Equest Angels Baseball K-9 Friends

**Measuring Success: Assessment and Evaluation**

Since the inception of the learning communities program in 1994 and service-learning in 1998, both primary qualitative data and secondary quantitative data have been used to measure the overall effectiveness of this collaboration. Focus group and survey data, and comparative retention and success rates are utilized not only in assessing student outcomes and promotional and program needs, but are also used as a vital measure of the success and institutionalization of the collaboration concept as a whole.

## **Student Focus Groups**

Since 1998, survey data has been collected from service-learning students, including those enrolled in learning communities, measuring general satisfaction with their service-learning experience as well as the effect of that experience on academic decisions and successes. Attitudes towards self, civic responsibility, volunteerism, and social awareness are also surveyed. More than 90 percent of the respondents report being satisfied or very satisfied with meaningfulness of tasks performed and would recommend service-learning to their friends or classmates. Three quarters of the respondents state that they are able to incorporate practical learning into their academic study (journal report, readings, etc.) and believe that their service experience is equal to or more educational than their classroom work. One third indicate that service-learning has affected their selection of a major and altered their career plans.

## **Faculty Focus Groups**

Since 1999, faculty focus groups have also been conducted each academic year with learning communities and service-learning instructors. This provides an opportunity for faculty to come together and discuss general successes and challenges in their courses, new or innovative methods of instruction, and suggestions for improvement in the areas of marketing, scheduling, and faculty recruitment. Student focus-group feedback is also shared with the faculty during this session. In reviewing the data gathered, comments such as “professionally revitalizing,” “intellectually stimulating,” and “innovative methods of instruction” are commonly found. The following statements are representative of the findings individual faculty members report:

Service-learning is the perfect way for our learning community students to show the connection between the LC's subjects, history, and English. They conduct historical research projects for nonprofit historical groups, then organize their findings into written form, the perfect blending of their historical study and their research and writing skills. Service-learning in the Learning Community is one of the best opportunities for students.

Being able to teach in the learning communities format has helped me to be a better instructor, and has allowed me to bring other aspects of different disciplines into my regular classes, along with helping to merge the disciplines within the learning community.

We incorporated local museums as service-learning opportunities for our students. They have worked as docents, researched genealogy, restored farm machinery and other historical artifacts. The students enjoyed the experiential learning with these kinds of service projects and could see how this work was connected to the learning community with an historical perspective. After the completion of the course a few of the students continued to volunteer at the museums.

I have taught learning communities for seven years and have always had enriching experiences. I have learned from the students and my teaching colleague. Collaborative, experiential learning, and service-learning projects have been significant components in our learning community. These

teaching approaches have been successfully transferred to my other classes. Using service-learning in learning communities has allowed me to be more of an innovator in the classroom.

The combination of Learning Communities and Service-learning offers students an extraordinary opportunity to experience integration and connection. From the learning community students see the overlap of academic disciplines and how each offers a different perspective or piece of the whole. Adding a service-learning component extends this connection to the local community. Through direct observation, students discover how each discipline relates to “real life” while also learning the value and need for service to the community. The academic learning community is thus expanded into a larger public community.

Learning communities—by design—encourage the application of different disciplinary perspectives to central and common themes. This interdisciplinary approach is the essence of true learning and affects both teachers and students alike in a positive manner. By incorporating service-learning into the curriculum, the connections and corresponding insights that naturally and inevitably emerge during the course—along with the sense of community that develops as we engage in our collaborative efforts—makes it, for me, a remarkable and stimulating environment.

### **The Engaged Campus: Lessons Learned**

Student and faculty focus group findings, retention and success data, and student survey findings are analyzed by the Learning Communities Advisory Task Force in an effort to generate discussion and implications for change. Marketing efforts, course-pairings, faculty participation, and administrative support are some of the issues that the task force addresses within the context of the data. Innovative programs such as learning communities and service-learning often encounter resistance because they bring change to established teaching practices of faculty and traditional single-course structures. And, they can be considered costly by administrators. If these programs are to become institutionalized into the culture of a college, we found it has been essential to gain faculty acceptance and administrative support that is deep and sustained. We think this lasting commitment can be obtained through perseverance and a willingness to learn lessons from existing successful programs, and from the valuable feedback that ongoing assessment data have provided. These lessons learned at Collin County include:

- Faculty need to be receptive to new and innovative programs. For engaged scholarship to succeed, faculty should consider their classrooms laboratories in which students are challenged to learn and employ participatory skills. This requires professional development support in the form of workshops and seminars where faculty members share what does and does not work.
- There is a need to continually attract new faculty members to learning community teaching and to service-learning possibilities. We offer workshops each semester at Collin County for faculty interested in teaching a learning community. In these workshops, our veteran faculty members share successful teaching methodologies, discuss strategies for strengthening student learning, and answer questions about learning community curriculum planning and pedagogy.

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- Building a faculty learning community of learning community teachers is essential. In addition to the regular meetings of the Learning Communities Advisory Task Force, faculty offering learning communities meet regularly to discuss common interests, strategies, and concerns of engaged scholarship. This is beneficial to both faculty members new to engaged scholarship, and those more experienced in the concept.
- Colleges need to have someone committed to meaningful community service opportunities for students. This person is a valuable liaison to community agencies. In addition to the service-learning director, each campus at Collin County Community College has a coordinator for service-learning. The coordinator assists faculty in identifying service opportunities related to their specific courses and aids students through the service application process. The service-learning coordinators on two of the campuses are also active members of the Learning Communities Advisory Task Force and regularly teach learning communities, making the collaboration between service-learning and learning communities even easier.
- Strong administrative support for innovation and risk-taking enhances the successful implementation of engaged scholarship. For programs such as learning communities and service-learning to succeed, there must be an “administrative champion” willing to commit to program institutionalization. Administrators offer support by ensuring that sufficient funds are available to promote and offer learning communities. Faculty at Collin County receive compensation for offering learning communities by having the classes outside their discipline count toward their required teaching load in the same manner as classes they teach within their discipline.
- We discovered that collaboration between existing programs increases the level of understanding, acceptance, and support among faculty and administrators. The learning communities program at Collin County collaborates with the Honors Institute and with the service-learning program. Established programs provide a support network that overcomes reluctance sometimes associated with new pedagogies.
- National studies indicate that students are receptive to courses including community service for credit. Survey data collected at Collin County was key in affirming the directions taken, demonstrating that students embrace courses that provide experiential learning opportunities and give them an opportunity to take on meaningful work in the community.
- Engaged scholarship can be viewed as a positive form of professional development for faculty. Our focus-group data also was affirming, reflecting that faculty members involved in service-learning and learning communities report a renewed passion for teaching, and an appreciation for the opportunity to explore and apply interdisciplinary concepts in greater depth.

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## Concluding Thoughts

As institutions of higher education continue to shape their civic identities and define their public purposes, they will adopt strategies of engagement that will, to a greater or lesser degree, transform their campuses. An engaged campus is not a vague, amorphous idea that escapes concrete definition and form. (Hollander, et al., in press)

At Collin County Community College, the transformation to an engaged campus started with the collaboration between our learning communities and service-learning initiatives. This collaboration has fostered deeper learning, civic awareness, and community involvement among students and faculty, and has begun to expand and evolve into a deeper sense of “public purpose.” This engaged campus initiative at Collin County has resulted in a district-wide “Campus and Civic Pride” campaign that has promoted a variety of activities such as special symposia, community gatherings, and service projects in the surrounding community. Nationally recognized leaders such as Paul Loeb (author of *Soul of a Citizen*) and Nobel Prize winner Norman Borlaug came to campus this year to speak on civic engagement. Wider student voter registration drives have continued. In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington on September 11, 2001, a number of spontaneous efforts increased the campus’s civic consciousness and engagement even further: a special community gathering on September 12 with six faculty and more than 100 students met for four hours to discuss the implications of the attacks; a major fund-raising drive led by students in our Fire Science Academy benefited the families of New York firefighters who lost their lives; and a blood drive on campus was led by students in our nursing program. These and other campus efforts signify a much more visible energy at Collin County, not to mention multiple tangible commitments on the part of the campus leadership and the students themselves, toward deeper engagement and responsibility for community, country, and world.

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