



How Community Engaged Scholarship Improves Teaching and Learning

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On campuses across the United States, “community engaged scholarship” has emerged as a promising strategy for problem-solving research, civic education, and revitalizing the democratic aspirations of higher education. Originally in response to student and social movement activists of the 1960s and 1970s who fought to make higher education a public good in practice rather than in theory, community engaged scholarship aimed to bring an aspirational democracy committed to equity into higher education’s role in society. This kind of scholarly work connects the core purpose of higher education—the generation and dissemination of knowledge—to efforts to address critical public issues.

Faculty accomplish these vital aims by bringing collaborations with off-campus community partners into their teaching, service, and research and creative activities. In such engaged scholarly activities, faculty collaborate with community partners to advance knowledge and students develop a sense of responsibility to society along with the capacity to act effectively on matters of public importance. Engaging communities in teaching and research increases relevance and improves outcomes.

Community engaged scholarship depends upon mutually beneficial partnerships between campuses and local, regional, national, and global communities. By forging such partnerships, the resources of higher education are leveraged to address social issues while instilling a passion for civic and democratic engagement in young people. In a time when the relevance and benefits of higher education are questioned by many critics, community engaged scholarship counters ivory-tower stereotypes.

Teaching and Learning through Engagement

One way that community engaged scholarship is practiced is through faculty efforts to connect classroom teaching to experiences in the community. Knowledge is furthered by bringing together the lived experiences and understandings of the teacher, students, and community partners.

Community engaged teaching and learning is designed as course-based activity. Students participate in carefully identified off-campus activities that are aimed at fulfilling the learning goals of a course. The off-campus activity is determined in part by community partners who have a direct stake in community issues. Students become active, collaborative, and engaged. Student reflections on these community experiences further enhance integration with course content and academic learning.

Community engaged teaching and learning embraces the background, knowledge, and experiences of off-campus partners and students in addition to the expertise of faculty. In this learner-centered form of education, students contribute significantly to the learning process. Thus, diverse forms of knowledge and experience help shape the learning that collectively takes place.

Community engaged teaching and learning approaches are possible in a broad array of academic fields and courses. Among many examples, Catherine Roberts, Professor of Mathematics at The College of the Holy Cross, has shared the experience of teaching an undergraduate course on mathematical modeling. Students form teams to work on projects proposed by community partners which both enhance student learning and make a valuable contribution to partner organizations. Examples include providing mathematical analysis to critical public issues related to water quality, asthma, exposure to mercury, and recycling. At the end of the course, community partners are provided with a product containing important information as the learning

goal of connecting the significance of mathematics to understanding and explaining the world is achieved.

Such community engaged courses are designed to achieve outcomes in two primary areas: academic learning and civic learning. One outcome is the integration of community engaged activity with the disciplinary knowledge of the course. Another outcome is the development of civic commitments and capacities among students: their sense of purpose in addressing important social challenges and their ability to work with others to make effective contributions. In the process, students become knowledge producers who are better equipped to become active participants in democratic life.

Student Success

Research indicates that the academic success of historically marginalized students is enhanced by increased opportunities to participate in community engaged teaching and learning, including in courses taught by faculty from their own backgrounds. Data from the National Survey of Student Engagement shows, for example, that when lower-achieving Latino first-year students became more actively engaged in the learning process, they earned grade point averages that surpassed those of their white counterparts. Highly engaged black students were also more likely to exceed their white peers in persistence toward baccalaureate degree attainment.

George D. Kuh, Founding Director and Senior Scholar at the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment at Indiana University, has led efforts to further examine this evidence to identify a list of “high impact” educational practices. Kuh concludes that, “while participation in effective educational activities generally benefits all students, the salutary effects are even greater for students who begin college at lower achievement levels, as well as students of color, compared with white students.” Of these proven approaches, community engaged teaching and learning is the only “high impact” practice in which students of color participate at higher rates than white students.

How Higher Education Can Further Democratic Aspirations

One way for campuses to achieve their civic mission is to educate students to be active democratic citizens. For community engaged teaching and learning to be available to all students, more faculty from various academic fields will need to offer community engaged courses. This will only happen if faculty are supported and rewarded for doing this kind of teaching and scholarship. Campuses that commit to community engaged scholarship not only improve teaching and learning, but also reduce racial, ethnic, and gender inequities in student success and faculty retention. By addressing real-world challenges through teaching and learning practices, colleges and universities are taking concrete steps towards fulfilling their educational missions and enhancing American democracy in the process. The teaching and learning practices associated with community engaged scholarship can enable higher education to achieve its vital civic and democratic aspirations.

Read more in C.A. Roberts, “Perspectives on Modeling Applications in a Service-Learning Framework” in *Mathematics in Service to the Community: Concepts and Models for Service-Learning in the Mathematical Sciences*, edited by Charles R. Hadlock (Mathematical Association of America, 2005): 15-23; George Kuh, *High-Impact Educational Practices: What They Are, Who Has Access to Them, and Why They Matter* (Association of American Colleges & Universities, 2008); and Shaun R. Harper, “Race-Conscious Student Engagement Practices and the Equitable Distribution of Enriching Educational Experiences.” *Liberal Education* 95, no. 4 (2009): 38-45.