

Civic Education and Service Learning

Oregon Civic Solutions: Statewide Partnerships for Public Service

Oregon Campus Compact/Portland State University

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It's an honor to be back with people doing such important work. I want to commend you, not only for innovation in your own teaching but for working to develop students as citizens, and for engaging your campus and classroom in public problem solving. I believe what you are doing is essential not only for the health of our democracy but also for the health of our institutions. Perhaps it is important for our own health as educators and students too.

Our topic is civic education, and its relationship to service learning. A former colleague, Rick Battistoni, has written a fine guidebook called [Civic Engagement Across the Curriculum—A Resource Book for Service Learning Faculty in All Disciplines](#). Rick is correct in pointing out that in the last couple of decades higher education has undergone a major shift in the way we view our civic mission. In a very short time, we've gone from promoting community service, to integrating service into academics, then striving to institutionalize service learning within disciplines and across the campus, and now we're promoting community based learning, civic education and student civic engagement.

Civic education is a complicated subject, and there are multiple definitions. I think the Corporation for National Service's 4th goal, which seems to encompass the first three, states it well: "To educate for effective citizenship" means "to develop the social, cultural, and analytical skills necessary to effectively participate in the American democracy". The purpose of civic education therefore, the intended outcome of civic education, is effective or engaged citizenship.

What *is* civic education? Effective or engaged citizenship? I googled "civic education" and got 2,400,000 hits. "Civic responsibility" returned 1,090,000 hits, and "engaged citizenship" another 697,000. I scrolled through about 500 or so of these, and can report that a lot of people—nationally, internationally, in higher ed and K-12, in cities, in foundations, all over the place, are writing, thinking and starting projects, initiatives, and organizations to promote civic responsibility in one way or another.

There are, as you may know, many schools of thought on what constitutes our civic responsibility. Certainly engaged citizenship goes beyond voting and participation in the electoral process, as important and timely as that is. We can also include forms of civic engagement like all kinds of community service, everything from road cleanups to serving on nonprofit boards, participation in voluntary associations, philanthropy, citizen advocacy, public protest, scholarship and problem solving, activism, community organizing, and even professional careers in public, nonprofit, or even private sector organizations that are purposed towards the common good.

This broad range of participation requires some pretty sophisticated skills. Skills which, according to the Constitutional Rights Foundation, encompass competencies in

research, participation, persuasion, and intellect. This seems rather a lot to ask of a college course, don't you think? What can higher education actually do to prepare students for all of this? What can busy faculty members with many demands on their time—during limited contact with students who also have many demands on their time—actually do to help students effectively participate in the American democracy?

One of the key questions the Oregon Civic Solutions program will rigorously evaluate in looking at your courses is, “does service learning develop civic responsibility in students”. A pretty fundamental question. And the answer is, I think you know, it depends. It depends on what happens in a service learning course. And it depends on what we mean by civic responsibility.

Does service learning develop civic responsibility in students? The reviews are mixed. Harry Boyte at the University of Minnesota has argued for a long time that “service is not a cure for political apathy” because “it teaches little about the arts of participation in public life”. Battistoni notes, indeed some students may be choosing community service instead of other forms of engagement, “volunteering as an antidote to the venom of political life”. Anecdotal reports from faculty on over 12,000 service learning courses that Campus Compact monitors continue to worry that service fails to connect students to public life. On the other hand, there are promising studies indicating that service learning—when done right—is associated with a “greater sense of social responsibility, commitment to social justice, decreased stereotyping, belief in the importance of volunteering, and connectedness to community”.

Clearly then, doing service learning right is essential to achieving civic education outcomes. And doing service learning right is a huge topic, beyond the scope of these remarks, but one I imagine faculty members like yourselves have already thought a great deal about.

But perhaps connecting service learning and civic education is easier than we think, at least in principle. Not to oversimplify, but to me this much is clear: the basic unit or building block of democracy is the individual citizen. That is where it all starts. But not just any citizen—the citizen who is educated and empowered. The citizen who understands what's going on, who grasps the issues—who is educated. And the citizen who is responsible, who is willing and able to act—who is empowered. One can argue persuasively that service learning is in fact our essential educational tool, our pedagogy, for democracy. Because through learning we understand the issues and are educated. Through service we develop the capacity to act and are empowered.

Such citizen understanding and capacity are crucially important for the nation. There's a lot of talk in the leadership and management literature these days about “complex challenges”, challenges that defy ordinary logic, challenges that do not yield easily to solutions. The design community calls them “wicked problems”. What is true of organizations and companies is even more true of cities, communities, the country. We do live in a time of “wicked problems, of incredibly complex challenges in our democracy, that much is certain.

Authors Charles Palus and David Horth of *The Leader's Edge* say that the first order of business in addressing complex challenges is “sense-making”. Sense making means really understanding what's going on before you start trying to solve a problem. Sense making is in fact the most critical aspect of solution making. And sense making, it turns

out, is largely a social process, one that requires a lot of the skills that any good classroom environment develops: paying attention, collaborative inquiry, thoughtful dialogue and skilled debate. A lot of sense making goes on in good service learning, both in and out of the classroom. Any time service learning develops in students a more comprehensive, nuanced appreciation of the complexity of the issues addressed—like hunger, k-12, the rural/urban divide—we have succeeded as service learning educators.

But sense making and skill building—as critical as these are—may not be the most important thing we can do for our students or for our country.

What if we instill in students a passion for participation itself? For just as love of learning and the inquisitive mind may be more important educational outcomes than mastery of a particular body of knowledge, so creating a sense of responsibility for and love of participation in democracy may be our most important contribution as civic educators.

That is because students with a passion for participation will somehow, in the course of their lives, try to make sense of the issues and build the skills for effective engagement in the American democracy.

In these complex times, with impossible challenges on all fronts, times that encourage disengagement and despair, simply to plant and nourish a seed of civic involvement in our students is a great and noble thing. But if we are able, somehow, in our classrooms and disciplines, to combine sense making, skill building, and an enduring passion for participation, then we are succeeding brilliantly as civic educators and as service learning professionals. May it be so.

David Sawyer

In 2002, U.S. News and World Report ranked tiny Berea College #1 in the nation in service-learning, tied with Stanford University and the University of Pennsylvania. The person who began Berea's service-learning program in 1988 was David Sawyer.

Sawyer spent ten years in the field of national service and service-learning, writing and speaking extensively around the country, and the service learning program he directed received the Points of Light award from the White House in 1993. David was an original member of Campus Compact's Invisible College and served on the board of COOL (the Campus Outreach Opportunity League). He helped develop the Bonner Scholars Program, serving as its first campus director, and worked with the Corporation for National Service to help launch the nation's Americorps program. Sawyer also traveled to India to meet with the Dalai Lama and Tibetan officials to help design a Tibetan refugee education program for college age Tibetans-in exile.

In 1998 Sawyer left Berea to become a leadership and management consultant, working with businesses, foundations, and nonprofit organizations. In 2000 he helped develop a national fellowship program for social entrepreneurs and facilitated an international conference on climate change. Five years ago Sawyer moved to Portland, Oregon, and until recently was the Executive Director of Social Venture Partners, promoting venture philanthropy and citizen engagement. He is President of the consulting firm, Context.