

Civic engagement and service learning programs combine community involvement, reflection

BY ED FINKEL





Civic engagement work at Mesa Community College dates back to the early 1990s. Image Credit: Mesa Community College

Community colleges traditionally have provided a combination of liberal arts education and/or career training, depending on a student's goals and outlook.

But increasingly, two-year colleges are adding a third leg to their stools aimed at building more socially aware citizens through civic engagement programs that combine elements of community service and getting involved in the democratic process with classroom reflection that distills and solidifies the lessons learned. Colleges cite similar reasons why they consider civic engagement programs important. At Salt Lake Community College in Salt Lake City, the Thayne Center for Service & Learning was founded in 1994 out of a belief that higher educational institutions had an obligation to create an actively engaged citizenry, says Sean Crossland, director of the center.

"I see it as a great necessity, and an obligation of higher ed, to not just churn out the next round of the workforce but to create an engaged citizenry that can make informed decisions and engage in democracy," he says.

To that end, Salt Lake has inserted community as one of the values listed in its strategic plan and cited increasing the culture of community engagement as one of five strategies in a campus-wide civic action plan. Employees of the college receive 24 hours of paid leave to do service in the community, Crossland says.

"That can look however they want," he says. "Their supervisors are not able to discriminate based on where they serve. It's meant to be their opportunity to get involved in the community in a way they care about. That's a commitment from the institution that we do believe we are very much part of our community."

The Center for Service & Learning has become much more a part of the typical student's experience at Salt Lake, and few people resist that concept anymore, Crossland says. "It no longer feels like it's about the challenge of legitimizing our work, it's the challenge of operationalizing it and seeing where it fits," he says. "I don't think there's a whole lot of pushback against this work."

Nassau Community College in Garden City, New York, formalized its Center for Service Learning in 2010 partly due to State University of New York requirements that all colleges do applied learning but also out of a belief that students learn better by doing, says Evangeline Manjares, dean of academic and student services.

"We believe that students will remember what they do in service learning, instead of thinking about what the lecture was in the classroom," she says. "We also believe it helps with our retention, and it improves their graduation and employment outcomes. It can make our academics more relevant by connecting students with their work, and integrating work experience with the curriculum." Although not all faculty and students are on board, increasing numbers of them realize that civic engagement and service learning not only broadens opportunities for students but also improve community relationships, Manjares says. "Everyone is too involved with looking at our cell phones," she says. "It's time to maybe share some of their cell phone time with the community."

Duane Oakes, faculty director at the Center for Community & Civic Engagement at Mesa Community College in Arizona, believes the civic engagement work at his campus, which dates to the early 1990s, is probably the most important function the college serves.

"It does no good to educate a doctor, lawyer, teacher, whatever it is, if those individuals don't understand their role in society," he says. "There's nothing more important I can do than to graduate a student who's a better citizen. We think our mission is to prepare a workforce, but they already know they have to get jobs. We also want to give them the skills, knowledge and abilities to be better citizens, so they can make a difference in the communities where they live and work."

Students always tell Oakes, who is also campus coordinator for a national umbrella group called The Democracy Commitment, that they like to learn by doing, yet too many academic programs don't take that into account and focus solely on more traditional lecture environments. "We need to change the way we teach, to make the things we teach relevant and alive," he says. "They walk out of classes I've taught, and they're engaged in things they know can make a difference."

Besides, service learning can help further career exploration, Oakes says, which is why Mesa has placed civic engagement alongside communication, critical thinking and cultural engagement as its four key student learning outcomes. "It's about understanding our society, and improving the quality of life through political and nonpolitical means," he says. "We're putting the 'community' back into community college."

BLEND OF COMMUNITY AND ACADEMICS

The Thayne Center at Salt Lake is named for local author, educator and activist Emma Lou Thayne, and until just a couple years ago it housed the campus service learning program, although that moved out of the center to the academic side, Crossland says.



Students at Mesa Community College have many opportunities for service learning.

"That was based on the hope and belief that would give it more legitimacy," he says. "We're still very much learning what that change looks like, and how we interact with the service learning program." That interaction will continue to include a community partnership database that the center still maintains, which has between 125 and 150 organizations that have signed a memorandum-of-understanding outlining the goals for an ongoing partnership.

These have varying levels of commitment based on each organization's goals and desires, Crossland says. "We don't want to force them into more obligations than they want," he says. "One of the things we want from our partners is input

into how we shape our programming and steer our efforts here. ... For the most part, these partnerships are used in service learning classes although some faculty choose to use their own. We don't want to limit who a faculty member can work with." The partnership levels allow organizations to easily join, and faculty can request specific organizations be on-boarded year-round.



Eyeglasses are collected at Nassau Community College. Image Credit: Nassau Community College

UMBRELLA ORGANIZATIONS HELP COLLEGES FOSTER CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

In addition to individual programs on community college campuses, some colleges participate in national umbrella programs that help to foster civic engagement and service learning at two-year schools and, in some cases, four-year colleges and universities.

The Community Learning Partnership (CLP) began nearly a decade ago with the goal of developing new leaders and community organizers from low-income communities of color. The goal, says Executive Director Ken Rolling, has been to create a community change workforce by establishing a program with an academic component that covered economic and political analysis, as well as content related to race and culture.

Community colleges seemed like natural partners, Rolling says. "We're helping those colleges become partners and generators of community change," he says. "Our programs credential the students for leadership and organizing skills and activities. We award certificates and, in some cases, associate degree programs ... in community leadership." Students are placed in a variety of institutions, including for-profit companies and banks.

To date, the CLP has established 12 such programs, including two that are coming online this fall, ranging from south central Los Angeles, to Detroit, to Jackson, Mississippi, to a new partnership with the American Indian Higher Education Consortium, which has 37 member tribal colleges and universities.

"We're particularly looking to embed that within new tracks in public healthcare careers that they are developing," Rolling says. "They want public healthcare workers to have these leadership and organizing skills as part of their competencies."

In doing so, the CLP helps community colleges broaden beyond their traditional

mission of preparing students for trade and technical careers, he says. "What [the partnership's growth] is showing is that there are more and more college administrators and presidents realizing that they need to be relating to and preparing their students for engagement in their communities, along with getting well-paying jobs."

In providing an academic skill-building component, the CLP goes beyond a traditional college service club, Rolling says.

Working at a considerably broader scale is Campus Compact, a national coalition of more than 1,000 member colleges and universities, organized into state and regional networks, of which 230 are community colleges. Compact's members are bound together through a shared commitment to the public purposes of higher education, both preparing students for lives of civic engagement and fostering partnerships across campuses, President Andrew Seligsohn says. Campus Compact creates resources such as books and toolkits, and brings people together through conferences, workshops and webinars, as well as awards programs for civically engaged faculty. "The focus is on developing their skills as the next generation of problem solvers," Seligsohn says. "Colleges and universities have a special role to play in a democratic society. That's because they are places where the free exchange of ideas, and the developing of young people and not-so-young people, go right together."

Community colleges help develop critical thinking skills, have deep connections to the communities in which Campus Compact tries to engage, and serve a disproportionate number of students from historically excluded populations, Seligsohn says.

"Community colleges, more than any other sector, are educating students who are not coming from lives and families of opportunity," he says. "Helping them to be as effective as possible in growing opportunities for students to build democratic skills is an important role for us to play in supporting their work." Campuses that have integrated service learning into coursework have enjoyed significant improvements in retention rates among students who have participated, Seligsohn says. "We're seeing students who are themselves taking a leadership role on their campuses," he says. "They're connecting through the course work they're doing and co-curricular organizations to find opportunities to make positive change in their communities."

Campus Compact is currently facilitating a cohort of community colleges through a program called Bringing Theory to Practice, which involves engaging students, community partners, faculty and staff in structured dialogues aimed at thinking about how the community college can advance civic action plans. "We see evidence of the special position of community colleges to bring together students and community members," Seligsohn says.

Another Campus Compact project is aimed at putting a focal point on civic and

democratic learning in the curriculum. "We don't have, collectively, the level of democratic capacity that we need," he says. "We don't have a citizenry with the critical analysis and thinking skills to engage in civic dialogue. Community colleges are rising to that challenge and contributing to the stronger citizenry we're going need, if we're going to make it."

Perhaps the flagship offering of the Thayne Center is the Student Leaders in Civic Engagement (SLICE) program that involves a yearlong commitment to service on the student's part and a tuition waiver that can include an Americorps award and a small living stipend. Students are expected to be involved at least 20 hours per week, meeting weekly as a group and also interacting with a staff supervisor who's assigned to between one and four members, Crossland says. "It's meant to be an immersive cohort experience where students are developing leadership skills," he says. The three-part experience begins with internal community building, continues with academic content like social change models, and culminates in an individual or group project. "We're trying to very much push them outside of their comfort zone, encouraging them to venture out and effect change," Crossland adds. "It's about helping them connect some of the things they're learning in classes and opportunities to effect change in the community." Thayne and Salt Lake also offer the Civically Engaged Scholars program, which includes all SLICE students but is open to others who participation in civic engagement, that designates in a special notation on a student's transcript that they graduated with distinction as a civically engaged scholar. "It's a nod from the institution that they did something special," Crossland says. "That's open to any student."

As the dean for applied learning at Nassau, Manjares sees her role as "acting like a GPS" for students and faculty to engage with community and civic projects. Nassau has considered making civic engagement a requirement for graduation but has decided not to do so based on the diverse needs of its 20,000 students, some of whom don't have their own cars and need to rely on public transportation to get around, she says.

To help facilitate everyone's involvement, "We encourage faculty to have their service learning projects on campus," she says. "We have a lot of possibilities here ... sustainable gardens, a day-care center, a 'prom boutique' where we invite junior and senior students from neighboring high schools to get free gowns for their prom."



A Salt Lake Community College student involved in Student Leaders in Civic Engagement organized an Earth Day Festival. Image Credit: Salt Lake Community College

Nassau's Center for Service Learning works closely with the Long Island Volunteer Center to identify opportunities for students to civically engage, Manjares says. "Their website has a very rich resources for our students," she says. "It has to be formally planned, and there has to be execution of the plan. Reflection is very important--students have to share what they have learned before their classmates and faculty."

Projects have included collecting books, care kits for nursing home residents and cellphones for soldiers, as well as conversational English "partners" for those learning the language, blood pressure screening at nearby churches on the part of nursing students, and merchandising internships at local stores undertaken by art and marketing students, Manjares says.

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EVANGELINE MANJARES, dean, Nassau Community College

"It's beautiful because you see the engagement of students, and the value of doing something for their community," she says. "It's already built into their curriculum." Manjares has built a faculty committee from various departments that has established standards distinguishing service learning from mere community service, which lacks the reflective classroom component.

"We have support from the administration, and we have a good number of faculty who are sold on this concept," she says. "There are those who are not because of time constraints, but they will join us one day. We are not forcing them to do it

right now."

Mesa Community College has documented a collective total of more than 1.7 million hours of community service in the past 15 years, Oakes says, and that doesn't include projects that faculty have commissioned on their own outside the aegis of the Center for Community & Civic Engagement. "I've watched students change their lives," he says.

The center coordinates teams of students who take on issues like hunger, homelessness and poverty, projects related to literacy and autism, work with the Special Olympics and registering students to vote, Oakes says. "We coordinate a lot of student leadership aspects," he says. "We're preparing students to become engaged however they choose. They want to do this, but they don't know how." Students have become involved through the campus Americorps program and some have received scholarships through "mini-grants" that Mesa has funded, Oakes says. "They go back to students who do awesome work in the community," he says. "It's so much better to prepare students to be better citizens. We just need to educate them. We need to be focused on providing opportunities."

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