How Can We Teach Civic Action and Community Development Without Doing It Ourselves?
A Concept Paper for a Community Conversation

Clayton Hurd, Stanford University
Timothy K. Stanton, Ravensong Associates and Stanford University (retired)

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Increasingly we speak about our work as “community engaged scholarship” with goals of enabling students to develop skills, knowledge and commitment to civic action and community development. In this dialogue is an implied assumption that graduating such students will lead to lives of civic engagement and therefore to a more just, equitable society. As our programs have proliferated, however, our society has become both more unequal economically and more polarized politically. Challenges such as persistent poverty and unemployment, homelessness and climate change seem ever more intractable. While it would be unfair to assume a strong correlation, we should ask ourselves: To what extent can we say that our institutional efforts to promote community-engaged scholarship are being thoughtfully designed to advance community development rather than primarily to train students for individualistic, careerist models of social service delivery and program development? In other words, are we committed to designing our institutional programs, in assessable ways, with community development goals strictly in mind, or are we largely content to assess our community impact by counting service hours and partnerships and surveying community partners’ satisfaction? We wish to suggest that we may never reach our lofty goals for students and community partners unless we as practitioners, programs and/or institutions actually situate and commit ourselves to civic action and community development rather than just teach about it.

This call for a community development focus within higher education civic engagement is not particularly new (e.g., Ramaley 2016, Stoecker 2014). However, we argue that this is an important and particularly felicitous moment for reflection, reassessment, and collective re-imagination of our work. For clarity’s sake, our perspective on the practice of civic engagement and partnership as a mode of community development is one strategically focused on sustainable justice, which involves “build(ing) capacity of the community [with whom we partner] to define their own issues, gather the resources to address those issues, and go to work solving them (Stoecker, 2013, p. 49).” We embrace the Society for Community Development’s following “Principles of Good Practice:”

- Promote active and representative participation toward enabling all community members to meaningfully influence the decisions that affect their lives.
- Engage community members in learning about and understanding community issues, and the economic, social, environmental, political, psychological, and other impacts associated with alternative courses of action.
• Incorporate the diverse interests and cultures of the community in the community development process; and disengage from support of any effort that is likely to adversely affect the disadvantaged members of a community.
• Work actively to enhance the leadership capacity of community members, leaders, and groups within the community.
• Be open to using the full range of action strategies to work toward the long-term sustainability and well being of the community.¹

Such a perspective sees the core commitment of campus-community partnerships to be the active and sustained co-creation of agendas for engagement with the communities with whom we work. It calls for the full range of community-engaged learning and research initiatives the university invests in (inclusive of service-learning, CBR, and ongoing co- and extra-curricular service programming) to be shaped by a process of shared visioning, experience, and interdependence. This is distinct from what we believe still constitutes the more predominant form of partnership building in higher education, where partnerships are the product of relatively isolated or serendipitous one-on-one pairings, disconnected from any larger strategic, intentional, comprehensive, and shared visioning processes and development agendas.

On the broadest level, a community development mandate for higher education civic engagement necessitates that universities take leadership to participate and sustainably invest in networks of allies and advocates including community-based organizations (particularly those led by and serving marginalized populations), foundations, public institutions, and academics who are deeply committed to working interdependently to develop the participation, leadership and capacity of communities in ways that lead to effective and lasting community and equity-based solutions. Here, social transformation toward a more just and equitable society is understood as most effectively accomplished through coordinated, collective action, and bred through intentional, comprehensive, and sustained visioning, as well a willingness to challenge status-quo relationships in both public and private sector organizations in order to assure accountability to the will of the people (including the most marginalized) in the communities in which they operate. Assuring accountability to these collaborative goals over time requires not a cache of community partner surveys, but a process of inclusive, multilateral reflection on the extent to which collaborative university-community partnership efforts can and have built community capacity and impact or transform systems, individuals, organizations, communities, and even higher education institutions themselves.

(Re-)imagining of civic engagement as community development has significant implications for how we practice and promote community-engaged scholarship. First, it suggest that we as practitioners, our programs, departments, even our institutions, select and partner with organizations and communities with a development agenda that we embrace long-term. Rather than viewing our partners as placement sites where students can develop and display their charitable commitments and entrepreneurial skills, we partner to engage in community improvement, development, and ultimately attainment of economic, social and political equity over the long-term, which we and our partners mutually embrace. Second, while students come

and go through these partnerships, the nature of our relationship to the partners should be explicit and transparent, with students coming to understand that their participation in the partnership is part of something larger in scope and longer in term than what they contribute during their short time with it. They become part of our program’s, our department’s, maybe even our institution’s commitment to economic, social, and political equity in surrounding communities.

This partnership model suggests that students do not necessarily pick and choose how they will serve; their roles become ones of assisting the partners in carrying out their missions as they understand them. The service assigned will be that which the partners view as their priority and not necessarily the students’. Students must come to understand that they are in service to and with the partners. Hopefully that service yields for them new experience, knowledge and skills, and it certainly does not preclude them from thinking creatively or acting in an entrepreneurial manner. But the explicit goal is assistance to the partnership and to its equity goals.

Without doubt, this stance toward partnership and service has deep implications for what students can learn, and the skills and attitudes they can and should develop, particularly in a 21st century context that requires not only a mastery of (inter)disciplinary content knowledge but also of socially-responsive skills and knowledge for effective public problem solving. This includes what Harry Boyte has called “skills in the democratic arts” such as abilities to develop relationships across difference (social and political), ability to listen and speak well, to understand and reflectively practice power and solidarity, and to hold others (and oneself) accountable for their actions and responsibilities to one another. California State University-Monterey Bay, for example, has established specific knowledge outcomes for their service-learning courses around four themes: diversity, justice, compassion and social responsibility (see: https://csumb.edu/catalog/area-d-social-sciences#d4-upper-division-service-learning). These more holistic approaches to civic engagement acknowledge, as Amanda Moore McBride and Eric Mlyn have emphasized, that “while modern civilization, the advance of society, and longevity of the human species surely rest on innovation, research, and development, social change fundamentally rests on social cooperation, political negotiation, and persistence. The real challenge is in the doing, not in the thinking up.” In working alongside partners on complex community improvement and development issues, it may be that students come to realize that a commitment to “joining the struggle” with humility is as important as endeavoring to “solve the problem” with an innovative vision or app.

A community development approach to civic engagement and partnership, in fact, requires us to reimagine the nature and intention of students’ learning and development in the community context. Rather than students seeing their service as a place where they can display their charitable impulse, advanced knowledge and skills, or learn new, often career-related knowledge and skills, they come to see that their learning and skill development derives from learning to serve through accompanying and contributing to partners’ work in long-term community improvement and development. Learning, skills, and attitude development come through their service experience rather than from it. This puts students in the productive position of “learning service.” (Boyle-Baise et al., 2006), which “implies engagement with service, engagement with our own relationship to service, engagement with others in the service relationship, and engagement with the context in which service takes place.” (McMillan & Stanton, 2014, p. 66).
Andy Furco and others suggest that it is the intention of community-based activity – its goals and purposes - rather than the actual activities themselves that distinguishes community-engaged practices. Thus, if we are to embrace community development in our work as described above, our goals, focus and principles – our intentions in partnership development, student placement, service delivered and students’ knowledge and skills development - must be explicitly development-focused.

However, there is one additional point we wish to put forward, one that shifts our focus from program and pedagogy to institutional and personal practice. In a recent article (Seligsohn, 2016) the President of Campus Compact examined the role of the college or university as an ethical guide for students. Drawing on Aristotle’s conception of the role of habituation in ethical development and relevant data, he suggested that greater commitment to public goods by colleges and universities would lead to greater ethical development among students. He closed his argument as follows:

No one doubts that the designed components of the student experience—curricular, co-curricular, and pedagogical—are crucial in promoting student learning and civic development. I have argued here that attention to the design of the student experience should be accompanied by attention to the broader institutional context if we wish to maximize the development of students for lives of engaged citizenship and ethical action. *Institutions must act in ways that are consistent with the values they seek to develop in students.* (Italics are ours) When they do not, students will notice, and the potential inherent in the designed components of the student [civic engagement] experience will be diminished. (p. 6)

Seligsohn’s argument suggests that unless we walk our talk in terms of our and our program’s relationship with our community partners, *unless we engage in development work ourselves*, the impact of all we do on our students will be diminished, at least over the long-term. While they undertake the hard and often courageous work of community-based service-learning and research, students must see that their teachers, mentors and institutions are also similarly engaged. Thus, we practitioners have a citizenship responsibility to add to our professional ones: *we must visibly role-model civically engaged citizenship as should our institutions.* These commitments in many cases may be carried out in after hours personal time for practitioners, or through focused institutional administrative strategies (e.g., endowment investment in economically challenged communities, geographically-focused procurement policies; housing assistance for lowest paid employees, public transport, etc.). What’s important is that they be visible and sustained over the long-term. In this way all of us – students, faculty, staff and institutions – can move toward a society that is infused with commitment to equity-focused civic action.

**Some Questions to Consider:**

1. Just how do our institutions advance community equity and development – through research, teaching, administrative policies, etc.?
2. How and where are these commitments expressed, with whom do we partner?
3. Are we testing how far we’ve come, and how we’ve fallen short, in the communities in which we work? What metrics are we using to understand how far the community advances?
4. What are we teaching students about the nature of civic and action and community development?
5. Where are we teaching our students (not just encouraging them) to use the tools of political action, and commit to a cause for the long term?
6. Is there a disconnect between what we teach and what we do as individuals, as programs, as departments/centers, as institutions?
7. What would it look like for universities to engage in comprehensive community development partnerships of this kind, and to engage students in them?
8. What examples do we have of how to be creative, collaborative, and engaged in long term process of praxis with our community partners?
9. What questions do you have about this perspective?

References


