CHANGING THE LANDSCAPE OF SOCIAL CAPITAL: HIGHER EDUCATION COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND CIVIC RENEWAL

A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of The School of Continuing Studies and of The Graduate School of Arts and Sciences in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Liberal Studies

By

Kristin Y. Tate, B.A.

Georgetown University
Washington D.C.
October 27, 2011
Civic health in the United States is in a state of distress. In 2000, Robert Putnam’s seminal work on social capital and the state of civic engagement in the United States, *Bowling Alone*, painted a troubling picture, laden with undeniable statistical proof that Americans were more isolated and less engaged than they had been in decades past. Years later, the country has yet to turn the corner. We are less connected to one another, we participate less in associational life, and we increasingly lack trust in our institutions. Meanwhile, research continues to demonstrate that trust, connectivity, reciprocity and mutual effort are critical to addressing pressing social problems and building communities that thrive socially, politically and economically. Strategies that can address this growing gap are essential.

This thesis argues that higher education community engagement programs are exactly this kind of strategy. When designed and implemented well, these programs can immediately strengthen social capital and lead to dramatic long-term changes in the civic skills, attitudes and behaviors of student participants. This thesis draws upon a growing body of research which demonstrates how community engagement participation impacts student participants in the short- and long-terms. My methodological approach has been to provide a snapshot of the field, to refine operating definitions of high-impact
community engagement programs, and to weave together existing research with theoretical frameworks to make a more vivid case for the importance of this work.

In the end, this thesis establishes that through participation in community engagement programs, students cultivate both bonding and bridging social capital, which allows them to perform better academically; to connect more with faculty and peers; and, to sharpen their emotional, moral and intellectual capacities. These skills and experiences translate into lifelong engagement through voting, serving as community leaders, donating money, volunteering, participating in associations, working for nonprofits, and engaging in other important civic roles. The whole of this effect is more than the sum of its parts: these lifelong behaviors have a collective impact with the potential to shift the landscape of social capital across the country. As the United States continues to grapple with an economic crisis and myriad complex and pressing social issues, the importance of this reconnection and transformation for students and graduates across the country cannot be understated. It is the foundation upon which a renewed state of civic health, connectivity and vibrancy will be built.
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INTRODUCTION

Civic health in the United States is in a state of distress. In 1995, Robert Putnam warned that our fabric of social connectedness as a nation was falling apart in his essay, “Bowling Alone: America’s Declining Social Capital.” His follow-up seminal work on social capital and the state of civic engagement in the United States, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, painted an even more comprehensive and troubling picture, laden with undeniable statistical proof that Americans were in fact more isolated and less engaged than they had been in decades past.\(^1\) Now, 15 years after Putnam first rang the alarm, the country has yet to turn the corner to restore the vibrant associational life that once was a cornerstone of American society. In 2009, the *Civic Health Index* (CHI), a national report on civic health indicators published by the National Conference on Citizenship (NCoC), noted that the economic recession hitting the country had translated into a civic recession. The national survey found that “72% of Americans say they cut back on the time they spent volunteering, participating in groups, and doing other civic activities in the past year, during the same period when the economy was free-falling.”\(^2\) Trust in major institutions such as agencies of the federal government continues to decline, more and more families are forced to turn inward as they struggle to get back

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on their feet, and individuals report a low sense of civic health and vibrancy in their communities.\(^3\)

While two decades worth of evidence that social connectedness is falling apart is troubling, the institutions and values that have always called upon Americans to engage with and better their communities provide a critical foundation on which civic renewal can be built. Throughout the country, Americans still find ways to connect with one another and to work together to solve problems, whether through formal organizations like a Parent Teacher Association, informal venues like the neighbor’s front porch, or the vast, emergent forum for connectivity provided by social networking and new media. Public, private and nonprofit organizations continue to engage citizens in collective effort through corporate volunteer programs, community service days, Sunday suppers at church, or online cause campaigns.

While this vast and dynamic landscape of opportunity for engagement holds promise, there is one particular platform for cultivating community engagement and civic responsibility that holds unique potential for impact—higher education. This thesis will focus on how contemporary higher education institutions in the United States, building on their traditional mission to advance the common good, are creating new and meaningful avenues for students to develop critical civic skills and values through community engagement programs. These programs are not only shaping the lives of

\(^3\) *America’s Civic Health Index 2009*, Executive Summary.
student participants themselves, but are providing critical levers to transform the current state of national civic disconnectedness into one of renewed vibrancy and health.

As a professional who has been engaged full-time in the field of community and civic engagement for the past decade, I acknowledge my implicit bias as the author of this work. My own experiences in community engagement and service programs as an undergraduate played a significant role in shaping my worldview, values and professional trajectory. Furthermore, I have worked for two organizations that are cited throughout this thesis. I spent three years as the Program Director of the D.C. Schools Project at Georgetown University’s Center for Social Justice Research, Teaching and Service, leading community-based service and immersion programs with undergraduates. I now work as Director of Community Strategies for the National Conference on Citizenship, a national organization which works to promote research, dialogue and action around civic engagement, social connectedness and modern citizenship. These experiences have informed the arguments and research I will present, as well as shaped the lens through which I view this work. They have also, however, enabled me to witness firsthand, in communities across the country, this field’s capacity to unlock our communities’ and nation’s potential to thrive.

When I first approached this topic, I considered generating first-hand research by conducting a qualitative and quantitative study of the short- and long-term impacts of community engagement programs on students at Georgetown University. After conducting a review of existing research in the field, however, I found there to be a wealth of research and dialogue around the same impacts that I had hoped to establish.
This is not to say that there are not significant gaps in the current body of research—a topic I will address throughout this thesis—but rather, I realized my own capacity as a researcher would not position me to address these gaps. In short, I realized that the availability of evidence of these program’s impacts, which is often understood as insufficient, is not as much lacking in substance as it is in platform and visibility. For that reason, my methodological approach has been to provide a snapshot of the current landscape of the field, to refine operating definitions of the programs which have the most potential for impact, and to weave together existing research with theoretical frameworks to make a more vivid case for the importance of this work. Although the research I draw upon is largely quantitative in nature, I have woven in anecdotal evidence available through my own work with undergraduates at Georgetown University to provide texture to the story that the numbers tell.

I begin this thesis in Chapter One by providing context on the theoretical framework of social capital, key arguments for why social capital and connectedness are critical to sustaining a high-functioning society, and evidence of the contemporary breakdown of civic health pervading American society. In Chapter Two, I explore why and how higher education has begun to respond to this state of civic distress and provide operating definitions of the community engagement programs discussed throughout the thesis. In Chapter Three, I examine how these community engagement programs are proven to increase short-term bonding social capital, resulting in a number of benefits for student participants and campus communities. In Chapter Four, I further examine how community engagement programs strengthen social capital and students’ civic skills in
the short-term, but through the lens of bridging social capital. In Chapter Five, I look at how the civic attitudes, values and skills cultivated in students while in college translate into long-term shifts in civic behaviors and actions. Finally, in Chapter Six, I argue that this transition from short-term to long-term gains in social capital has the potential to transform our civic health and social connectedness on a national level. As the United States attempts to recover economically, compete globally, and tackle pressing social issues, there is no better time to focus attention on how higher education community engagement programs can help move the nation from civic distress to renewed vitality.
CHAPTER ONE
SOCIAL CAPITAL: RELATIONSHIPS MATTER

The United States has, since its founding, been shaped by its civic and associational structures and institutions. In his seminal work *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville noted, “in detail the vibrant associational life that underpinned American democracy and economic strength.”¹ Many theorists, in domestic and international contexts, have long focused on the nature of these social connections and their value to democracy, governance, spiritual and economic health. As Putnam writes, “Social capital is to some extent merely new language for a very old debate in American intellectual circles.”² The debate is indeed grounded in deep sociological foundations. As John Field notes in his comprehensive overview of the concept, *Social Capital*, the fact that “relationships matter” is not a new idea and “was already present when the discipline of sociology was founded.”³

Field highlights the work of three critical thinkers who have shaped thinking on social capital from his perspective: Pierre Bourdeiu, James Coleman, and the aforementioned Robert Putnam. Field notes that Pierre Bourdeiu, a French sociologist of the 20th century, argued that social capital reinforces existing hierarchical structures of privilege and access to other forms of capital. This is an important argument that will be revisited later in this thesis. According to Field, Coleman, an American 20th century

sociologist, largely shaped thinking about social capital as a public good, built upon an expectation of reciprocity which cultivates wider networks of trust and shared values.\(^4\)

Putnam, Field argues, moved from this foundation to popularize the subject and bring its exploration to a much wider audience.\(^5\)

Given his examination of social capital in a contemporary American context, Putnam’s work and principles serve as the guiding voice for the meaning of social capital throughout this thesis. Putnam writes, “By analogy with notions of physical capital and human capital – tools and training that enhance individual productivity – the core idea of social capital theory is that social networks have value.”\(^6\) In essence, the degree to which we are more connected on personal, community and nationwide levels, has significant implications.


The benefits of social capital have been thoroughly documented through numerous studies, and across varied academic disciplines. Field summarizes of this research:

Social capital broadly does what the theorists have claimed: to put it crudely, people who are able to draw on others for support are healthier than those who cannot; they are also happier and wealthier; their children do better at school, and their communities suffer less from antisocial behavior.\(^7\)

\(^4\)Field, Social Capital, 23.
\(^5\)Ibid., 32.
\(^6\)Putnam, Bowling Alone, 19.
\(^7\)Field, Social Capital, 49.
Public health studies continually reestablish the benefits of connectedness noted above, showing that “people with strong social networks had mortality rates half or one third of those with weak social ties.”\(^8\) Our ability to obtain and secure employment and bargain for benefits relies on social capital.\(^9\) In fact, a recent issue brief released by the National Conference on Citizenship, “finds that five measures of civic engagement – attending meetings, helping neighbors, registering to vote, volunteering and voting – appear to help protect against unemployment and contribute to overall economic resilience.”\(^10\) Our participation in associational life not only impacts our own well-being, but it shapes the efficacy and vitality of our democracy, noted early on by de Tocqueville who wrote:

> In their political associations the Americans, of all conditions, minds and ages, daily acquire a general taste for association and grow accustomed to the use of it. There they meet together in large numbers, they converse, they listen to one another, and they are mutually stimulated to all sorts of undertakings. They afterwards transfer to civil life the notions they have thus acquired and make them subservient to a thousand purposes.\(^11\)

Building upon this argument, Putnam notes in a modern context how social capital impacts our ability to get things done. Participation in these groups such as neighborhood associations or political parties allows us to gather our voices behind a common agenda and be heard more effectively.\(^12\) In sum, our social connectedness serves as critical glue,
which “greases the wheels that allow communities to advance smoothly. When people are trusting and trustworthy, and where they are subject to repeated interactions with fellow citizens, everyday business and social transactions are less costly.”13

II. Turning Inward: A National State of Civic Decline

Although social capital has been proven to be of significant value, it has also been demonstrated to be on decline in recent decades. In *Bowling Alone*, Putnam examines this decline through several lenses and demonstrates how Americans are engaging less in politics, religion, voluntary associations; and, on the most basic levels, they are engaging less with one another in neighborhood and family settings. On the political level, declining engagement is rooted deeply in growing mistrust in institutions. As Putnam writes, “In the 1990s roughly three in four Americans didn’t trust the government to do what is right most of the time,” a phenomena that he describes as undermining the confidence necessary to motivate participation.14 His snapshot of life outside of politics demonstrates that this lack of engagement in the political sphere has not been, as could be hoped, diverted into other areas of community. While organizations and associations have grown, a reflection of the vitality of any democratic system, Americans have been participating less: “we’ve stopped doing committee work, stopped serving as officers and stopped going to meetings.”15 The portrait of poor civic health continues throughout the

13Ibid., 288.
14Ibid., 47.
15Ibid., 64.
study, showing that not only do we vote less, but we are less happy in the workplace;\textsuperscript{16} we attend church, a potential hub of community life, less frequently;\textsuperscript{17} and, most of us believe we live in a less trustworthy society now than our parents did.\textsuperscript{18}

While Putnam’s work was published in 2000, current measures of civic health echo many of the same concerns. The National Conference on Citizenship, an organization chartered by Congress in 1953 to advance civic life, works to “commission and publish the annual \textit{Civic Health Index}, a quantitative means for building program consensus and measuring success with the goal of strengthening citizenship in America.”\textsuperscript{19} The \textit{Civic Health Index} report on the nation’s state of civic health in 2009 demonstrates troubling trends that echo Putnam’s research. In light of the economic downturn, the study shows that Americans were participating less and that “66\% of Americans say they feel other people are responding to the current economic downturn by looking out for themselves.”\textsuperscript{20} Similar to Putnam’s theory that lack of trust in political institutions leads to lack of participation, the study shows a distressing decline in trust of the government: “Only 6\% of Americans have a ‘great deal of confidence’ in Congress, the Executive Branch, or banks and financial institutions, and major companies occupy

\textsuperscript{16}Ibid., 91.

\textsuperscript{17}Ibid., 79.

\textsuperscript{18}Ibid., 139.

\textsuperscript{19}National Conference on Citizenship, “About Us,” \url{http://www.ncoc.net/about} (accessed October 22, 2011).

\textsuperscript{20}America’s Civic Health Index 2009, Executive Summary.
the basement of public trust at only 5%.”21 In examining other forms of engagement, the survey also sought to understand if Americans prioritize working for the public good in their careers and found that, “public benefit did not emerge as a major motivator for most people—only 6% chose it as their top motivation.”22

The report in 2009 builds from data and other worrisome trends from the year prior. While there was reason for hope and inspiration following the new levels of participation and voting in the presidential election in 2008 from some groups, particularly young people and African Americans, overall nationwide trends did not shift dramatically. In fact, counter to the popular narrative, overall registration and turnout rates in 2008 declined 0.2% from 2004.23 Furthermore, the 2008 Civic Health Index found that 38% of respondents said they would ‘definitely not’ or ‘probably not’ sustain engagement after election day by contacting elected officials about issues raised in the campaign, contacting media about issues raised, talking with friends about issues raised, or working to change local policies.24

Many of the same trends, on national and state levels, appear to continue into 2011. On state levels, the National Conference on Citizenship recently released reports in Indiana and Arizona which highlight this fact. In Arizona, for example, only 10% of

21Ibid.
22Ibid.
residents trust that their elected officials represent their interests. Unsurprisingly, it follows that 10% contacted or visited a public official in 2010. Furthermore, just 12% of Arizonans believe that people in their community care about one another.²⁵ By different measures, but demonstrating similar trends, residents of Indiana seem to also feel disconnected—6.5% of respondents say that they work with neighbors to solve community problems, and just over a third of residents belong to religious, neighborhood, schools, sports, and other types of groups in their community.²⁶ This breakdown in local efforts and trust reflects nationwide trends again. In 2010, 41.8% of Americans voted, 34.5% participated in any community group (sports, religious, school, or otherwise), and 8.4% of adults worked with neighbors to solve a community problem.²⁷

The arguments for why the United States finds itself in this state of civic distress are many and varied. Field asserts that, “Putnam’s message in his articles throughout the mid-1990s was a consistent one: America’s social capital was in a state of long-term decline, and the main culprit in its demise was the rise of television.”²⁸ Putnam does argue that television is a major source of decline in participation and asserts that

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²⁸Field, Social Capital, 35.
“privatizing our leisure time” might account for 25% of the problem. He also argues that factors such as the pressures of two-career families, suburbanization and sprawl, and generational change all play key roles. The 2009 Civic Health Index seems to suggest that the economic decline, and the widely known misdeeds on various institutional levels that led to it, has put a significant strain on ability and desire to participate in and trust communities and institutions. Regardless of the factors, the troubling fact of the phenomenon is that it is a negatively reinforcing cycle of decline. As Field reminds readers:

A number of writers have suggested that in order for people to cooperate to achieve their goals, they not only need to have some previous knowledge of one another. They also need to trust one another, and expect that if they cooperate then they will not be exploited or defrauded, but can at some time or other expect to benefit similarly in return.

This breakdown of trust and reciprocity creates a shaky foundation from which to begin rebuilding.

**III. Sounding the Alarm and Moving Forward**

Despite the troubling evidence of the chronic state of civic distress across the country, there is reason for hope and optimism as new solutions stem from strong foundations and light a path forward. First and foremost, the US is, at its core, shaped by its social networks. Its democracy and founding values reflect a sense of common effort

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30Ibid.

31America's Civic Health Index 2009, Section 10.

and interwoven destiny. As Putnam argues, while an individualistic self-narrative may often cloud this collectivism, in the end, “Paul Revere’s alarum was successful only because of networks of civic engagement in Middlesex villages.”\textsuperscript{33} While conflicting and sometimes competing narratives shape the values of the country, strong networks and foundations have seen its evolution through many cycles of civic engagement.\textsuperscript{34} For example, Putnam highlights a similar downturn at the end of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century from which the country was able to rebound as evidence of the capacity to do so again.\textsuperscript{35} He also offers as reason for hope the fact that Americans are aware of the problem, a critical step to move toward solution, citing a 1987 survey which showed that 77\% of Americans said the nation was worse off because of less involvement in community activities.\textsuperscript{36}

In more recent years, the same data that demonstrate troubling trends in engagement in the national 2009 \textit{Civic Health Index} also show glimmers of promise. The 2009 report showed that while trust has declined in large institutions, “small/local businesses received the highest level of public trust with 31\% expressing a ‘great deal of confidence.’”\textsuperscript{37} A new generation of Millennials, often portrayed for their apathy and lack of engagement relative to the Baby Boomer generation, is actually showing great promise by leading the way in volunteering with a 43\% service rate and engaging more

\textsuperscript{33}Putnam, \textit{Bowling Alone}, 24.

\textsuperscript{34}Ibid., 25.

\textsuperscript{35}Ibid., 28.

\textsuperscript{36}Ibid., 25.

\textsuperscript{37}America’s Civic Health Index 2009, Section 10.
in social media, blazing new trails for creating space for dialogue, engagement and solution.38 More recently, 2010 data shows that while participation rates are dismal in some forms, other forms of engagement are strong with nearly half of Americans donating to charitable or religious organizations, and a striking 88.7% of Americans eating dinner with others a few times a week.39

These types of formal and informal connectedness and investment in others provide critical foundations upon which to build. There is also reason for hope in the sentiment echoed by Putnam, that Americans recognize the problem and even more so, are eager to find solutions. The 2009 Civic Health Index reported the following summary of Americans’ response to potential solutions:

Tax breaks, paid time off, and educational vouchers are the incentives that people favored most as ways of increasing levels of public engagement. Additionally, there was very high support for public policy that provides tuition credit for community service, a national deliberation involving a million Americans on an important issue, requiring all high schools to provide service-learning courses, and implementing a new civics test to emphasize the need for civic education (all garnered 65-80% support).40

The country’s foundation has sustained it through difficult and fragmented times before, and Americans’ willingness to acknowledge the problem and its impacts, as well as to seek effective solutions, holds great promise for a creating new era in civic participation, engagement and health.

38Ibid., Executive Summary.
39Corporation for National and Community Service, “Civic Life in America: Data on the Civic Health of the Nation.”
40America’s Civic Health Index 2009, Executive Summary.
Social capital is critical to the well-being, health and vibrancy of individual lives and communities. While the United States is operating at a deficit of this vital social capital, there is a collective desire to find solutions. In the strategies section of his book, Putnam notes the importance of the multi-pronged efforts of emphasizing civics education and extracurricular activities for young people; adapting the workplace to be more family-friendly and community-oriented; making our living spaces, torn apart by sprawl, more integrated and neighboring-friendly; and, emphasizing a renaissance of spiritual and pluralistic dialogue and engagement.\textsuperscript{41} Among these efforts, Putnam notes of particular significance the value of community service programs that “strengthen the civic muscles of participants.”\textsuperscript{42} These types of service and civic engagement efforts are currently taking shaping in formal and informal ways across the country. Organizations such as the HandsOn Network, which “inspires, equips and mobilizes people take action around the world,”\textsuperscript{43} provide spaces to engage individual in meaningful service and civic education projects across the country. Movements such as the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools, a coalition of 40 organizations committed to improving the quality and quantity of civic learning in American schools, work to ensure that young people understand their rights,

\textsuperscript{41}Putnam, \textit{Bowling Alone}, 405-409.

\textsuperscript{42}Ibid.

responsibilities and roles within their own governance. Targeted efforts such as Mobilize.org, which seeks to empower Millennials to tackle social problems or Experience Corps, which engages the Boomer generation in service to address the public education crisis, are reaching audiences whose potential has yet to be fully tapped. Indeed, the ways in which Americans engage in and better their communities are many: some grow up volunteering in soup kitchens with their local church, some mentor local youth, some vote and participate in political campaigns, some serve on their local PTA or coach a child’s soccer team. The list goes on.

With this critical context in mind, the need for high-impact, strategic solutions to the civic health crisis brings me to the central argument of this thesis—that higher education community engagement programs, in particular, provide a powerful vehicle for building social capital in the immediate and long term, for individuals and communities. By focusing on this particular strategy, I do not intend to devalue the importance of other critical efforts. All of those stated above, and more, are significant ways in which Americans actively engage in building relationships, helping their neighbors, shaping their democracy, and bettering their country. Higher education community engagement, however, is uniquely positioned, through its historical values and current efforts, to build

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social capital in the short term and shape the landscape of social capital across the country in the long term.
CHAPTER TWO

EDUCATING FOR THE PUBLIC GOOD: THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

The role of higher education in serving the public good has long been woven into the fabric of American institutions, and American higher education has always prioritized its mission of preparing students to participate fully in society, the economy and democracy. In recent years, particularly in light of the current crisis in civic health among other pressing social and global issues, the demand of higher education to serve as a leader has become stronger:

So there is indeed much work to be done, and higher education must prepare and motivate the next generation to do it. Colleges and universities must educate students to understand how democracy and governments function and to appreciate freedom, self-determination, and the responsibility of citizens to actively engage in the welfare of their own and other countries.\(^1\)

While the concept of the value of outreach and educating for the public good are “as old as American higher education itself,” the 1990s saw a “dramatic increase in efforts to bring college and university resources to bear on both broad social issues and local problems.”\(^2\) Influenced by Putnam’s warning of the state of civic decline, resources galvanized around an effort to reprioritize the mission of colleges and universities to prepare effective and engaged citizens.\(^3\) In recent years, this effort has been reflected in


\(^2\)Ibid., 13.

\(^3\)Ibid., 14.
the growth of nationwide organizations and associations, the shaping of federal policies and programs, and institutional reprioritization around this kind of programming.

I. Landscape of Civic Engagement in Higher Education

There is a plethora of growing nationwide organizations that reflect the renewed focus on higher education as a critical space for civic engagement. The book, *Civic Engagement in Higher Education: Concepts and Practices*, provides a comprehensive overview of the contemporary landscape of the field. It highlights several initiatives, including an important leader in the field, Campus Compact. Founded in 1985, Campus Compact has gained a great deal of traction and visibility and is now a “national coalition of more than 1,100 college and university presidents – representing some 6 million students – dedicated to promoting community service, civic engagement, and service-learning in higher education.”

The book also notes the emergence of a new forum for capturing and highlighting the civic engagement work at higher education institutions through the classification for community engagement developed by the Carnegie Foundation in 2006. An additional example of a national initiative designed to draw attention and resources to the field is the American Democracy Project, founded in 2003 by the American Association of State Colleges and Universities and the *New York Times*, with the goal of “preparing the next generation of active, engaged citizens for our...

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democracy.” The movement within US higher education has even led to the growth of the international Talloires Network, first convened by Tufts University in 2005, which is an international association of institutions committed to strengthening the civic roles and social responsibilities of higher education. Each of these initiatives, representative of many, has taken shape in different ways. Some offer a platform for institutions to communicate their impact whereas others provide a network for sharing resources and professional development. Through his comments about the success of the American Democracy Project, Thomas Ehrlich captures the overall need for the movement: “The enthusiastic response to this project, which does not offer funding for participating campuses, is one of the clearest signs of how much faculty, students, and institutions resonate to the need for greater civic engagement.”

As national organizations and support mechanisms have grown, so has institution by institution support for civic engagement, as “higher education associations of all sizes and membership bases have embraced civic engagement and included it in their missions, as have foundations, research organizations, and individual institutions.” This embrace of engagement has led to a critical shift in infrastructure and resources in the past decade:

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6Ibid., 17.


9Jacoby, *Civic Engagement in Higher Education*, 15
Volunteer centers often run by nonacademic staff, became a more common fixture, and the numbers of student organizations devoted to community service grew. In many cases, presidents’ offices readily took on civic engagement as a robust entrepreneurial and public relations dimension of the president’s, and the institution’s role.\(^\text{10}\)

The research of Campus Compact also demonstrates this shift in institutional support:

One exceptional statistic revealed that civic knowledge and engagement was found in the strategic plans of 81% institutions surveyed, second only to critical thinking (90%)…Of respondents, 87% indicated that their institution has a mission or purpose statement that drives policies supporting community service, academic service-learning, and/or civic engagement. Also, 83% indicated that service/civic engagement is explicitly stated in their institution’s strategic plan.\(^\text{11}\)

Essentially, a sea change in how civic and community engagement is valued in higher education has occurred, represented by the exponential growth in national initiatives, the institutional reinvestment in and restructuring around these efforts, and the prioritization of these values in strategic plans and mission statements across the country.

A further indicator of the national recognition of the importance of student civic engagement in higher education is the growth in federal policies and initiatives that have been designed to support, recognize and catalyze this work. One outstanding example of this support is the federal law included in the modified Higher Education Act which states that all institutions participating in the Federal Work-Study program allocate at least seven percent of their annual Federal Work-Study (FWS) funding toward community service oriented jobs. The Higher Education Act states that one of the purposes of the FWS program is “…to encourage students receiving Federal student

\(^{10}\text{Ibid., 56}\)

financial assistance to participate in community service activities that will benefit the Nation and engender in the students a sense of social responsibility and commitment to the community.”

While this policy reflects important support of community engagement in higher education, there have been consistent calls to go further and raise the minimal percentage devoted to community service. In his 2002 State of the Union Address, President George W. Bush “recommended increasing the amount of Federal Work-Study (FWS) funds that colleges and universities are required to spend on community service positions from 7% to a whopping 50%.”

The federal government has also supported civic engagement in higher education through strategic programs and partnerships. One program of note in this arena is the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development’s initiative, Universities Rebuilding America Partnerships (URAP) which offers resources for students, faculty and staff to engage in projects to rebuild the Gulf Coast. These federal policies and initiatives, alongside the remarkable growth in national organizations and institutional support for the field in recent years, are testaments to the cross-sector recognition of the critical need for this work.

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II. Setting the Agenda

As one might expect, with such a diverse, cross-sector group of individuals, institutions and organizations focused on civic engagement in higher education, there is just as diverse a set of perspectives on how to label, define and set an agenda for the work. As Barbara Jacoby notes, “There is widespread recognition that defining civic engagement presents formidable challenges.”\(^\text{15}\) Within the higher education arena, these definitions and terminology are disparate and oftentimes competing. Practitioners, scholars and advocates might use terms such as “social capital, citizenship, democratic participation/citizenship/practice, public work/public problem solving, political engagement, community engagement, social responsibility, social justice,” and more.\(^\text{16}\) Furthermore, this vocabulary is often shaped by, or results in, vastly different ways of centralizing the work across different institutions. The names alone of these institutions reflect this. With a simple search of model programs on the Campus Compact website, one comes across the following diversity of titles: Center for Student Leadership, Ethics and Public Service, North Carolina State University; Engaged Student Programming, Fitchburg State College; Citizenship and Neighborhood Development, Baylor University; Howard University Center for Urban Progress; Center for Public Service and

\(^{15}\) Jacoby, Civic Engagement in Higher Education, 5.

\(^{16}\) Ibid., 6.
Community Engagement, Indiana State University; and Service Learning Center, Michigan State University.¹⁷

These names also reflect the programs’ and centers’ varied homes within the university’s organizational structure. Some fall directly under the leadership of the Provost, while others are positioned under the auspices of the President’s office, and yet others operate under the guidance of Student Affairs. This tension of how to appropriately and effectively label and centralize engagement programs is one that is palpable in dialogue among practitioners, administrators, faculty, and staff. Some argue that for civic engagement to be taken seriously academically, it must ultimately be embedded in the academic work of the institution and therefore overseen by the Provost. Others suggest that it must be positioned at the heart of the mission and identity of the university, and is accordingly best placed under the guidance and vision of the President. Still others contend that the priority of building strong community partnerships and establishing and sustaining the institutions’ presence in the local community necessitates its placement under an office such as that of public relations. Yet others assert that the student leadership and development aspects of civic engagement require its placement under the support, supervision and guidance of student affairs professionals.

Indeed, this dialogue and tension is not only about a place on an organizational chart, or choosing the most appropriate vocabulary; it signals conflict that runs deeper.

As John Saltmarsh eloquently highlights, this disagreement on meaning has significant implications for how civic engagement work takes shape:

A lack of clarity about what is meant by ‘civic engagement’ is evident when, at almost any gathering convened for the purpose of furthering civic engagement in higher education, questions inevitably arise about what is meant by civic engagement and about how it relates to civic education, service learning, democratic education, political engagement, civics, education for citizenship, or moral education. Moreover, the lack of clarity fuels a latent confusion about how to operationalize a civic engagement agenda on campus.\(^{18}\)

Saltmarsh raises a critical point about the difficulty of reaching consensus not just on definitions and vocabulary, but on what those definitions mean for the philosophical approach, strategic planning, and implementation of programs. While this dialogue and debate is sometimes contentious and oftentimes challenging, it is also healthy and productive for a field that is still in its early stages of evolution relative to the scope of American higher education. As the field continues to grow, and the dialogue continues, common language will continue to be refined and will likely be more closely aligned to a common set of principles and values.

### III. The Meaning of Community Engagement

In the meantime, for the purposes of this thesis, I will identify a label and set of criteria that most closely align with my conception of high-impact engagement programs in higher education. Here I turn to Jacoby who, after exploring multiple iterations of describing the work, lands at the following operating definition:

Civic engagement is defined as acting upon a heightened sense of responsibility to one’s communities. This includes a wide range of activities, including developing civic sensitivity, participating in building society, and benefiting the common good. Civic engagement encompasses notions of global citizenship and interdependence. Through civic engagement, individuals – as citizens of their communities, their nations, and the world – are empowered as agents of positive social change for a more democratic world.\textsuperscript{19}

While this definition effectively captures the essence of what I explore in this thesis, the particular terminology carries specific connotations that might be limiting. Civic engagement is often understood to connote particular forms of participation such as political organizing, voting, or advocacy. While these are all critical forms of civic engagement, the programs which I examine are more specifically defined by engagement with community—that is, partner organizations and residents in local, national and global communities outside of the campus. For this reason, the label that more closely aligns is community engagement. The Carnegie Foundation defines community engagement as, “the collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context or partnership and reciprocity.”\textsuperscript{20} Essentially, community engagement captures the essence of Jacoby’s definition above—that is, programs that encourage developing civic sensitivity, participating in building society, and benefiting the common good—while emphasizing that this action is taken in partnership with others outside of the campus community.

\textsuperscript{19}Ibid., 9.

\textsuperscript{20}Ibid., 21.
In choosing community engagement as a label, I have carefully considered other labels often used to describe this work such as volunteerism, service, community-based learning or service-learning. Each of these terms could necessitate a thesis in and of itself to unpack the philosophical and practical implications of its meaning. In short, volunteerism or service, as labels, might be limiting because they refer primarily to the work done in the community, or the action, and do not necessarily include reflection or further analysis. Reflection, as will be discussed throughout this thesis, is a critical element to the successfulness of these programs. Community-based learning, while a close match to my focus, is limited in scope to a specific pedagogy in which faculty integrate a community-based component into their coursework. While community-based learning courses are an example of one type of community engagement, the programs I explore are not limited to those that are aligned with an academic course. Service-learning falls short similarly for its narrow scope, but furthermore, for criticisms that the name might reflect an oversimplification of the privilege dynamics sometimes at play in the student-community relationship.

Community engagement, therefore, is the most fitting label to capture the various types of programs, and their impacts, that I will examine. Essentially, this name is meant to describe programs and initiatives which:

- Involve student work with marginalized and underserved individuals or groups (or organizations working with and for marginalized and underserved individuals or groups).  

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• Involve student work in a local, national or global community setting and not solely within the campus community.

• Include a reflective component which encourages the exploration of the link between action and theory, issues and root causes.

• Involve sustained student engagement with the community.\textsuperscript{22}

• Include working collaboratively with others, whether with peers, community members or community organization staff.

While these criteria may on some level seem intuitive, they are effective at narrowing the focus from a broader scope of civic engagement to one that is more applicable for the purposes of this undertaking. For example, the second defining characteristic that students work in a community setting outside of their campus, whether that is local or elsewhere, narrows the focus from the broader possibilities of engagement which could include participation on campus in political groups such as the College Democrats or Republicans. While this form of engagement likely leads to many of the same outcomes explored in this thesis, understanding their impact requires an in-depth examination of a different set of factors and implications.

As another example, the characteristic of incorporating some form of reflection with engagement can be interpreted broadly. This could include programs such as community-based learning courses, community-based tutoring programs paired with issue-based enrichment sessions, or alternative spring break trips that incorporate peer-led reflection sessions or guided readings. While broad, this characteristic does, however, rule out programs in which students volunteer in the community but do not engage in

\textsuperscript{22}‘Sustained’ is difficult to define but for the purposes of this thesis, can be as short as a week-long but intensive service or immersion trip, and as long as a four-year community-based education program.
reflection upon the meaning of their experiences. Similarly, the criteria that the programs involve a sustained effort rules out less intensive participation such as, for example, one-day community service projects or efforts to earn minimal service hours for punitive reasons. Finally, the defining characteristic that the programs are collaborative in nature is meant to narrow the focus to exclude more independent and solitary efforts such as conducting research, building a website, or editing documents for a nonprofit. Again, while these types of engagement have value, they are simply not the focus of this particular thesis. This overview is meant to serve as a cursory description of the kinds of programs I will and will not explore, but the substantive qualities of community engagement programs that meet these criteria will be discussed more relative to their proven benefits.

Now that a clearer, albeit imperfect, conceptualization and set of criteria for community engagement has been defined, a few other points must be acknowledged regarding the inquiry of this thesis. Just as the language of community engagement in higher education is fraught with complexity and disagreement, so to is the effort to understand the impact and implications of these programs on all stakeholders involved. More research and dialogue must take place to better understand and inform the impact on community of this work. In essence, there are critical questions to be asked and answered regarding the degree to which universities’ and, more specifically, students’ contributions add value for marginalized individuals and communities. There is also a significant need to more fully understand institutional and faculty impact, or more specifically, the impact of community-based learning and research on staff behaviors,
faculty reward systems, and research and scholarship. While these, among other gaps I will address later, are critical to fill in order to understand the full scope of this work, the focus of this thesis will be on the student participants—their experiences, their development, and how their participation shapes their civic values, competencies and behaviors in the short and long terms.
CHAPTER THREE
HIGHER ACHIEVING STUDENTS AND MORE INCLUSIVE CAMPUSES: COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND BONDING SOCIAL CAPITAL

The impact of participation in community engagement programs on students has received growing attention in recent years. With the surge of support, resources and initiative devoted to the field of higher education community engagement, a demand has grown for better tracking, measuring and analyzing the impact of these programs. Practitioners, participants, faculty and administrators alike have long shared an intuition that these experiences have dramatic impact, but anecdotal proof of their value is no longer sufficient. As researchers have turned to understanding and documenting this impact, a growing body of evidence has developed which confirms this intuition. This new body of research shows that students who participate in community engagement programs, particularly those that are collaborative, reflective and sustained in nature, reap significant rewards. What’s more, these positive effects are not felt by the students alone. Indeed, these benefits translate to strengthened social capital in the short term and lead to higher functioning, more welcoming and vibrant campus communities.

For higher education community engagement programs to have significant impact on social capital, they must be collaborative in nature. As described in Chapter Two, this means that the programs engage students in efforts alongside others, whether that means peers, community members, staff and faculty, or community organization representatives. This collaborative effort is in large part what leads to the growth of bonding social capital within a community. Putnam describes bonding social capital as
“exclusive” or that which looks to “reinforce identities,” and he offers examples such as “ethnic fraternal organizations, church-based women’s reading groups, and fashionable country clubs.” While these particular examples might not connote a necessarily positive type of engagement, I will examine how collaborative community engagement programs strengthen bonding social capital and create more inclusive and high-achieving campus communities that allow students to thrive.

I. Bonding Social Capital: A Sense of Community

Higher education community engagement programs can dramatically strengthen bonding social capital by creating a space for fostering relationships and connections among student participants. Community engagement programs oftentimes provide a unique venue on campuses in which students of diverse ages; courses of study; and racial, economic and religious backgrounds come together. As such, they provide a rich space for students to engage with questions of identity, values and worldview while doing so with an overarching shared purpose—their work in the community. This kind of unique opportunity to build dialogue and relationships outside of the typical college social interactions adds tremendous value.

Alexander Astin, a thought leader in the field and founding director of the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA, has produced research which “highlights the importance of peer group interaction for college student success and notes that service is

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\[^{1}\text{Putnam, } Bowling Alone, 22.\]
one way to develop peer relationships.”

When considered in light of other research on psychological and social well-being, the importance of these opportunities becomes even clearer. The article “Civic Engagement and Psychosocial Well-being in College Students” highlights some of this research, such as one study which indicates that “relationships and responsibilities are more psychologically beneficial for people than are independence and freedom.”

The article also draws from the wealth of research that demonstrates that being part of a community satisfies the fundamental human need for a sense of belonging.

Examples of community engagement programs that provide opportunities for this type of positive peer interaction abound. Among a series of case studies of successful community engagement programs, Jacoby highlights one particular program which uses civic engagement as a vehicle for building a strong sense of community among students. She describes the Michigan Community Scholars Program at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor:

At the beginning of the new students’ college careers, MCSP offers them the opportunity to form a meaningful affiliation with their institution by participating in an engaging learning community. Given that half of the student population is from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds, first-year students participate in intergroup and intercultural dialogues in their residential and classroom learning environments. The program also exposes students early to a wide range of civic

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4Ibid.
engagement and leadership experiences that many sustain throughout their college years. MCSP has witnessed success with a 95 percent retention rate for all students after one year of college and 100 percent retention for students in traditionally underrepresented groups.\(^5\)

The program includes a number of local, national and global community service opportunities including screening community films on social issues, working with local youth on urban gardens, and providing musical performances in local shelters, hospitals and group homes.\(^6\) The retention data for the program is stunning and reinforces that programs with community engagement components, particularly when structured with an emphasis on collaboration and dialogue, can help students find a critical sense of belonging. The program has also been featured as a model for a healthy environment for students in terms of reducing depression, stress, and binge drinking.\(^7\)

Another program which has shown potential for strengthening bonding capital among student participants is the D.C. Schools Project (DCSP), a program of Georgetown University’s Center for Social Justice Research, Teaching and Service. DCSP engages Georgetown undergraduates to provide education programs for Washington, D.C.’s low-income immigrant community. With the guidance of a full-time professional director, a team of student coordinators recruit, train and support their peers as tutors for K-12 and adult English Language Learners. Each tutor commits 4-6 hours per week to tutoring as well as lesson planning, and completes additional pre-service and

\(^5\) Jacoby, *Civic Engagement in Higher Education*, 111.


semester-long training and enrichment sessions. It is an example of a collaborative, sustained community engagement program that engages a diverse group of students while cultivating a sense of shared purpose and identity. As former DCSP Program Director, I was able to witness firsthand how participation in such a program could have dramatic impact on students’ sense of belonging.

A look at one year’s program evaluations helps to illustrate this impact. In academic year 2009-2010, 82 program evaluations were returned from the 266 students who participated as tutors. Of this sample, 33 respondents were freshman, 25 were sophomores, 7 were juniors, 11 were seniors, and 6 did not identify their class year. Even more diverse than the class years, were the courses of academic study and departments represented: majors included English, German, Government, History, International Business, International Politics, Marketing, Psychology, Spanish, Linguistics and more. This kind of diversity of age and academic background, classifiers that typically serve to separate and divide students on a college campus, provides a rich space for diverse students to work together for a common purpose.

Indeed, although the group of students was notably diverse in age and academic focus, the experiences they reported in the program were very similar. When asked if their participation in the program enhanced their college experience, a striking 69 of 82 respondents said “Yes.” Students were also asked to rate on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 representing “strongly disagree” and 5 representing “strongly agree,” how they felt about the following statement: “I felt like I was part of a strong DCSP community.”

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8D.C. Schools Project Tutor Program Evaluation 2009
students responded “disagree,” 27 responded they were “indifferent,” and the majority, 40 and 9 respectively, responded that they agreed or strongly agreed with the statement. In sum, 84% of respondents felt that their participation in the program had enhanced their college experience and nearly 60% agreed that they were part of a strong community. Some of the students’ open-ended responses echoed this feeling of belonging, such as, “DCSP became a great support system where I met wonderful people and allowed me to become an active participant in society.” Another participant commented, “DCSP is one of the few parts of my college experience that I can point to as not entirely self-interested…I feel like I am doing my part to demonstrate that… there are many of us who truly care about others.” These responses reflect a noteworthy outcome—students who might otherwise consider themselves to be on quite different paths in their college experience found a new sense of community through their participation. This sense of belonging and community reflects bonding social capital at its best.

The experience of the students in the D.C. Schools Project and Michigan Community Scholars Program provide just one snapshot of the much broader landscape of higher education community engagement programs, in which students are able to find a sense of belonging and shared identity by working alongside peers for a common goal. Another way in which these programs build bonding social capital within campus communities is by facilitating stronger relationships between students and faculty members. In the study “How Undergraduates are Affected by Service Participation,” Astin and co-author Linda Sax highlight improved interaction with faculty among many benefits of service participation: “Perhaps the strongest effect occurred in the case of
interaction with faculty: Service participants, compared to nonparticipants, were nearly 50% more likely to spend at least an hour per week interacting with faculty (48% vs. 33% for participants and nonparticipants, respectively).”

In another study of the impact of service and service-learning on students, Astin noted the same trend: “that participation in service increases the likelihood that students will discuss their experiences with each other and that they will receive emotional support from faculty.”

While the studies do not clarify if the faculty are always explicitly involved with the service experiences, the research seems to show that the positive effects of service and service-learning spill into other interactions between students and the campus community. In addition to connections built with faculty, student participants are also able to build relationships with university and community partner staff who serve as guides, mentors and supporters through their community engagement work. The connections built with peers, faculty, and other mentors through community engagement programs clearly build bonding social capital and provide new avenues for students to find a critical sense of belonging.

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II. Community Engagement and Academic Gains

The value of this strengthened sense of community and more expansive set of social networks manifests itself in numerous ways for student participants. One area of particular note is the impact on academic performance, and degree persistence and completion. A growing body of research has established that students in community engagement programs, which foster a sense of social connectedness and belonging, perform better academically. Campus Compact recently produced an issue brief highlighting some of these findings, noting that service learning was among “six high impact activities, based on National Survey of Student Engagement findings that it promotes deep/integrative learning and personal development among both first-year students and seniors.”11 The report provides a wealth of evidence which demonstrate this trend across diverse institutions:

- Compared with students in traditional courses, students in service-learning courses at a private research university reported a greater intention to reenroll, a relationship influenced by the higher engagement and academic challenge also reported by the service-learning students.

- Of the five Community College Survey of Student Engagement benchmarks, one of the most consistent predictors of persistence, self reported learning gains, and GPA is “Active and Collaborative Learning,” which includes “participated in a community-based project as part of a regular course” and other activities commonly part of high-quality service-learning.

- First-year students in service-learning courses at 11 Indiana campuses were not only more likely than their peers to indicate that they planned to reenroll, but also

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more likely to reenroll the following fall, an effect mediated by the educational quality of the course.\textsuperscript{12}

In short, a wide body of research indicates that high-quality community engagement is positively correlated with student success, persistence and degree completion.\textsuperscript{13} The underlying principle which accounts for how bonding social capital translates into positive academic outcomes can be succinctly stated, “The one thing we know about persistence is that involvement matters. The more academically and socially involved individuals are—that is, the more they interact with other student and faculty—the more likely they are to persist.”\textsuperscript{14}

The impact of community engagement on academic performance and degree persistence is not only promising for individual students but has much broader implications on a societal level. The US has recently experienced troubling trends in college degree persistence and completion rates. Once leading the way globally in terms of higher education, some reports now rank the US eleventh in college completion rates.\textsuperscript{15} Even more worrisome than poor overall completion rates is the ongoing disparity in degree attainment based on race and ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. In fact, only 26 percent of African Americans, 18 percent of Latino and Hispanic Americans, and 24

\textsuperscript{12}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{13}Campus Compact, “A Promising Connection.”


percent of Native Americans and Pacific Islanders have at least an associate’s degree.\textsuperscript{16} Furthermore, only 12\% of students whose families fall in the bottom income quartile earn a bachelor’s degree by age 24, compared with 22\% of those in the middle quartiles and 73\% from the top quartile.\textsuperscript{17} This startling gap has significant implications for access to opportunity and upward mobility. As such, strategies that can bridge this gap are critical to identify, assess and replicate.

Community engagement programs, as discussed previously, are exactly this kind of strategy. As research is beginning to demonstrate, students who participate in community engagement are more likely to persist in college. This is of particular importance when the students come from backgrounds that have been traditionally underrepresented in higher education. Numerous studies reinforce this particular argument, such as, “The Impact of Community Service on African American College Students’ Academic Achievement” which demonstrated that “African American students who performed community service had significantly higher GPAs than those that did not.”\textsuperscript{18} Taking the argument even further, to explore how community engagement can impact traditionally underrepresented students in a particular field, one study sought to establish whether service-learning impacts learning objectives in an engineering course.

\textsuperscript{16}Ibid.,7.

\textsuperscript{17}Campus Compact, “Building Engaged Campuses,”1.

The study demonstrated that, “Women and non-white participants in this study generally assessed their learning outcomes to be greater than white males, which could have important implications in the recruitment and retention of such students in engineering.”

Campus Compact echoes this argument by highlighting research by Astin identifying student-faculty relationships as one of the major contributing factors to academic success particularly for students of color and those from underrepresented populations.

When one considers the ways in which social capital has been demonstrated to have wide-reaching effects in all areas of individual and social life, the dramatic impact in the higher education environment is unsurprising. The same interconnectedness that brings improved physical, mental and social health for people of all ages also empowers students in higher education settings to thrive. In short, these kinds of programs are demonstrating unique and potentially transformative potential to:

…level the playing field, especially for those from low-income family backgrounds and others who have been historically underserved, increasing the odds that they will complete their program of study and enjoy the intellectual and monetary gains associated with the completion of the baccalaureate degree.

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20 Campus Compact, “A Promising Connection,” 15.

Providing new avenues for connecting with peers and faculty, building a shared sense of identity, and creating a stronger sense of community creates better environments for students to succeed.

III. Making the Meaning: The Importance of Reflection

Until now, I have focused on how the collaborative nature of community engagement programs can lead to growth in social capital, which has a ripple effect of benefits for students and campus communities. However, that these programs are collaborative in nature is not the only ingredient to their success. Indeed, to have the most impact on student participants and social capital, the programs must also be sustained and reflective. The reflective aspect of community engagement programs may take shape in many ways. It could be in the form of a specific pedagogy known as community-based learning, in which a student is encouraged to merge theory with practice by incorporating their community work with readings, classroom discussions and assignments. For example, at Georgetown University’s Center for Social Justice, students may participate in a community-based learning course entitled “Foundations of Education”, in which they integrate experiences tutoring elementary school students in an urban public school with coursework that addresses systemic injustices in US K-12 education. Reflection might also take place in co-curricular settings, outside of the classroom, such as the nightly reflection conversations that are incorporated into a weeklong Alternative Spring Break trip. In this setting, reflections are facilitated by student leaders and participants unpack the meaning of their experiences in new
communities and their exposure to social justice issues. Reflection might even take shape in less formal or structured ways, such as the conversation two students might have about their experiences in a homeless shelter in the van ride back to campus or the introspective processing that takes shape through a student’s journaling or creative writing.

Likewise, the defining trait that a community engagement program be sustained to have impact can be broadly interpreted. Sustained could entail participation in a year-long academic course that incorporates ongoing community-based work with a nonprofit organization, with academic coursework, readings and research. An example of this might be a capstone project for a community-based research course. Sustained could also mean participation in co-curricular programs which are shorter in span of time, but highly intensive, such as week or month-long service and immersion trips. Finally, sustained efforts might refer to participation in projects which span longer amounts of time, but require less intensive weekly commitment, such as tutoring once a week in an afterschool program.

Though broadly defined, the degree to which community engagement programs are reflective and sustained shape how deeply and meaningfully their impacts are felt. In his reference to the importance of service programs as a strategy for strengthening social capital, Putnam notes, “A mounting body of evidence supports that community service programs really do strengthen the civic muscles of participants, especially if the service is meaningful, regular, and woven into the fabric of school curriculum. Episodic service has little effect.”

22 This argument has resonated throughout the higher education field,

22Putnam, Bowling Alone, 405.
with thought leaders and practitioners alike turning not just to documenting the value of community engagement programs as a whole, but to understanding what designs and approaches result in the greatest impact. Astin and Sax reiterate Putnam’s argument by highlighting that the number of hours spent in service and the use of reflection help determine positive impacts, “suggesting that the design and quality of service-learning programs plays a critical role in determining the effectiveness of these programs.”

One reason why reflection plays a critical role in shaping the effectiveness of community engagement programs is that it becomes a valuable vehicle through which bonding social capital is built. The examples of the positive outcomes of the University of Michigan Community Scholars program and D.C. Schools Project seen previously illustrate this argument. In both cases, the programs emphasized sustained efforts and ongoing space for dialogue and reflection. The Community Scholars program, for example, focuses on “community members coming together to teach, study, learn, understand, and engage with ideas from different disciplinary perspectives and with people from different backgrounds” and “reflective learning about democratic processes, civic life, social problems and social justice, self, and society.”

The D.C. Schools Project incorporates monthly enrichment sessions which include community tours in the neighborhoods where the program serves and a series of speakers, films and discussions based on issues related to education, immigration and social justice. The community tours, in particular, are followed by guided reflection discussions that draw upon the


tutors’ perception of assets and challenges in the communities where they work. These deliberate efforts to engage participants in ongoing reflection in both programs likely play an important role in why the students find a strong sense of community through their participation.

Reflection not only creates new connections and community among peers, but it also facilitates more interaction between students and faculty and staff members. As noted previously, students in community engagement programs are more likely to connect with faculty and more likely to turn to faculty for emotional support.\(^{25}\) Community engagement programs that incorporate thoughtful reflection components, such as community-based learning courses, provide avenues for students and faculty together to, “engage in collaborative meaning making and together discover the types of settings that engender significant learning experiences.”\(^{26}\) Furthermore, through developing relationships with student affairs professionals, program managers, nonprofit staff and other adults, students are exposed to more diverse and richer opportunities for mentorship. A key component to cultivating social capital is building trust, and it is evident that reflection helps build trust among students, faculty and staff and, as such, builds a more interconnected campus community.

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\(^{25}\) Astin, “Understanding the Effects of Service-Learning,” 46.

Reflection is not just valuable in so far as it facilitates the growth of connections, relationships and social capital in the short term. Reflection paired with community engagement also serves as a critical method for student participants to “strengthen their civic muscles.” One of these civic muscles is the cultivation of empathy and compassion that comes with a thoughtful pairing of reflection and action. Reflection provides a space for students to fully process their experience, and to do so while learning and growing from the thoughts and reflections of others, which can lead to a deeper, more fully formed understanding of their experiences. The article, “Designing Effective Reflection: What Matters to Service-Learning” refers to this process as a clarification of values and notes the numerous potential benefits:

When reflection activities engage the learner in examining and analyzing the relationship between relevant, meaningful service and the interpretative template of a discipline, there is enormous potential for learning to broaden and deepen along academic, social, moral, personal, and civic dimensions.27

The article also notes that students who participate in more ongoing and frequent reflection do see greater gains in social values and civic attitudes.28 In sum, among the many benefits that reflection can bring to community engagement are: giving meaning to the experience, creating a sense of accomplishment which inspires further action, clarifying values, preventing the reinforcement of inaccurate perceptions or biases,


28Ibid.
building community among participants, facilitating group problem solving, and encouraging participants to think critically about root causes of issues experienced.29

Perhaps as further evidence of why reflection is so critical, research has also shown how the absence of reflection, or its poor execution, can prove detrimental. Some service-learning practitioners suggest that the lack of reflection has a negative impact on the participants’ attitudes about service.30 Jacoby explores this issue in her book noting that providing careful reflection is critical to avoid reaffirming stereotypes or misconceptions, as she cautions, “When designing community engagement programs, facilitators should provide a solid foundation of reflection and learning to help students dispel myths and negative stereotypes and to help create a healthy experience.”31 There is also potential for more serious emotional consequences when appropriate reflection and support is not provided to help participants process their experiences. The previously cited article examining the relationship between civic engagement and psychosocial well-being offered such an example of a retrospective study conducted with forty participants of “Freedom Summer”, when students from elite universities in 1964 went to help register voters in Mississippi. The study found:

Compared to those who were interested in the project but did not participate in Freedom Summer, those who engaged in this intense encounter with injustice in


31Jacoby, Civic Engagement in Higher Education, 142.
America ultimately became more cynical about the government. Afterward, some had social adjustment problems including loneliness, isolation, and loss of emotional control; one in ten became estranged from loved ones in subsequent years. While this may be a more dramatic example, it does communicate the potential emotional risk for students who are exposed to difficult issues without appropriate venues to process and debrief in a trusted community. Omitting reflection from community engagement not only misses a vital opportunity for growth, but can lead to negative consequences, as well.

The collaborative, reflective, and sustained nature of high-impact community engagement programs strengthens bonding social capital and benefits student participants in a number of ways. Working alongside peers, staff, faculty, community members and community partners fosters stronger relationships and creates a vital sense of belonging, leading to healthier and higher achieving students. Reflective engagement can also strengthen students’ emotional and intellectual civic muscles, a topic to which I turn in more in depth in the following chapter.

\[\text{Flanagan, “Civic Engagement and Psychosocial Well-being.”}\]
CHAPTER FOUR

THE LIVED EXPERIENCE: TRUST, EMPATHY AND CRITICAL THINKING THROUGH BRIDGING SOCIAL CAPITAL

While the reflective and collaborative nature of community engagement programs are critical to their success, these are designs that are built upon the programs’ central characteristic—that they provide avenues for students to engage with marginalized and underserved communities. It must be said that the question of how to design, shape and implement effective programs in the community is one that raises much concern and contention in the field. The ways in which students are trained, guided and supported to provide effective services for the community, particularly when working with vulnerable populations, has significant implications. Understanding if and how student engagement really does impact community outcomes is critical to the field, and an area that has been severely underexplored. Furthermore, the resulting questions of how to effectively build community partnerships, how to sustain a university’s presence within its local community, how to prioritize investment of time and resources among competing regions or issues of importance, how to engage community input, and how to assess progress, are all highly complex and pressing questions. Recognizing the need for further research and dialogue on these topics, I will continue my focus on the ways that effective community engagement can strengthen social capital and catalyze students to be lifelong engaged actors in their communities.
I. Broader Identities and Reciprocity: Bridging Social Capital

As discussed in Chapter Three, classroom discussions and peer reflection sessions are important elements of an effective community engagement experience, but the transformation begins with the student’s experiences in the community. It is this hands-on experience that allows “students to gain real-world insight into the causes and effects of a social problem from an empathetic social justice perspective by working in the community.”\(^1\) It is for this reason that the working definition throughout this thesis necessitates involvement with a local, national or global community outside of the campus community. One way to understand the transformation that students undergo by working in community is through the lens of bridging social capital. While bonding social capital refers to that which builds connections among a group of people with a pre-existing shared identity, bridging social capital is that which connects people across diverse backgrounds, such as “the civil rights movement, youth service groups, ecumenical religious organizations” and can “generate broader identities and reciprocity.”\(^2\) While I have previously explored the positive externalities attached to increased bonding social capital, it is important to understand how bridging social capital intersects with bonding social capital to cultivate these positive outcomes.


One of the key components to strengthening bridging social capital involves building a foundation of trust and reciprocity. Jacoby speaks to the importance of this in community engagement programs:

In terms of engaging the community, trust must be established and developed slowly, incrementally, and carefully....It is important to the trust-building process to include both campus and community stakeholders in all aspects of the community project... The development of trust is a key element that often is overlooked, yet without it, little progress can be made.  

Trust is a critical component to the development of meaningful community partnerships and thereby ensuring productive student engagement. Reciprocity is also a concept of great importance when considering student and community relationships. Reciprocity is described by Putnam as both specific: “I’ll do this for you if you do this for me” and generalized: “I’ll do this for you without expecting anything specific back from you, in the confident expectation that someone else will do something for me down the road.”

At first glance, the concept of reciprocity might seem counter to the philosophy of community engagement. In fact, the terms “service” and “service-learning” often are understood to imply a giving of one’s talents, time or energy without expecting anything in return. I would argue, however, that the most powerful and transformative forms of engagement are actually built fundamentally upon a concept of reciprocity, or a mutual exchange. Recall the Carnegie classification for community engagement that calls for a “mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources.” Indeed, effective

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community engagement involves mutual growth, learning and contribution and, as such, strengthens the trust and reciprocity necessary for bridging social capital.

II. Empathy and Compassion

One positive consequence of the bridging social capital built through community engagement programs is the development of empathy in student participants. As discussed previously, reflection plays a key role in cultivating this empathy, but the foundation from which this growth is made possible is the student’s experiences in the community. The article “At A Glance: What We Know about The Effects of Service-Learning on College Students, Faculty, Institutions and Communities, 1993-2000: Third Edition” speaks to this development, citing twenty studies that show “service-learning has a positive effect on student personal development such as sense of personal efficacy, personal identity, spiritual growth, and moral development.” Empathy is a key part of this moral development.

The idea that empathy is cultivated by participation in community engagement is one that has been tested recently in several studies. A recently published journal article entitled, “Service-learning and the development of empathy in US college students,” demonstrated that, “Students involved in the service-learning assignment were significantly (p < 0.05) more likely to express empathy in their reflective writing than the

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students who did not participate in service-learning.” In the article, “Training Transformative Leaders Through Critical Service-Learning”, the authors assert this same principle, that service-learning, or work in the community that incorporates critical analysis and reflection, “fosters the empathy required to understand circumstances from another’s point of view.”

One particular study attempted to measure this growth in empathy and compassion by studying the impact of immersion trip experiences on student participants. The study compared the experiences of students who participate in immersion programs with those who did not. While the student participants in the trips typically had higher pre-trip indicators of compassion than the comparison group (a variable of important consideration when examining these outcomes), they still saw “marked increase” in compassion after their experiences. Student participants also “reported a stronger sense of empathy relative to students who did not participate on an immersion trip.” The study affirmed what a larger body of research has begun to establish: that community

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9 Ibid.
engagement can be a powerful way to create bridging social capital, through which students develop empathy and compassion for others.

Another interesting way of looking at this development of empathy is by examining how it can lead to greater self-awareness. Astin’s study on the impacts of service showed that participation in education-related service had higher impact on college GPA, knowledge, aspirations for advanced degrees and time devoted to homework and studying. From these results, he posits: “These findings could also be interpreted as strong evidence for the efficacy of cooperative learning: Students become better students by helping to teach others.”\(^\text{10}\) While specific to one particular form of community engagement, this compelling research shows how empathy can foster new insights into the experiences of others, and in turn, lead to greater self-awareness.

This insight, empathy and self-awareness that stem from growth in bridging social capital also play a large role in the development of more nuanced and mature understandings of racial and cultural identity. Students in one of Astin’s studies noted the most significant change in values such as “promoting racial understanding.”\(^\text{11}\) The “At A Glance” snapshot of proven benefits of service-learning also cites numerous studies which find that, “service-learning has a positive effect on reducing stereotypes and facilitating cultural and racial understanding,” and that, “diversity has an impact on students, particularly personal outcomes, such as identity development & cultural

\(^{10}\)Astin, “How Undergraduates Are Affected by Service Participation,” 257.

\(^{11}\)Ibid., 255.
understanding.”¹² More nuanced, thoughtful and compassionate understandings of racial and cultural identity are another key indicator of the benefits that strengthened bridging social capital offers to student participants.

III. Performing Flexibly With the Topic: Critical Thinking

Given this thesis’s focus on higher education, it is important to emphasize the intellectual ‘civic muscle’ strengthened by participation in community engagement—critical thinking skills. As discussed previously, community engagement participation has been shown to correlate strongly with stronger academic performance. One possible explanation for this link is that reflective community engagement strengthens students’ critical thinking skills. An interesting way to understand critical thinking, yet another term that could require a separate thesis to unpack, is the ability to “perform flexibly with a topic.” This term, crafted by David Perkins, is employed by authors Edward Zlotkowski and Donna Duffy when trying to understand how community-based work leads to gains in critical thinking:

Perkins (1998) describes understanding as the ability “to perform flexibly with the topic—to explain, justify, extrapolate, relate and apply in ways that go beyond knowledge and routine skill. Understanding is a matter of being able to think and act flexibly with what you know” (p. 42). Taking the risk of venturing into an unknown community setting is one kind of activity that gives students this kind of opportunity “to perform flexibly with a topic.”¹³


¹³Zlotkowski, “Two Decades of Community-Based Learning,” 37.
This ability to understand topics beyond the base knowledge and routine skill is also echoed in the theories of John Dewey and David Kolb which suggest that engagement combined with reflection lead to greater understanding of content.\footnote{Kara Connors and Sarena D. Seifer,"Reflection in Higher Education Service Learning," (Washington D.C.: Community-Campus Partnerships for Health, 2005), \url{http://www.servicelearning.org/instant_info/fact_sheets/ae_facts/he_reflection/} (accessed October 23, 2011).}

Numerous studies have cited gains in critical thinking and writing abilities as critical benefits of service and service-learning experiences for student participants. Several studies cited in the “At a Glance” fact sheet cited above lead to this conclusion: “Service-learning participation has an impact on such academic outcomes as demonstrated complexity of understanding, problem analysis, critical thinking, and cognitive development.”\footnote{Eyler, “At a Glance,” 4.} Not only have these gains been shown through research and faculty perspectives, but students have identified the link between their enhanced understanding of issues and their work in the community. One study which sought to compare how students viewed service-learning versus other pedagogical tools in a nonprofit marketing course found that students reported service-learning as the most effective of pedagogical tools employed toward the learning outcomes identified.\footnote{Sandra Mottner, "Service-Learning in a Nonprofit Marketing Course: A Comparative Case of Pedagogical Tools," \textit{Journal of Nonprofit & Public Sector Marketing} 22, no. 3: 231 (2010), \url{http://0-web.ebscohost.com.library.lausys.georgetown.edu/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=3&hid=107&sid=d6a64884-f01b-468d-997b-abcb782a890d%40sessionmgr113} (accessed October 24, 2011).}

Another study which sought to explore how students’ learning outcomes and critical thinking skills were impacted by service-learning pedagogy documented the impacts on nursing students who participated in a community-based component to their
course. Ninety-four students participated and their weekly journals, classroom discussions and end of class presentations were analyzed. The study found that their community-based work had significant impact on the students:

Two major themes of the critical-thinking perspective were: development of a professional self-perspective (with a focus on caring for others and improving communication skills); and development of a community perspective (with a focus on promoting health and developing an awareness of diversity).\textsuperscript{17}

The study also reinforced the idea that service-learning proves effective in cultivating a sense of empathy and orientation toward others, stating, “The caring for others perspective broadened students’ views of themselves. They were able to look at situations from multiple perspectives. This experience provided opportunities to move from a ‘self focus’ to an ‘other focus.’”\textsuperscript{18} On their growth in critical-thinking as it related to communication skills, the students offered reflections such as, “I had to think of ways to communicate with children who could not speak. I had to use more nonverbal forms of communication such as hand gestures and showing pictures,” or, “I needed to be patient to ask the right questions and listen to the responses.”\textsuperscript{19} This study reinforces the idea that students, through lived experience and outside of traditional classroom settings, can learn to perform flexibly with a topic, whether that is through how they interpret the


\textsuperscript{18}Ibid., 101.

\textsuperscript{19}Ibid.
experiences of others analyze an issue, or adapt their communication skills for a particular audience or setting.

Another study compared students in a Master’s level education program who participated in service-learning with those who did not, to assess growth in critical thinking skills. The authors found: “From both the qualitative and the quantitative comparison and contrast of students’ knowledge assumptions demonstrated in their assignments, we learned that service-learning did stimulate the development of student critical reflective thinking.” 20 Highlighting the important role, again, that relationship plays in these gains, the Campus Compact report, “A Promising Connection”, cites the importance of faculty-student relationships in leading toward significant growth in critical thinking skills. 21

In short, reflection upon meaning community engagement, both in classroom and co-curricular settings, creates new ways for student participants to integrate theory and practice, and in doing so strengthens their critical thinking muscles. Returning to John Saltmarsh, who wrote extensively on the value of civic learning in education, we can understand this as a “a type of critical thinking that involves conflict and reconciliation

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21 Campus Compact, “A Promising Connection.”
between academic and practical worlds.” 22 This metaphorical bridging of two worlds is built upon a foundation of bridging social capital between students and community.

The strengthened emotional, moral and intellectual civic muscles of student participants weave together to create more nuanced understanding of social issues and stronger sense of self-efficacy. The tutor program evaluations cited previously for the D.C. Schools Project help to illustrate this. The evaluation asks students to rate, on a scale of one to five (with one indicating ‘no impact’ and five indicating ‘significant impact’) the extent to which their participation in the program affected the following areas:

- Awareness of opportunities to integrate social justice into your life, academics, or future career.
- Commitment to being an active, socially responsible citizen who works toward the common good.
- Exposure to social issues (such as poverty, gentrification, immigration, etc.)
- Reflection about the root causes and solutions to social issues (such as those listed above).
- Belief that you can make an impact in the community.
- Understanding of the immigrant community, neighborhood or culture beyond media stereotypes.
- Comfort with unfamiliar environments.
- Awareness of issues and challenges facing public education.

\footnote{22Schamber, “The Development of Political Awareness,” 79.}
These questions stem from the premise that participation in the program would impact the student’s social awareness, civic responsibility, and commitment to action. The breakdown of the responses is as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale reflects 1 as ‘no impact’, 3 as ‘some impact’, and 5 as ‘significant impact’.</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Awareness of opportunities to integrate social justice into your life, academic, or future career.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment to being an active, socially responsible citizen who works toward the common good.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exposure to social issues (such as poverty, gentrification, immigration, etc.)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflection about the root causes and solutions to social issues (such as those listed above).</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belief that you can make an impact in the community.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding of the immigrant community, neighborhood or culture beyond media stereotypes.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comfort with unfamiliar environments.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awareness of issues and challenges facing public education.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The above responses were overwhelmingly positive and echoed the same growth and development that has been demonstrated in larger research studies. The majority of student respondents for each statement noted that their participation resulted in some impact to significant impact, with some areas seeing dramatic results. For example, a striking 82% of respondents indicated their participation had strong to significant impact (rating 4 or 5) on their “Commitment to being an active, socially responsible citizen who
works toward the common good.” A similarly impressive 83% indicated that their participation had strong to significant impact (rating 4 or 5) on their “Awareness of issues and challenges facing public education.” Demonstrating the critical sense of self-efficacy that comes with these experiences, 71% of students noted strong to significant impact (rating a 4 or 5) on how their participation shaped the, “belief that you can make an impact in the community.” Open-ended responses also provide qualitative evidence of these gains. Students reflected on their growing interest in social issues and desire to take further action with comments such as:

- “I learned that it's easy to put social issues (such as immigration and displacement) out of my mind. But when I see it on a first-hand basis, I can be greatly impacted.”
- “DCSP [D.C. Schools Project] certainly has made me more invested in immigration issues and language policy.”
- “I really came to value education much more as an unconditional and necessary foundation for building a successful future.”
- “I am much more interested in education policy.”

The program, as discussed previously, draws in a diverse group of participants in terms of age and academic course of study. The students also come to the program with a diverse set of experiences in community-based education and with varying levels of previous exposure to social issues. For example, some students may have grown up as English Language Learners themselves and join because they want to give back to a community with whom they identify. Some students participate because they have grown up, or attended high school, in a culture of volunteerism and enjoy working with children. Others are less exposed to the challenges within urban public education but join
because they are interested to learn. Despite this wide range of experiences and motivations, the program is able to place nearly 100% of applicants which creates a rich opportunity for students to learn from one another’s experiences and perspectives, as well as their work in the community. That the students do come from such diverse backgrounds and entry points to the program makes their consistent movement along the scales of social awareness, civic competency and civic responsibility even more compelling. While just one example of a program’s success, the data provides an interesting window into the larger transformation happening in similar programs across the country.

Students who participate in community engagement in higher education are proven to see gains in empathy and compassion, critical thinking skills, self-efficacy and a desire to act. These benefits are natural outgrowths of the fundamental principle of both bonding and bridging social capital—that relationships matter. Put simply, when people come to understand that they have something in common and that they share values, they are more likely to work together to achieve goals. Sustained and reflective community engagement empowers student to create this bridging social capital and to discover a broader sense of shared identity with individuals of diverse backgrounds. The strengthening of emotional, moral and intellectual civic muscles that stems from strengthened social capital has long-term implications for how students engage in their communities well beyond their graduation.

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CHAPTER FIVE
LIFELONG CIVIC ACTORS: COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT BEYOND THE CAMPUS WALLS

On campuses across the country, community engagement programs are building stronger networks among students and faculty, forging new bridges between higher education institutions and the communities in which they reside, and cultivating the civic competencies of student participants. As a result, students are more socially aware, civic-minded and committed to action on pressing social issues. In the short term, students are healthier and achieving at higher rates; campus communities are more connected and inclusive; and, colleges and universities are bringing their resources to bear on critical issues in local, national and global communities. Even more remarkable than these short-term transformations, are those that happen for students in the years after diplomas are issued and they depart their campus gates. It is when the graduates’ refined civic skills, clarified values, and renewed sense of social responsibility are infused into lifelong engagement that the most important benefits of higher education community engagement programs are felt.

I. Potential for Long-Term Transformation

It may seem intuitive that students who have developed empathy, strong critical thinking skills, and a sense of self-efficacy in their college experience would continue to contribute to their communities in meaningful ways post-graduation. However, as the civic and community engagement field in higher education has evolved, and as the nation has faced a crisis in ongoing participation and engagement, there has grown a demand to
better understand, document and prove these lasting effects of undergraduate participation. The starting point for this research has been to initially examine the potential for long-term impacts by examining how students report they have been changed by their experiences and how they envision this impacting their lives post-graduation. From 1993-2000, a number of studies were conducted that began to find evidence of the potential for these long-term effects. The “At A Glance” fact sheet which captures the results of these studies, cites many that lead to the following conclusions:

• service-learning has a positive effect on student personal development such as sense of personal efficacy, personal identity, spiritual growth, and moral development;

• service-learning has a positive effect on sense of social responsibility and citizenship skills; and,

• service-learning has a positive effect on commitment to service.¹

This echoes the research of Astin and the Higher Education Research Institute which found that:

Service participation shows significant positive effects on all 11 outcome measures: academic performance (GPA, writing skills, critical thinking skills), values (commitment to activism and to promoting racial understanding), self-efficacy, leadership (leadership activities, self-rated leadership ability, interpersonal skills), choice of a service career, and plans to participate in service after college.²

Not only did the study reinforce some of the short-term benefits to students previously discussed in this thesis, but it demonstrated that community engagement had an impact on students’ plans for participating in service after college and choice of a service career.


²Astin, “How Service Learning Affects Students,” 3.
This kind of potential for long-term impact was also demonstrated in the program evaluations of the D.C. Schools Project where a striking 82% of respondents said that their participation in the program had ‘some’ to ‘significant’ impact on, “Commitment to being an active, socially responsible citizen who works toward the common good.” Of that group, 35% had responded that their participation had significant impact. Following this question of whether or not participation had impacted their academic or professional plans, students offered comments such as, “DCSP really made me more interested in community service,” “I want to work in a nonprofit in D.C. after I graduate!” and “I would seriously consider going into social work now.”

Another study that demonstrated the potential for long-term impact stemming from participation in community engagement looked at the impact of community-based learning on a group of students in a first-year general education seminar. Through quantitative and qualitative methods, the study established significant gains in civic competencies and orientation. In short, “data from the students’ interviews indicate that experiences in the community combined with academic research provide students with a context for realizing the relevance of social issues, grasping a personal stake in policy issues, and sympathizing with community need.”\(^3\) The theory pulled from student papers reflected similar gains, showing that they had had begun to think along the lines of a “community advocate who seeks to evaluate social policies through critically discerning value-based judgments.”\(^4\) The study illustrates what many practitioners predicate their

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\(^3\) Schamber, “The Development of Political Awareness,” 93.

\(^4\) Ibid.
theory of change upon: that students’ participation in community engagement can help them to empathize with the needs of others, think critically about the root causes of these needs, and, ultimately, be inspired to continue addressing these root causes in their own professional and personal lives.

II. Civic Vision and Professionalism

An interesting way of viewing this long-term transformation for students is the idea that they move from developing civic skills to cultivating civic vision. Zlotkowski and Duffy argue that through reflective action students are able to develop this civic vision, in which they use their capacities to seek common good outcomes for others.\(^5\) This belief that one’s actions matter, in addition to the desire to contribute to the common good, is a critical combination to sustaining students’ participation. Research from the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) demonstrates how community engagement can foster a sense of self-efficacy in students, leading them to become more committed to helping others and to be more inclined to believe that individuals have power to create change.\(^6\) Essentially, not only are students well-equipped to be important contributors to their communities, but they have developed the desire and self-efficacy necessary to realize that potential.

\(^5\) Zlotkowski, “Two Decades of Community-based Learning,” 40.

\(^6\) Astin, “How Undergraduates Are Affected by Service,” 256.
This realized potential is, in part, what happens when students move from civic vision into civic professionalism. This concept, written about by M.W. Sullivan, is described in the article “Educating for Informed Community Involvement”:

The civic-minded professional embarks on a career with a public-service orientation in mind, rather than a solely technical or economic/profit orientation to practice. According to Sullivan, the civic-minded professional has a variety of skills in addition to professional knowledge and skills; among these skills is the ability to communicate well with others, and especially the ability to listen to divergent points of view.\(^7\)

The skills discussed previously in this thesis—critical thinking, empathy and compassion, tolerance, and engagement with diversity—all have the potential to translate to this civic professionalism. Furthermore, participation in these programs connects students directly with the opportunities to realize this potential. One study examined the link between preparation and opportunity, and found as follows;

Students’ involvement in service learning during college was positively correlated with: the likelihood that students were offered a job at the service placement site; their first job and current job being in the same state as their service placement; acceptance of employment in service-related fields; and the likelihood and amount of post-graduation community service.\(^8\)

This link between engagement and employment opportunities is echoed in the findings of a study recently released by the National Conference on Citizenship which demonstrated a connection between civic engagement and economic resiliency and posited one


\(^8\)Ibid.
potential explanation for this link to be that people find jobs through social networks.\textsuperscript{9} It follows that communities with stronger social networks generate more employment opportunities. Similarly, college students with stronger social capital and increased networks also increase their odds of finding employment in their desired field.

One example of the way in which community engagement not only cultivates the potential for students to be civic professionals, but also creates the opportunities to do so, is Teach for America (TFA). The organization, which now places 5,200 recent college graduates in under-performing public schools throughout the country, has a long-term vision of addressing the public education crisis in the US. The organization has grown to involve a highly competitive application process and now only accepts 11 percent of applicants, many of whom come from elite schools. The organization’s website outlines criteria of who they are looking for in this competitive process, illustrating how important the skills gained through community engagement are to creating opportunities for civic professionalism. The website states that 59% of their members represent service organizations in college, and every single member has held a leadership position in their academic career. Furthermore, the organization lists the following among its most important criteria:

\begin{quote}
\ldots achieving ambitious, measurable results in academic, professional, extracurricular, or volunteer settings; strong critical thinking skills: making accurate linkages between cause and effect and generating relevant solutions to problems; and, respect for individuals’ diverse experiences and effectively working with people from a variety of backgrounds.\textsuperscript{10}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{9}National Conference on Citizenship, “Civic Health and Unemployment.”

These are precisely the skills that have been proven to develop through higher education community engagement. While TFA is just one example of a post-graduate opportunity in which students can contribute meaningfully to the common good, it is illustrative of how the skills and experiences cultivated through community engagement can both prepare students for, and provide access to, high-impact civic careers.

III. Lifelong Civic Actors

While the evidence that shows the potential for students to become lifelong civic actors is promising, the research that documents the reality of their engagement years later gives even more reason for hope. In 2005, the Higher Education Research Institute published a report exploring how “both individual participation in service learning and an institutional climate of valuing service during college is related to political engagement during the post-college years.”\(^{11}\) The study expounds upon this strong connection, “This main effect was present above and beyond the effects of other background and college characteristics, suggesting that the service learning experience in college does indeed have long-term benefits on political engagement throughout the respondents’ early career years.\(^{12}\) This study focuses specifically on political engagement defined by activities such as donating to a political candidate or cause, working with a political group, raising


\(^{12}\)Ibid., 22
awareness about a political issue, or signing a petition. This is just one form of engagement, albeit important, that reflects the translation of civic skills and attitudes into action.

Providing an even more holistic view of long-term civic engagement is the 2006 study published by HERI. The study examined engagement ten years post-graduation, drew from an impressive sample of diverse higher education institutions, and controlled for a number of variables such as pre-college beliefs and experiences, institutional characteristics, and a variety of college experiences.\(^\text{13}\) It examined engagement in various forms ranging from volunteerism to media access to donating money. In regard to volunteerism, the study found as follows:

> Although volunteering accounts for the impact of service-learning on post-college propensity to participate in volunteer work, one of the reflection variables – discussing one’s (college) service experience with other students – also has unique effects… This suggests that when students participate in co-curricular service experiences, the act of discussing their experience with other students reinforces and strengthens their long-term commitment to voluntarism.\(^\text{14}\)

This finding in particular not only demonstrates how service-learning can generate long-term commitment to volunteerism, but it reinforces the importance of reflection for the ways that it facilitates the growth of bonding social capital. Similarly, the study finds that service-learning also has significant impact on long-term civic leadership, measured by how often one has played a leadership role in improving his or her community post-graduation. The findings illustrate again the importance of reflection and bonding social capital.

\(^\text{13}\) Astin, “Understanding the Effects of Service-Learning,” 1.

\(^\text{14}\) Ibid., 79.
capital to this outcome, noting: “Service-learning has a positive effect on civic leadership after college because it affords students an opportunity to reflect on the service actively with the professor.”\textsuperscript{15}

Additional questions looked at how graduates stayed involved in their community through activities such as “working on a community project with a government agency, working with others to solve a community problem, playing a leadership role in improving one’s community, participating in a community/ neighborhood group, identifying a goal of becoming a community leader, and identifying a goal of participating in a community action program.”\textsuperscript{16} In short, the study demonstrated that working with communities post-graduation was linked with volunteerism and service-learning in college, particularly when reflection was involved: “volunteering and one form of reflection—discussing the service experience with one’s professor—remain significant after other college involvements have entered the regression.”\textsuperscript{17} When looking at charitable giving, the research showed a strong connection between service-learning and donating money long-term, and a borderline connection between volunteerism in college and donating money long-term.\textsuperscript{18}

Finally, the study revisited the question of long-term political engagement and demonstrated a striking link between community engagement in college, in the forms of

\textsuperscript{15}Ibid., vii.
\textsuperscript{16}Ibid., 24.
\textsuperscript{17}Ibid., 82.
\textsuperscript{18}Ibid., 83.
service-learning and volunteer work, and long-term political engagement, even after controlling for “entering student demographics, high school experiences, institutional characteristics and peer measures.”19 Similar to other areas of engagement, the same trend was presented—that volunteering and discussing service experiences with a professor had “unique effects on one’s post-college propensity to be engaged in political activities that cannot be explained by other college experiences.” Establishing yet again the important link between action and reflection, the authors noted:

Volunteering during college is a significant predictor of commitment to promoting racial understanding even when high school experiences, institutional characteristics and demographic variables are controlled…It appears, then, that volunteering strengthens students’ commitment to promoting racial understanding because it increases the likelihood that they will discuss their experience with other students.20

Increasingly throughout the study, two themes become utterly apparent. The first is that community engagement programs in higher education do fulfill their potential to prepare students to continue civic participation in many forms in the long-term. This includes volunteering, donating money, participating in politics, working in communities, and more. The second theme is that the connection between action and reflection, the synthesis of bonding and bridging social capital, is critical to long-term transformation. The findings on volunteerism, civic leadership, charitable giving, political engagement and commitment to racial understanding all showed that engaging with peers and faculty, as well as engaging with difficult social issues in diverse communities, resulted in sustained post-graduate engagement.

19Ibid., 86.
20Ibid., 93.
Another study, “Comparing College Community Participation and Future Service Behaviors and Attitudes,” conducted by Loyola College of Maryland, sought to establish some of the same long-term impacts as discussed above, by conducting a survey of 481 alumni of a religiously-affiliated liberal arts college. In sum, the report offered similarly encouraging results:

…participating in either general community service or service-learning in college has long-term positive effects on young adults’ attitudes toward social and personal responsibility, the importance of personal political participation, and continued service involvement through volunteer service and holding a job in a service field.21

The study also demonstrated the same critical link between action and reflection, with service-learning exerting a stronger effect on long-term engagement than volunteerism. Reiterating the importance that community engagement programs be sustained and reflective, the study showed stronger positive links when students had participated in ten or more hours of community engagement activities through a service-learning course in which reflection opportunities were frequent and meaningful.22

There is certainly need for the body of research to grow which demonstrates how community engagement shapes students’ actions and behaviors post-graduation. However, the current evidence demonstrating both the potential for and realization of long-term engagement is very promising. Students are translating skills into action, values into behaviors, and vision into commitment for years after their participation in


22Fenzel, “Comparing College Participation and Service.”
these programs. It is this shift that has potential to transform a contemporary state of civic distress into one of renewal.
CHAPTER SIX
SHIFTING THE LANDSCAPE OF SOCIAL CAPITAL

The beginning of this thesis paints a troubling picture of the current state of social
capital and civic engagement in the United States. For two decades, all signs have
pointed in the same direction—we are less connected to one another, we participate less
in associational life, and we increasingly lack trust in our institutions. Meanwhile,
research continues to demonstrate that trust, connectivity, reciprocity and mutual effort
are critical to addressing pressing social problems and building communities that thrive
socially, politically and economically. Strategies that can address this growing gap are
essential.

Higher education community engagement programs are exactly this kind of
strategy. When designed and implemented well, with an emphasis on engaging
marginalized communities in sustained, reflective and collaborative ways, these
programs can strengthen social capital in the short term and lead to dramatic changes in
civic skills, attitudes and approaches for student participants. Students are more
connected to one another and their faculty, they perform better academically, and they
find a critical sense of belonging through participation. Their emotional, moral and
intellectual abilities are sharpened as they develop empathy and compassion, critical-
thinking skills, and self-efficacy through the bridging social capital built with community
members. They develop civic vision and are prepared to enter into the working world as
civic professionals. These skills and experiences translate into lifelong engagement
through voting, serving as community leaders, donating money, volunteering,
participating in associations, working for nonprofits, and engaging in other important
civic roles. The whole of this effect is more than the sum of its parts.

I. The Ripple Effect

The transformation that happens for individual students through their
participation in community engagement not only shifts their own trajectories, but shifts
the landscape of social capital in communities across the country. Each graduate who
actualizes his or her civic vision and works to advance the common good also helps to
build a foundation from which social capital can thrive. Some graduates serve as
classroom teachers, where they incorporate a service-learning or civics education
curriculum into their coursework, cultivating invaluable skills and attitudes in their $5^{th}$
grade students who may one day become community leaders themselves. Some graduates
pursue careers with nonprofit organizations, addressing pressing community needs and
unlocking new potential for individuals to participate in their own schools,
neighborhoods, economies, and governance. Others might work in the corporate sector
and do so with a vital orientation toward social responsibility. Still others might become
full-time parents who bring their children along to volunteer at the local food bank, coach
the soccer team, or welcome the new neighbors with a home-cooked meal. Each of these
trajectories has its own ripple effect—changing the lives of people and communities
within each graduate’s reach, and cultivating new soil from which richer engagement and
participation can grow.
This shift in the foundation of social capital and civic participation is perhaps most critical when viewed in terms of economic and racial divides. Not only has the income gap in the United States grown to be wider than any time since 1928,¹ but research related to social capital has shown troubling indications of “a growing ‘class gap’ among American young people, as kids from upper-middle class backgrounds are increasingly well-nested in family, religious, and community networks, whereas kids from the other side of the tracks are increasingly isolated from such connections.”² This kind of loss in human capital—shutting out entire segments of the population from full participation—will make it nearly impossible to recover from the current state of civic decline. A new generation of civic leaders is needed that can address these pressing challenges and create new pathways to participation for all individuals and communities. Those with the empathy, critical thinking, skills and experiences cultivated by community engagement are up to the task.

II. Leveling the Playing Field

Not only are well-equipped compassionate civic leaders needed to restore access to and inspire participation, but higher education institutions themselves have the opportunity to help “level the playing field” through community engagement. As discussed previously, these programs have been linked to promising gains in academic


achievement, and degree completion. This is critical in light of Pierre Bourdieu’s argument that social capital is another form of capital, similar to political or economic, wielded by those with privilege to exert power and influence. Of higher education’s role in reinforcing this structure, he wrote:

The sociology of educational institutions and, in particular, of higher educational institutions, may make a decisive contribution to the frequently neglected aspect of the sociology of power which consists in the science of the dynamics of class relations. Indeed, among all the solutions provided, throughout the course of history, to the problem of the transmission of power and privileges, probably none have been better dissimulated and, consequently, better adapted to societies which tend to reject the most patent forms of hereditary transmission of power and privileges, than that provided by the educational system in contributing to the reproduction of the structure of class relations and in dissimulating the fact that it fulfills this function under the appearance of neutrality.\(^3\)

This theory is sadly reinforced by the dramatic disparity in degree completion across socioeconomic and racial lines in the United States cited previously in this thesis. Again, only 12% of students whose families fall in the bottom income quartile earn a bachelor’s degree by age 24, compared with 22% of those in the middle quartiles and 73% from the top quartile.\(^4\) However, higher education community engagement programs present a glimmer of promise to address this crisis. By strengthening social capital for traditionally underrepresented students, and in turn strengthening their academic and economic capital through degree completion, these programs could be critical avenues for making higher education a more authentic lever for upward mobility.


\(^4\)Campus Compact, “Building Engaged Campuses,”1.
It is equally important to consider how higher education community engagement shapes the experiences and trajectories of those who do come from privileged backgrounds. In shaping the minds and long-term behaviors of graduates of elite universities who will occupy leadership and influential roles in all sectors of society, higher education has a significant responsibility to shape empathetic, compassionate, visionary and well-equipped civic leaders. As Harry Boyte and Nancy Cantor poignantly remind us:

Higher education has a special responsibility to step up to the plate in helping create a different kind of politics, of problem solving rather than blaming. After all, it was the graduates of our prestigious universities -- not evildoers from another planet -- who devised financial instruments like derivatives which (inadvertently) led to financial meltdown and economic crisis.\(^5\)

With high-stakes and pressing social issues facing the next generation of leaders, it is incumbent upon higher education to prepare students of all backgrounds to tackle these issues with thoughtfulness, compassion and a deeply felt sense of responsibility to their communities and country. Community engagement programs have proven to be an effective strategy to support traditionally underrepresented students to succeed, and as such, to incorporate their talents and contributions in the long term economically, socially and politically. These programs also are proven to cultivate an orientation toward civic responsibility, empathy and critical thinking about social issues—qualities of the utmost important for graduates who will face a lifetime of decisions with implications for their loved ones, communities and country.

\(^5\)Boyte, Harry and Nancy Cantor, “We are the Ones We’ve Been Waiting For,” Huffington Post, entry posted August 24, 2011, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/harry-boyte/we-are-the-ones-weve-been-waiting-for_b_935336.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/harry-boyte/we-are-the-ones-weve-been-waiting-for_b_935336.html) (accessed October 27, 2011).
III. Conclusion

As the field of community engagement in higher education continues to grow and strengthen, so will the time and resources devoted to better understanding, capturing and communicating its impacts and implications. Critical questions remain—including more fully understanding what other variables and influences best position students pre-, during, and post-college to become lifelong civic actors. More research is also needed to capture comprehensive longitudinal data showing the full arc of civic participation over an individual’s life span, and not just a snapshot from graduation to years later. Further, while studies have demonstrated the positive outcomes for those students who participate, little research has been produced to show what happens to the other large segments of the student body. Why are they disengaged, and what are the consequences of their lack of involvement?

It is also critical for the field to better understand the immediate and long-term outcomes for individuals and communities who are directly impacted by engagement programs. This understanding offers significant implications for how these programs are designed and implemented, how partnerships are sustained, and how community input is incorporated. Finally, there is a significant gap in understanding and measuring how faculty and institutions themselves are fundamentally changed by this work, and how decisions about resources, reward structures and capacity are made accordingly. All of these gaps are necessary to address, as they promise to clarify the value and importance of this work, and generate more data-driven and informed approaches to creating sustainable and high-impact programs. While these critical questions remain, the existing
body of evidence highlighted throughout this paper explicitly document what many have understood implicitly for years—that the implications of students’ experiences in community engagement programs reach far beyond their personal development while in college, and even beyond the ways in which their lives are changed for years after graduating. Their experiences are part of a collective, a larger narrative of transformation taking shape across the country.

Putnam begins *Bowling Alone* with a story of two men, John and Andy, one an older African American retired hospital employee and the other a young white accountant, living in a small town in Michigan. When John needed a kidney, Andy came unexpectedly to his rescue. The unlikely friends were brought together by a simple fact that “made all the difference”—that they bowled together in their local league. Now, nearly 15 years after that story took place, Putnam’s call to action and insistence that Americans engage and reconnect with one another could not be more important. As the United States continues to grapple with an economic crisis and myriad complex and pressing social issues, the importance of this reconnection and transformation happening for students and graduates across the country cannot be understated. It is the foundation upon which a renewed state of civic health, connectivity and vibrancy will be built.

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