

Doing Research in Your Own Backyard: Student Researchers Working on University Needs

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They insisted. I thought it was unnecessary, since he had written and spoken so often on the topic, but the students really wanted to do it so I revoked my objections. They scheduled the interview. They read all his public statements. They wrote and practiced their questions. And they did the interview with the university Chancellor. They got what they wanted, the opportunity ask him *how* he intended to enact his “metropolitan vision” for the university. And it worked. It worked because the students had the skill set supplied by our course work and because they had become engaged in the purpose of the project. They understood the larger goals, they saw the necessity. They felt invested in the project’s outcome and hopeful for the impact it might have. This essay is intended as a reflection on the process of getting students invested in this way; of using students to meet campus needs, and the possibilities that come from inviting students to be active partners in defining a campus vision.

The particular project undertaken by my class involved an audit of campus knowledge of and attitudes toward civic engagement. Unlike traditional audits, the students and I were not disinterested third-parties, we were stakeholders and potential consumers of the institutional changes the audit might suggest. That position made gathering the information all that more important and meaningful. National organizations promoting the development of students as aware and active citizens and universities as engaged partners in their communities highly recommend such assessments, though they

generally assume that the research will be undertaken by faculty and/or staff.¹ The American Association of State Colleges and Universities' *American Democracy Project* has suggestions of where to look for engagement on campus as well as some examples of audits done by member campuses.² The national Campus Compact did an extensive three-year study to determine "indicators of engagement" that campuses might use to measure the extent of their own efforts.³ And while all of these proved useful resources for designing an audit, the reality was that someone still had to do the actual work on our campus if we were going to move ahead in our efforts to make civic engagement a core part of the university's identity and student experience on campus.

Assessment is a core practice of institutions of higher learning. Professors assess students. Faculty assess faculty. Administrators assess programs. Committees assess proposals. There is no shortage of this kind of work around campus. Most of us who work in this environment already feel overburdened with plans that must be laid and discussed, reports that need to be written, and meetings that must be held. As a newly promoted and tenured associate professor with numerous service commitments, including directorship of the UMD Civic Engagement Project, I initially resisted doing an audit for just that reason – it just seemed like too much work.

Using students to do the research as part of a class, however, offered a way out. A course on social sciences qualitative methods would award students credit while offering them a unique experiential learning opportunity that also met real campus needs. The course would count toward my normal teaching load and be on subject matter that I love to teach (methods). It helped me enormously to approach this endeavor as an academic service-learning (ASL) course, even though students would not be leaving

campus to do the work. Regardless of the location, this was very much service-learning. The service furthered the learning objectives of the course and met real needs of (as defined by) the community, the only difference being that, unlike traditional ASL courses, the community being served was the university itself.

The Audit

Our university began its Civic Engagement Project in the fall of 2003. Two years later, the small group of staff and faculty who had become the project's steering committee decided we needed to know more about campus attitudes toward civic engagement. Our goals for the audit were to better understand how UMD "did" civic engagement. What were the places and programs that supported civic engagement? How did faculty, staff, students, and administrators think about the work? What benefits might individuals and the institution accrue from increasing this kind of work? We also wanted to know what people saw as the key values of the institution and how these related to civic engagement and how the institution acted on or demonstrated these values. Finally, we wanted to be able to identify the primary obstacles faced by the campus, name our institution's strengths, and specify both tangible and intangible resources available for increasing civic engagement work.

Course Design

After much discussion, the UMD Civic Engagement Project steering committee decided that these goals would best be met through a qualitative research study. This

allowed me, a qualitative researcher, to teach a special topics methods course in the social sciences department. A supportive dean and provost let the course to run with an unusually small group of students and money from the provost's office provided a barebones office and a workstudy student to support the project. Three-quarters of the students had taken other classes of mine and were deeply involved in a co-curricular Women's Studies program that encouraged active citizenship.⁴ In other words, I recruited from the pool of "usual suspects" to "staff" my research project, and that helps to explain the extraordinary commitment level I got from those students. Now that I have taught the course and seen the positive response that the students in my course got from their colleagues, I do believe it could be successfully executed with more representative groups of students, as long as students are encouraged to see how their work will fit with larger project goals and the development of the university.

We began our semester with a crash course on the history and shape of civic engagement in American life and on college campuses. Students read everything from Theda Skocpol, to Harry Boyte, to Thomas Ehrlich.⁵ They also surveyed examples of audits done by other campuses and consulted with the UMD Civic Engagement Project steering committee in order to refine the kind of information that would be most useful to collect. Finally, I introduced them to the data that the university routinely collects on its students, including results of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and the Higher Education Research Institute's CIRP freshman survey (more commonly know as the UCLA freshman survey)⁶ from which they garnered a better picture of their fellow students' backgrounds, aspirations, and volunteerism.

Next the students began reading about qualitative research methods. We held discussions of ethics and practices on each of the methods we chose to use for our study. I used Kristen G. Esterberg's (2002) Qualitative Methods in Social Research to guide these class sessions, but there are many such texts which I might have chosen. The students appreciated the instructions and specific examples in the book and its short length made it feasible for them to read both this manual and all the secondary literature I had assigned. Even though we were virtually certain of being declared exempt from needing human subjects approval, during this early section of the course I had the students contribute materials (release forms, interview questions, and research design) to our application package so that they would become familiar with the workings of an institutional review board.

Working as a class, we developed a research plan for the audit. Much of the plan followed easily predictable lines – textual research using existing documents (especially webpages, publications, and mission statements), interviews with stakeholders, and focus groups with students, faculty, and staff. The students in the course, however, determined many of the specific subjects to be included and developed a cold focus group technique for reaching a wider range of students. They worked in pairs to go out and run these mini-focus groups with students lounging in the student center or working in the group study area of the library on several different days/times. No group of students refused them and they gathered some wonderful data on what “average” students at UMD thought about the developing push for the campus to be more involved in the metropolitan community. They also developed a technique to educate and encourage discussion of civic engagement and began distributing the UMD Civic Engagement

Project newsletter on “What is Civic Engagement?” to all the people they encountered during their research. They found people started talking more easily with something in front of them and the practice raised awareness for the CEP.

The students, alone and collaboratively, developed all of the interview and focus group questions and determined many of the individuals to be interviewed and the order in which specific pieces of the research would progress. The students and I critiqued these instruments before they were used, but I did not dictate what was to be asked. I left them responsible for translating the desires of the steering committee into usable research questions. We also ran practice sessions before anyone went out into the field. The students definitely needed work in this area but they realized it and pushed each other to get firmer in asking questions, do more follow up with subjects and, best of all, use the data they had collected in the textual work to prompt their subjects to answer. They decided that they would be more effective in teams and coordinated with each other so that at least two of them would be at every interview and focus group, despite the extra time commitment this entailed.

Processing and Assessing

In order to help students process the material they were uncovering and producing, I created several smaller assignments. They wrote a short literature review on the secondary sources they had read, for example. They also did some concept mapping on civic engagement and the university. They wrote field notes for all the interviews and focus groups and they eventually transcribed each of their interviews. Every other week, they presented to the group the results of the smaller research tasks in which they had

been engaged. It helped us enormously to have a project website where all of these materials could be uploaded and accessed by anyone in the group. By the end of the term, we had twenty in-depth stakeholder interviews, twenty-five focus group discussions, and hundreds of documents on programs and attitudes relating to civic engagement across the campus.

Where we fell short was in actually drafting the audit report. Collecting and first-pass processing of the data took up almost of all of the latter two-thirds of the term. Rather than having students draft small sections of the final report as their “final exam” – as I had intended when designing the course – we spent six hours during exam week meeting as a group and trying to sketch out answers to the major questions we had laid out at the beginning of the study. From those notes, the students went on to present tentative results from their work at a student research conference a few weeks after the term ended and I drafted the actual audit report on my own from the data they had collected and produced.⁷

Conclusions

The collaborative research process actually made creating consensus on an overall assessment of civic engagement on campus relatively easy, since we had been discussing and refining our ideas throughout the whole term. Ultimately, we concluded that UMD has substantial pockets of engagement but the vision of the university having “metropolitan impact” remains abstract to many in our community, particularly students. The programs we do have that promote civic engagement suffer from the larger “silo effect” present at our institution. One part of campus rarely knows what the others are

doing. This lack of visibility is coupled with a lack of intentionality in our efforts. There are not explicit common themes, goals, or infrastructure guiding UMD's work with the wider community and no one at the university systematically evaluates or even tracks the work that is being done.

The efforts of this particular research project did net some very important information that can be used to create intentionality as the university moves forward with the metropolitan vision the Chancellor has articulated for us. For example, civic engagement work is almost universally seen as service work – disconnected from the areas of campus life that are most readily recognized and rewarded, namely teaching and research. Service will not get you tenured and promoted, so faculty and deans place little emphasis on it. If faculty do not buy in, then there is not the academic/intellectual nucleus necessary to make civic engagement a core value of the institution. Counter to traditional campus culture, this is one area where faculty want more leadership from the administration, yet my students' interviews revealed that administrators are unaware of this and expect faculty to take the initiative. Another key disconnect revealed by the audit was that faculty consistently underestimate the students and assume that they are “too busy” to be interested in community-based learning. While students were adamant that they did not want to add to their requirements for graduation, they had nothing but enthusiasm for optional engagement opportunities, particularly service-learning courses, which could be built into their current programs. These key pieces of information will help our institution design a center for civic engagement that meets the needs of our particular campus.

As this was my first time teaching a course using the pedagogy of academic service-learning, I, not surprisingly, learned a lot as well. Since we were not able to write even the first draft of the report during the term, I obviously expected too much in terms of the workload. I was overly ambitious in believing we could start the project from scratch and see it all the way through to the final stages. When next I teach such a course (and the opportunity to update the audit in five years and do similar projects with our community partners certainly exists), I will also be more sensitive to the number of students; four is too few, but 15 would be too many. Having a small number of students made it far more manageable and resulted in higher quality work since I could monitor them more closely. It did mean that we were able to cover less, but I will take the quality over the quantity.

Finally, I will need to generate more measures of performance tied to the research itself. For me, this is the hardest part of teaching a service-learning course.⁸ Grading a student on the quality of research seems objective enough, but the actual practice was much murkier, especially as the students became more and more invested in the project. On occasion they did make mistakes (forgetting to ask a question in an interview, for example), but they did, with some nudging on my part, go back and fix these when they could.

Beyond these types of logistical issues, I also learned that students can do the work. I went into the course concerned that the students would have a hard time being critical so we worked on this in writing questions and during practice interviews. By the time the students got to their presentation at the research conference, they had probably gone a bit too far to the other extreme in their assessment of the university. Because I

had pushed them to challenge their sources, they lost the side of critical thinking that also recognizes strengths and positives. This is not uncommon in student learning. They came into the project naïve about how the university might start new initiatives and they became hypercritical of the red-tape and politics involved in the situation. They did not get to the stage wherein they might develop a more nuanced appreciation of the complexity of institutional change during the course of the term, though I think they did reach this intellectual space by the end of the following term, after we had presented the research around campus and they had had a chance to see the reactions of many different stakeholders. Another lesson for me; anticipate this process in order to move them through it faster.

The students in the course took away an enormous amount from the experience, as well, which seems only fair since they invested more than the usual number of hours in the project. Through the sheer volume of research they did, the students not only became familiar with qualitative research techniques but they were able to refine their skill at developing and using these practices over the course of the term. These included some experience with designing projects, dealing with human subjects, crafting interview questions/techniques, running focus groups, doing field notes and transcriptions, handling ethical issues, and evaluating evidence.

Because the project was rooted in the university, they also learned a great deal about the organizational structure, social and physical geography, decision-making processes, powerbrokers, and culture of the institution. They also learned a surprising amount about their own strengths and weaknesses. This meshed well with the collaborative aspects of the course, and they learned to pair off effectively with people

whose skills complemented their own. Interestingly, they all worked with everyone in the class at some point over the course of the term and each worked with me on some task or another. They cheered each other on, but they also were honest and critical with each other. Coming from an intensely individualistic discipline myself (History), this was fascinating for me to watch and something I probably would not have been able to successfully engineer if I had tried.

The students developed a sense of efficacy from working on a “real” research project that enhanced their learning. They were understandably proud of the work we accomplished and throughout the following fall term, long after the course had ended, they came to the various campus presentations I gave on the audit. While all of them declined to help give the presentation (research and presentation are different skill sets, after all), they were curious to hear how their work was received and interested that the issues raised by the audit be discussed by the campus community.

Finally, and perhaps most significantly, the project took students who had already been directly involved in service projects and taught them the value of a larger institutional commitment to fairness and justice in order to sustain and spread the work. They came to understand through their experiences some of the challenges involved in making civic engagement intentional and institutionalized. They began to see how infrastructure might impact engagement and they felt the frustrations of the politics of budgets. The experience left them committed to the least sexy part of creating social change and promoting civic engagement: planning, negotiating, and reaching consensus. They now saw social justice in a new light – one that could be personally meaningful when engaged in directly, but something that might have greater impact with significant

institutional commitment to making lasting change. For this particularly committed and talented group of students, these revelations were empowering rather than discouraging. It was precisely these lessons that propelled them into the Chancellor's office to challenge him to put his money where his mouth was on creating the "metropolitan vision."

The campus audit created a valuable opportunity for experiential learning for students while meeting real campus needs. Beyond this, however, students proved to be a valuable asset for the study since it is hard for anyone on a college campus to turn away a student who is working on a class project and needs just a few minutes of your time. The Chancellor cleared a spot in his schedule to spend time with the students. The senior officers beamed when I introduced the students during a presentation of the audit findings. All of the interview subjects took the process very seriously and most expressed interest in both the topic and what the students were learning in their research. The students' work eased faculty service burdens while at the same time increasing student voice on issues of curriculum, intellectual engagement, and pedagogy. Faculty, myself included, are often intimidated by having to find community partners and negotiate the logistics of getting students off campus in traditional academic service-learning projects. What a small and eager group of students helped me to learn is that there are also valuable opportunities to serve and learn without ever leaving the confines of our own backyard.

Endnotes

¹ I found no guidance on how to use students in this process and only one example of an audit that involved student researchers. At Michigan State University, a first-year seminar did a very preliminary assessment focused mostly on identifying campus stakeholders. See

<http://www.aascu.org/programs/adp/resources/default.htm>, accessed 30 October 2007.

² American Democracy Project, <http://www.aascu.org/programs/adp/resources/default.htm>, accessed 30 October 2007.

³ Edward Zlotkowski and Jennifer Meeropol, “overview of the Indicators of Engagement Project,” *Metropolitan Universities: An International Forum*, (April 2006), 117.

⁴ This program, Women in Learning and Leadership or WILL, combines Women’s and Gender Studies coursework with co-curricular service projects chosen, designed, and implemented by the students.

⁵ Harry Boyte, *Everyday Politics: Reconnecting Citizens and Public Life* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Nancy Burns, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Sidney Verba, eds., *The Private Roots of Public Action: Gender, Equality, and Political Participation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001); Anne Colby, Thomas Ehrlich, Stephens J. Beaumont, *Educating Citizens: Preparing America’s Undergraduates For Lives of Moral Responsibility and Civic Responsibility*. (San Francisco: The Carnegie Foundation For The Advancement of Teaching, 2003); Thomas Ehrlich, *Higher Education and Civic Responsibility* (Phoenix, AZ: Oryx Press, 2000); Theda Skocpol and Morris P. Fiorina, eds., *Civic Engagement in American Democracy* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press; New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1999); Edward Zlotkowski and Judy Patton, “Service-learning and the Commuter Student,” *Metropolitan Universities: An International Forum* (November 2004).

⁶ NSSE, <http://nsse.iub.edu/index.cfm>, accessed 30 October 2007; HERI CIRP freshman survey, <http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/heri/cirpoverview.php>, accessed 30 October 2007.

⁷ The full report can be found on the UMD website. See, Georgina Hickey and SSCI 390, “University of Michigan Dearborn Audit of Civic Engagement,” 26 July 2006, http://casl.umd.umich.edu/civicengagement/files/civic_engagement_audit.pdf, accessed 30 October 2007.

⁸ I am not alone on this front. For more on the challenges of assessment and how to overcome them, see the Campus Compact publication, *Assessing Service-Learning and Civic Engagement: Principles and Techniques* (2001), available through their website at

http://www.compact.org/publications/detail/assessing_service-learning_and_civic_engagement, accessed 30 Oct 2007.