



Summer 2015, Vol. 18, No. 3

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More than Bells without Clappers: Students Finding Voice through Civic Engagement with Big Questions

By: Francisco Acoba, Robert Franco, Krista Hiser, Peter Fiume, Liz Di Giorgio, Jay Kelly, Wendy Kuntz, Lori Moog, Duane Oakes and Lynn Robertson

With the national conversation about college emphasizing timely degree completion and readiness for employment, how can community college educators prepare our students to tackle the big questions they currently experience and will further confront in the complex, changing environment of our interconnected global future? A reductionist emphasis on employment readiness may limit students' ability to recognize, understand, and use the levers of social and political change and power. Will our graduates be like bells without clappers—voiceless and lacking resonance? How will this voicelessness affect their lives, their liberty, and their pursuit of happiness?

In a project funded by the Teagle Foundation, housed at the Community College National Center for Community Engagement (CCNCCE), and led by Kapi'olani Community College, faculty at six community college campuses—Kingsborough Community College and Queensborough Community College (New York), Raritan Valley Community College (New Jersey), Delgado Community College (Louisiana), Mesa Community College (Arizona), and Kapi'olani Community College (Hawai'i)—are actively engaged with questions like these. Through this project, titled Student Learning for Civic Capacity: Stimulating Moral, Ethical, and Civic Engagement for Learning that Lasts, faculty are implementing pedagogical, curricular, cocurricular, extracurricular, and assessment innovations across developmental, liberal arts, and career and technical education programs. These innovations address a single big question: *How do we build our commitment to civic and moral responsibility for diverse, equitable, healthy, and sustainable communities?*

This big question has implications across the nation and the planet, manifesting differently in each of the unique communities, economies, and ecosystems served by the six participating colleges. Between six and twenty faculty members at each college, teaching over fifty class sections and reaching a thousand students, are addressing the question in their curricula through topics that weave from local to national to global, including environmental sustainability, climate change, human trafficking, poverty, homelessness, health, and immigrant adaptation, using high-impact practices (described in Kuh 2008) such as service-learning, undergraduate research (see Franco 2010), civic engagement, and global and diversity learning. Below, we highlight courses that are addressing global

Curricula

topics at participating campuses and share assessment tools and early evaluations from the project.

Environmental Sustainability

At Raritan Valley Community College, Jay Kelly, assistant professor of biology and environmental science, is training community college students as citizen scientists. In partnership with the New Jersey Audubon Society, students in Kelly's environmental field studies course assess forest conditions in central New Jersey and work with local officials to improve forest health through science-based solutions. Students seek to understand what is needed to maintain the health of local forests as human population densities rise and urban and suburban development increases. Kelly's students engage with issues affecting forest ecosystems in New Jersey, the eastern temperate forests of North America, and around the world.

One rapidly increasing threat to ecosystems around the world is the threat posed by introduced species, which can negatively affect biological diversity and endanger environmental sustainability. At Kapi'olani Community College, an environment and ecology laboratory course for nonmajors taught by Wendy Kuntz, assistant professor of ecology, is structured around a community-based ecological restoration project focused on the impact of introduced algae species in the local marine ecosystem. Working directly with the local chapter of the Nature Conservancy and Mālama Maunaloa (a community-based organization), students learn ecology skills and techniques to monitor algae diversity while removing invasive algae. The semester culminates in a scientific poster session where student teams present their results to the community. Since the project's initiation, more than 150 students have removed over fourteen tons of invasive algae. Students who participate report having a greater understanding of the issues surrounding introduced species and a deeper appreciation of the importance of science in addressing both local and global environmental challenges, compared to earlier in the semester.

Faculty at Delgado Community College in New Orleans are engaging students in issues related to Louisiana's declining shoreline, which is still feeling the effects of Hurricane Katrina and the 2010 BP oil spill. Inspired by an article that highlighted how Louisiana is losing its boot shape to coastal erosion (Anderson 2014), Associate Professor of Speech Communication Jenny Louis asked students to research the topic in small groups and find a way to present it to the public. To display their findings, the students created a website, www.savedatboot.org. In another course, Lynn Robertson, professor of television production, asked her students to create ten-minute documentaries focused on local issues. One student's documentary highlighted individuals who are trying to make New Orleans more bike-friendly, promoting the idea of bicycling as an environmentally friendly commuter option.

At Kingsborough Community College, a marine technology course titled Vessel Technology 1, taught by professor of maritime studies Donovan Withers, promotes an ethic of, and skills central to, sustainability learning. Students in this course collect used cooking oil from on-campus cafeterias and local businesses for conversion into fuel used by boats in the college's maritime studies program. This course helps students fulfill Kingsborough's recently implemented civic engagement graduation requirement, which requires two cocurricular,

extracurricular, and/or curriculum-based experiences.

Human Trafficking, Homelessness, and Health

Faculty and staff at Mesa Community College have infused human trafficking awareness into administration of justice, counseling, social work, and nursing courses. Faculty, staff, and students from those courses conducted human trafficking trainings for more than 1,500 people. Their purpose was to bring awareness to the campus, educators, medical professionals, high schools, and the public about the signs of human trafficking and its effects on the community. Faculty and students created brochures, PowerPoint presentations, and public service announcements to share with educators, health care professionals, and other students at these trainings. Mesa social work professor Rose Marie Lichtenfels and student Valerie Le Grande, who helped lead the college's effort, also conducted trainings at the 2014 CCNCCE conference, which focused on Human and Sex Trafficking, prompting participants from dozens of community colleges to explore the civic and moral dimension of this global issue.

Since fall 2010, Queensborough Community College (QCC) has conducted the Picture Me in College project. Working through community-based organizations, QCC art faculty member Liz Di Giorgio invites children from local transitional housing programs to participate in her drawing class. While drawing the children's portraits over the course of three class sessions, Di Giorgio's art students engage the children in conversation about their interests and dreams for the future. The college students help the children envision education as a path to a positive future and integrate an aura of optimism into their portraits. At the end of the term, the children receive colorful digital posters (transformed from simple pencil portraits), rolled and tied with ribbons to represent college diplomas. Supported by QCC colleagues Josephine Pantaleo and Meghmala Tarafdar, Di Giorgio uses the Picture Me in College project as a framework for exploring global poverty, homelessness, and issues of identity and equality.

At Raritan Valley Community College (RVCC), many service-learning programs directly address and ameliorate the nutritional needs of recent and growing immigrant communities. In RVCC's Trends in Nursing courses, taught by Susan Williams and Mary Balut (both associate professors of health science education), students discovered through community-based research that dependency on local food banks was increasing as new populations turned to these community resources. After finding that fresh fruits and vegetables were in short supply at local food banks, students developed a Squash Hunger: Produce for Pantries project. Through this project, students obtained fresh produce from local grocery stores and community members, supplementing the processed foods that are disproportionately present in food bank clients' diets.

Qualitative and Quantitative Assessment Findings

In addition to sharing curricula and pedagogical strategies, faculty from the six colleges are using a shared quantitative pre- and post-course survey as well as a set of shared qualitative reflection prompts that students address in their end-of-term capstone essays. For the survey, students in courses that address the project's big question rate their agreement with a

series of items according to a five-point scale, with responses ranging from "completely agree" to "completely disagree." In the first semester of using these assessment instruments (fall 2014), students who participated in service-learning courses at the six community colleges showed statistically significant gains on the following items:

- We need to change people's attitudes in order to solve social problems.
- It is very interesting to listen to others who have viewpoints very different from my own.
- I have helped my community work toward a smaller carbon footprint.
- In order for problems to be solved, we need to change public policy.
- Each of us has a duty to provide service to underserved populations.

For their end-of-semester capstone reflection essays, students addressed the following prompts:

- Identify the issue you focused on, and explain how it relates to diversity, equity, health, or sustainability. Describe activities you engaged in.
- Describe three to five central course concepts or theories that engaged you and deepened your understanding of the issue.
- Explain how coursework and activities have shaped your personal, change agent, academic, and/or career goals.
- What elements of unfairness or injustice does the issue have? Do you believe more people should care about the issue? Discuss possible solutions to the problem.
- Discuss in detail three actions you will take to reduce the impact of the problem.

Faculty scored the essays using a shared project-wide rubric, now in its third iteration. The campuses with the highest scores were those where faculty had most consistently integrated the prompts into course curricula over the course of the semester, using the essays as part of the course grade. In response to the last item, which asked students to plan their future commitments, students generally indicated plans to continue working with community service organizations, and some students also indicated that they planned to take another course or get a degree that would help them further address the problem.

The project team is currently revising and assessing both the quantitative and qualitative assessment tools, which will be disseminated nationally in 2017. Authors Acoba, Hiser, and Franco can be contacted for current drafts of these tools.

Conclusion

In April 2015, faculty participants from the six community colleges joined counterparts from four-year institutions participating in ten additional projects at a convening for the Teagle Foundation's Larger Vision for Student Learning program. At this convening, project participants realized a deeper purpose of their collaboration: America's 1,100 community colleges are places where many students of color, low-income

students, and first-generation students are contemplating whether they belong in college, and to what end. Project faculty concluded that through curricula developed from research-based high-impact practices supporting student learning and engagement, their students could not only achieve institutionally prized degree completion goals, but also learn what it means to achieve "full participation" (see Sturm et al. 2011) in America's democracy, economy, and ecology in a globally interdependent era.

Participating faculty discussed the metaphor of a bell to capture the compelling work before them and their students. Preparing students to graduate without civic engagement and learning would be like a shaping a bell without its internal clapper: the bell would not be heard; it would have no resonance. The bell of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness would be hollow, silenced. Only through engagement, learning, and achievement can students authentically succeed on campus, in their communities, in the nation, and in the world.

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