Brief Report: Fostering Student Leadership in Tackling Community-Based Problems

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Fostering Student Leadership in Tackling Community-Based Problems

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This brief report outlines the integration of a service-learning component into a required major course for undergraduate political science students entitled “Government in Action: Public Policy.”

Problem to Be Investigated

Research demonstrates young people’s underperformance in the political process (Colby, Beaumont, Ehrlich, & Corngold, 2007). In my years of teaching, I have found that students have difficulty analyzing and articulating policy problems. Nevertheless, understanding the policy cycle gives students a firmer grip on politics overall, allowing them to negotiate their places within the system. By combining deep student reflection and service in the nonprofit sector with a strong foundation in public policy theory, this service-learning project fosters undergraduate students’ understanding of the policy process.

In the spring of 2007, I was selected as a California Campus Compact-Carnegie Foundation Fellow charged with the responsibility of creating, rolling out and assessing a service-learning course geared at increasing the political involvement of young people. I redesigned a course required for political science majors, entitled POLS 119: Government in Action: Public Policy. POLS 119 is an upper-level course that examines the theoretical literature on policy making, including the role of multiple actors from Congress to interest groups, policy analysis, and the nature of policy change. The service-learning portion requires 7-10 additional hours per week outside of class working closely with a nonprofit community partner on local policy issues and assisting families who are navigating the local social services labyrinth.

The Role of Cognitive-Affective Learning in Addressing the Problem

Understanding the very complex nature of public policy in general, and of community social services in particular, necessitates a higher level of learning and social awareness than is often required in college courses (Bloom, Hastings, & Madaus, 1956; Colby et al., 2007). Traditional emphasis on mere cognitive learning falls short of providing students with the skills to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate policy problems, despite the fact that such an understanding of policy making is a key component of developing student political participation. Fostering a greater connection between cognitive and affective learning components can result not only in deep and enduring student learning, but perhaps equally important, in increased youth political participation (Chickering, 2006; Colby et al., 2007; Owen-Smith, 2004). Through the service-learning component in which students participate hands-on in the policy realm while keeping detailed journals and writing thoughtful blogs that respond to instructor prompts, students experience the reality of concepts such as opportunity costs and cost-benefit ratios.

Service-Learning Course Design

Students are required to spend approximately 7—10 hours per week with the community partner, working directly on policy issues ranging from education to health care for the underserved members of the Stockton community. The course consists of the following components:

Class Participation. Students are expected to come prepared to class having completed all assigned reading and to actively participate in class discussions. Secondly, students contribute to an online weekly discussion forum (blog). The arguments and questions raised in the forum are typically discussed further in class, particularly when student confusion evident in blogs can be mitigated by further discussion.

Offsite Participation. Students are expected to spend between 7-10 hours offsite doing work with the community partner, San Joaquin Community Partnership for Families (CPF). Students submit weekly progress reports to the instructor and CPF containing number of hours worked, tasks in progress/completed, and journal entries.

Op-Ed Essay. Students write an essay of at least 1000 words that identifies and describes a particular policy problem in which a specific action is suggested to be taken by a specific party.
Exam. One cumulative exam is given in class toward the end of the semester.

Term Paper. This 10-12 page paper will focus on a policy debate other than what students wrote about in the op-ed assignment. It entails an in depth analysis of a particular policy pertaining to the community partner and is expected to incorporate the tools and concepts highlighted in the class.

Research Presentation. Students will give an oral presentation that reviews the analysis from their term papers. Furthermore, the course has multiple learning objectives, including:

- The development of critical thinking skills
- The development of discussion skills
- The development of research skills
- The development of writing skills, especially pertaining to research

To improve written communication skills, students will keep daily journals with free-form and structured responses to prompts. Students will reflect on their experiences and link them to theory. They will take inventory of the tools gained as they approach the third and final phase of the course.

Students would develop their writing skills through weekly “Status reports” containing common reporting templates employed in the workplace as well as a reflective component in which students would be required to draw upon their experience working with the community partner. Their writing and research skills would be sharpened by producing a final report handed in to both the community partner as well as myself.

Oral communication skills would be practiced frequently throughout the course. Class sessions would be heavily discussion-based, with the professor acting as a presenter of questions and stimulator of thoughtful discussion. Outside of the classroom, students would further hone these skills by directly interfacing with the community nonprofit and its clients. This would be particularly unique, given that college students are so often accustomed to practicing communication at a “student level.” In contrast, this service learning course requires thoughtful and developing student reflection as well as professional interaction with the community partner.

In the final phase as critical thinking and problem-solving skills are honed, students will submit a research paper proposing a solution to a single public policy problem facing one community using data they have collected. The level of political participation this project requires far surpasses that a traditional class setting provides. Witnessing an entire policy cycle is a unique experience. Ongoing open dialogues will encourage students to discuss challenges and opportunities.

Assessment of Learning Objectives

Students will take a pre-test assessing their baseline understanding of how policies are changed and implemented. The exercises will contain a problem solving section forcing students to consider their handling of particular challenges policy entrepreneurs commonly face. During the semester, students are required to keep daily course journals responding to instructor’s prompts regarding the policy process.

At the conclusion of the semester, students will take a post-test gauging changes and improvements in their understanding of the policy process, specifically considerations regarding problem solving. A committee of social scientists will read the submissions and assess the degree and nature of change.

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REFERENCES


