

Civic Learning and the Development of the Citizen Scholar: The University of South Florida St. Petersburg Experience

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Abstract

In 2006, the University of South Florida St. Petersburg (USFSP) created the Center for Civic Engagement (CCE) to "make USFSP distinctive in its commitment to civic and community engagement through the development of the citizen scholar model." Since its creation, the CCE has undertaken a number of initiatives, including the regular review of courses that offer a civic engagement component, and conducting surveys with students taking these courses. In this study, 782 students were surveyed in the College of Arts & Sciences, the College of Business and the College of Education to understand how the civic engagement component of their citizen scholar course impacts learning outcomes. The surveys were analyzed using quantitative and qualitative content analysis with focus on how service activity enhanced the course content, the students' contribution to the community through service-learning experience, and the tools and skills learnt in the course that were used in the community. The results indicate that civic and community engagement activities significantly increase learning outcomes, especially with regards to communication skills and critical thinking.

Introduction

The United States Department of Education, in collaboration with the Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement National Task Force, the Global Perspective Institute and the Association of American Colleges and Universities has tried persistently to persuade Colleges and Universities to integrate citizen scholarship programs in their curriculum in order to help with the recovery of the pervasive decline of civic America (Musil, 2012). In response to the call, many Colleges and Universities around the country have made civic and community engagement an essential general education requirement (O'Grady, 2014).

Methods

The data for this study was collected from 782 students (from three colleges: the College of Arts & Sciences, the College of Business and the College of Education), taking courses with a civic engagement component. The study is based on a survey instrument consisting of six open-ended questions that evaluates the extent to which concepts learned in the classroom are put into effect in the local community. The study was promoted at the first general faculty meeting at the beginning of the 2017 academic year. Marketing of the study continued throughout the academic year through faculty and student email lists, the campus newspaper, and classroom visits. The survey was conducted during the last two weeks of the Fall and Spring semesters in 2017. The survey data was entered on an excel spreadsheet in six categories following the open-ended questions. Each response that evaluates the extent to which concepts learned in the classroom are put into effect in the local community constituted a unit of analysis. The data was analyzed using quantitative and qualitative content analysis.

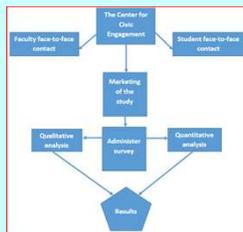


Fig. 1. Study method visualized

Results

The results of this study are presented in three sections: (1) activity enhancement of course content, (2) making meaningful contribution to the community, and (3) impact on learning outcomes. The results represent the responses of 367 students surveyed in the spring semester and 415 students surveyed in the fall semester.

Did your service activities enhance your understanding of course content?



Fig. 2. Service activities – Spring

In the spring semester, 93% (342 out of 367) of students surveyed reported that the civic engagement component enhanced their understanding of course content.

Did your service activities enhance your understanding of course content?



Fig. 3. Service activities – Fall

A similar result was registered in the fall semester with 92% (381 out of 415) of students indicating that civic engagement enhanced their understanding of course content.

I feel that I was able to make a meaningful contribution to the community through this service-learning experience



Fig. 4. Contribution to the community – Spring

In the spring semester most respondents, 82% (301 out of 367), agreed that they were able to make meaningful contribution to the community through their service-learning experience.

I feel that I was able to make a meaningful contribution to the community through this service-learning experience



Fig. 5. Contribution to the community – Fall

In the fall semester, a lower percentage of students, 77% (321 out of 415), agreed that their service-learning experience brought meaningful impact to the community.

Do you plan to continue serving with this community program after completing this service-learning course?



Fig. 6. Continue program after course – Spring

With regard to willingness to continue serving with the community program after completing the Citizen Scholar class, 83% (304 out of 364) of respondents in the spring semester indicated that they plan to continue serving the community after completing the class.

Do you plan to continue serving with this community program after completing this service-learning course?



Fig. 7. Continue program after course – Fall

A slightly low percentage was registered in the fall semester with 81% (335 out of 408) of respondents indicating that they plan to continue serving with the community program after completing the Citizen Scholar class.

Over all, during the 2017 academic year, 12,443.45 direct total hours, 7,363.25 reflection total hours, and 19.9 average direct hours per student were spent on civic engagement projects.

Table 1. The impact of Civic Engagement component of the Citizen Scholar Courses on learning outcomes.

| LEARNING OUTCOME | 1 No Change | 2 Increased a Little | 3 Increased Somewhat | 4 Increased a Lot | 5 Increased Significantly |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|----------------------|------------------------------|
| Communication Skills | 22% | 9% | 30% | 18% | 21% |
| Critical Thinking | 9% | 9% | 39% | 22% | 21% |
| Understanding Community Needs | 4% | 9% | 32% | 33% | 9% |
| Ability to apply concepts of your academic discipline to the local community | 4% | 13% | 26% | 39% | 9% |
| Understanding/Appreciation of Diversity | 9% | 13% | 30% | 22% | 17% |
| Ability to effectively lead a group | 21% | 13% | 35% | 28% | 4% |
| Ability to effectively participate in a group | 21% | 17% | 26% | 17% | 4% |
| Likelihood of future participation/engagement with community issues and organizations | 9% | 17% | 22% | 30% | 17% |



Fig. 8. Themes throughout the student responses

Discussion

During the past 12 years, the University of South Florida St Petersburg (USFSP) has increasingly focused on community outreach through its civic engagement (citizen scholar) program. Since 2016, the University has created over a dozen initiatives related to civic engagement – Experiential learning workshops, civic engagement fairs, community partnership discussion forums, internship and experiential learning, among many others. These initiatives have led to a renewed interest in campus activism and civic engagement within the student body and faculty.

Conclusion

This study describes students' community and civic engagement activities as it relates to their citizen scholar courses. The results of the study also show that citizen scholar courses at USFSP are motivating students to take an active, personal and purposeful role in changing the community. Thus, the University is making meaningful contribution towards the recovery of the pervasive decline of civic America.

Acknowledgements

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