

Student Philanthropy: A Tool to Promote Civic Engagement

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Course Background



The Philanthropy Lab is a unique course which engages students in philanthropy through an active learning model. Through the course, students are given the tangible responsibility of granting \$50,000 to nonprofit organizations in the community. Students study the history, purpose and practices of philanthropy and then apply their learning to develop and enact the grant making process.

INTRODUCTION

Learning Problem:

An often cited goal of higher education is to instill a sense of civic engagement in students. In light of marked decreases of civic engagement in the US, institutions are turning using unique teaching models to accomplish this goal.¹ Often these techniques, however, fail to promote financial engagement.

Student Philanthropy:

Student philanthropy as a teaching strategy provides a promising avenue to both promote civic engagement and fill the gap for financial engagement. This strategy is designed to actively engage students in the curriculum while increasing awareness of social issues and nonprofit organizations.² While some empirical studies have been conducted to assess the effectiveness of student philanthropy in meeting its expressed goals, continued evaluation is needed due to the variety of implementation techniques. Further research is also needed to better understand *how* the teaching strategy impacts students' commitments to civic engagement.

Teaching as Research Question:

How does a semester long course utilizing a model of mixed passive and experiential learning of philanthropy through a direct giving model influence students' attitudes and intentions towards civic engagement?

METHODS

A mixed-method design was used to analyzed both the impact and process of student civic engagement impacts.

Quantitative: The validated Civic Engagement Scale was used to assess student attitudes and behaviors towards civic engagement. We used a self-reflection survey at the end of the semester to determine changes attributed to the course. These measures provide data on course effectiveness in increasing student commitment to civic engagement.

Qualitative: Student led focus groups were conducted at the end of the course and supplemented with researcher observation and short answer survey responses. For focus groups, students were given guiding questions and discussions were recorded and then inductively analyzed for major themes informed by researcher observations. This qualitative data was collected to address our central question of *how* the course impacted students' commitment to civic engagement through their learning experience.

LEARNING ACTIVITIES & OUTCOMES

Study Philanthropy Concepts

Students will understand the history, field, purpose, potential and practices of philanthropy.

Developing plan and awarding grants

Students will apply theories learned to design and implement their giving plan through a group board process.

Reflection and evaluation

Students will evaluate their decision making and fund giving process. They will reflect on the utility of practices and theories, and they will also develop and implement a long term grant evaluation to assess their funding success.

QUANTITATIVE RESULTS

The Civic Engagement Scale was designed to gauge student attitudes and intentions towards civic engagement.³ Students completed a Likert sliding scale comparing their attitudes and behaviors before the course and at the end.

Attitudes

Sample Prompt: I feel responsible for my community.

18% Increase in measure of financial responsibility to the community.

17% Increase in measure of general responsibility to the community.

Increase in all attitude measures.
Avg 9%

Behaviors

Sample Prompt: I am involved in structured volunteer opportunities in my community

12% Increase in participation in discussions of social responsibility with others.

7% Increase in planned Future community involvement.

Note:

Many students reported high measures of civic engagement behavior prior to the course, leading to low increase measures.

QUALITATIVE RESULTS

Several major themes were key in supporting learning:

Empowerment: Learning was enhanced by students making key decisions and guiding the process like in the "real world".
"The fact that we have real money to deal with was very beneficial to my learning. We weren't just talking hypotheticals."

Group Process: Students learned to communicate, make decisions and compromise in a dynamic group setting.
"I think a big achievement is coming together and working as a team instead of focusing on just our personal interests"

Diversity: Students came with diverse perspectives and passions which challenged others to extend their thinking.
"We had to work to make sure that we were adhering to being inclusive of the different experiences and perspectives."

Civic Engagement: Student perspective of civic engagement expanded to include community involvement and philanthropy.
"I used to associate it just with politics, and in this class we were just having discussions...but really thats how it all starts"

Impact: Seeing the impact of their work on organizations reinforced the classroom learning experience.
"The Awards Ceremony was one of the coolest experiences I've had as an undergrad, it brought the money to life"

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSIONS

This mixed-method study supports the theory of student philanthropy as a useful approach to supporting civic engagement. Students showed increases in attitudinal and behavioral measures. While behavior increases were lower in this study, this is likely due to many students being enrolled in a nonprofit major. The process itself allows students to develop skills that are key to civic engagement including attention to diversity, self-efficacy, and effective group interaction. Students reflected learning about philanthropy and an increased commitment to supporting their communities. Key process elements that supported this included the autonomy and free-will granted to students to make decisions, and seeing the tangible impact of their work on communities to reinforce knowledge gained in the classroom.

REFERENCES

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