**Research Commentary**

# Enhancing Workforce Readiness Using Civic Education and Service Learning Experiences of College Students and Their Political Efficacy

Brian E. Anderson, Ph.D., (Primary Contact)[1]
Anna L. Green, Ph.D.[1]
Gisele Gentry, Ph.D.[1]

[1]Jackson State University

## Abstract

Civic education and service learning aim to prepare competent and responsible citizens through active learning, workforce development and civic and political engagement that purposely connect students with their communities. Political efficacy is related to an individual's belief, faith and trust in citizenship, government policies and practices. This commentary argues there are connections between workforce readiness and college students who engage in service learning, social and political activism, and volunteerism. The theoretical approach underscoring this argument is embedded in civic education structures that afford college students various opportunities to learn and be active citizens in their communities. This commentary explores different types of civically engaged experiences students are exposed to on college and university campuses, the surrounding communities, and their relationship to workforce readiness. Student experiences will be examined through civic education, service learning, and how these models of engagement are infused within higher education institutions. Thus, these experiences and others may influence college students' perspectives and understanding of political affairs, social issues, global awareness, community development, and workplace readiness. Colleges and universities are embedded in many communities that students reside and thus impact their choice to become or not become active citizens and workforce ready within their communities.

## Introduction

Researchers agree that education is the foundation of democracy. The concept of community-based learning is referred to as the collective strategies used within education to include academically based community service, civic education, environmental, education, place-based learning, service learning and work-based learning (Melaville, Berg & Blank, 2011). Exploring the landscape of higher education institutions leads to an understanding of the student population, curriculum, departments, faculty and staff, and the community and workplaces that surrounds the institution. A dialogue, and not a monologue, around civic education must take place between the university, faculty, staff, students, the community, local businesses, churches, and other surrounding parties. This commentary explores to what extent this conversation has taking place amongst civic-minded scholars and researchers. The following three-fold approach will be used to examine this conversation: (1) operationally define civic education and service learning; (2) discuss ways in which both are applied within

education and workforce development in general and specifically to student engagement; and (3) discover what collegiate experiences would give students a sense of political efficacy that would apply to everyday life and the role they play in the communities where they live and the places they work.

## Civic Education

Civic education aims to prepare competent and responsible citizens through active civic, workforce, and political engagement that purposely connect students with their communities. It is not a new term and was introduced in the sixties as a way to discuss racial, class, cultural and economic differences. Today, researchers provide new perspectives to its interpretation and application. Melaville, Berg and Blank (2011) provide core characteristics that inform the integration of civic education into the framework of student engagement. These characteristics are listed as meaningful content, voice and choice, personal and public purpose, resources and relationships. These characteristics are discussed to illustrate their relevance, sustainability, and relationship to civic education, service learning, and workforce readiness.

Meaningful content focuses on the source of knowledge and the learning experience. Outreach community based opportunities that provide students with the acquisition of new skills, employability strategies, practice, problem solving application and discussion yield to overall engagement and real-life learning. For example, students who develop a recycling program within their community, or explore ways to be more energy efficient in their environment, have shown that engagement at this level provides meaning between the student, their community, and possible business development and/or employment strategies. Thus, personal and political efficacy now becomes a part of an individual's character (Koliba, 2000).

Voice and choice are evaluated based on the students' judgment and feelings of academic and workplace competence, skill sets, and self-efficacy from the community-based learning experience. Scholars who have transformed their curriculum to include civic education bring forth the intellectual capacity of their students through exposure to public service, ethics and civic responsibility (Ray, 2014; Hollister, 2014).

Personal and public purpose is connected through the lens of a student's perspective of their ability to recognize, contribute and solve a problem that affects their university, community, state, and/or local economy. Their actions taken from this purpose brings forth a broader awareness and understanding of social issues, economic issues, and their citizenship development. Some universities have Civic Engagement Centers on the campuses, but Ray (2014) argues that students are more empowered when their reach is beyond an isolated space on campus. Instead, their civic and service learning experiences have now merged their university with their community for a larger perspective of engagement and economic development.

The above listed characteristics could not be possible without resources and relationships. The collaboration between all facets of the community, such as public and private business sectors and the younger generation is paramount to fully instilling the employability skills, attitudes, and beliefs that allow for students to want to engage in opportunities outside of themselves. This collaboration can help shape their civic character to better function in a diverse and global workforce. This civic character development helps expand on a deeper level the impact that community, business, and education organizations have on student engagement. Active

learning, student engagement, and life-long perspectives on rendering service are a result of collaboration and partnership between all educational institutions and the community stakeholders, including local businesses that are potential workforce readiness opportunities.

When higher education institutions take the responsibility to create an environment where both faculty and students create authentic learning experiences around civic- and business-minded projects, then a true partnership is born. For example, an English professor organizes her class to write about policy problems, class discussions and make presentations at local town hall meetings to address those policy problems like workforce development; or a psychology professor studies the intergroup dialogue between students of diverse social identities, and then engages in discussions about civic actions and student commitments (Checkoway 2014). These are but a few examples of the possibilities that exist when authentic learning experiences are used to promote civic involvement and workforce readiness.

Based on the infusion of civic education within the foundation of learning, the unique role of higher education can become the conduit that taps into the intellectual capacity of faculty and students. This practice will ensure that the university encourages professors to use their classes, lectures and curriculum to engage students in public policy, problem solving, democratic awareness, addressing economic disparities and cultural tolerance, promoting community development and workforce readiness opportunities.

## Service Learning

As societal and economical values continue to transition, colleges and universities are also impacted. Many would question today's college student's overall commitment to service and philanthropy, in comparison to seeking purely materialistic and/or financial gain, due to changing morals and values in society. While maintaining this thought, it is evident that administrators at some institutions of higher learning have begun to question the level or existence of political efficacy amongst college students. As a means of combating some of these matters, as well as to integrate student activity that would be more of a mirror image to the institution's missions and goals, some universities have started to either strongly encourage or even mandate a designated number of internship credits, volunteer or service learning hours prior to graduation. It has been noted that creating these types of opportunities for students would not only promote philanthropic citizenship, but enhance students' employability skills, networking, social skills, and self-efficacy toward democracy and enhance the overall collegiate experience.

Service learning has evolved over time as an integration of "volunteer type" activities into the classroom setting that demonstrates and results in a meaningful service connection to course content. Two educators by the name of Robert Sigmon and William Ramsey were responsible for the origination of the term "service learning" in 1967. During that time, as an approach for students to grow educationally, service learning was referred to as the process in which education was applied to community-based, extra-curricular activities (Seitsinger, 2005). By 1975, service learning had grown into an academic disciplinary component that incorporated significant community service with course content in an effort to teach civic responsibility, workforce readiness, lifelong civic engagement, and to strengthen America's poorest economic communities.

Today, many service learning programs are curriculum-based and a class requirement, which includes classroom and off campus experiences with a reflective component (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Hatcher, Bringle, & Mathiah, 2004; Hurd, 2006; Mariani, 2004). This initiative has grown so much over the years that colleges and universities have expanded participation in community service in an effort to promote innovative service learning programs, while serving as a civic institution to meet societal and economical needs (Learn and Serve, 2010; Mariani, 2004). According to the American Association for Higher Education (1999), service learning should address the following: meet the needs of the community and is coordinated with the academic institution; foster civic responsibility; enhance rather than replace the classroom curriculum; and include a reflective component. Hurd (2006) also states the goal of service learning is to assist students in developing global skills and knowledge to make better decisions and problem solvers.

Since its introduction and increasing social, academic, and economic benefits, institutions of higher learning have become more intrigued with the concept of service learning. With regard to faculty, embedding this concept could add more creativity in methods of instruction and ensure that each student participates in a structured, community-based, hands-on reflective experience. Pribbenow (2005) indicated faculty use of service learning brings about an increased use of constructivist teaching and pedagogical approaches, a greater involvement in a community of learners and teachers, a more significant commitment to teaching, an enhanced awareness of student learning processes and outcomes, a more in depth connection with students as individuals, and enhanced communication of theoretical concepts.

The at-large community and community partners are extremely vital to the success of service learning programs. Continuous input, updates and clarity from the community is imperative with regard to directed needs of populations being served as well as clear and concise goals and objectives with community partners. However, very little is known about the community's perspective on service learning, especially as related to workforce and business development (Blouin & Perry, 2009; Katz, 2010; Vernon & Foster, 2002). Without a well-defined plan, effective communications and relationships between university, faculty, students, businesses, and the community will be doomed.

### Political Efficacy

Political efficacy should remain a focus among the leadership at institutions of higher learning. Many colleges and universities have maintained missions and goals for years centered on service. It is imperative that these institutions continue to strongly involve civic education, service learning programs, workforce readiness, and global economic activities for students, faculty and staff. This connection will ensure that all parties are civically engaged and the future workforce is ready for employment; thus creating a positive citizenship that will remain an important element in the college environment and provide meaningful collegiate experiences and job opportunities for students. As students transition from the university setting into the larger world, it is hoped civic education, service learning, political efficacy, and workforce readiness experiences will help to create and foster an altruistic mindset and character among those students.

### Moving Forward

This commentary explored at the surface level the relationship between civic education, service learning, and political efficacy as related to enhancing the workforce readiness of college students. The direct

and indirect connection between civic education, service learning, volunteerism, economic stability, and workforce readiness are illustrated through the learned experiences that college students are afforded.  It is imperative that institutions of higher education offer its students a curriculum that is centered on engagement within the college, university, workplace, and surrounding community.  This educational structure will expose, educate, and equip students with employability skills, life-long perspectives for rendering service and volunteerism, and an overall understanding of the role they should play in their communities, workplaces, and beyond.

## Implications for Further Research

As noted, the integration and usage of civic education, service learning, political efficacy, and workforce readiness is of great importance to college students today. These modular concepts provide college students additional training, employability skills, workforce and interpersonal relations that are needed to be successful in today's highly competitive society. Even as this engagement has heighten and become more popular on university campuses, there still remains a need for collaborative best practices and further research.  Below are a few suggested research opportunities that would continuously enhance this overall integrative and collaborative concept:

1. Conduct a case study on one institution of higher education that has embedded civic education, service learning, and workforce readiness as a part of its mission, goals and academic learning environment to uncover the personal impacts, employability skills, political efficacy and civic-minded perspectives of the faculty, administrative staff and students.

2. Create an instrument that assess and evaluate college students' perspectives related to their academic learning, political efficacy, civic engagement, problem solving skills, and workforce readiness as a result of participating in service learning opportunities.  From this data, individual and group follow-up interviews could be conducted for in-depth personal accounts of these experiences.

Pursuing the above research agenda should help to identify opportunities that can further unleash the potential of civic education and service learning as effective workforce readiness strategies.

## References

American Association for Higher Education. (1999). Series on Service-learning in Disciplines, American
    Association for Higher Education, Washington, DC.

Blouin, D. & Perry, E.  (2009). Whom does service-learning really serve? *Community-Based
    Organizations Perspectives on Service-Learning*, 37 (2): 120-135.

Checkoway, B.  (2014).  Civic-minded professors.  In J.N. Reich (Ed.), *Civic engagement, civic
    development and higher education.* (pp. 77-80).  Washington, DC:  Bringing Theory to Practice.
    Eyler, J. & Giles, D.  (1999). *Where's the learning in service-learning?* San Francisco,  CA:  Jossey-
    Bass Inc. Publishers.

Hatcher, J., Bringle, R., & Muthiah, R. (2004).  Designing effective reflection:  What matters to
    service-learning?  *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*.

Hollister, R. M. (2014).  Building a university-wide college of citizenship and public service.  In
        J.N. Reich (Ed.), *Civic engagement, civic development and higher education.* (pp. 51-54).
        Washington, DC:  Bringing Theory to Practice.

Hurd, C. (2006).  Is Service-Learning Effective?  A Look at Current Research.  Colorado State
        University.

Katz, S. (2010). Does Service Learning Really Help?  *The Chronicle of Higher*
      *Education*. Washington, DC.

Koliba, C. (2000).  Democracy and education schools and community initiative conceptual
        framework and preliminary findings.  Retrieved from:
        http://www.uvm.edu/~dewey/articles/Democonc.html

Learn and Serve. (2010). Retrieved from:  http://servicelearning.orgwhat_is_service-
        learning/History/index.php.

Mariani, D. (2004).  Service-Learning Enhances Coursework.  Advance Archive   Search Page.
        Retrieved from:  Advance on the web-Issue Archive http://advance.uconn.
        Edu/2004/041025/04102410.htm.

Melaville, A., Berg, A.C. & Blank, M.J. (2011). Community-based learning: Engaging students
        for success and citizenship.  Retrieved from:  http://www.communityschools.org.

Pribbenow, D. (2005).  The impact of service learning pedagogy on faculty teaching and
        learning.  *Michigan Journal of Community Service-Learning,* 25-38.

Ray, D. K. (2014).  Civic diffusion:  Moving the center to the center.  In
        J.N. Reich (Ed.), *Civic engagement, civic development and higher education.* (pp. 55-58).
        Washington, DC:  Bringing Theory to Practice.

Seitsinger, A.M. (2005).  Service-learning and standards-based instruction in middle schools. *The Journal of*
        *Educational Research* 99, 19-31.

Vernon, A. & Foster, L.  (2002). Nonprofit Agency Perspectives of Higher Education Service
        Learning and Volunteerism 10 (2): 207-230.