

Creating Context for Civic Engagement through the Study of Social Issues

Introduction

Preparing students as informed, engaged, and responsible citizens has historically been a commitment of higher education in the United States. A recent survey of members of the Association for Colleges and Universities confirms that many institutions are placing greater emphasis on civic education by developing innovative practices for promoting related learning outcomes.¹ We suggest a process for providing a context for civic engagement that is particularly useful in social science undergraduate courses on applied sociology, methods of research or social problems. Students engage in a series of activities focusing on interrelated social issues, in this case food insecurity and food waste, and complete a capstone assignment in which they reflect upon their learning over the semester. Results from their reflections are useful for assessing student learning in relation to civic engagement.

Pedagogy

Civic engagement can assume many forms, and in the context of the college learning environment can include activities like service learning, integrating academic work with community engagement, and engaging others in learning about issues they care about.² Undergraduate courses on applied sociology, research methods, and social problems provide ideal settings for

gaining hands-on training while helping students to connect knowledge to their campus and community and become active citizens.

In this illustration, team-designed activities are used by one of the authors in an introductory-level applied sociology course directed toward sociology majors and minors at a small, private liberal arts college. The academic skills of students tended to be above average, and all had completed at least one self-initiated, supervised field experience before entering the course as part of their college-level requirements which emphasize experiential learning. Throughout the course, students engage in a series of interconnected activities focusing on social concerns of food insecurity and food wastage. Here, students have the opportunity to make a difference in communities while developing the “knowledge, skills, values and motivation to make that difference,” key factors in fostering civic engagement.³ Collectively, these activities provide the context for civic engagement and the development of knowledge and skills, civic identity, and commitment to civic life that is personally enriching and beneficial to society.

Building and Communicating Knowledge

At the onset of the semester, students complete a writing assignment on explanations for and the extent to which hunger is a problem in the United States, and what they think should be done to solve the problem. At this stage, we suggest using the term ‘hunger’ as most students are unfamiliar with the concept of food insecurity. For this assignment, students are instructed to rely upon

existing knowledge and refrain from researching the subject. Students retain a copy of their work for comparison to the end-of-semester capstone reflective essay.

The next steps involve students conducting library and Internet research in order to build knowledge and produce tangible products for raising awareness, educating, and promoting social activism. Initially, students are charged with investigating the relationship between hunger and food insecurity, and how the problem is most effectively conceptualized and measured. Next, students research the nature of food insecurity at local and national levels, paying particular attention to the relationship between the issue and social factors such as socioeconomic status, gender, family structure, race and ethnicity. Finally, students explore the relationship between food insecurity and food waste, and the “missed opportunity” food waste represents with regard to alleviating food insecurity in industrialized societies.⁴ Drawing upon their research, student teams prepare professional-quality electronic posters using Microsoft PowerPoint software to be displayed on campus as part of a broader awareness raising campaign like Earth Day to bring to light the relationship between food waste and food insecurity in wealthy nations.

In addition to these activities, students work collaboratively to prepare and deliver short presentations to their classmates. For instance, students conduct a cross-national comparison on food insecurity between the United States and a

country of their team's choosing. In other assignments, students share best practices for positive change at community and national levels by highlighting one government and one non-governmental program.

Integrating Academic Work with Engagement

Having developed an understanding of the relationship between food insecurity and food waste, students engage in self-study and community-based research to explicitly connect academic work with civic engagement. Seeking a better understanding of individual contributions to national food waste, students investigate their own food wastage and related attitudes and behaviors. They engage in a week-long study of their own food waste by photographing food wasted prior to discarding it and providing descriptions of the images and reasons for discarding the food. They arrange the photographs, descriptions and explanations into an electronic document for analysis, and use content analysis to organize the data according to select concepts and themes. Then, students compare the frequency of different types of foods discarded and their reasons for discarding. They present their findings in a written report, and are encouraged to draw linkages between personal attitudes, behaviors, and broader cultural values and norms, and discuss how changes in individual attitudes and actions may contribute to social change. To promote their success in the project, students are provided a model food waste journal and written analysis.

In the community-based research project, student teams conduct semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with select local food purveyors and food assistance providers to collect information on the production, management and/or redirection of food waste. The teacher's previously established community connections and knowledge of local businesses were useful for identifying potential participants. Teams are provided a telephone script to solicit participation and detailed instructions for preparing for and completing interviews. Student teams practice using the interview script to develop skills prior to conducting interviews. Collected data is combined and the class conducts a descriptive analysis to draw conclusions about food waste production and management among participating organizations. Lastly, through an in-class debriefing, students are encouraged to identify barriers and opportunities for creating alternatives to discarding edible foods in order to decrease food insecurity in the local community and suggest directions for further research and social action.

Service Learning

To gain a deeper understanding of the issues, students participate in organized service activities by volunteering at a food bank, pantry, or other agency whose primary function is to provide food support. In this case, a campus office provided information on co-curricular opportunities in the area to the teacher, and arrangements with organizations were made in advance so that

students could contribute most effectively to their operations. Opportunities included assisting the local BackPack program to assemble back packs of food distributed to local school children, distributing food to individuals and families, and assisting with daily operations.

Capstone: Reflective Essay

During the final weeks of classes students are again asked to prepare an essay on explanations for and the extent to which hunger is a problem in the United States, and what they think should be done to solve the problem. Students are directed to draw upon, incorporate, and synthesize knowledge gained and reflect upon how their answers compare to those they offered at the start of the semester. As with the initial assignment, they are to rely upon current knowledge and refrain from conducting additional research for the purpose of the assignment. This offers opportunity for a value-added perspective to students' learning by comparing what they knew at the onset of the semester to their knowledge and skills at the end of the course, and identifying how the knowledge is useful for positive change.

Assessment

Grading rubrics are used to evaluate student learning on course objectives related to research, theory and practice. Evaluation criteria include accuracy, organization, synthesis and presentation of information for posters and presentations, and completeness, clarity, and adherence to protocols for

documentation related to the food waste analysis and community-based research project. Both the written food waste analysis and oral contributions from the community-based research project debriefing provide evidence of skills in critical analysis and interpretation, as students are expected to make appropriate generalizations and draw informed implications.

The capstone reflective essay is the point to assess student learning in relation to civic engagement. To formulate expectations used to evaluate student learning, we drew upon the Association of American Colleges and Universities' Civic Engagement VALUE Rubric, which offers fundamental criteria for learning outcomes. Students are assessed on their ability to connect their knowledge to civic engagement and commitment to civic action within community contexts.

Connecting Knowledge to Civic Engagement

In their capstone essays, the majority of students expressed the combined experiences significantly enhanced their knowledge about food insecurity, its relationship to food waste in the United States, and programs designed to ameliorate this problem. Students consistently made relevant connections between their knowledge and activity associated with civic engagement, and explained how being knowledgeable is crucial to addressing the problem. The following statements are representative of this:

I think the biggest issue with hunger is the lack of awareness people have for the issue. This is exactly how I was in the beginning of the semester

until I began researching local issues and talking with individuals at [the] volunteer experience.

I have learned that knowledge about a certain topic is the first step we can take in order to start helping the issue at hand.

Moreover, students frequently discussed how their academic work was useful for understanding and sharing information about food insecurity. The following typify these outcomes for some of the students:

In addition to learning the scale of food insecurity...I learned how to connect concepts and theories to this issue. This can be seen in my [work] where I explained statistics on food insecurity through concepts of the conflict theory.

At the beginning of the year I was very vague and quite naïve about the topic at hand and had no idea where to even start. Now I am able to report facts and display data findings that suggested the importance of focusing on the food we waste in order to help hunger and those living in food insecurity.

Students also generally remarked on how knowledge added improved their capacity to offer solutions for positive change:

At the beginning of the semester the solutions I offered were ones that I would probably be quick to dismiss because I believe they would not be very effective. The solutions I offer now are reinforced with policies that would back up the efforts in decreasing food insecurity.

I not only know more facts about food insecurity and hunger, but I also know what can be done about it.

Demonstrating Civic Identity and Commitment

Imagining oneself as an active participant in society and having a responsibility to work with others toward social objectives is indicative of the development of a civic identity. Students consistently reported a growing or

clarified sense of civic identity and commitment to and motivation for action in their reflective essays:

I found myself bonding with people and learning all about their program and how many children they fed a year. It was just touching to me and made me want to help out even more.

I have already consciously decided to make change in my habits to address the problems of hunger and food insecurity.

Particularly evident in their analysis of personal food waste, students described how the experience raised their concern for others and the community in contrast to their personal lives, key to a commitment to civic life.

I did not know much about food insecurity and hunger...this never really occurred to me really, I was more focused on my life along with what I was doing personally, not about the food insecurity of another person.

Having this experience that I can relate to forever changed my mindset on wasting food... every time I throw away food I think of why I threw it away and how food could be used more productively.

Many students recognized themselves as part of the larger social fabric, and made connections between their growth in knowledge and the need to work collaboratively within community contexts to achieve civic aims:

All of the work and research we did this semester opened my eyes to the issue and made me realize there truly is a problem in the United States and we can, we should, do our part.

Through everything I learned this semester, I can conclude that it is going to take a collaborative effort at all levels to fight food insecurity in America.

Conclusion

This paper demonstrates a technique to study social issues that can not only promote the development of skills critical to meet course objectives related to research, theory and practice, but also advance a combination of knowledge, skills, values and motivations that serve as a foundation for civic identity and a commitment to civic life. Successful implementation of the semester-long project involves a fair amount of production activity (e.g. creating example food waste journal and analysis) and coordination (e.g. arranging volunteer opportunities) in advance, and adherence to a fixed schedule and sequence of assignments. While the current illustration involves an examination of food insecurity and food waste, we suggest other social concerns may be interposed in this process to achieve comparable, desirable ends.

¹Sylvia Hurtado and Linda DeAngelo, "Linking Diversity and Civic-Minded Practices with Student Outcomes: New Evidence from National Surveys," *Liberal Education* 98, no. 2 (2012), https://aacu.org/liberaleducation/le-sp12/hurtado_deangelo.cfm (accessed May 17, 2014).

²"VALUE: Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education," *Association of American Colleges and Universities*, <http://www.aacu.org/value/rubrics/civicengagement.cfm> (accessed March 30, 2014).

³Ibid., sec. 2.

⁴“U.S. Food Waste Challenge FAQ,” *United States Department of Agriculture*,
<http://www.usda.gov/oce/foodwaste/faqs.htm> (accessed March 30, 2014).