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Implementing an Experiential Learning Program Focused on Civic Leadership to Produce Social Justice Outcomes

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Introduction

These are troubling times for our nation and particularly for our democracy. The past few years have provided ample evidence that American democracy is at risk. The nation is deeply divided along partisan lines, some political leaders seemingly embrace mob rule, and voter suppression efforts have escalated. On January 6, 2021, the world witnessed a violent attack on the United States Capitol, which shook our democracy to its foundations. At the same time, racial and social injustice remains rampant, and cynicism has become pervasive among American citizens.

The “new crisis in democracy” (Flores & Rogers, 2019, p. 1) has clearly worsened, and the need for higher education to respond meaningfully has become more urgent (see McGuire, 2021). The January 6 assault on American democracy created an inflection point for higher education. Indeed, events over the past four years or so signaled “another crucible moment” for colleges and universities (Flores & Rogers, 2019, p. 11). The much-cited “crucible moment” of 2012 came in the wake of citizen passivity and a downward spiral in public confidence in the nation’s political institutions (National Task Force, 2012). That troubling situation led to a national call to action in making college students’ civic learning and democratic engagement an educational priority and a means of strengthening democracy.

A large number of higher education institutions throughout the United States responded to the national call by instituting strategies and programs to foster civic engagement and democratic renewal. The University of Maryland, Baltimore County, for instance, sought to fulfill the “holistic aspirations” of *A Crucible Moment* (National Task Force, 2012) by “supporting and deepening a rich, humane culture

of engagement through careful organizing, curricular and co-curricular experimentation, and storytelling” (Berger et al., 2020, para. 7). Meanwhile, the Center for Public Deliberation at a large university in Colorado ratcheted up its work in enhancing democracy locally through improved public communication and community problem-solving (Colorado State University, n.d.); and California State University, Monterey Bay, leveraged its service-learning program to advance social justice and equity (Ochoa, 2019).

Over time, the efforts at many higher education institutions lost momentum and the much-sought-after democratic renewal proved somewhat elusive. Understandably, then, institutional leaders have called attention to the urgency of recommitting higher education to the public good (e.g., Cantor, 2020; Carcasson, 2019). For some institutions, civic engagement through experiential learning holds the key to preparing students for active participation in advancing this nation’s democratic institutions and processes. One such institution has established a program that is the subject of this article.

Institutional Context and Focus of Inquiry

This inquiry examined fundamental elements of a civic learning and leadership development program for undergraduates at Barry University, a Catholic institution in Miami, Florida. Founded in 1940 by the Adrian Dominican Sisters, Barry prides itself on inspiring students to foster positive change in the community, from local to global. According to the university’s mission statement, “a Barry education and university experience foster individual and communal transformation where learning leads to knowledge and truth, reflection leads to informed action, and a commitment to social justice leads to collaborative service” (Barry University, 2008, para. 2).

Classified by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching as a community-engaged institution, Barry recently institutionalized experiential learning as the fulcrum of a strategy to foster personal and social responsibility among undergraduates. The university's Center for Community Service Initiatives (CCSI)—currently celebrating its 10th anniversary—functions as the coordinating unit for community-focused experiential learning programs and related faculty development. The CCSI plays a key role in preparing students to be engaged, productive citizens.

Focused on civic learning and leadership development, the Barry Service Corps (BSC) Fellows Program aims to foster civic mindedness and, in the process, prepare students to become agents of social change. According to Steinberg et al. (2011), civic mindedness is “a person’s inclination or disposition to be knowledgeable of and involved in the community, and to have a commitment to act upon a sense of responsibility as a member of that community” (p. 20). The program equips student leaders primarily for engagement with marginalized populations in underserved communities (Bowen & Berrien, 2020).

In this inquiry, we were interested in examining the practice-based approach to the program by describing the main components and the implementation procedure. Although an in-depth analysis of the outcomes of the program was not part of this inquiry, we were also interested in highlighting a few outcomes that would indicate the extent to which the program demonstrates effective practices in civic learning and social justice education. In addition, we would identify the challenges encountered in implementing the program and specify the implications for practice.

Experiential Learning Strategy and Components

The BSC Fellows Program is implemented as a cocurricular experiential learning initiative characterized by a social justice orientation. Cocurricular initiatives are programs, projects, and events that complement the curriculum. Developed and organized intentionally as learning experiences, they augment course content and enrich classroom experiences (Bowen, 2021). At Barry University, *experiential learning* is treated as largely synonymous with *active learning*. *Experiential learning* is defined as “a process in which students acquire and apply knowledge, skills, and values in a relevant setting . . . [and which] involves linking theory to practice through student engagement complemented

by critical reflection” (Barry University, 2014, p. 12).

Social Justice Framework

The university’s experiential learning initiatives are usually placed within a social justice framework. Social justice is viewed as “the state of institutional or structural arrangements in which there are no inequalities that are unjustifiable in terms of the greater social good or that are imposed unfairly” (Marullo & Edwards 2000, p. 899). As Cohen et al. (2001) have explained, social justice entails efforts to influence outcomes, including public policy and resource allocation decisions within political, economic, and social systems and institutions, that directly affect people’s lives. In this vein, experiential learning toward social justice reflects complexities of both the process and the goals, with specific experiential strategies being focused on the community while engaging complex and contested issues (Butin, 2007). Additionally, experiential learning with a service component can encourage students to see themselves as social change agents who respond to injustice in communities (Mitchell, 2008).

In accordance with the social justice framework, students learn about the systems of power and privilege that produce social inequalities; they critically explore factors related to such inequalities (e.g., race, religion, gender, and sexual orientation). Further, students learn to work collaboratively with others, banding together to challenge inequities and to seek solutions to social issues by analyzing the root causes of the identified issues (Bowen, 2021).

Each academic year, the CCSI selects students to form a cohort of about 20 program participants. To be eligible for selection, students must be undergraduates who express interest in civic engagement and social justice and must show a propensity for leadership. Consideration for diversity within the cohort is a significant part of the recruitment process. Program administrators purposefully select students to produce a diverse mix in terms of age, gender, race, ethnicity, and experience.

The BSC Fellows Program, which was launched in 2013, includes specialized training and mentorship for civic leadership development. The intensive training provided by campus and community leaders and year-round support from CCSI staff prepare students to fulfill three requirements that constitute major components of the program:

“During training sessions, students learn how a diverse set of identities intersect and affect an individual’s lived experience and well-being.”



Figure 1: Barry Service Corps Fellows Program Components

community engagement program support, collaboration with community partners, and focused projects (Bowen & Berrien, 2020; see Figure 1). We will look at each program component in turn.

Civic Leadership Development

Civic learning and civic leadership are the twin elements of education for civic engagement practice through cocurricular experiential learning at Barry. For this university, *civic engagement* means individual and collective actions designed to identify and address issues of public concern (Bowen, 2018). The civic competencies for the program are based on the six “braids” of Musil’s (2009) “civic learning spiral:” (1) knowledge acquisition and generation, (2) civic skills, (3) civic values, (4) self-awareness and attitudes, (5) community and cultural awareness, and (6) public action. It is important for students to acquire civic knowledge—the fundamental understanding of the structure of government and the processes by which government enacts policies and makes laws. They should also develop civic skills—the ability to participate as active, responsible citizens in a democracy. And they should embrace civic values—the standards and principles that shape one’s moral and civic compass and affect one’s “disposition towards matters that have implications for a fair and just society” (Lott & Eagan, 2011, p. 33).

The program facilitators take the BSC Fellows beyond the fundamentals of civic learning by covering such key concepts as *cultural competence* and *intersectionality* (see Figure 2). To build cultural competence, students are provided with the opportunity to examine their cultural experiences and to discuss their own biases. Year after year, the program administrators have noted that the vast majority of BSC Fellows were unfamiliar with the term *intersectionality* (see Crenshaw, 2016); therefore, the facilitators are always prepared to devote several experiential learning activities to elucidating the concept.

During training sessions, students learn how a diverse set of identities intersect and affect an individual’s lived experience and well-being. Intersecting identities include most, if not all, of the “Big 10” social identity markers: race, ethnicity, gender, age, religion, sexual orientation, ability, socioeconomic status, physical appearance, and immigration status. The facilitators guide students in confronting stereotypes and assumptions and in finding common values among cohort members. The students come to understand that social identity is complex and that oppressive institutions are interconnected and therefore cannot be properly examined in isolation.

Moreover, the program facilitators delve into civic leadership, drawing on the Higher Education Research Institute’s (1996) social change model of leadership development as well as the work of Kouzes and Posner (2017), who described five practices of exemplary leadership. As emphasized in the social change model, leadership is concerned with effecting positive change through collaborative efforts. Kouzes and Posner’s leadership practices are as follows: *Model the way*, *inspire a shared vision*, *challenge the process*, *enable others to act*, and *encourage the heart*. The BSC Fellows,



Figure 2: Key Concepts of Civic Learning

as emerging leaders, explore these practices through various experiential learning activities. For example, to lay the foundation for modeling the way, they complete a “Values Checklist,” identifying values that they consider very important, somewhat important, or not important (Bowen, 2018). Workshops are an avenue for BSC Fellows to acquire knowledge of social issues affecting communities. Through facilitated discussions, the student leaders explore the complexity of a social issue—its historical, sociological, cultural, and political contexts; its causes, effects, and how it intersects with other issues (Bowen, 2021).

Experiential learning activities such as role-plays, simulations, and games provide opportunities for them to practice civic skills, including effective communication, critical thinking, and the ability to organize and persuade others to take action. Here are three examples of experiential learning activities that have served their purposes well

- Simulation Training Systems’ “BaFá BaFá” is an activity intended to help participants understand how culture affects each person’s behavior and what is required of each person to live or work with people who have different values, work styles, and worldviews. Participants learn to work across difference, read nonverbal communication, reflect on cultural humility, and consider context when working with community-based organizations.
- “Animal Game” involves the assignment of animal identities (i.e., cat, dog, mice, and goldfish) to participants. Roughly half are dogs, half are cats, two are mice, and one is a goldfish. The participants are instructed to stand in a circle and keep their eyes closed. Each makes the assigned animal sound (at the typical volume) and moves about, with eyes still closed, finding others who are the same “animal.” The dogs and cats are dominant; the mice and fish tend to be unnoticed and intimidated. This game demonstrates dominance and marginalization, with students reflecting on which voices are heard and unheard in communities; and it builds empathy for marginalized people.
- “Forced Choice” is an experiential exercise that allows students to reflect on their positionality while learning the concepts of *social identity* and *intersectionality*. This activity is also effective for teambuilding.

In addition, students sharpen their leadership skills by serving on event planning and institutional governance committees on campus. They also share their work and hone their presentation skills at local, national, and international conferences—notably Campus Compact state-level conferences, the IMPACT National Conference, and the annual conference of the International Association for Research on Service-Learning and Community Engagement (IARSLCE).

Community Engagement Program Support

The BSC Fellows assist with facilitation of other programs, projects, and events coordinated by the CCSI. For example, they serve as community-based project assistants and service-learning reflection facilitators especially on designated days of service and during alternative breaks. The student leaders also assist with the physical arrangements for events such as the public forums that comprise each academic year’s Deliberative Dialogue Series organized by the CCSI.

Collaboration with Community Partners

During the cohort’s orientation, the new BSC Fellows take part in a preliminary experiential learning exercise during which they individually indicate the social issue (or social justice issue) that is most important to them. Later, the BSC Fellows are assigned to social justice teams; each team concentrates on a specific social issue and is matched with select community organizations.

During training sessions, to ensure that the emerging leaders can engage effectively and ethically with community partners, the program facilitators emphasize power dynamics. The participants discuss approaches to understanding the experiences of the most marginalized groups in society and ways of redressing social issues and citizen grievances. Additionally, the BSC Fellows learn that they will be approaching the community from a position of privilege. They also learn the importance of avoiding “colonial and disempowering practices in civic engagement” and of helping to build “relationships of mutuality and reciprocity” (Bowen & Berrien, 2020, p. 173).

Their collaboration with community partners involves direct service as well as the application of social change methods such as grassroots/community organizing, popular education, advocacy, and public action. The student leaders tackle social issues as viewed through a structural/systemic change lens. In this regard, they explore the root causes of the issue before working collaboratively with community partners to address the issue. The students understand

that taking action without identifying the factors that contribute to the issue can result in misdirected efforts while wasting resources. Before taking public action, for instance, the student leaders engage in issue exploration, coalition building, and direct-action organizing.

One experiential learning activity that has proven useful for explaining structural/systemic social change involves the story of the Babies in the River. Below is an abridged version of the story.

Once upon a time in a riverside village, a woman noticed a shocking sight: a drowning baby, crying his lungs out, being washed downriver. She rushed to save the baby, rescuing him just before he went over the falls at the edge of town. The next day, there were two babies in the river; the day after, three more, then four. With the help of her neighbors, the woman saved them, too. When babies kept washing downstream, the villagers banded together, setting up a 24-hour rescue watch. Still the babies kept coming. So, the villagers installed an elaborate alarm system and strung safety nets across the river, but they were still overwhelmed trying to save the babies.

The BSC Fellows suggest and discuss various approaches to the situation. In the end, they grasp the importance of long-term, systemic solutions to social issues rather than responding simply with charity. (If some of the villagers go upstream and find out why babies are ending up in the river, then other villagers would not have to keep rescuing babies downstream.)

Among the social change methods, advocacy and public action are popular practices at Barry. For example, BSC Fellows have engaged in advocacy to address hunger by participating in Bread for the World's Racial Wealth Gap Simulation and the organization's Offering of Letters to Congress. And BSC Fellows have been at the forefront of public demonstrations, agitating for food retailers to support the Coalition of Immokalee Workers' Fair Food Program (Bowen, 2021). For their part, community partners function as service site managers and coeducators for civic learning and leadership development.

Issue-Focused Projects

Fulfilling another requirement of the program, the students engage in projects focused on salient social (justice) issues. The projects call for research, planning, implementation, and presentation. Students show creativity in their projects, which have dealt with a variety of issues, from educational disparities and health inequities to farmworker exploitation and food insecurity. As noted by Bowen and Berrien

(2020), some BSC Fellows focused their projects on the needs of resettled refugees, the poor treatment of incarcerated women, and the injustice meted out to racial minority groups. The student leaders present the outcomes of their projects at Barry's annual Community Engagement Symposium.

Outcomes of Civic Learning for Social Justice

The assessment of learning outcomes (i.e., the BSC Fellows' demonstration of civic competencies) involves the use of three validated instruments: the Civic-Minded Graduate (CMG) Scale, the CMG Narrative Prompt, and the CMG Interview Protocol with associated evaluation rubrics (Steinberg et al., 2011). Assessments have shown that students generally become civic-minded graduates who demonstrate the capacity and desire to work with others for social change. In the process, they acquire the knowledge, develop the skills, and embrace the values that reflect their readiness for the role of social change agents.

Evidence of their preparedness for social change agency has been found in their declarative responses to the CMG Narrative Prompt, which states: "I have a responsibility and a commitment to use the knowledge and skills I have gained as a college student to collaborate with others, who may be different from me, to help address issues in society."

One of the BSC Fellows declared:

I feel a natural sense of moral responsibility to share [information about social issues] because I know that too many of my peers know less about these issues. I have established myself among my peers as someone who can discuss social issues with passion and educate others. Hopefully . . . they will become inspired and see the importance of becoming involved in the political process . . . and to embark on long-term, progressive change.

Further, a BSC Fellow, who accepted a leadership role in a national alliance to help secure a better deal for farmworkers, produced literature and other resources for use by her successors. One of her cohort members developed a mechanism to help resettling refugees navigate the local health-care system. Two BSC Fellows started a student organization as part of Barry's Campus Democracy Project to promote civic learning and democratic engagement, including participation in electoral processes at the federal, state, and local levels. Also, over the years, several BSC Fellows have traveled to the state capitol (Tallahassee, Florida) and to Capitol Hill (Washington, D.C.) to speak with legislators.

Program Implementation Challenges and Implications

In implementing the BSC Fellows Program, the administrators and facilitators have encountered a few challenges. All of these challenges have implications for practice, which experiential learning program organizers at other universities may find instructive.

First, it is somewhat challenging to maintain the program as truly cocurricular (complementing the curriculum) rather than extracurricular (unconnected to the curriculum). This is because course instructors are not administrators or facilitators of the BSC Fellows Program, and the components of the program do not properly align with course content. The clear implication is that a procedure is necessary to connect aspects of cocurricular experiential learning directly to at least a few courses that students will likely take while in the program. This may require some negotiation between program planners and course instructors. At the very least, students should be encouraged to integrate and transfer learning from courses to their cocurricular experiential learning activities and vice versa.

Second, students' class schedules and academic demands sometimes prevent them from attending some program-related events or completing certain assigned tasks in a timely manner; and, at times, students and community partners have conflicting schedules. Building flexibility into the schedule as well as implementing parts of the program on weekends usually addresses that challenge.

Third, because students enjoy direct service, which typically makes them see their fruits of their labor almost immediately, advocacy sometimes seem like less-rewarding work. Consequently, from time to time, some students in the program try to cut corners and do not spend enough time on advocacy processes. Advocacy does take time, and responses from decision-makers may be slow. Nevertheless, advocacy is a tried-and-true method of influencing policies and decisions within political, economic, and social spheres (Cohen et al., 2001). Offering a mix of opportunities for direct service, advocacy, and public action is an effective practice that students will appreciate.

Fourth, the critical reflection process is not always as effective as it should be; students sometimes give superficial responses rather than reflect deeply on their civic engagement. In a social justice context, it is important that students reflect critically on power, privilege, and positionality even as they learn to grapple with weighty issues in a thoughtful manner.

Facilitating reflection activities with a series of relevant questions and prompts is a good way to improve the process. Questions should encourage students to articulate and elaborate on their individual and collective experiences and to analyze the implications.

Conclusion

In the wake of increased political polarization, the unprecedented attack on Congress, and voter suppression efforts, serious concerns about the state of American democracy have come to the fore. The situation serves as a clarion call to higher education to produce graduates who are well prepared for public service—graduates who can draw upon their civic learning and democratic engagement at institutions where civic engagement and attention to social justice are educational priorities.

The program at Barry University exemplifies an educational initiative that signals acceptance of the essential role that institutions can and should play in preparing students for lives of civic responsibility in a democracy. Indeed, the Barry Service Corps Fellows Program has contributed to building students' commitment to active citizenship and social change as a way of addressing community needs and social inequities.

Numbered among today's students are tomorrow's leaders. It is incumbent on institutions of higher education to prepare students to become social actors who have a sense of their own agency as well as a sense of civic responsibility—and who will engage meaningfully in systemic social change and democratic renewal efforts. ■

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