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Civic Engagement
&
Community Learning Initiatives:

Is There a Tie?

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Introduction

Trinity College is in a period of change, and part of this change is the expansion of Trinity's involvement in the Hartford community. One of the progressive programs that Trinity has instituted is its community learning initiatives (CLI); these initiatives are class components that get students out into the community to do hands-on work. The Educational Studies Program offers many classes with components, and Education 200 is one of the most familiar CLI courses offered at Trinity. After almost 10 years of program development, Trinity College has a very well established CLI program that continues to grow and improve.

This program was designed to integrate Trinity College with the surrounding Hartford community while improving the image of Trinity and the lives of students. Research investigating the impact of these CLIs will help determine the success or failure of the program in the context of the goals of CLIs and Trinity College.

Significance

In his article, "Street Rigor: Community Learning in the Liberal Arts," Dan Lloyd relates CLIs to Trinity's specific missions and goals. He cites Trinity's Mission Statement and its three specific goals. They are: 1) to foster critical thinking; 2) to free the mind of parochialism and prejudice; and 3) to prepare students to lead examined lives that are personally satisfying, civically responsible, and socially useful. Lloyd makes the

argument that all of this can be broken down into the idea that learning outside of the "ivory tower" is one of the critical aspects of a liberal arts education. "The College mission is a double vision, an ideal of cognitive virtue and one of civic virtue" (Lloyd 6). Community learning initiatives focus on the civic to enhance the cognitive, in the hope of supporting the development of individuals who demonstrate these ideal standards of Trinity's Mission Statement.

In addition to Trinity's Mission Statement, there are also two goals specifically pertaining to community learning initiatives that have been laid out by the forefathers of the program. These goals are, "Enlarging understanding and learning of course materials, at the same time as providing a benefit for one or more community partners" (Lloyd 1). The educational benefits of achieving these goals are well stated by Patricia Owen-Smith of the Oxford College of Emory University.

> *Many educational psychologists remind us that the absence of experience might explain why students misunderstand. Through theory/practice or service learning opportunities students were challenged to negotiate the tension between their strongly held beliefs and the discrepant images and information gained from their actual experiences in social service agency work. They were compelled to reflect on the limitations of theories and assumptions in making sense out of and reconciling real world problems" (Owen-Smith np).*

The benefits of CLIs expand the knowledge gained in the classroom beyond anything a professor could ever present out of a textbook or in a lecture.

Community learning initiatives began at Trinity College in the 1995-1996 school year. Originally formulated when 25-interested faculty came together with six professors from campuses already involved with community learning programs to discuss the specific ways in which CLI would be carried out at Trinity. The original structure of the program was that interested faculty would approach the organizers of the program,

(faculty members who volunteer to participate), with their ideas. In turn, they, "Offered training for students, logistical support and curricular ideas for faculty, and gentle reminders of our existence" (trincoll.edu). The specific details of the training were omitted from the description, however the critical factor here is the fact that it was not to school whom instigated the conversation, but individual professors.

Over the years, Trinity's CLI program has developed into one of the largest, most successful community learning programs in the country. It has become the model that other schools use to develop their own programs, to the point in which a seminar was help at Trinity this summer to demonstrate to other universities how Trinity has made its program so successful. The Trinity College Institute for Urban Learning & Action Conference was held June 1-5, 2004. "Trinity College has gained a national reputation for being involved in revitalizing its hometown, and college officials from across the U.S. came to the Hartford campus this week to learn how it's done" (Wozniacka np). This makes Trinity the model for many other universities. Therefore, it is important to determine if the program is as successful as it claims to be.

Many of the other questions critical to determining the success of CLIs can be found in the comprehensive report by Daniel Sibirski for the Kellogg Foundation, the organization that funds many of Trinity's community projects. The report gives information supporting the notion that as an educational tool, CLIs are very successful. "Eighty-four percent of the students (253/300) strongly agreed or agreed with the statement, 'The community fieldwork in this course helped me to become aware of the needs of the community'" (Sibirski 5). This supports the idea of CLIs increasing the civic-mindedness of participants. But this begs the follow-up question; does it increase

the civic engagement? It is one thing to be aware of a problem, it is another thing altogether to try and fix it.

In order to determine a possible relationship between civic engagement and CLI participation, it is necessary to define civic engagement, as it is a very ambiguous concept that can mean many things. For the purposes of this study I have defined it as such:

> *Civic engagement is defined, for purposes of this research project, as any type of participation in your community that works toward its betterment.*
> *Some examples of civic engagement include internships, participating in the local school board, volunteering your time at a community center, participating in a charity walk, or simply writing an editorial to your local newspaper.*

The above definition will be provided to those who participate in the study on the consent form. This definition does not necessarily encompass all activities that may be considered civic engagement, such as voting; however, it incorporates things that do not operate on a set time scale. The example activities named above are ones that one must take a more proactive approach into involvement.

Questions

The second part of the CLI goals pertaining to the civic benefits, expands into the notion that the benefits work both ways- both the community partner and the student. This idea can be combined with the third part of Trinity's Mission Statement that suggests Trinity is supposed to make students civically responsible as defined by participation in civic activities. This begs the question, do community learning initiatives

help promote civic responsibility? In other words, do levels of civic engagement increase as a result of participation in CLIs?

A precursor to being civically involved in Hartford is breaking the stigmas associated with it. Many students come into Trinity with very negative perceptions about the community that surrounds the school. When students venture out into the real world, some may find themselves in areas such as Hartford where there is intense poverty, violence, crime, and cultural diversity. Thus, it is important to determine whether or not CLIs have a positive impact on student perceptions of Hartford. In other words, is there a relationship between higher CLI participation and a greater change toward the positive in terms of student perceptions of Hartford?

Thesis

The initial thesis was that community learning initiatives increase levels of student civic engagement. Furthermore, the more CLIs a student takes, the higher the level of civic engagement demonstrated by the student as quantified by hours per week.

Data collection revealed this theory not to be true. In fact, the thesis evolved when the desired correlation of the data was not found. There is no direct correlation between higher levels of CLI participation and higher levels of student engagement.

The second question involves the effect of CLI participation of perceptions of Hartford. The original thesis was that increasing levels of CLI participation would result in a greater positive change in student perceptions of Hartford. However, data once again proved not to cooperate with the thesis, and thus evolution was again necessary. Student

perceptions of Hartford are improved toward the positive from their initial perception upon arrival at Trinity regardless of their level of CLI participation.

Methods

The primary basis for this research is survey data. Survey has been chosen because it can get the most information from individual students in the least amount of time, while still obtaining a full picture of the students' experiences. The survey has been designed to collect data including personal information about the student, participation levels of civic engagement based on number of hours per week, including the specific activities participated in, plans to continue civic engagement throughout college and after graduation with specific examples of how, and then a question about whether or not the student has taken a class with a community learning initiative component. At this point, if the student has not participated, the survey is complete; if they have taken a CLI course, there is another series of questions. The questions in part II include questions about how many CLIs they have participated in, how many hours were spent in the community for each class, if there was a change in perception of Hartford after CLI participation, career aspirations and CLI participation, and finally a question about mandating CLIs in first year seminars. This is a lot of information to gather from one survey, but it will help paint a complete picture of the student's experience.

The survey has received IRB approval, and thus has been deemed ethical. The original intention was to distribute it to 40 females and 40 females in each class from '08 to '05. However, it was very difficult to receive that kind of return from students. Data

was collected by personally handing out surveys to students at meal times in Mather Hall, in the Cave eatery at various hours, in the Underground Coffeehouse at various hours, and in Clemens Dormitory, which is where I live and houses a high concentration of '06 males, my lowest return group. The total final counts were three '08 males, three '08 females, four '07 males, six '07 females, nine '06 males, eleven '06 females, thirteen '05 males, and twenty-nine '05 females, for a total of 69 surveys.

The data has a strong leaning toward upperclassmen, with very few first-years responding. This is likely a result of the fact that more seniors have personal relationships with myself, and therefore feel more of an obligation to return a survey, while I do not know that many first-years who also may be more intimidated by a senior approaching them. This skewing creates a less well-rounded data set, but gives a sample that will nevertheless provide useful information. With the exception of one '08 female who claimed she had participated in over 5 CLI courses (which is nearly impossible as most first-years are only allowed to take 4 total courses- what may account for this is a late graduation date, or a very confused survey taker) none of the '08 students had CLI experience. There were some first-year seminars that included a CLI component, but I was unable to find out who these students were in time. The large '05 pool allowed for a greater representation of those who have participated in CLIs and have had a prolonged experience with the program. More survey data would be helpful in creating a more complete picture, however the data collected has been deemed adequate.

<u>Analysis</u>

The surveys will be analyzed by a number of different features. There will be an attempt to establish a pattern of connection between levels of civic engagement and the number of community learning classes offered. This raises a correlation/ causation issue as to whether or not is the CLIs causing the civic engagement or if the students participating in the program are doing so because they are already very heavily civically involved. However, this dilemma is negligible because correlation is enough to prove that CLIs are in keeping with the element of Trinity's Mission Statement that Trinity will produce students that are civically responsible. By examining the civic involvement of those who have not participated in the program, it can also be determined whether or not the program is appealing to students who are already involved.

There are a few specific areas of interest on the surveys that will be analyzed. For one, the levels of civic engagement of those who have not participated in CLIs will be compared to the number of those who haven't. This will be measured by the number of hours spent per week in civic engagement activities. The definition of engagement based on an hour per week scale will give a better representation of the student's perception of how involved they are in the community. Some students listed many different civic engagement activities, and yet listed themselves as participating zero hours per week demonstrating that although they have helped out in the community at times, they do not consider themselves civically engaged. Self-perception may cause some skews in the data, but hours per week as a measure ensures that students who help out through obligation, for example, through a fraternity, do not consider themselves

civically engaged through any means other than their ties to an organization. It is one thing to spend a day doing community service for say a sports team, and another thing altogether to lend oneself to a mentoring program every afternoon.

Another factor that is especially important to consider is whether or not there was a change in perceptions of Hartford as a result of CLI participation, and if there is a correlation between a more positive change in perception and high levels of CLI participation. This will help to answer the specific question about CLIs effect on perceptions of Hartford. These factors in particular will answer key questions about the success of the CLI program.

For the purposes of answering the two key questions of this study, the data was organized in a number of different ways. The data was first organized into two parts. One, the specific civic engagement data was separated from the data on perceptions of Hartford. The civic engagement data was then organized by number of civic engagement hours. These data were put into a chart showing the distribution of civic engagement by number of CLIs taken. The civic engagement data was also organized by class and gender to demonstrate the distribution of the data. The second pool of data regarding perceptions of Hartford was then organized into two sets- one including all of the original perceptions of Hartford regardless of CLI participation, and the second all of the CLI participants' initial perceptions and then their change in perceptions. The second set was then taken and the average change in perception was calculated for each level of CLI participation group to determine which level of CLI participation had the greatest change in perception toward either the positive or negative. This arrangement and calculations of data are all quantitative ways of measuring results.

There is little correlation found between the number of hours of civic engagement one participates in, and the level of participation in community learning initiatives. The chart below shows the distribution of civic engagement hours organized by the number of CLIs taken:

Distribution of People Serving # Civic Engagement Hours per Week						
	0	**1 to 2**	**3 to 4**	**5 to 6**	**7 to 8**	**9+**
0 CLIs	7	19	1	1	0	0
1 to 2 CLIs	4	13	4	1	2	2
3 to 4 CLIs	2	4	0	4	0	0
4 to 5 CLIs	0	0	1	0	0	0
5+CLIs	1	1	0	0	0	0

This chart demonstrates that high CLI participation does not necessarily correlate with high levels of civic engagement. For example, 19 people who participated in 1 to 2 hours of civic engagement per week had taken no CLI courses while only 13 with the same participation level had taken 1 to 2 CLI courses, and 4 had taken 3 to 4. What may account for this is that the highest number of returned surveys reflected 0 CLI participation level. However, one would expect a more dramatic change in the numbers if there were a correlation. Thus it is found that there is no strong correlation between levels of civic engagement and the number of CLIs taken by a student.

The second question posed regards changing perceptions of Hartford as a result of participation in CLIs. Is there a correlation between higher CLI participation and increasing positive perceptions of Hartford from initial perceptions upon arrival at Trinity

College? The chart below shows the average change in perception of students after participating in CLIs:

Average Change in Perception of Hartford Pre and Post CLI Participation		
1 to 2 CLI	2.217391	Somewhat Positively
3 to 4 CLI	2.444444	Somewhat Positively
4 to 5 CLI	1	Very Positively
5+ CLI	2	Somewhat Positively

This chart demonstrates that there is a change toward the positive in student perceptions of Hartford across the board. There is no correlation between higher CLI participation levels and a greater average change in perceptions, however there is a constant positive relationship regardless of how many CLIs the student participated in.

Conclusions

CLIs do not necessarily increase levels of civic engagement as measured by participation hours per week. However, CLIs are heavily participated in by students who also participate in civic engagement activities. Thus, CLIs do contribute to Trinity's Mission Statement because they do help to foster students who are both civically responsible and socially useful.

Community learning initiatives also help improve perceptions of Hartford in a positive way. Regardless of how many CLI courses are taken by a student, the average student's perception of Hartford becomes more positive after participation in CLIs from their initial perception when they arrived at Trinity.

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