

Fall 2021

"Agents of Change" – Lessons Learned From the Nation's First Undergraduate Civil Rights Advocacy Clinic

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Recommended Citation

Rogers, Kath E. and Orange, Olu K. (2021) "'Agents of Change" – Lessons Learned From the Nation's First Undergraduate Civil Rights Advocacy Clinic," *Experiential Learning & Teaching in Higher Education: Vol. 4 : No. 2* , Article 14.

Available at: <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/elthe/vol4/iss2/14>

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Cover Page Footnote

Special acknowledgement to USC Dornsife Associate Dean Tammara Seabrook Anderson, a renowned Los Angeles public service luminary, who was instrumental in launching and supporting the development of the program described in this paper. Student names in this paper have been changed to protect students' privacy. Readers are welcomed to contact the authors through the contact form on the program website at uscaoc.org or by email at info@uscaoc.org.

“Agents of Change”: Lessons Learned from the Nation’s First Undergraduate Civil Rights Advocacy Clinic

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America has shown a striking lack of progress almost 150 years after President Ulysses S. Grant signed the Civil Rights Acts of 1871 for the purpose of “securing to all citizens of the United States the peaceful enjoyment of the rights guaranteed to them by the Constitution and the laws” and to prevent the deprivation of “the emancipated class of the substantial benefits of freedom.” Black Americans are routinely killed by police officers. Immigrant children are only recently being freed from cages at our Southern border – and healthcare, educational, and economic inequity and instability are rampant in minority communities nationwide. Our nation’s colleges and universities are uniquely positioned to address these challenges in real-time—but how?

Specifically, how can universities support their students in pursuing civil rights activism? In doing so, how can universities involve students from marginalized communities who are most affected by justice issues? In this paper, we will explore lessons learned from the nation’s first civil rights clinic at the undergraduate level.

Responding to the urgency of our time, the Dornsife College at the University of Southern California (USC) created the “Agents of Change: Civil Rights Advocacy Initiative” in the Summer of 2020 to support students in addressing civil rights challenges in the Los Angeles community. We will discuss the importance of the civil rights activism clinical model at the undergraduate level. We will also explore challenges and best practices in incorporating hands-on field work, community partnerships, mentorship, and custom-tailored curricular classes and modules.

In 2020, young people rose up *en-masse* in the street to respond to numerous tragic police murders

of Black Americans, including that of George Floyd. More than ever, students have a broadly inclusive definition of “community” and are looking for ways to accomplish fairness and justice in their communities. Universities must do more than pay lip-service to students’ needs to positively impact the world they are inheriting. Universities must create and facilitate opportunities for the students to do the work they earnestly desire. Undergraduate civil rights clinics satisfy the need for students who are eager to take action on justice issues. In this role, universities can help bridge the gap between the community and the classroom—both by connecting students to opportunities in their communities to take action, as well as by bringing community leaders and lessons into classrooms. The goal of USC’s new Agents of Change program is twofold—to allow students to do fieldwork toward solutions of pressing civil rights issues, while

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also enabling a real-time transactional bridge between classroom pedagogy and community experience. The program has developed meaningful community partnerships and corresponding curricula. This two-fold approach affords students opportunities for meaningful hands-on learning in activism, policy, and the law.

Importantly, the program has been structured to close the “access gap” that has historically prevented many minority and low income students from participating in prestigious civil rights opportunities. To address this issue, the University provides necessary work-study stipends and counts as selection criteria experiences of students whose understanding of social justice is shaped by their own demonstrated ability to overcome challenges. To make the most of the students’ experiences, program staff collaborate with professors to link students’ field

work to classes the students already intend to take.

In this paper, we will describe the undergraduate civil rights clinic model, structure, and programming of the Agents of Change program, as well as its underlying theoretical and pedagogical frameworks.

Problem Statement: Universities Must Curricularize, Facilitate, and Financially Enable Student Civil Rights Activism

The George Floyd uprisings of 2020 resulted in what has been described as a “seismic shift” in public opinion on issues of racial justice, policing, and support for the demonstrations following Floyd’s murder by police (Russonello, 2020). Following these demonstrations, universities around the country felt the heat of student activism on campuses. A study of 130 statements released by universities in the aftermath of the George Floyd uprising revealed that colleges made both short-term commitments such as one-time events, as well as long-term commitments like improving relationships with the community (Belay, 2020).

For example, at USC in June of 2020, students marched inside university gates and organized fora where students could share their experiences of being Black at USC (Solis, 2021). University President Carol Folt responded with an update on “Diversity Initiatives” announcing that the University celebrated Juneteenth for the first time and removed the name of a controversial figure from its international and public affairs building (Folt, 2020). It also announced the launch of revision and creation of focused programming, including: an office of Equity, Equal Opportunity and Title IX to act as a clearinghouse to report incidents of bias; a Community Advisory Board to oversee the campus’s public safety operations; a Task Force on Racial Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (REDI); a Chief Inclusion and Diversity Officer; a “space” and new “programming for underserved students”; mandatory unconscious bias training for students, faculty, and staff; and new initiatives to increase “community collaboration” (Folt, 2020).

Student activism reached its highest level in 2020, since 2015-2016 (Cudé, 2020), and it follows that university programming should help to facilitate student activism, as well as to build bridges between the university and the surrounding community. Service-learning and internship opportunities can serve a vital role of connecting students with meaningful activism opportunities in the community that fulfill the students’ desire to participate in social change, as well as the university’s desire to further connect

with the surrounding community. Both service-learning and internships are considered “high impact practices” in the achievement of a well-rounded liberal arts education (Kuh, 2008). This is especially true for students who enter the university with lower academic scores, as well as for “students from communities that historically have been underserved in higher education” (Kuh, 2008, p. 1).

Tragically, while historically underserved students tend to benefit most from service-learning and internships, these students are less likely to have access to these opportunities (Kuh, 2008, p. 17). Therefore, making these types of experiences available to all students will “have a demonstrable impact in terms of student persistence and satisfaction as well as desired learning outcomes” (Kuh, p. 20). Universities must recognize this problem and “create incentives to induce purposeful behavior” (Kuh, p. 20).

It is important to note that “low-income and/or first-generation students may lack the financial and/or social capital to identify and then complete an internship” (Hora, 2021, p. 17). Resultantly, it may be the case that “internships act as a gatekeeping mechanism that inhibits social mobility” (Hora, 2021, p. 17). In one study, 64% of student respondents who had not participated in an internship during college said they “had hoped to do so but could not for various reasons” (Hora, 2021, p. 18). Among those reasons, the top four were students’ “need to work,” “heavy course load,” “lack of internship opportunities,” and “insufficient pay” (Hora, 2021, p. 18). Universities can help overcome these challenges by providing financial support for student internships, by providing some amount of course credit for internship, as well as by curating and assisting with securing meaningful internships in the areas of civil rights and social justice.

In structuring school-supported service-learning and internship programs, educational institutions must be wary of requiring or incentivizing a model of unpaid labor. There is growing criticism of universities for perceived complicity in exploitative unpaid internships—which disproportionately harm low-income students, may skirt labor regulations, and benefit private corporations (See Perlin, 2011). Therefore, rather than mandating unpaid internships for course credit—in which students essentially pay for course credit to work for free—universities should consider providing compensation to participating students.

It is vital for university-supported service-learning and internship programs to be linked to pedagogical models that help “participants to see their

[service] questions in the larger context of issues of social justice and social policy—rather than in the context of charity” (Stanton et al., 1999, p. 3). To do this, service-learning opportunities should be paired with opportunities for students to reflect on the systemic causes of social problems and critically analyze their experiences. (Stanton, p. 3). This should be done in the context of an “engaged pedagogy” (hooks, 1994, p. 203) in which students are “active participant[s]”, and not “passive consumer[s]” (p. 14).

Universities should also ensure that the “principles for service-learning” are incorporated into their relationships to community partners: ensuring that the impacted community members “control the services being provided,” that the people served are empowered through the service, and that there is an acknowledgment that the student interns are learners and can shape their educational experience (Stanton et al., p. 3). University service-learning programs should foster a sense of “reciprocity” between the student participants and their clients in order to avoid paternalistic notions of “charity” and center a justice-based framework that centers the needs of the community in which the university is housed (Stanton et al., p. 3).

Program Description: USC Dornsife’s *Agents of Change: Civil Rights Advocacy Initiative*

Created by Program Director Olu Orange at the request of Associate Dean Tamara Seabrook-Anderson in the Summer of 2020 at the USC Dornsife College, the *Agents of Change: Civil Rights Advocacy Initiative* (“*Agents of Change*”) has committed institutional resources to the cause of social justice for the culturally diverse and vibrant population of the City of Los Angeles. The program is a first-in-the-country undergraduate civil rights clinic within which students participate in a sequence of three civil rights advocacy divisions: (a) governmental policy; (b) community activism; and (c) legal advocacy over the course of a two-year commitment. The following is a description of the program’s structure.

Student Selection Process

The program’s competitive application process attracted at least three times the number of applications as spaces available in the program in its first year—demonstrating strong student demand for this type of programming. The application process was directed by program staff with the goals of mitigating bias through an objective rubric and identifying students with a demonstrated commitment to civil

rights, work-ethic, teamwork, resiliency, ability to thrive in the program, and diversity of backgrounds, skills, and experiences. The process also considered how students’ understanding of justice issues had been shaped by their own lived experiences. While the application process will likely be continuously refined, its goals will remain the same of providing a well-rounded, holistic understanding of student applicants and their ability to thrive in the program and contribute meaningfully to its goals.

Program Partnerships and Structure

Community partnerships have been vital to the program’s success. With the assistance of Program Manager Kath Rogers, *Agents of Change* has established and maintains relationships with nearly 40 community partners—ranging from grassroots associations such as Black Lives Matter to legal services groups like the Legal Aid Foundation to government entities like the California Governor’s Office. The program aims to pair students with partner organizations that are a good fit for each student, based on the student’s interests, skills, and background. Throughout the program, students rotate between three internships—focused on “community activism,” “government policy,” and “legal advocacy.” The latter legal placement is the program’s most time intensive internship, which is an acknowledgment that legal work may have a steeper learning curve, and the nature of legal remedies requires students to stay longer in order to see a legal case through its various stages. This emphasis on legal remedies may also reflect the fact that the program’s Director and Manager are both civil rights attorneys.

Crucially, students receive a generous stipend for the entire duration in the program. The stipend addresses the peculiar paradox of minority students being the least able to participate in USC programs designed to address issues that negatively impact minority communities. This stipend aims to allow students to pay their bills without worrying about juggling additional employment. As an example, one participating student previously worked at a grocery store during her college education. The stipend allowed her to quit that job and focus on a new role in the City of Los Angeles Department of Civil and Human Rights.

Classroom Learning Component

Classroom learning helps to bolster the students’ field work experiences by incorporating structured reflection, as well as theories of change. One important vehicle for classroom learning is the program’s coordinating class called “*Law and Local Political Activism*,” which provides students with a working

understanding of legal issues relevant to civil rights activism in Los Angeles, as well as theories and methods for creating social change. It features regular guest lectures by local activists and leaders, and the course syllabus includes modules relating to the three methods of social change emphasized by the program: activism, government policy, and the law.

In its exploration of activism topics, the course examines relationships between local change-makers and the systems and structures they seek to change. It also explores the demographic make-up and traditional interests and needs of persons living in the Los Angeles region, basic concepts of the American justice system, analysis of case law, discussion of race-based inequities and the access to the legal “access to justice gap,” the structure of the court system and its functionaries, and legal rights of protesters and the public. Course assignments involve development of practical skills, as well as critical reflection on the students’ field work experiences. Students are encouraged to bring their life experience and prior knowledge into the classroom and to create a supportive, nurturing environment.

In addition to the one-unit coordinating class, the program also collaborates with professors to embed curricular modules into classes in which participating students are enrolled. Program staff coordinate with professors to incorporate custom-tailored civil rights modules into existing course curricula. The goal of these curricular modules is to further link the students’ field work experience to their classroom learning. The modules relate to the subject of the students’ field work by featuring local guest lecturers, incorporating experiential exercises, and involving students in local community-based advocacy efforts. For example, one political science class included a guest speaker from Human Rights Watch who discussed ongoing efforts in California to eliminate pre-trial detention, engaged in dialogue with students, and discussed ways students could get involved in these types of legislative efforts.

Maintaining Perspective in Fundraising

Experiential programs in which students receive financial support have costs and require fundraising. One source of funding program administrators and development officers may be inclined to look toward is corporate support. In fact, in the wake of 2020’s intense nationwide furor over police killings, multiple corporations announced spectacular gifts to support civil rights causes and endeavors. Sample commitments include Bank of America’s \$1 billion dollars, Walmart’s \$100 million dollars, Nike’s \$40 million dollars, and Target’s \$10 million dollars (Reuters, 2020).

At first glance, these commitments appear to demonstrate good corporate citizenship and potential partners for civil rights program support. But the precise *nature* of the program must also be considered. A clinical civil rights advocacy program must maintain credibility with dedicated community partners and idealistic student participants – groups of people committed to fairness and justice. Sponsors of students’ activities, whose names will sometimes be attached to students’ efforts, cannot be simultaneously engaged in creating the very problems the students and their community partners are working to solve.

Looking at the four corporate donors listed above, participation in a credible civil rights program by any of them presents problems. Internationally, Bank of America finances Malaysian palm oil plantations where trafficked persons are enslaved, beaten, and made to work for no wages (Mason, 2020). In the United States, Bank of America supports police associations in cities where many of the worst and most deadly civil rights violations by law enforcement officers occur: Los Angeles, Chicago, New York, and Atlanta (Armstrong, 2020). In late 2020, Walmart paid an eight-figure settlement to settle a federal civil rights lawsuit brought to address hiring discrimination against female applicants nationwide (U.S. EEOC, 2020), and funds police associations in Washington, D.C. and Houston (Armstrong, 2020). Nike’s supply chain includes goods produced by forced labor from Uyghur workers who were sent to work camps by the Chinese government where they cannot practice their religion and are surrounded by watchtowers and razor-wire (Xiuzhong, 2020). Last, Target has given “Public Safety Grants” to more than 4000 law enforcement agencies (Skolnik, 2021), and “the company has long been associated with police surveillance and [the Minneapolis Police Department]’s treatment of black and low-income residents of the city” (Mak, 2020). Officers from the Minneapolis Police Department killed George Floyd.

No civil rights program can command the amount of credibility in the community necessary to position itself to truly be of service on fairness and justice issues by affiliating with such corporations. Therefore, when seeking financial support, program administrators should avoid the temptation of the recent high-dollar corporate campaigns and remember that between 1988 and 2018 corporate donations declined by the largest percentage – yet alumni giving remained proportionally consistent across educational institutions (Shaker, 2020). Stated differently, the passion of the moment has prompted circumstance related corporate giving. Logically,

as popular sentiment decreases, so will corporate money. However, over time, the significant and lasting love alumni have for an institution will yield support as a constant. As of 2018, alumni giving was surpassed only by foundation gifts (Shaker, 2020).

Sample Student Outcomes

To demonstrate the impact of the program so far, we provide case studies of two student participants. Katrina is a Junior majoring in Political Science and is currently interning with Black Lives Matter of Los Angeles (BLM-LA). For the past six months, Katrina has served as a policy team intern with BLM-LA. In this role, she has learned how to lobby elected officials, write bill language, work with a disparate coalition of organizers and attorneys, as well as read and understand civil rights laws. Katherine is helping to pass two important state bills: Senate Bill 2 (the “Police Decertification Act”), and Assembly Bill 118 (a law to fund community-based responses to mental health crises, domestic violence, and other emergencies). At the outset of Katrina’s internship, she was reluctant to speak up in meetings because she was unsure what to say. After six months, Katrina’s confidence has noticeably improved after having the opportunity to facilitate group meetings, speak at rallies, and organize events. She is now an active participant in coalition meetings and has been vital in shaping two important pieces of civil rights legislation.

Elisa is a Junior majoring in Political Science and is currently interning with the American Civil Liberties Union of Southern California working with the Jails Conditions team. In this role, she has worked to oppose the expansion of local jails and has addressed civil rights violations against incarcerated individuals. Elisa has helped incarcerated individuals file grievances, obtain medical and mental health treatment, and report civil rights violations to jail command staff. Notably, Elisa has taken the initiative to expose the Orange County jail system’s failure to provide hot meals, medically required diets, and to meet religious dietary requirements. Her work recently resulted in a state investigation and LA Times exposé of regulatory violations related to food served in these jails.

Next Steps and Implications for Experiential Learning

Admittedly, it is too early to speak decisively about the impact of *Agents of Change*, as it is a new program. However, in reflecting on its first two semesters, it is clear that participating students and the program’s partners are benefiting by their involvement. Two students have been quoted in major news sources

for their activist work, and nearly all participants have stated that the program is a favorite part of their college experience. The weekly classroom reflections have been surprisingly effective, as students have commented on how much they enjoy the opportunity to reflect on their experiences with their peers each week. The program’s partners have resoundingly indicated their appreciation for the students’ work in service of their mission.

The authors of this paper believe programs like *Agents of Change* can serve a crucial role in colleges around the country in bridging the gap between the community and the classroom. They establish important relationships of trust between the university and local community partners, and they help students to understand how social change happens from both a theoretical and practical perspective. Perhaps most importantly, they can help students effectively channel their passion for social justice into effective action that will position them for a lifelong career in public interest – at a time in history when this work has never been more important. ■

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