Going Back to School: A University-Middle School Civics

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Going Back to School: A University-Middle School Civics Partnership

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Abstract:
Many scholars, governmental agencies, and foundations have urged institutions of higher education to refocus their energies on the creation of responsible and engaged citizens. In response, some universities sought to expand their curricula and to refine their mission statements and university strategic plans to take into consideration the new emphasis on engagement. These efforts proved largely fruitful, but often relied on creating discipline specific community partnerships that did little to bridge disciplinary divisions or to reach out beyond traditional partners. While the colleges and universities adapted their curricula in response to the call for greater levels of community engagement, elementary and secondary schools were in the midst of a serious civic crisis. Schools eliminated their civics courses and dramatically decreased their instruction in social studies as well in response to the narrow focus on math and language arts in the No Child Left Behind requirements and budget shortfalls in school coffers. These school districts found that social studies and civics education were luxuries that they could little afford. Thus, just as institutions of higher education were attempting to reinvigorate their own engagement with the community and develop reciprocal relationships with their community partners, elementary and middle schools were looking for opportunities to bring civics and engagement into the classroom at little cost to them. This paper will examine one engagement model that may prove useful to other campuses wrestling with the issues of reciprocity and engagement and highlight some of the challenges and benefits of such work.

Keywords:
Civic Education, Community Engagement, and Higher Education

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Introduction

In January of 2012, the U.S. Department of Education and the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) issued a report on the role of higher education in a democratic society. The report, entitled *A Crucible Moment: College Learning & Democracy’s Future* (2012), called on colleges and universities to renew their efforts to promote civic learning and civic engagement. In a blog post at the time of the report’s release, Carol Geary Schneider, the president of the AAC&U, lamented the proliferation of “pared down degree programs” and the current, witheringly reductive versions of college learning that seek to leave by the roadside—as an unaffordable luxury—some of the very disciplines…that, by any sober reading, build capacities of mind and heart that are basic to a principled democracy (de Vise, 2012).

Instead, the report demanded that institutions of higher education seek to expand the civic ethos, civic literacy, civic inquiry, and civic action of their students (Crucible, p. 31).

The Central Connecticut State University (CCSU) campus, in general, and the Political Science Department, in particular, has made significant progress toward the integration of a civic curriculum in our undergraduate courses. In the Political Science program, currently, we provide both short-term and long-term opportunities for engagement. These opportunities include semester-long internships, month-long collaborations with local governments, agencies, and non-profit organizations, and one-day service projects as poll workers on Election Day. Additionally, the department offers several courses that focus on engagement in part, or in their entirety, including: “State and Local Government”; “U.S. Elections”; “Political Leadership”; and an interdisciplinary “Introduction to Community and Civic Engagement” course. Despite these concerted efforts, the department initially failed to recognize that their courses and programs were an insufficient solution to the civic crisis facing the nation. The Department of Education and AAC&U report highlighted this nation-wide failing; namely that colleges and universities did not seek significant opportunities to collaborate with K-12 institutions on the development of civic education programs.

In fact, the authors of the *Crucible* report noted that, “although the charge was to focus on undergraduate higher education, every
roundtable discussion inevitably commented upon the robust civic continuum whose origins need to be established in K-12” (p. 27). Unfortunately, that continuum does not currently exist. For example, the Carnegie Foundation and CIRCLE Report on the Status of Civic Education and Citizenship (2003) found that “young Americans are not prepared to participate fully in our democracy now and when they become adults” (p. 8). The serious implications of the Carnegie-CIRCLE study were reiterated by the results of the subsequent 2006 NAEP study that demonstrated that in the 4th, 8th, and 12th grades, only a fraction of U.S. students scored at the proficient level in civics (NCES, 2007, p.1).

Nonetheless, the authors of the 2012 Crucible report highlighted the congruence of interests between K-12, higher education, policymakers, and government officials. Moreover, they contended that the timing is right...to form sturdy bridges to civic learning and democratic engagement across students’ lifelong learning trajectories (p. 28).

Of course, creating collaborative arrangements between institutions of higher education and K-12 are difficult. As part of the process for reviewing applications for the Carnegie Community Engagement classification for institutions of higher education, John Saltmarsh et al. (2009) found, that “[o]ne of the most significant shortcomings is in the area of establishing reciprocal campus-community relationships” (p. 21). Reciprocity is a core value of those who seek to promote community engagement. But while higher education institutions have acknowledged the importance of reciprocity, all too often the early community engagement programs that emerged were designed to benefit one side of the partnership more than another. This paper will explore one attempt to create a reciprocal relationship between students enrolled in an upper-level public policy course and a group of local 7th grade students.

For quite some time, colleges and universities, like CCSU, have worked to improve the civic and community engagement of their student populations, but these efforts have rarely connected the institutions of higher education with elementary and secondary school children (with the exception of teacher preparation programs that have specifically emphasized such collaborations). More typically, a discipline seeks to create connections with related professional partners (e.g., a
Geography Department that teaches GIS and uses that skill to assist a state department of transportation with mapping projects or a Biology Department that utilizes students to catalog the flora prevalent in a city park. In Political Science, of course, student engagement often focuses on serving local, state, or the national government. Thus, partnering with a junior high school was a new endeavor for the department.

The proposal for the pilot project was presented to the principal of the middle school in the late spring of 2011. A small group of political science students would design and implement a civic education program for 7th graders during school hours the following fall. The university students recruited for the program would develop the curriculum for the program in consultation with a political science professor. The college students’ task was to determine how to teach the theory and practice of democracy to the middle school students. Their overall goal was to develop the civic knowledge, civic skills, and civic efficacy of the middle school participants.

Civic Knowledge, Civic Skills, and Civic Efficacy Among Adolescents

The founders of the Civic Mission of Schools that formed as an outgrowth of the 2003 Carnegie-CIRCLE report delineated three domains that they believe are crucial for the development of competent citizens: civic knowledge, civic skills (intellectual and participatory), and civic dispositions. One of the difficulties in research efforts in this area is to determine how the key terms of “civic knowledge”, “civic skills”, and “civic efficacy” are conceptualized and exactly what is meant by each of these terms.

Civic Knowledge

The Civic Mission of Schools organization further delineated the specific elements for each of these three categories. According to the CMS website, successful programs in youth civic learning should increase students’ civic knowledge by introducing: important historical events; issues and actors; the structures and process of government and the legal system; the role of social movements; and the relevant social and political networks for change (2004). Torney-Purta et al. (2001) presaged these same concepts, arguing that civic knowledge included an
understanding of democracy, governmental and economic processes, institutions, and values, as well as the social participation values of one’s nation and the socio-economic stratification and opportunity structures for selected groups in society (p. 71-86). Interestingly, neither of these definitions identified civic education solely as a political concept. These conceptions are important, particularly when developing youth civics programs, because, for young people, their capacity to participate in the larger political realm is quite limited. Thus, the definition of civic knowledge, at this level, will differ from more traditional conceptions of civic knowledge as inherently political knowledge. In short, civic knowledge includes: 1) an understanding of governmental structures, actors and processes; 2) a comprehension of governmental outputs in the form of policies; 3) knowledge of non-governmental forces such as the media, interest groups, and social movements; and 4) a familiarity with the prominent social networks and societal values within a given community setting.

Civic Skills

While civic knowledge has a degree of certainty in its conceptualization, civic skills, unfortunately, do not. Often when academics discuss civic skills, they refer to those skills necessary to be effective citizens. In other words, they delimit and define civic skills as those skills necessary for “effective political participation”. At times, effective political participation is further reduced to simply electoral participation. In other words, under these definitions, civic skills are merely those skills necessary to vote, and a “good citizen” is one who actually does vote. But such a definition neglects to include necessary skills that can be wielded outside of the electoral arena. Russell Dalton (2008), in *The Good Citizen*,2 distinguished between two distinct forms of citizenship: duty-based citizenship and engaged citizenship. Duty-based citizenship included the traditional forms of political participation such

2 Jennings and Niemi encountered the same issue. They asked participants to “describe a good citizen in this country – that is, what things about a person are most important in showing that he is a good citizen?” (p. 120). They coded 33 sub-categories of responses into 4 specific areas: participation in the system, including voting and helping with school affairs; allegiance to the system, including obeying laws and paying taxes; social-interpersonal behavior, including being a good family person and good neighbor; and moral-ethical behavior, including demonstrating integrity, and hard working (121).
as voting, paying taxes, obeying the law and he noted that, “these norms reflect the formal obligations, responsibilities, and rights of citizenship” (p. 5). Engaged citizenship, on the other hand, related to one’s concern for others and the community and having the capacity to “understand the opinion of others” and encompassed “a moral or empathetic element of citizenship” (p. 28). Dalton concluded that, “these orientations should promote tolerance” (Ibid).3 Jennings and Niemi (1974), in their 1974 study of adolescents, also found that good citizens (as conceptualized by their respondents) were those who were tolerant of others, got along with other people, were considerate, and were willing to be active in their communities (p. 121). Thus, while the definitions of citizenship vary, at their root, they share a common concern with tolerance and respect for the views of others.

Respect for divergent views is particularly important in youth engagement programs. In fact, the Carnegie-CIRCLE report concluded that one of the goals of civic education in all schools was to develop “competent and responsible citizens” who are “concerned for the rights and welfare of others, are socially responsible, [and] willingto listen to alternative perspectives…” (p.10). Moreover, according to the CMS, youth engagement programs should develop two strands of civic skills: 1) intellectual civic skills, such as critical thinking, active listening and “understanding, interpreting and critiquing various media…[and] different points of view” (CMS, 2005); and 2) participatory civic skills such as effective communication, building consensus, community mapping, and organizing groups. Finally, quality civic education programs will teach tolerance and respect as well as a “rejection of violence”, a “desire for community involvement”, and “personal efficacy” (CMS, 2005). Overall, civic skills can be summarized as those abilities that foster group work, acceptance of differences, the critical examination of community issues, and the development of personal efficacy. The model of the “good citizen”, then, is one rooted in civic knowledge, civic skills and civic efficacy. Efficacy, however, also has a wide variety of conceptualizations and definitions, to which we now focus our attention.

3 Dalton’s concept of civic knowledge also produced certain “core democratic principles, starting with tolerance” (226).
Civic Efficacy

Albert Bandura (1977) argued that efficacy, specifically self-efficacy, was the “conviction that one can successfully execute the behavior required to produce the outcomes” (p. 193). Twenty years later, Bandura offered a more concise definition. Self-efficacy was “a belief in one’s personal capabilities” (1997, p. 4). Maddux and Gosselin (2003) added that “self-efficacy beliefs are not concerned with perceptions of skills and abilities divorced from situations; they are concerned, instead, with what people believe they can do with their skills and abilities under certain conditions” (p. 219). For example, they found that the capacity for self-regulation was significantly affected by one’s sense of self-efficacy. “When faced with complex decisions, people who have confidence in their ability to solve problems use their cognitive resources more effectively than do those people who doubt their cognitive skills” (p. 226). The Civic Mission of Schools echoed this belief by noting that the goal of civic education should be to educate democratic citizens who “are informed and thoughtful about public and community issues, reflecting a grasp and appreciation of history and the fundamental processes of American democracy” and who have a developed sense of “personal efficacy” (2005). According to Kahne and Westheimer (2006), “a sense of efficacy is a key building block for civic commitment” as well (p. 289). They noted that, “many educators believe that if we shore up young people’s sense of efficacy (their confidence that they can make a difference), then their levels of civic and political engagement will rise” (Ibid).

According to Torney-Purta et al., although political scientists have long expressed interest in efficacy as an important concept relevant to adult political behavior, “[t]he community and the school are among the settings in which such efficacy can be experienced, especially by young people” (130). Moreover, children’s sense of their own efficacy is a “powerful predictor of their educational achievements” (Maddux and Gosselin, 2003, p. 230). Numerous researchers have shown that higher levels of efficacy contribute to not only greater academic success, but also a willingness to persevere when challenged and a capacity to seek alternate solutions to problems. (See, for example, Reivich, 2010 and Kitsantas 2011.) In other words, the evidence indicates that the creation
and promotion of civic knowledge, civic skills, and civic efficacy is vital to educational achievement.

The University-Middle School Civic Education Program

In the spring 2011, the author and principal of the middle school negotiated a broad outline for the implementation of a civic education program. The recruitment of the college student participants took place at that time as well. College students enrolled for the fall semester in an upper-level “Current U.S. Public Policy Issues” course were invited to participate in the intensive civic engagement project. The project mirrored the nationally recognized Public Achievement Program. Public Achievement is a youth engagement model begun at the Center for Democracy and Citizenship through the University of Minnesota’s Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs. In the prototypical Public Achievement program, college students take a semester-long course on civic education, engagement, and developing the efficacy of young children. The following semester, the college students are assigned to work with groups of children in an elementary or middle school. The school children, with the assistance of their college “coach”, select a project that must be public in nature. Often these projects focus on some local concern or issue. Whatever the topic or concern, the college students act merely as facilitators while the younger students develop their projects and see them through to fruition (Hildreth, 2000 and Boyte and Farr, 1997).

Unlike a prototypical Public Achievement Program, however, the CCSU students had no opportunity to complete a preliminary course in the fall semester. Rather, the students met over the summer to design a syllabus, select democratic concepts and ideas to emphasize, and to create related activities that would allow the younger students to develop their own civic skills. In early September of 2011, they met with the 7th grade social studies teachers at the middle school to discuss the project and to respond to any concerns that they might have. Any 7th grade student could elect to sign up for the new one semester “Civics” course, but enrollment would have to be limited to 25 students. The 42-minute class would meet once a week for 12 weeks.

Obviously, developing civic knowledge, civic skills, and civic efficacy in a 12-week period is quite difficult. Consequently, the CCSU
students chose to focus on certain civic concepts and civic skills. The university students selected 9 concepts, one to be presented in each weekly session. The three weeks at the end of the semester would be utilized to finalize the pre-teens’ projects and to present them to the teachers and staff of the school. The 9 concepts they chose as important were: democracy, freedom, community, diversity, leadership, power, accountability and responsibility, public work and public spaces, and citizenship. They chose these concepts for two reasons: first, these concepts echoed some of the content recommended by the Civic Mission of Schools, such as a focus on the “Principles…essential to constitutional democracy” (CMS, 2005); and second, they agreed that these concepts were important for understanding the political system at the local level and for advancing the students’ civic interests.

In addition to a civic concept, the college students also selected certain skills to teach each week, including democratic decision-making, identifying public problems, productive brainstorming, negotiating and building consensus in groups, perspective-taking, active listening, power mapping, overcoming obstacles and challenges, and organizing and planning presentations. As in the case of the concepts mentioned above, these skills mirror even more closely those promoted by the Civic Mission of Schools (CMS, 2005). Over the course of the semester, the middle school students would select three public projects to study. They would review the relevant research, collect data, develop a policy proposal, and present their conclusions to the school faculty and administration. Although there were no specific lessons directed to building civic efficacy, the research shows that increased knowledge and skill development coupled with an engaged classroom environment should also result in a greater sense of efficacy.

Initially, more than 40 seventh graders expressed interest in the program. However, because of space limitations, the program was limited to 26 students. The group largely reflected the larger demographics of the school population, with 32% minority enrollment in the program, including one student who had only just recently emigrated to the U.S. The students came from all three seventh grade teams in the school. Interestingly, more boys (15) than girls (11) opted to enroll in the program. Additionally, over the course of the semester, three girls chose to withdraw, while only one boy did so. Thus, 22
students completed the 12-week program. Likewise, one university student proved unable to meet the demands of the project and withdrew, leaving his peers to direct the work of 22 students.

While the intent of the program was to develop the civic capacities of the middle school students, the program also had a meaningful effect on the college students. The college students read assigned materials over the summer related to youth civic engagement. They debated which concepts were the most important for the children and how to best present the concepts and skills to them. They also agreed to take responsibility for helping the groups with their public projects. The middle school students would select the projects with the support and guidance of their university student instructors. In the first two class sessions, the middle school students proposed a variety of public projects. A few of these related to the larger community, such as the establishment of an afterschool youth center, the greening of the public spaces at a local intersection, and the improvement of the youth selections at a nearby branch library. However, most of their proposals related to their lives within the school itself. For example, the students wanted Wi-Fi access throughout the building, the installation of mirrors in the girls’ bathrooms, and more afterschool sports options.

Eventually, after much debate and discussion, the middle school students selected three projects: 1) to research and promote the acquisition of hydration stations in schools and town buildings; 2) to go “green” at school; and 3) to create a weekly student-run school newspaper. All of the projects would retain some of their original focus, but the students would further refine and develop their goals as the semester progressed. Over time, the projects evolved and became more focused and, in the case of the latter two projects, they were intrinsically tied to the middle school curriculum in science and language arts. The first project largely remained the same albeit with a reduced scope of installing hydration stations in only two locations: one in the school and one at the town hall. The second group decided that their “green” project should focus on the reduction of cafeteria waste and the creation of a composting site for that waste. And the third group decided to narrow their project to a monthly student newsletter.
The university students faced a difficult task motivating the middle school students because many of them did not believe that they had any voice in school or town affairs. In fact, on surveys conducted at the inception of the program, 47% of the middle school students expressed agreement with the statement, “Kids like me don’t have any say about what school officials do or decide” although they did believe that their opinions and ideas were valued by other their peers. Another third of the respondents signaled that they were neutral on this item and only 19% indicated that they disagreed with the statement. The results were identical when the students were asked if they felt that they had any say on what town officials did or decided.

**Challenges and Benefits**

Initially, the greatest obstacle for the university students was their own trepidation. They had not set foot in a middle school since their own pre-teen years. Moreover, they were uncertain of how much authority they would actually be able to wield. Almost immediately, they realized that middle school students are rambunctious and need constant direction in order to stay on task. More importantly, over the course of the semester, the university students found that teaching democratic concepts to seventh graders was difficult. As a result, some of the concepts needed to be emphasized and reemphasized. In one journal entry, the university student expressed frustration with her group because they could not grasp the public/private divide. She had to explain it to the middle school students repeatedly and search for examples that might help them understand so that they could successfully contribute to a discussion on the development of public spaces. She explained that, *At first I felt nervous to teach such concepts, because I was unsure if I had enough of a grasp on community and public/private. It was not that I did not know what the concepts were, but more so the question of being able to relate the concepts to students in that age group.*

Even after the students understood the concepts, there were still other issues. A university student noted that for one particular middle school student comprehension did not bring clarity: *When the concept finally started to make sense, his scaling became skewed. Instead of discussing authority in the local or school community, he went straight to the First Lady.*
In another group, a university student claimed that it was actually easy for the middle school students to “form a good understanding of these concepts”. However, “applying these concepts to life experiences was a little more difficult” for them. Thus, the university students not only had to learn the concepts they taught, but also how to present them to a different audience.

On other occasions, it was not the concepts that proved difficult, but the middle school students’ inability to utilize certain civic skills. Periodically, the middle school students exhibited poor group dynamics and, more frequently, they struggled with the skill of active listening. In one case, a university student thought that one member of the group dominated the direction of the discussions such that other students withheld their own suggestions as a result. In another example, a university student worried that two specific children should not work in the same group because it seemed to affect their personalities. That university student noted that one young woman seemed less inclined to contribute when her friend was present; she was too “timid”. She wondered if they “would be very different” if they were not in the same group. Another group expressed exasperation to their college coach when one of their group members continued to promote grand solutions to mundane problems. Typically, however, as the group demonstrated greater engagement, the reticent students were more likely to participate. One university student described such a situation: “when [he] sees how much his peers think about the activities we do, he becomes more inclined to be part of the group and offer ideas”.

Similarly, the middle school students often had difficulty listening to each other. As one of the university students described it, “they like to talk over each other and shoot down ideas”. Another university student said that her main problem was getting them to negotiate with each other. “This was not because they were not trying to negotiate, but rather that they did not have a clear idea of how to negotiate”. While in the third group, the students often quibbled at length about the location for the installation of the hydration station in the school and neglected to make progress on other fundamental aspects of the project like the physical feasibility and the cost.

Nonetheless, for the university students, the program produced two concrete benefits. First, the university students really felt as if they
were contributing to the middle school students’ lives and increasing their civic capacity. One of the university students wrote that while the younger students seemed to have fun, “I think most importantly it made them feel like prominent citizens of the school community”. Another university student mentioned that almost all of the members of her group “saw it as an opportunity to do something for the school that teachers and students were all excited about”. Moreover, she learned that some of the students were motivated by that knowledge. She described the response of one student, “[t]he fact that her teacher thought it was an exceptional idea made her want to work to actually make it happen”.

Second, the university students both indicated that they also benefitted educationally from the program. One university student observed that the program helped her “to better understand civic engagement”. One of her peers indicated that, “[t]he most positive thing...was watching them do the final presentation and watching their teachers nodding in agreement with them”. In short, the program provided an opportunity for the university students to increase the civic capabilities of a younger age group while also augmenting their own knowledge and familiarity with democratic concepts and skills.

**Lessons and Conclusions**

The recent report from the U.S. Department of Education and AAC&U calls for the very type of arrangement reviewed in this paper. One of their primary recommendations was to call for greater collaboration between colleges and universities and K-12 educational institutions so that they may focus on their “interdependent responsibilities...to foster progressively higher levels of civic knowledge, skills, examined values, and action as expectations for every student” (Crucible, p. vi). The project described above clearly reflected a concerted effort to enhance the civic knowledge and skills of the middle school and the university participants. And, to a large extent, the project was successful. However, the program also highlighted the difficulties of this work.

First, such programs are incredibly time consuming. Even though the middle school was excited about the prospect of the civics program, the planning process for the mere program outline required
three separate visits between the author and school officials in May and June of 2011. Overall, the university students were only in the middle school for approximately one hour of instruction per week. But they met with the author as many as 3 hours outside of the middle school for every hour in the classroom. The university students also had to complete a significant amount of reading and planning during the summer months. Meeting with the teachers and administration of the school during the fall semester added to the amount of time the university students’ devoted to the project. As a result of that time commitment, one university student withdrew from the program after it had commenced. Additionally, the final student presentation at the middle school occurred during the university winter break. Thus, for the university students and the author of this paper, while the work was rewarding, it was time intensive.

Second, any institution that undertakes such a program must not only understand the time demands but also the necessity of recruiting quality students, providing training and developmental materials to the students, and acknowledging their efforts. At CCSU, students were recruited from a 400-level course. Although some additional students expressed interest in the program initially, a few were not invited to participate because they did not demonstrate a capacity to work with young children, while others demurred when they learned of the extensive time commitment. Thus, the recruitment process must include a carefully drafted application that allows the faculty member in charge to determine whether that student will succeed in the program. Also, the training materials must be tailored to increase the likelihood of success. The training materials, in this case, included articles about the relationship between civic engagement and active citizenship, youth engagement program models, and children’s understanding of politics as well as basic information about the demographics of the school and the larger community. Finally, any similar program must develop a mechanism for recognizing the work of the university students. In this case, the students were able to receive credit for their work in the fall semester. They completed assignments related to their work, including the development of the syllabus, the creation of weekly lesson plans, and the submission of weekly journal entries. In addition, the university students completed an exit interview about their experience in the
middle school. However, in hindsight, the credit they received for their efforts was not commensurate to their labors.

Third, institutions, that seek to develop such civic education programs, must recognize their own institutional constraints, including the length of the university calendar, the ability of students to opt out of courses after the start of the semester, and the failure of most institutions to reward such faculty endeavors. One difficulty that was not apparent at the inception of the civic education program was the constraint of the university calendar. The course that the university students enrolled in was for the fall semester. The university students rightly presumed that the program would last the same length of time (i.e. approximately fourteen weeks). However, the first week of the semester, the university students submitted their syllabus to the middle school administration and the next week they met with the middle school teachers, reducing the program length to twelve weeks. Then, in October, the state was hit by an unprecedented snowstorm that knocked out power for two weeks in some areas. The middle school cancelled classes for seven straight school days. Unfortunately, the cancellations removed one more week from the program and a subsequent alteration of the date of a school assembly because of the storm resulted in another lost class session. By mid-December, the university students were finishing their final exams, but we had not yet finished with the middle school program. Fortunately, the university students opted to return to the middle school during their winter vacation to hold two additional sessions. Overall, the university schedule imposes a great constraint on planning long-term university-middle school partnerships. If undergraduate student participation is linked to enrollment in a particular course, then the nature of the collaborations will be further delimited by the university calendar.

Another significant constraint on university-middle school or university-elementary school partnerships in the realm of civic education is that university students have the ability to register for courses and then withdraw from those courses after the inception of the semester. At CCSU, students may withdraw from courses for a full eight weeks after the start of the semester. And that is precisely what happened in this case. A student enrolled in the course, volunteered to participate in the program, completed the summer work, and then withdrew from the
course (and, consequently, the program) after its inception. Ideally, community organizations can rely on their collaborators to provide them with a stable relationship and reliable individual partners. In the case of universities, the students (who are the individual partners) may not only change from semester to semester, but they may also withdraw from programs within a given semester.

A final constraint on university-local school collaborations is that there is very little institutional incentive for faculty to undertake such work. These kinds of programs, that blend courses with community partnerships, are not easily categorized in the normal institutional boxes of “teaching”, “research”, or “service”. While there has been much research on service learning of late (see Bowdon, et al., 2008 and Moely et al., 2009) and youth civic engagement programs (see Sherrod, et al., 2010), there is almost no research on political science departments and their students developing and implementing civic education programs for youths. Part of the problem is that the discipline is not really interested in the political attitudes or behaviors of twelve year olds (for an exception, see Berti, 2005), even though there are many political scientists who have lamented the fact that the typical university student today has little understanding of citizenship and is ill-prepared to be a “citizen” when they arrive at the college or university (see, e.g. Colby, et al., 2007).

A secondary issue, however, is that there are so few outlets within political science for scholarly publication of material related to building civic knowledge, civic skills, and civic efficacy in youths. Those articles that have been published usually examine youth engagement in hindsight. In other words, they examine such questions as whether voters are more likely to participate in elections if they were more engaged as youths (Soule and Nairne, 2009) or issues such as whether adults demonstrate a greater understanding of candidate positions because of their experiences in a high school civics course (Pasek, 2008). While these studies are useful, they neglect programs such as that described above where political science and middle school students simultaneously demonstrate growth in their civic attitudes. The university students indicated that they benefitted greatly from the program and that they would very much like to undertake such a program in the future. One university student said that she would “love
to be involved in another civic youth program”. Another student, who had once attended that same middle school years before at a particularly poor time in her life, was surprised to learn that, “once you are a member of a community, you always feel ties to it”. Their reflections highlight the benefits of these kinds of experiences. Additionally, if political science, as a discipline, is to truly understand the effect of youth civic engagement programs or civics courses on long-term political attitudes and behaviors, researchers need to look at what effect the curriculum had on those young students at that time -- and not simply the course curriculum and the number of hours spent on it.\(^4\)

For institutions seeking to meet the call of the recent Department of Education and AAC&U report, university-elementary and university-secondary school civic education partnerships would appear to be a very promising route for fostering increased democratic engagement. Indeed, there are definite benefits in such arrangements for all parties, including the university students and faculty and the target school students and teachers, beyond the benefits that may accrue to society. However, there are also substantial institutional challenges and obstacles to such work as discussed above. In the final analysis, for the goal of the authors of *A Crucible Moment* to be met, the institutions of higher education will have to support and encourage these collaborations and value the work conducted by both faculty and students. Moreover, all of the academic disciplines will have to do the same within their own professional circles.

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\(^4\)For the purposes of brevity, the data regarding the middle school students’ acquisition of civic knowledge, civic skills, and self-evaluated sense of civic efficacy has not been included but they did demonstrate overall growth in all three domains.


