

Civic Learning in Interdisciplinary Majors

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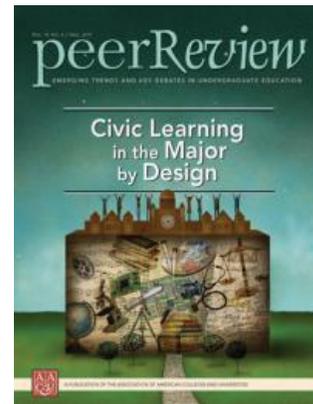
Note: Both Providence College and St. Mary's of California have made civic learning a degree requirement for all students. The interdisciplinary programs described here help students become leaders in connecting civic inquiry and action.

The development of academic programs focused on civic learning has been an essential dimension of the next generation of community engagement on college and university campuses. Our programs at Providence College and Saint Mary's College of California provide two examples of what Dan Butin and Scott Seider have chronicled as a “new intellectual movement” (2012, 1) in higher education to offer majors, minors, and certificate programs to prepare students to be democratic citizens. The work of citizenship and social justice then becomes about much more than off-hours volunteerism or a single course of study. Rather, through the study of “public and community service” and “community, justice, and leadership” at Providence College and Saint Mary's, respectively, we offer a sustained developmental curriculum grounded in real-world engagement and public problem solving.

Our programs integrate community engagement in an interdisciplinary set of sequential courses that empower students to develop leadership and organizing skills while working towards positive social change. Thus, students are not forced to choose between an area of study and a desire to change the world. And at the same time, by infusing civic engagement within academic majors on campus, students gain valuable experiences that prepare them to connect the responsibilities of citizenship with their future careers. In short, students' work as civic practitioners begins with their college majors.

Providence College's Department of Public and Community Service Studies

Beginning in 1993, Providence College was among the first campuses to make “a major commitment” (Battistoni 1998; Hudson and Trudeau 1998) to civic learning for what would become a new major and minor in Public and Community Service Studies under the administrative umbrella of the then newly created Feinstein Institute for Public Service. Supported by a \$5 million grant from Rhode Island philanthropist Alan Shawn Feinstein, the Public and Community Service (PSP) curriculum was initially developed by a team of eight faculty and three students, along with four community partners, “from the ground up as an



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interdisciplinary, developmental, experientially grounded, liberal arts curriculum” (Morton 2012, 90). The college approved the curriculum in 1995, with the first minors graduating in 1996 and the first majors graduating in 1997. Originally established as an interdisciplinary program, PSP was granted department status (with dedicated faculty lines) in 2007 and currently supports not only the major and minor, but also several courses that meet the civic engagement proficiency in the core curriculum of the college. Through 2017, 228 majors and 254 minors have graduated from Providence College with a degree in Public and Community Service Studies.

The departmental curriculum has students work towards a set of competencies focused on areas such as “eloquent listening” and storytelling, writing and public speaking, organizational and personal development, and cross-cultural engagement and border crossing. The curriculum is designed so that each major will spend a minimum of 550 hours in community-based work. These community experiences are integrated through a sustained, developmental curriculum that includes several foundational community engagement courses that introduce and problematize the concepts of “service,” “community,” “justice,” and “democracy,” along with the history and practice of leadership in nonprofit organizations. These courses also address the convergence of theories, methods, and praxis that allows students to articulate how race, class, gender, and/or sexuality (and other social markers) undergird inequality. Students then take a community organizing course, a class based on an organizing framework developed by Marshall Ganz at Harvard University that enables students to learn the theory and practice of public narrative and community organizing while tackling a self-selected public project that is grounded in their own values and passions.

As part of the major, students also have two intensive community immersive experiences: a required internship and a yearlong practicum course in which they play a leadership role at local nonprofit organizations. Through the practicum course, students develop skills in areas such as community asset mapping, grant writing, and facilitation. Students in the major are required to take core courses in theology and philosophy focused on “ethical leadership” and “Catholic social thought,” and then they are able to create a “thematic concentration” with three courses focused on self-selected themes such as nonprofit management, education and social change, or environmental justice. Faculty in the department also offer upper-level interdisciplinary courses that enable students to engage in innovative civic learning. For instance, PSP faculty offer The Community Lens, a community photography course with the art department (see www.communitylens.org); “The City and...” (i.e., The City and Its Youth, The City and Its Cultures, etc.), a course with a nontraditional college, College Unbound, focused on a rotating theme that engages with the city of Providence; and Philanthropy, a course where students make funding decisions for grants to local nonprofits. The culminating experience for the major is a yearlong capstone (while the minor offers a separate semester-long capstone) which includes vocational explorations and a focus on “careers for the common good,” along with a community-engaged research project.

While the curriculum has continued to develop and evolve over the past almost twenty-five years, several core values undergird the program with a corresponding set of reflective

practices, including *democratic education, engaged scholarship, and reciprocal community partnerships*.

A commitment to democratic education is seen in the role students play as cocreators of learning in the PSP curriculum. Building on the theories of education developed by educational leaders such as Paulo Freire, Myles Horton, and bell hooks, PSP practices a liberatory educational approach that “frees the power” of students to contribute to their education. For instance, upper-level students often coteach the introductory courses with faculty (and community partners) and serve as community liaisons in support of local nonprofits.

Becoming an academic department has allowed PSP to integrate engagement into the reward systems of faculty, most especially with our tenure and promotion guidelines. Originally written in 2008 and revised in 2017, the Guidelines for Tenure and Promotion in Public and Community Service Studies sets “engaged scholarship” as the expectation for faculty members, which includes the praxis of engaged research, engaged pedagogy, and community engagement.

Finally, the program in collaboration with the Feinstein Institute has built a series of reciprocal community partnerships over several decades. Core partnerships have been developed with a range of nonprofit organizations and leaders that include not only students and faculty accompanying communities in their work off campus, but also community partners being offered small stipends to coteach courses in the department—an embodiment of the value placed on the wisdom of communities.

Saint Mary’s Justice, Community, and Leadership Program

The Justice, Community, and Leadership program (JCL) is only in its fourth year since being revamped from its old Liberal and Civic Studies model. However, we have already built a reputation as a mission-focused, innovative program. In restructuring the program from a breadth of courses in the liberal arts to a program deeply embedded in a democratic education, a commitment to community, and issues of equity, JCL grounds itself in the college’s core values of respect for all people, concern for the poor, and social justice. The process for creating JCL was multifold, and included faculty and staff across campus, including the college’s Catholic Institute for Lasallian Social Action (CILSA), the on-campus institute that oversees community engagement. Through yearlong workshops and subgroups, we explored high-impact practices, surveyed students, and researched other programs with a social justice framework, including Providence College.

JCL has become the second largest major in the School of Liberal Arts and has diversified its student body to more closely resemble the population at Saint Mary’s, which is designated as a Hispanic-serving institution (HSI). Since its inception, JCL has added three new tenure-track lines and regularly utilizes affiliated faculty across the campus to teach courses. Even with the rapid growth of the program, the faculty are committed to continual renewal, assessment, and student feedback to continue to modify curriculum, create new courses, and develop a culture of care in its program.

In JCL, students learn about histories of oppression, environmental justice, critical theories, global perspectives, ethics, leadership, and education. The program emphasizes self-reflection and humility in order for students to consider their social responsibility in movements to make the world more socially just. Curriculum design has scaffolded learning outcomes in order to build competencies in research, analysis, community engagement, and critical self-reflection.

JCL includes the following learning outcomes:

1. Knowledge—Demonstrate an understanding of engaged pedagogy, critical theory, and social systems as related to justice and leadership studies, and be able to apply theoretical explanations to empirical examples.
2. Research—Use data analysis and interpretation, appropriate library and information literacy skills, and field research to articulate and interpret the complexities of significant social issues.
3. Application—By using leadership studies and critical theory, assess a complex social or community issue and develop multiple viable strategies that contribute to a more just social order.
4. Communication—Effectively use oral, written, and new media formats to educate, advocate, and collaborate with multiple audiences.
5. Reflection—Demonstrate, through written and oral self-assessment and reflection, an understanding of the impact of their own academic learning experience and how it prepares them for a life of active citizenship.

Like the PSP program, the core of the JLC curriculum is the Freirean pedagogy of coeducation, as faculty and students collaborate on creating knowledge in the classroom and taking theory to praxis. Three of its core classes (and several other elective courses) are community engagement (CE) classes in which students work with community partners in mutually beneficial activities and projects. CE classes are also scaffolded, as students start in the introductory class reading about CE theories and best practices and conduct direct service. Each of the introductory sections has on average three partners from communities throughout the Bay Area. Students continue direct service in an upper-division course, Environmental Justice, by engaging with an on-campus community garden and the Campus Sustainability Committee, as well as an organization in the Bay Area working on relevant issues. In its capstone community engagement class, students work in small groups on a project developed along with a community partner. Students have completed an array of projects, including training videos for parents with special needs kids, resource gap analyses for a local homeless shelter, websites on college-readiness for first-generation students, college day field trips, field trips for elementary students on environmental education, institutional histories, and a curriculum for tutoring programs. In JCL, we have also scaffolded service with targeted key community partners, so they also have a reliable flow of student workers.

Five years ago, Saint Mary's made completing a community engagement class a requirement for all students. JCL students take a minimum of four CE courses, and most log over one hundred hours by the time they graduate. The JCL program teaches 25 percent of all CE courses on campus, providing the expertise and experiences to provide high-impact practices that benefit the community and the students.

JCL has a three-part capstone experience. In addition to the CE capstone, students have a thesis capstone in which they conduct original research and a self-reflection capstone that requires students to create an eportfolio of their work at Saint Mary's, reflecting on their growth and ways they will live out their education in their personal and professional lives. As part of the eportfolio, they also create a resume that addresses the intensive experience they have working in communities, and they also conduct mock job interviews so they are able to explain how this kind of learning has created a meaningful and desired skill set. JCL students grapple with the complexities of policies, laws, and cultural practices that disadvantage some groups of people while benefiting others. Students in JCL go on to work in diverse fields such as education, nonprofits, law, social entrepreneurship, government, public health, community organizing, and business—yet they share a common framework of critical pedagogies and aim to make the world more socially just.

This kind of comprehensive, whole-person approach to education creates exciting opportunities for transformation. At the same time, the focus on oppression—racism, sexism, ableism, homophobia, and xenophobia (to name but a few)—requires authentic and constant attention to class culture in order to enable the spaces of discomfort that promote dialogue, as well as to build connections with the community. This holistic, reciprocal dynamic requires faculty and students to build trust and be responsive to issues as they arise. It also requires a great deal of relational and social-emotional work from the faculty. While it is a labor of love, the department also works to develop opportunities for renewal, whether through informal collegial events or supporting colleagues in maintaining work/life balance. This work cannot be done in a silo, but must be always in community and solidarity.

Democratic Promise in the Civic Work of Academic Programs

Providence College and Saint Mary's have both developed programs that are committed to civic engagement and social justice, grounded in their Catholic missions. Values-based institutions have a unique ability to declare a position in ways that make education a profoundly political act. But other types of institutions have similar opportunities to draw upon their unique missions to promote the public good through academic programs. At a time when (1) the liberal arts are under attack, (2) higher education faces challenges in responding to the demands of the twenty-first century, and (3) our nation and world confront another wave of nationalism that threatens democracy, it is imperative that higher education institutions provide support for pathways that are innovative, responsive, and relevant. This means developing academic programs that challenge students to think and act as socially responsible citizens.

Based on our experiences leading programs at Providence College and Saint Mary's, we think a few things are essential to support this work. Specifically, colleges and universities need to

- support a new paradigm of education that is collaborative and interdisciplinary;
- invest in the infrastructure and professional development necessary for community-engaged pedagogies;
- create opportunities to learn from and integrate lessons from other programs and high-impact practices;
- involve students as coeducators and coproducers of knowledge;
- recognize that the most powerful learning goes beyond texts and involves real-world problem solving; and
- take risks and be open to change.

Ultimately, we see our work at Providence College and Saint Mary's as connected to a much larger public mission. And these lessons are vital to this purpose. Our academic programs developed not only as a response to student demands or institutional needs, but as responses to the adaptive challenges we confront in today's world. At a time of growing inequality and uncertainty and crisis in our democracy, and with higher education often shrinking from its social responsibility, we hope our efforts illustrate how colleges and universities can be at the forefront of change through the design of academic programs with deeply integrated civic missions.

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