

## [VALUING STRENGTHS, FOSTERING SUCCESS]

## Giving Back: Community-Based Learning and Men from Low-Income, First-Generation Backgrounds

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For years, research and practice have shown the powerful educational value of community engagement. Service learning and other forms of community-based education can positively affect a wide range of psychosocial and learning outcomes (Celio, Durlak, and Dymnicki 2011; Warren 2012). In fact, community-based pedagogies are well known as a high-impact educational practice that can improve student learning, success, and persistence (Kuh 2008).

Yet much of what we know from the research about the impact of community-based education is centered on the outcomes of those who are most likely to participate in these experiences: white, female students from middle- to higher-income backgrounds (Foster-Bey 2008; Salgado 2003; Sax 2008). For a variety of reasons, first-generation, low-income, and male students are less likely to participate in community engagement activities. These student groups are also the least likely to persist in college (Buchmann, DiPrete, and McDaniel 2008). Because community-based learning can have a positive impact on persistence, it should be further examined as a possible strategy for engagement and retention.

This article draws upon data from a mixed-methods study of first-generation male college students, the majority of whom came from low-income backgrounds. I examined participation in community engagement activities, the effects of community-based learning experiences on study participants'

learning and engagement, and how their knowledge and assets shaped their experiences in community-based education.

In the initial quantitative phase, I used data from the 2004/09 Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Survey (BPS:04/09) to investigate national participation rates of first-generation male college students in community service experiences. In the subsequent qualitative phase, I interviewed fifteen men (fourteen of whom came from low-income backgrounds) from two universities in the Pacific Northwest. The group included eight current students, two recent graduates, and five staff who worked with community-based education programs. All had been active participants in community-based learning experiences in college.

### Participation Rates

Surprisingly little information is available on community engagement participation rates of different demographic groups in college. Thus, I began by examining community engagement participation by income level. I used the federal TRIO program eligibility criteria to define "low income" as an annual income of \$25,000 or less for a family of four. Analysis of the BPS data showed that nationally, low-income college students (both male and female) were significantly less likely to volunteer than higher-income college students, which is consistent with research on low-income youth and adults (Hyman and Levine 2008; Spring, Dietz, and Grimm 2007).

In my interviews, I explored some of the reasons for these lower participation rates. Interview participants who grew up in low-income households reported a constant struggle with finances, and most had to maintain paid employment in college. Many students also commuted from home rather than living on campus, which limited their ability to do things outside of class, particularly when total commute time could take over two hours per day. In addition, several participants indicated that community engagement activities might seem foreign or impractical to people from low-income backgrounds, particularly when juxtaposed with the need to generate income.

However, the same themes that surfaced as barriers to participation also seemed to motivate the students to continue their community involvement. Several students cited growing up in poverty as a critical motivator, and the most common theme that arose was a strong sense of obligation to "give back" to low-income, minority, and/or immigrant communities that were similar to their own.

### Outcomes of Participation

The men I interviewed described a wide range of outcomes from community-based learning:

1. **Academic and career outcomes.** Participants indicated that their community-based learning helped them better understand their coursework on related topics. In addition, their participation prompted them to reflect on their academic experiences more broadly, making their academic pursuits feel more relevant to "real life."
2. **Psychosocial outcomes.** Students described expanding their leadership and communication skills, which contributed to increased self-confidence and empowerment, both

of which lead to greater self-efficacy. Moreover, community engagement enabled them to cope with college stress by helping them maintain perspective and by providing an opportunity to get off campus. Several participants shared that while college sometimes felt like an elite, alienating environment, the local community felt more familiar and welcoming.

**3. Personal and spiritual growth outcomes.** Community-based learning allowed the study participants to explore questions of calling and purpose. They were challenged to think beyond themselves and their own interests. As men from first-generation and low-income backgrounds, their involvement motivated them to persevere academically because they were reminded about why they were in college. Those who worked with youth felt a responsibility to graduate because they served as role models to kids from similar backgrounds to their own.

**4. Sociopolitical outcomes.** Because of their community engagement, study participants became more aware of societal issues at local, national, and international levels. They began to critically examine the socioeconomic inequities they saw through their direct experiences and apply their insights to their own economic contexts, as well as to larger societal problems.

Overall, community-based learning provided positive developmental experiences for the men in this study and contributed to their behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement in college (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris 2004). By providing meaningful assistance in schools and communities that resembled the places where they grew up, students from low-income backgrounds were empowered to “give back”

by tapping into their own community’s cultural wealth to share their knowledge and skills (Yosso 2005), in particular by serving as male role models to boys from similar backgrounds. At the same time, they built academic knowledge and leadership skills that are beneficial in college. These positive outcomes were accentuated when students had opportunities to share their expertise, assets, and identities through their engagement experiences and when they felt valued for their contributions.

### Recommendations for Practice

Community-based learning is a high-impact educational practice, yet institutional and structural barriers prevent low-income students from participating. There are several ways that colleges and universities can increase access and participation:

- **Broaden the types of community engagement opportunities available.** This could include allowing students to count relevant paid experiences (such as work in helping professions like healthcare or education) for their service learning courses.
- **Compensate students for community engagement.** Because students from low-income backgrounds are highly likely to have financial needs, colleges and universities should explore ways to monetarily compensate students for community-based engagement that does not provide academic credit. Community service work-study funds could be one mechanism to pay students for their community work.
- **Offer scholarships for community engagement participation.** Some universities have used scholarships to incentivize low-income students to work with similar populations in K–12 public schools.

By drawing upon these recommendations, institutional leaders and practitioners can modify their community engagement strategies to be more inclusive and supportive of low-income men. ☐

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