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About Diversity & Democracy

Diversity & Democracy supports higher education faculty and leaders as they design and implement programs that advance civic learning and democratic engagement, global learning, and engagement with diversity to prepare students for socially responsible action in today’s interdependent but unequal world. The publication features evidence, research, and exemplary practices to assist practitioners in creating learning opportunities that realize this vision. To access Diversity & Democracy online, visit www.aacu.org/diversitydemocracy.
Community-Engaged Signature Work

In his 2011 biography of Steve Jobs, Walter Isaacson relates an anecdote that speaks to the power of taking pride in one’s contributions to collaborative work. When the team behind the original Macintosh finished the computer’s design, Jobs gathered the team members together to sign a sheet of paper. These signatures, Isaacson writes, “were engraved inside each Macintosh”—invisible from the outside, but suggesting the artistry that went into the product. In the words of Steve Jobs, as quoted by Isaacson: “Real artists sign their work” (134).

In undergraduate education, the key artistic “product” of a person’s endeavors is arguably the self—always a work in progress. But in creating the self, one also creates a variety of more concrete outcomes (such as papers, projects, or artworks), each in some way signifying the changes that have occurred within. Ideally, these outcomes illustrate not only one’s learning, but also one’s positive contributions to the world—a key idea behind “signature work,” as the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) has conceived of it. In signature work, through integrative projects lasting at least one semester, students pursue questions that matter both to themselves and to society, with the goal of strengthening both (AAC&U 2016).

Through this dual focus, it might be argued, all signature work could, and perhaps should, involve elements of community engagement. With this issue of Diversity & Democracy, we are asking what it means for signature work to explicitly and intentionally ask students to reflect and act on their roles within a community. Joining us in this exploration are our partners at the Corella and Bertram F. Bonner Foundation, which empowers students—particularly low-income students, first-generation students, and students of color—through community engagement scaffolded across their undergraduate years. We believe that something can be gained by putting the Bonner Foundation’s developmental model of student learning and AAC&U’s conception of signature work in conversation with each other. By braiding together these approaches, higher education can deepen the role that signature work can play in students’ lives and in the public sphere.

In their article framing this issue of Diversity & Democracy, Ariane Hoy and Kathy Wolfe interweave these threads as they describe community-engaged signature work and argue for its importance in advancing higher education’s civic mission. Robert Hackett explores the need for effective leadership to support this work. Contributors from Allegheny College share lessons they have learned about structural and cultural change, and staff at the University of Richmond’s Bonner Center for Civic Engagement describe an innovative and creative approach to assessing student learning. Researchers Ashley Finley and Robert Reason share promising evidence suggesting possible connections between community-engaged signature work and student well-being. Authors from Emory & Henry College, Portland State University, Rhodes College, and DePaul University share innovative program models, while two recent graduates reflect on their learning experiences.

Together, these authors have lent their own signatures to a collection that we hope will provide support for new approaches to student learning across higher education. These approaches will prompt students to work in reciprocity with community partners as they build culminating projects to which they are proud to contribute, projects that advance community goals and launch students into meaningful lifelong civic engagement. If offered equitably—as opportunities for signature work should be—these approaches will help ensure that all students, regardless of social identity or relative privilege, experience the optimal benefits of their undergraduate educations.

Much like the original Macintosh—although perhaps crafted with more careful consideration of community assets and needs—community-engaged signature work should have lasting effects on the world at large, and on the students who create it. And just as computers have become pervasive across our classrooms and campuses, opportunities for community-engaged signature work should become networked across our institutions, essential infrastructure for college learning that affects every student. We hope this issue will help you envision a world where such change is possible, and where student learning changes not only the self, but also our society.

—Kathryn Peltier Campbell
Editor, Diversity & Democracy

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High-Impact Learning for Self and Society: Community-Engaged Signature Work

KATHY WOLFE, senior fellow at the Association of American Colleges and Universities and professor of English at Nebraska Wesleyan University

Just over two decades ago, Ernest Boyer, then president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, expressed concern that higher education was falling short in addressing a key aim of its mission: its public purpose. Concerned about societal inequities and a range of other problems, he called upon higher education leaders and faculty to rethink their approaches to teaching and learning. In Scholarship Reconsidered, Boyer wrote:

Beyond the campus, America’s social and economic crises are growing—troubled schools, budget deficits, pollution, urban decay, and neglected children, to highlight problems that are most apparent. Other concerns such as acid rain, AIDS, dwindling energy supplies, and population shifts are truly global, transcending national boundaries. The challenge then is this: Can America’s colleges and universities, with all the richness of their resources, be of greater service to the nation and world? (1990, 3)

Taking up this question, Boyer set out an aspirational vision for a “New American College” in which undergraduates and faculty participate in field projects, connecting ideas to real life. In such an institution, “Classrooms and laboratories would be extended to include health clinics, youth centers, schools, and government offices. Faculty members would build partnerships with practitioners who would, in turn, come to campus as lecturers and student advisers” (1994, A48).

Today, at a time of increasing disparities and intensifying societal challenges, Boyer’s vision has even greater meaning. Moreover, the opportunity to create the “New American College” has been enlivened by decades of concerted effort to define, refine, and integrate engaged learning and civic work across higher education. In 2012, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) published A Crucible Moment: Civic Learning and Democracy’s Future (National Task Force 2012), capturing the themes of a yearlong national dialogue involving representatives of colleges and universities, civic organizations, private and government funding agencies, higher education associations, and disciplinary societies. The publication’s call to action heralded the need for higher education to play its part in addressing declining civic knowledge and participation in the United States. In response, higher education leaders and practitioners have invested in sophisticated efforts to enhance civic ethos within and across their institutions through new collaborations and innovations in curricula and in cocurricular life.

Community-engaged signature work—described throughout this issue of Diversity & Democracy—is one such innovation. This approach has the potential to advance higher education’s public purpose and presents an opportunity to strengthen the connections among undergraduate education, student learning, and the vitality of our democracy. Drawing on pedagogies that are student-centered, collaborative, and proven effective, community-engaged signature work represents a collective attempt to better align the knowledge and assets of our colleges and universities with those of our communities. By scaling models like community-engaged signature work, colleges and universities can be “anchor institutions” and “stewards of place” that leverage resources to support the economic vitality of surrounding neighborhoods, towns, and cities (Taylor and Luter 2013; Votruba et al. 2002). Through such engagement, institutions of higher education also may enact a new paradigm of democratic community engagement, one in which institutions work alongside other community constituents to produce and apply knowledge (Saltmarsh and Hartley 2011; Hartley, Saltmarsh, and Clayton 2010).

The LEAP Challenge and Signature Work

Community-engaged signature work grows out of the LEAP Challenge—the next generation of Liberal Education and America’s Promise, an initiative launched over a decade ago to respond to the workplace and civic demands of the twenty-first century. After a decade of public advocacy and campus action, LEAP has resulted in strategies and tools that have contributed to transforming undergraduate education. LEAP has supported the creation of Essential Learning Outcomes, the articulation and replication of high-impact practices, and the development of the VALUE (Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education) rubrics. Building on these successes, the LEAP Challenge calls for all students to engage in “integrating and applying their learning to complex problems and projects that are important to the student and important to society” (AAC&U 2011; Hartley, Saltmarsh, and Clayton 2010).
2016). Through a culminating experience—or a signature work—students synthesize their knowledge and skills across general education, majors, the cocurriculum, and off-campus study, applying what they know and can do to important, unscripted real-world problems.

Signature work lasts at least one semester and can take several forms, including undergraduate research projects, community-based research, and project-based learning. As individuals or in teams, students grapple with complex questions requiring input from multiple disciplines and perspectives. The nature of the assignment itself can help to clarify the purpose of broad liberal learning—not as a random collection of credit hours that make one “well-rounded,” but as a means of acquiring the “big-picture” knowledge and skills needed to address real and difficult problems in our civic, professional, and personal lives. This work is called “signature” because, although students are mentored in connection with their projects, they take the lead in defining an issue and communicating its significance, drawing from their own interests and commitments as they complete work that is indeed worthy of their authorship.

To prepare students for signature work, colleges and universities are (re)designing educational pathways that foster integrative learning, rather than maintaining separate silos for general education, majors, and the cocurriculum. Some institutions are tying these creative efforts to programs, while others are re-envisioning the core curriculum for all students. Already, the foundation for integrative capstones is strong: as reported by Kinzie (2013), according to the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), 46 percent of senior-level students report doing some kind of culminating work.

This Issue of Diversity & Democracy

Over the past decade, the Bonner Foundation has worked in partnership with AAC&U on a number of initiatives connected to the LEAP Challenge. This work has included the development of civically focused academic programs, captured in Civic Engagement at the Center: Building Democracy through Integrated Curricular and Cocurricular Experiences (Hoy and Meisel 2008). It deepened through collaboration on the Bonner High-Impact Initiative, through which teams of faculty, administrators, students, and community partners worked strategically to foster curricular and cultural change at their institutions, promoting the integration and replication of high-impact practices tied to civic purpose and community engagement.

At the heart of the Bonner Foundation’s work is an intentional, developmental, and collaborative approach to institutional change and engagement. The Bonner Scholar and Leader Program models are founded on a commitment to enhancing college access and success for students—especially low-income students, first-generation students, and students of color. This focus on students enables participating colleges and universities to create vibrant campus-wide cultures where engagement is woven into the very fabric of curricular and cocurricular life, deeply connected with mission and purpose.

Today, the Bonner Foundation and AAC&U grapple together with the aspiration and challenge to see all students—no matter their institutions or majors—integrating their knowledge and skills to complete a significant inquiry-based project, a form of signature work. We believe that we can make small steps toward meeting this lofty goal through thoughtful and intentional curriculum and program design. This issue of Diversity & Democracy explores and amplifies a key dimension of signature work: that it be important to the student and important to society. The issue’s authors highlight examples where integration of capstone-level work with civic engagement or purpose is already occurring as students, faculty, and other institutional actors apply their knowledge for the common good, pointing toward what community-engaged signature work could be.

Why Signature Work Matters

Signature work may take the form of a range of high-impact practices that foster achievement and completion, especially for traditionally underserved students—including undergraduate research, writing-intensive courses, collaborative assignments, internships, capstones, and community-based learning (Brownell and Swaner 2010; Kuh 2008). To be truly effective, these practices must be effortful; help students build substantive relationships; support students in engagement across differences; provide students with rich feedback; help students apply and test what they are learning in new situations; and provide opportunities for students to reflect on the people they are becoming (Kinzie et al. 2008; Kuh 2008). Community-engaged signature work may combine these features, making it an especially robust approach for student learning.

Indeed, empirical research already suggests that capstones, and especially community-engaged capstones, may promote deeper student learning. The integrative, applied, and reflective kinds of learning that signature work represents are positively correlated with improvement in outcomes such as critical thinking, moral reasoning, and an inclination toward lifelong learning (Pascarella and Blaich 2013). In addition, according to studies that draw on NSSE data, students who reported a culminating experience were more engaged in purposeful activities and more
likely to report gains in job- or work-related knowledge (Kinzie 2013; NSSE 2009; NSSE 2011). Moreover, capstones involving "a field placement or experience were associated with the greatest number of educational gains (fourteen of fifteen common gains), including working effectively with others, acquiring job- or work-related skills, solving complex, real world problems, applying theory, and synthesizing and organizing ideas" (Kinzie 2013, 28).

Such methods are also useful in teaching students the practical skills they need for employment and post-graduate success. Well-designed and well-implemented signature work can foster independent research or inquiry, critical thinking, communication skills, and integrative learning (Schermer and Gray 2012). Community-based capstones have been found to be associated with greater gains in leadership, tolerance for difference, knowledge of people from different cultures, and understanding of social issues (Rhodes and Agre-Kippenhan 2004). Partnerships with community constituents require faculty and students to be flexible as they work to maintain relationships, and may involve the kinds of “disorienting dilemmas” that Sill, Harward, and Cooper (2009) have found can be important to students’ learning experiences.

Finally, a growing body of evidence suggests that experiences associated with signature work have long-term positive effects in graduates’ lives. Graduates who worked on a semester-long project, had a mentor, and had a chance to apply their learning outside the classroom report being more likely to be engaged in their work and to feel that their college education was worth the investment (Gallup 2014). Employers also indicate that applied learning experiences should be required of all students, and that such opportunities benefit graduates on the job market (Hart Research Associates 2015).

**Figure 1. Sample Guided Pathway with Signature Work**

Preparing students to do signature work will require thoughtful redesign of curricular pathways. This example of a general education pathway is rich with problem-based learning. It can be integrated with any well-designed major. Students taking this pathway would develop core intellectual skills and knowledge through exploration of big questions, and they would be required to apply their learning in their own Signature Work. A version of this figure originally appeared in *The LEAP Challenge: Education for a World of Unscripted Problems*, published in 2015 by AAC&U.
**Pathways and Networks**

Students have already generated inspiring examples of community-engaged signature work: analyzing and designing a strategy to address urban food deserts; writing a high school curriculum on environmental sustainability; conducting oral histories and producing a community theater project; conducting a county-wide poverty assessment; and creating a STEM mentoring program for underrepresented middle school students, to name a few. The innovative educational pathways that colleges and universities are creating to support signature work can allow community-engaged projects like these to serve as the culminating experience (see fig. 1). By selectively incorporating civic engagement opportunities, even pathways that do not involve civic connections for all students may still prompt individual students to focus their academic studies on achieving real-world impact.

On a local level, these pathways are made possible through sustained relationships between faculty and community partners, facilitated both through academic departments and through the designated centers for civic engagement that are now prevalent across colleges and universities. Key cross-institutional networks, such as those formed through AAC&U’s VALUE project, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities’ American Democracy Project, the Bonner Foundation’s network, Bringing Theory to Practice, Campus Compact, The Democracy Commitment, Imagining America, and NASPA’s Lead Initiative, have built expanded infrastructure and innovation for community-engaged scholarship.

Across these networks and in the nonprofit sector, engagement is increasingly characterized not by short-term volunteerism, but instead by a rich array of linkages with academic scholarship, sustained over time. Both campuses and

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**EXAMPLE: Local Government Pathway (Public Policy)**

- **FIRST- OR SECOND-YEAR SEMINAR**
  - Featuring town hall meeting and public pedagogies
- **THEMATIC COURSE CLUSTERS**
  - **Political theory course**
  - **Government internship**
  - **Research methods course**
- **SENIOR CAPSTONE**
  - Team-based project working with local government agency

**EXAMPLE: Environmental Sustainability Pathway (STEM Field)**

- **FIRST- OR SECOND-YEAR SEMINAR**
  - Environmental science
- **THEMATIC COURSE CLUSTERS**
  - **Environmental sustainability course**
  - **Summer internship with environmentally focused nonprofit**
  - **Course on fuel**
- **SENIOR CAPSTONE**
  - Creation of local fuel station and strategy to recycle reclaimed cooking oil into biodiesel

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* For students in two-year degree programs, this work is Signature Work. For students in four-year degree programs, it is preparation for Signature Work. Transfer students may take the second-year inquiry seminar at the original institution or following transfer.
An Education for a Lifetime

Community-engaged signature work speaks to two important changes that have occurred in American society in the decades since Boyer’s call to action. For one, the diverse millennials who are a significant number of today’s college students are arriving at college with a greater commitment to civic engagement and activism than students at any time in the past (Eagan et al. 2016, Levine and Dean 2012). They want to change the world. Secondly, the issues that Boyer (and others) articulated have not gone away. We face entrenched challenges, like poverty and increasing economic stratification, that threaten the health and welfare of the nation and globe and have profound implications for higher education (Stone et al. 2015). College students, faculty, and institutions can make vital contributions to these issues.

Ultimately, signature work matters because we need graduates with the capacity and the commitment to address complex problems in their personal and civic lives and in their workplaces. Signature work projects can be the evidence—and far better evidence than degree completion alone—of graduates’ readiness to work across differences to solve problems in thoughtful and ethical ways. By rethinking undergraduate education to include community-engaged signature work, higher education can help prepare the reflective scholars and practitioners who will address today’s most challenging problems and ultimately contribute to our communities and our democracy.

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[COMMUNITY-ENGAGED SIGNATURE WORK]

Presidential Leadership for Community-Engaged Signature Work

ROBERT HACKETT, president of the Bonner Foundation

How are college and university presidents and other senior leaders addressing the challenge of rethinking liberal education for today’s world? How are they mobilizing their institutions to adapt and advance that vision? I recently asked these questions of five college presidents and a senior academic officer who are leading their institutions in ways that might suggest roadmaps for others as they work to integrate community-engaged learning across their own institutions.

The leaders I interviewed all work at small liberal arts-focused institutions: four private colleges with full-time undergraduate enrollments between 950 and 2,300 students, and two public institutions with full-time undergraduate enrollments between 4,450 and 6,650 students. While each institution is distinctive within its own context, all share common themes in their work and have similar approaches to framing, planning, and more fully incorporating community-based learning and civic engagement in their educational programs.

Rethinking Liberal Education Today
My initial interest was in how the leaders I interviewed frame the strategic opportunity to rethink teaching and learning within the contemporary context. While the details of their approaches differed, these leaders were generally in agreement with the “growing consensus that Liberal Education 2.0 needs to respond to the world that students are going to graduate into,” as Nancy Budwig, associate provost of Clark University, put it.

Brian Rosenberg, president of Macalester College, presented the challenge as incremental and cumulative, asking how “we create another layer of curriculum that overlays the traditional liberal arts curriculum, which is the foundation,” resulting in a multifaceted approach “that prepares students to move into the real world. The problem-based curriculum is a more accurate representation of the world they will face.”

Richard Guarasci, president of Wagner College, believes that linking students’ educational experiences to issues of public importance will animate the curriculum while also preparing students to take their place in the world beyond the institution. He indicated that Wagner has “a community-defined curriculum, organized around a notion that the university and what we study are defined by the world around us.” He said, “If you come to Wagner College, our goal … is that you become a civic professional. You [will] learn at Wagner to serve the public through … your vocation,” whatever it happens to be.

Like most presidents of small colleges, Jake Schrum of Emory & Henry College has accepted the charge to increase his institution’s enrollment and endowment. When he arrived at the college three years ago and began searching for foundations upon which to build in pursuing these goals, others on campus pointed him repeatedly to the work of the college’s Appalachian Center for Civic Life and of Emory & Henry’s honors students and Bonner Scholars, who were already finding ways to connect and make sense of the subject matter in their majors through internships and community-engagement experiences. In this work, Schrum saw an approach that, when applied across the college, would represent “what the ampersand in Emory & Henry is all about…. freedom and civic responsibility (from Patrick Henry) linked to faith and learning (from Bishop John Emory).”

Elsa Núñez, president of Eastern Connecticut State University, also saw a vision for the university’s future within the concept of applied learning: “Strategically, we … had a niche as Connecticut’s only liberal arts public college. Ninety percent of our students are state residents, and 50 percent are the first in their families to go to college. Everybody who graduates has to have a good shot at graduate school or a job.” After asking “what kinds of experiences … these students need to have,” Eastern “defined [the sum of those experiences] precisely as a first-class liberal arts education that is practically applied through undergraduate research with faculty, service learning, internships, and community service.”

At The College of New Jersey (TCNJ), president R. Barbara Gitenstein draws inspiration from the school’s founding as the New Jersey State Normal School in 1855, concurrent with “an avant-garde teacher education movement whose impetus was owing something to your community.” The public purpose of a TCNJ education appears clearly in the school’s mission statement, which reads in part, “Grounded in the liberal arts, TCNJ’s personalized, collaborative, and rigorous education engages students at the highest level within and beyond the classroom” (TCNJ 2016). Indeed, each leader pointed to ways in which opportunities for real-world connections with the community were shaping his or her visions and strategies.

Collaborative, Visionary Leadership
At the center of each leader’s agenda
At the center of each leader’s agenda was the goal of strengthening the links between students’ liberal education and each institution’s longstanding commitment to community and civic engagement.

President Núñez explained, “My leadership has focused on the core values of the institution. The faculty came to the school for a reason. They wanted to educate students from modest or working-class backgrounds. So when I began to talk [about] being an elite institution without being elitist, those words began to capture the imagination of the faculty…. Sharing my values allowed them to understand me better. That opened up the conversation, so we’re all working for the same thing. Persuasion is all I have.”

President Rosenberg agreed, stating that “the role of the president in leading these processes is providing big-vision leadership and listening to others and adapting the vision to incorporate their ideas. We had a committee of twenty faculty, staff, and students. My role was to draft the initial skeleton of the plan and then the committee went through topic by topic. Some things were refined and other topics, such as urban sustainability, emerged.”

During Emory & Henry’s strategic planning process, President Schrum focused on the ampersand in the college’s name. To him, it represented the project-based approach he wanted to feature in the school’s strategic plan, linking theory with practice, academics with engagement. However, rather than require project-based learning in the curriculum, Schrum has “tried to … quietly … push the idea from the back.” In spring 2016, the college “organized the first Project Ampersand Day … where students had the chance to hear about the projects of other students. From there, [project-based learning] is going viral.”

Faculty were given major roles on strategic planning committees at each institution. In some cases, faculty also took on prominent leadership roles, while in others they co-led the central strategic planning committee alongside the president or provost. President Gitenstein took the additional step of including the college’s Board of Trustees in the process, which “ended up being fantastic. The board enriched the plan by making sure they situated [it in relation to] the history of the college so everyone had a sense of the trajectory moving forward while keeping in mind continuity with the past.”

Each leader, regardless of his or her formal role in the strategic planning process, said that providing encouragement and leadership opportunities was not enough to promote institutional change. They also had to provide resources, such as opportunities to learn from those engaged in similar work on other campuses. For example, President Guarasci offered funding to support faculty attendance at national meetings and to bring to campus speakers who were using the Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP) framework and high-impact practices advocated by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), as well as additional support from Wagner’s Center for Teaching, Learning, and Research. President Rosenberg created $2,500 faculty incentive grants using his discretionary fund and put faculty in charge of determining who received these awards. Thanks to these efforts, the number of courses with a community-engagement focus rose from twelve to seventy.

At Clark University, Nancy Budwig has offered support for faculty and staff who are responding to the new institution-wide requirement that all students, beginning with those in this year’s incoming class, will have to complete a capstone before graduation. While Clark is beginning from a position of strength—90 percent of seniors report engaging in at least two high-impact practices, and 90 percent complete traditional capstones in their majors—“we are seeking to bring faculty and staff who provide these two kinds of experiences together in ‘exemplar groups’ to work on questions of how to build the infrastructure and more tightly link capstone seminars to signature work and student learning outcomes as we work to achieve the new requirement.” Budwig notes that Clark is seeking to promote “a mindset change: how can we get faculty and staff to see the synergy of capstones, community engagement, and high-impact practices as we work towards integrated liberal learning?”
Experimenting with New Pathways

The direction that arose out of each institution’s strategic plan speaks directly to the aspiration articulated through AAC&U’s LEAP Challenge: that every student will participate in a capstone or signature integrative learning experience before graduation. The idea that college should prepare students for active roles in the real world appears within these institutions’ strategic plans in clear and compelling language that supports, in particular, community-engaged capstones or signature work.

President Guarasci commented that “the faculty came to the conclusion during their two-year strategic planning process that students have to own their own work.” Wagner’s next immediate step is a revision of its general education requirements to prioritize this kind of ownership while further deepening the institution’s partnership with the Port Richmond neighborhood through sustained, multiyear projects connected to academic departments. Among the infrastructure supporting such long-term commitments is a four-year scholarship for local students who will become Bonner Leaders.

At Macalester College, the strategic plan points toward community-engaged signature work with two goals in particular, stating that Macalester will “become a leader in the offering of what might be called issue- or problem-focused academic programs, similar in nature to some of the concentrations that have been created during the past decade” and that it will “strengthen the connections between a liberal arts education and vocation by making more obvious and accessible the paths from the student experience at Macalester to eventual careers” (Macalester College 2015). Through the creative energy of faculty and in response to the overwhelming interest of students, Macalester has created a number of problem- or issue-based concentrations, including community and global health (the most popular, with more than seventy students) and food justice. Such efforts represent intentional developmental pathways through undergraduate education that may culminate in community-engaged signature work.

One strategic priority at TCNJ calls for every student to participate in five signature experiences: Personalized, Collaborative, and Rigorous Education; Undergraduate Research, Mentored Internships, and Field Experiences; Community-Engaged Learning; Global Engagement; and Leadership Development. President Gitenstein noted that “we’re doing well meeting our enrollment and retention goals, which suggests that what we’re offering is what [students] want. The [signature experience] programs are attracting students who wouldn’t have come [to TCNJ] in the past, and [these students] are getting jobs when they graduate.” TCNJ’s Center for Community Engaged Learning and Research, the administrative home for the college’s community engagement activities and Bonner Program, matches student learning goals with community partner goals.

At Eastern Connecticut State University, one objective of the strategic plan directs attention to three specific community issues: early childhood social and cognitive development programs, coordinated engagement programs for Windham Public School students, and health and wellness programs for Windham Public School students and their families. This objective states that “Eastern students will develop leadership and civic engagement values and skills through an integrative learning approach that allows students to make connections between learning in the traditional classroom and applied experiences on and beyond campus. These experiences will transform Eastern students as they transform their communities” (ECSU 2013, 10).

President Núñez explained, “It is very important to get students to do multiple experiences and help them find the core of their passion. Our Center for Community Engagement is able to help move students around to agencies that match their passion, and career services works on advising. We then look at the service-learning courses aligned to their interest. … The challenge now is to get faculty to offer courses that are sequential.” Eastern’s psychology department is pioneering such a model, in which students engage in service-learning projects that align with the curriculum and lead to a culminating capstone.

From Majors to Projects

The leaders I interviewed seemed pleased about the visions that had taken form in their institutions’ strategic plans, about the encouraging signs of faculty buy-in, and about students’ responses to their work. And yet, all acknowledged that their institutions are still in the early stages of building four-year pathways for integrated community-engaged learning that are clear and navigable for all students. The ultimate goal for many institutions may be suggested in the words of President Schrum, who says of Emory & Henry College, “[Now] when I see students on campus, I ask them not about their major, but [about] what project [they] are working on.”

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[COMMUNITY-ENGAGED SIGNATURE WORK]

Building Momentum for Community Engagement: From Structural to Cultural Change

- DAVE RONCOLATO, director of civic engagement for the Allegheny Gateway and professor of community and justice studies at Allegheny College
- RON COLE, provost and dean of the college and professor of geology at Allegheny College

A Hasidic tale tells of a rabbi quizzing his students. He asked, “How can we determine when the night ends and the day begins?”

One of the students suggested, “Day begins when, from a distance, you can distinguish between a dog and a sheep.” “No,” answered the rabbi. Another student asked, “Is it when you can distinguish between a fig tree and a grapevine?”

Again, the answer was “no.” “Please tell us the answer,” said the students.

“It is,” said the rabbi, “when you can look into the face of another human being and you have enough light in you to recognize them as your sister or brother. Until then, it is night and darkness is still with us.”

Change comes slowly to institutions of higher education. From one moment to the next, or one year to the next, it can proceed gradually, almost imperceptibly. Not unlike when night becomes day, significant turning points can be recognized only afterwards, when one reflects back. At Allegheny College, we believe we are experiencing the gradual dawning of a new day, and we reflect here on our change process.

Inspiration from National Efforts

One source of the coming light of morning has been Allegheny’s involvement in the Bonner network. Allegheny participated in the Bonner High-Impact Initiative, a three-year effort beginning in 2012 through which participating institutions aimed to change their curricula by linking high-impact educational practices with community engagement. To meet initiative goals, the Allegheny team proposed three innovations—a new academic requirement focused on civic engagement, a center for local knowledge and research, and a community listening project—that found significant traction on our campus and contributed to institutional changes now underway.

In September 2015, the Bonner Foundation coordinated a conference at Allegheny in response to a call issued by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U 2015) for all students to create signature projects focused on issues that matter to them and to society. Provosts, chief academic officers, and civic engagement administrators from more than twenty schools gathered to explore the potential of connecting the Bonner Foundation’s four-year, cocurricular, developmental model with AAC&U’s vision of guided pathways leading to culminating signature work. Emerging from this conference was the concept of community-engaged signature work, which brings into sharp focus the potential efficacy, relevance, and impact of undergraduate signature projects.

In remarks opening the conference, John Saltmarsh, director of the New England Resource Center for Higher Education, reflected on different paradigms of change on college campuses. The Bonner Program advocates for change that is rooted in student voice and student development; others argue that campus change results from change in faculty culture. These visions need not be mutually exclusive. In our experience, however, one thing is clear: effective institutional change relies on changes in institutional structure and changes in institutional culture. At Allegheny, structural change involves a robust shared governance process that includes faculty, students, staff, and administrators working together on standing committees to deliberate and make recommendations around the curriculum, budget, diversity and inclusion, academic and community standards, and strategic planning. Cultural change, through which changes in structure are put into practice, takes place more organically, unfolds over a significant period of time, and involves the whole community.

Institution-Wide Structural Shifts

Three recent changes in institutional structures are setting the stage for significant cultural change at Allegheny. These three changes—new core curriculum requirements, revised tenure and promotion guidelines, and the launch of the Allegheny Gateway—will place community-engaged signature work closer to the heart of the educational experience for Allegheny students. The shared project of putting these changes into practice—infusing them into our culture—defines Allegheny’s current moment.

Core Curriculum Changes

In November 2014, over 70 percent of faculty voted in favor of new distribution requirements: a power, privilege, and difference requirement; a global learning requirement; and a civic learning requirement. This change
in the core curriculum resulted from several years of campus-wide discussion and debate, some of it difficult, on topics ranging from pedagogical philosophy to logistical concerns. Faculty and students on our curriculum committee worked with members of our faculty council and assessment committee to collect community input through open meetings, an anonymous online survey, and debates held during full faculty meetings. After academic departments and programs identified the courses that would meet the new requirements, we launched the new curriculum in fall 2016. Our goal is to infuse our strategic priorities related to civic learning and diversity, as well as priorities for learning, more transparently and intentionally across each area of the curriculum.

The new requirements will provide supportive frameworks for an element of Allegheny’s curriculum that will stay the same: our longstanding tradition that every student completes a senior comprehensive research project. This graduation requirement is the culmination of a scaffolded educational pathway along which students travel over their four years as undergraduates (Coates et al. 2014). It offers a strong foundation for community-engaged signature work, as illustrated by several recent senior comprehensive projects:

- “Oh Freedom! Our Own Sounds: A Meadville Community-Based Theatre Piece with Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church,” a play based on the community’s history and residents’ experiences (Katie Beck, 2013, Bonner Leader) (Editor’s note: read more about Katie Beck’s work on page 28.)
- “Meadville Time Trade: The Analysis and Reflections of Building a Time Bank in Meadville, PA,” an initiative to create a local currency based on the equal value of every person’s volunteer time (Paige Missel, 2014, Bonner Summer Intern)
- “Tool City Voices: A Series of Podcasts,” an empowering youth voice project focused on identity and place (Haley Marblestone, 2016)

Tenure and Promotion Guidelines

Shortly after approving the core curriculum changes, the faculty voted in April 2015 to establish new promotion and tenure guidelines that support a range of high-impact practices, including service learning and community-based learning, and that recognize diverse approaches to scholarship, creative activity, and professional development beyond traditional published works, including community-based programs or initiatives. Like the curricular changes, these changes emerged from a multiyear process that included committee work, surveys of academic departments, and discussions at open meetings, with lively sparring among faculty about issues of credibility and evaluation.

The new guidelines passed by a wide margin (over 80 percent in favor), indicating that cultural change is underway. But there is work yet to be accomplished. Our tenure and promotion review committee depends on faculty within departments to contextualize the work of individual candidates, and those faculty members need to equip themselves to implement the new guidelines. Putting the changes into practice will require persistence and consistency from department and program chairs, the review committee, and the provost, as well as open communication and a self-conscious process of evaluation.

Allegheny Gateway

Writing of persistent divides among the civic engagement movement, the diversity movement, and the global learning movement, Caryn McTighe Musil (2011) offers a profound challenge to the higher education community: “It is time to braid these divided movements into one strand. Students deserve an education that prepares them to become responsible citizens deliberately working to repair dangerously stratified societies” (240). Allegheny took this challenge seriously as it finished its most recent strategic planning and accreditation evaluation processes. From these processes emerged the Allegheny Gateway, a multi-office center that aims “to graduate students equipped to be global citizens of a diverse, complex, and interconnected world” by “braid[ing] together curricular and co-curricular education in U.S. diversity, global learning, and civic engagement.” Through the Gateway, Allegheny students “develop a clear vision of who they are in the world, an inclusive and global perspective, and the commitment to be citizen-leaders addressing the complexities of the modern world” (Allegheny College 2016).

The Gateway is located within academic affairs, with staff reporting through the associate provost to the provost. While faculty involvement is encouraged and recognized, faculty within some academic programs were initially apprehensive of this new unit that blends curricular and cocurricular learning opportunities. Nonetheless, the Gateway has successfully launched several new initiatives, including
programs that will promote community-engaged signature work. A series of new academic concentrations, including Food Access, Law and Policy, Science and Society, and Equity, will create guided pathways for individual signature projects and serve as vehicles for shared projects through which students can address pressing societal issues using multiple disciplinary perspectives. The Gateway has also integrated one of the projects created through the Bonner High-Impact Initiative: the Network for Local Knowledge and Research, which brings together community partners, college students, and faculty members to address community-defined issues in a structured setting. The Allegheny Community Engaged Student Fellows, a student-initiated Gateway program, trains students to assist faculty members as they embed service-learning pedagogy in academic courses. Finally, the Gateway Global Scholars program, comprising a cohort of fifteen rising second-year students, integrates global learning, US diversity, and civic engagement in a three-year program involving curricular and cocurricular requirements.

Momentum for Cultural Change
As the evidence summarized above suggests, Allegheny College has accomplished a remarkable number of structural changes over a short period of time. Reflecting on our progress, we can attribute our success to a few practices:

1. We began with a strategic planning process to invite broad input and identify the best ways of realizing our institutional mission and goals.
2. We stayed student centered, always asking what students would learn and experience in the newly changed institution.
3. We included community members when planning and implementing community-engaged work.
4. We respected voices of dissent, acknowledging that change is difficult and that different individuals will embrace change with different levels of investment and at varying times.
5. We took risks, trusting the process we had established to modify structures and advance cultural change.

As we move forward, we are considering several strategies to accelerate shifts in Allegheny’s culture. Over the next two years, we will encourage departmental-level conversations using Civic Prompts: Making Civic Learning Routine Across the Disciplines (Musil 2015). We will offer faculty development programs that focus on Boyer’s (1990) four domains of scholarship: the scholarship of application, integration, teaching, and discovery. We will find new ways to incentivize, for both faculty and students, the practice of developing collaborative senior comprehensive projects focused on local, national, or international problems. We will offer a lunchtime learning series with representation from faculty, community partners, and students, focusing on epistemology that promotes collaborative knowledge production.

As we continue to cultivate excellence in the Allegheny College experience, we will reinforce the value of rigor in the academic disciplines in tandem with the value of community engagement. These two pivotal foci should remain perpetually in dialogue; each has something to say to the other. We will know that Allegheny’s culture has shifted when conversations about community-engaged signature work are familiar and commonplace; when this work is valued across the campus community; when there is a sense of bottom-up as well as top-down momentum for this work. We will know the culture has shifted when community-engaged signature work is visible in symbol, heralded in narratives of student learning, and recognized in public celebrations.

The Allegheny valedictorian was invited to the last faculty meeting of the year. She asked the faculty, “How can we determine the hour of the dawn of a new day in higher education?”

One tenured faculty member suggested, “It is when the college mission statement articulates a commitment to global learning, civic engagement, and diversity.”

“No,” answered the student.

A junior faculty member asked, “Is it when the college has modified its hiring practices, tenure and promotion guidelines, and core curriculum?”

Again, the answer was “no.”

“No, please tell us,” cried the faculty in unison.

“It is,” said the wise student, “when the whole academic community—students, faculty, and administrators—recognizes from afar the essential relationship between educating within the rigors of a discipline and educating in service to the global common good.”

REFERENCES

Engaging Assessment: Applying Civic Values to Evaluation

TERRY DOLSON, manager of community-based learning in the Bonner Center for Civic Engagement at the University of Richmond

BRYAN FIGURA, director of the Bonner Scholars program in the Bonner Center for Civic Engagement at the University of Richmond

SYLVIA GALE, director of the Bonner Center for Civic Engagement at the University of Richmond

At the 2015 Annual Meeting of the Association of American Colleges and Universities in Washington, DC, we asked participants in our session on approaches to assessing civicly engaged student learning, “Would you describe your own assessment initiatives as involving meaningful effort, offering staff and faculty rich feedback about your work, and providing opportunities for you to engage across differences as you reflect on the people your students are becoming?”

Not a single person in a room of more than fifty raised their hands. This did not surprise us. We were testing a bold idea: that as faculty and staff charged with assessing community-engaged student learning, we can let the values that underpin our civic engagement work shape our assessment efforts as well. This practice, we have found, is an effective tool for institutional cultural change, allowing us to reclaim assessment as a generative, inquiry-based cycle whose processes—and not only products—further our center’s mission.

From Frustration to Meaning-Making

At the University of Richmond’s Bonner Center for Civic Engagement (BCCE), we have been exploring the idea that the values that guide our efforts to support engaged student learning can also guide our assessment practices. This theme is also emerging through national conversations. At an Imagining America (IA) preconference meeting in 2015, for example, Patti Clayton and members of IA’s Assessing the Practices of Public Scholarship research group (of which Sylvia Gale is a part) invited participants to explore what it would mean to “walk the talk” in assessment of community engagement, considering “how and why we might best enact the values of community engagement in assessment practices.”

Yet the frustrations that emerge as we talk with colleagues around the country make it clear that many of us still work in assessment cultures that do not feel like our own because they do not emerge from our own questions, interests, and commitments. We can distill these frustrations into three common complaints:

- **Assessment is about collection, not reflection.** Assessment is a routine activity, not a creative activity. We collect information, but we rarely make meaning of the data in ways that bring fresh understanding to our work.
- **Assessment is something done to us rather than by us.** We are responding to external requests rather than pursuing our own inquiry about our work and its impact.
- **Assessment is something experts do best.** Assessment relies on specialized knowledge; therefore, doing it well demands that we outsource it when possible.

These complaints echo the kinds of barriers others have observed in their work on effective outcomes assessment (see, for example, Banta and Blaich 2011). Such frustrations point, in part, to gaps between the predominant assessment tools at our disposal and the complex, iterative, community-engaged learning we are trying to measure (including the learning that occurs through community-engaged signature work). As David Scobey writes, “I have rarely seen evaluative tools that do justice to my experience or that of my students,” an experience that he describes as rooted in “meaning-making and reflection,” which in turn “nurture[s] the student’s capacity for self-making and engagement (ethical, civic, vocational) in the world” (emphasis in original, 2009). This critique is especially sharp from academic humanists like Scobey, yet it is one that resonates deeply with our own experiences.

Eager to disentangle ourselves from the frustrations named above, we began several years ago to create assessment processes that resonated with our center’s four values: lifelong learning, collaboration, full participation, and intentionality. These values originally emerged from careful consideration of what guides our programs and partnerships, and they have come to define the processes we employ to build relationships, make decisions, and do our work. Attending to these values in our assessment efforts has allowed us to invite our staff, faculty, and partners into the very culture of authentic, collaborative, purposeful inquiry that we want to cultivate in, for, and with our students.

Collecting and Reflecting

Our most significant means of cultivating a culture of inquiry related to community-engaged student learning is a method we call the “data lab.” In a data lab, stakeholders in a program, class, or
shared experience gather to look carefully at artifacts (data) that emerge from their collaborations. The artifacts originate in classes our center supports or programs we administer, and may include reflections written by Bonner Scholars (who have committed to a four-year program of sustained community engagement), student papers drafted in connection with community-based learning experiences, and site evaluation surveys. We organize the data in stations, and participants cycle through each, working alone or in groups to complete a visual or verbal interpretative experiment as they interact with the collected artifacts. The data lab helps us to deepen our understanding of student learning across our programs, and in turn to develop and refine our programs using evidence. Yet its fundamental goal is different: to build a culture of inquiry among our colleagues and allies, in part by opening dialogue about foundational concepts relevant to our work and engaging our entire team in the assessment.

We conclude each data lab by asking two simple questions: What are we learning about [focus of the data lab] from this data? and What else do we wish we knew? The first question unifies our inquiry and prevents us from slipping into a critique of the specific program or initiative that produced that data lab’s artifacts. The second question reveals important gaps in our data collection processes, and, perhaps most importantly, points us toward future directions for inquiry. This question about what’s missing has been particularly fruitful. For example, in a recent data lab, we examined end-of-year surveys in which students reflected on the skills they were learning through civic engagement. Our analysis led us to ask, “How are students utilizing their skills to build the capacity of our nonprofit partners?” We have now modified the Bonner Foundation’s capacity-building survey, completed by Bonner Scholars at the end of the year, in order to capture more nuanced answers to that question.

**Assessment “Experts” at Play**

Data labs are generative. But they are also playful. In fact, we have learned that creative interaction with the data is critical to a data lab’s success. While it is tempting to simply let participants discuss artifacts in familiar ways, we instead strive to identify distinct themes for data labs and surprising protocols or instructions for each data “station.” Creativity matters, we’ve found, because it freshens people’s relationships with the question, “What are our students learning?” The playfulness that characterizes a data lab moves staff away from sensitivity about the success or shortcomings of their own programs, and toward inquiry about the bigger picture of our work.

In our most recent data lab, for example, which focused on learning about students’ understandings of their own identities and the identities of others, our colleagues entered the room and walked through the magical gates of Wonderland—a carnival that featured four stations: a ferris wheel, bumper cars, a duck shooting gallery, and an opportunity to design your own ride. Each station featured one type of artifact and instructions about how to analyze the artifacts. For instance, at the design-your-own-ride station, data lab participants read the following instructions:

**The artifacts are three Presentations of Learning (POLs) videos. [Note: POLs are ten-minute presentations in which senior Bonner Scholars respond to the question, “How has civic engagement affected you?”]**

![FIGURE 1. A Visual Representation of a Student’s Developmental Journey](image)
Your instructions are to watch one POL. When you are done watching, draw a carnival ride that demonstrates what the student learned about his/her identity and the identities of others through civic engagement. Use labels and comments to explain how the ride’s design represents the student’s understanding of identity. Name the ride for bonus points!

This exercise was useful in two ways. First, it forced us to slow our individual processing of the information in order to imagine and draw a representation of a student’s understanding of identity (see fig. 1 for an example). Second, the accumulation of these images allowed our colleagues, together, to connect and synthesize our examination of singular artifacts in a way that transformed our larger understanding. While this was fun, it was not easy. For BCCE staff, who work across three locations and do not see each other on a daily basis, data labs spur critical discourse and curiosity about student learning in a structured, generative, and at times complicated way.

At the end of the Wonderland data lab, we considered, as a group, our two customary data lab questions—in this case, What are we learning about students’ identity development? and What else do we wish we knew about students’ identity development? Though the data lab focused on an established BCCE student learning objective, the discussion that ensued made it uncomfortably clear that, even among ourselves, we had multiple understandings of the concept of identity. Our questions at the conclusion of the data lab highlight how complicated the foundational concepts of our work can be:

- How does the center define identity when we work with students?
- When we discuss identity, what is important? How do we talk about it? Do we reinforce frameworks, or do we teach students to look beyond them?
- How do students’ majors or courses of study—or their career searches—influence their thinking and understanding of identity?

The data lab method enables us to see data in new ways and allows our own questions to emerge so that we become fully invested. We left Wonderland with a more nuanced and complicated understanding of ourselves, each other, and our students’ experiences—but also, perhaps most importantly, with questions to guide our continued shared inquiry.

Where Is the Answer?
After visiting Wonderland, a new staff member confided, “It was great and I learned a lot. But I don’t understand—what is the answer?” The culture in which assessment means checking for right answers is entrenched, and has, ironically, robbed many of us of opportunities to learn about and from our own work. When we treat assessment as being primarily about finding out whether or not students learned what we wanted them to learn, we do not do justice to our students’ meaning-making experiences, or to our own. By emphasizing the data lab as a cornerstone of our assessment cycle (held two to three times a year), we are not rejecting more conventional assessment measures. But we are shifting the paradigm for what assessment of engaged learning can involve, and we are challenging the notion that any one person can “do” assessment alone.

Our data labs are a part of a larger assessment ecosystem which includes the traditional report we complete for our campus’s Office of Institutional Effectiveness. But instead of merely collecting data for that report, we first collect and share data internally, and reflect and learn together. We think that our mission is furthered more by this emphasis on process than by focusing on a completed assessment product alone. In the short term, embracing the messiness of the data we collect, and using data labs to inspire open-ended conversations, makes us better at giving students space for more authentic reflection. For example, we now lead seniors working on their Presentations of Learning through a multistep reflection process that includes a weekend retreat. In the longer term, having been to Wonderland together with our colleagues, we can never “unhear” what we heard about the complexity of identity, and the complexity of our roles within the university. These complexities will thread their way into our conversations when we visit our community partners, plan new community-based learning classes with faculty, reflect with students, participate in working groups for the university’s new strategic plan, and, of course, as we develop our next evaluation plan.

What we are describing is a culture of assessment that mirrors and models the kind of learning we want students to do—learning that is intentional, so we own the questions being asked; learning that is collaborative, because shared inquiry changes cultures; learning that values full participation so that multiple perspectives are heard; and learning that is generative and points, always, to new questions to pursue.

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When facilitated intentionally and inclusively, signature work—in which students develop culminating products over time, guided by faculty feedback and driven by their own inquiry—has the potential to be a high-impact practice with transformative results. That potential may be heightened when signature work involves community engagement. As we argue in this article, campus practitioners should consider how students’ participation in community-engaged signature work may positively affect certain noncognitive outcomes as well as cognitive outcomes.

The Benefits of High-Impact Practices

High-impact practices are referred to as such because they have been shown to positively affect a broad range of cognitive outcomes, including students’ perceived gains in deep learning, general education skills, practical competence, and personal and social development (Kuh and O’Donnell 2013; Brownell and Swaner 2010). These practices, which Kuh and O’Donnell (2013) have defined according to a list of eight characteristics, benefit diverse student groups, and particularly those traditionally underserved by higher education (Finley and McNair 2013).

Educators and education experts have increasingly paid attention to the fact that these practices might also contribute to students’ development of certain noncognitive skills, such as sense of purpose, meaning, and overall well-being. Researchers have begun to make connections between students’ participation in high-impact practices and their increased sense of self-confidence, resilience, and self-esteem (Finley and McNair 2016; Finley, Major, and Mitchell, forthcoming). Service learning, one of the most common high-impact practices, has been shown to positively affect a range of outcomes, particularly those associated with cognitive development, such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and grade point average (Brownell and Swaner 2010; Finley 2011). Emerging evidence suggests that service-learning and community-based experiences also contribute to greater levels of perceived flourishing and other noncognitive capacities (Finley 2016). Connecting two high-impact practices—signature work and community engagement—may amplify outcomes for students (see Swaner and Brownell 2010; Finley and Kuh 2015).

If signature work is a high-impact practice, to what degree might it affect students’ whole-person development, in addition to their development of cognitive outcomes?

As we argue in this article, campus practitioners should consider how students’ participation in community-engaged signature work may positively affect certain noncognitive outcomes as well as cognitive outcomes.

Student Well-Being and Signature Work

Supporting the work of Kuh and O’Donnell (2013), Clayton-Pedersen and Finley (2010) have argued that high-impact practices typically share three essential characteristics: high levels of effort, high levels of interaction (including feedback), and high levels of reflection. Students’ engagement in signature work appears to meet several of these criteria. By definition, signature work requires high levels of effort from students over extended periods of time. During these periods, students are typically revising and refining their work through ongoing collaboration and interaction with faculty members, and, in some cases, community partners and peer reviewers. Finally, students are often asked to reflect on the process of creating their signature work.

If signature work is a high-impact practice, to what degree might it affect students’ whole-person development, in addition to their development of cognitive outcomes? Constructing signature work involves more than integrating knowledge, problem-solving, and critical thinking: it also involves trying and failing, testing the limits of one’s passion for a single subject, and understanding one’s personal endurance. These outcomes are as relevant as intellectual skills to the successful completion of a project; one could even argue that noncognitive skills, such as resilience and perseverance, are the qualities that actually get a student’s signature work to the finish line.

Students who position their signature work within a community-based context have even greater opportunities to
explore the real-world implications of their projects; they encounter problems so complex that the solutions are contingent upon more than intellectual or financial resources. Community engagement reminds students that human connection, self-care, and care for others are vital resources for effecting change.

**Campus Climate and Student Well-Being**

If community-engaged signature work is to be most effective in promoting students’ overall well-being, then the context within which students engage with the work is vitally important. Research suggests that students’ perceptions of campus climate can influence learning and developmental outcomes (Pascarella and Terenzini 2005). Our own research, a study funded by Bringing Theory to Practice and conducted in partnership with the Personal and Social Responsibility Inventory (PSRI), found preliminary evidence suggesting that campus climate contributes to at least one measure of student well-being: levels of flourishing.

Using the concept of flourishing outlined by Keyes (2012), researchers found that students’ individual behaviors and perceptions of campus climate—particularly those related to contributing to a larger community—were related to a greater sense of flourishing. Specifically, students who participated in community-based projects (whether associated with a course or not) and who reported having meaningful conversations with peers about community needs reported higher levels of flourishing. Students on campuses in which there was an ethos that promoted contributing to larger communities also reported higher levels of flourishing than similar students at campuses without such an ethos (Mitchell et al. 2016).

These and other emerging findings (see Barnhardt, Sheets, and Pasquesi 2015; King 2016) begin to paint a picture of connections among campus climates, practices that are characteristic of community-engaged signature work, and student well-being. As mentioned above, Clayton-Pedersen and Finley (2010) have suggested that effective high-impact practices must include high levels of effort and opportunities for reflection. Findings from the collaborative research between Bringing Theory to Practice and the PSRI suggest that effort put forth in service to the community, coupled with reflective interactions with peers, correlates with greater reported well-being. Participation in these activities within the context of campus climates that emphasize the importance of contributing to the larger community likely increases positive effects on students’ flourishing.

**Conclusion**

Signature work, when intentionally and inclusively implemented across disciplines, could very well be considered a high-impact practice. Moreover, connecting community engagement to signature work holds the promise of immersing students deeply in the real-world implications of complex problems and their solutions. In providing these experiences for all students, campus leaders (faculty, staff, and administrators) should consider how these experiences uniquely contribute to students’ development of cognitive and noncognitive skills. Preliminary evidence on high-impact practices in general, and service learning in particular, suggests that students’ engagement may result in certain noncognitive outcomes, particularly self-reported levels of flourishing. As students explore their signature work in community settings, they may not only be learning well, they may also be learning to live well.

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Ringing True: Applied Civic Learning at Emory & Henry College

TALMAGE A. STANLEY, director of the Appalachian Center for Civic Life at Emory & Henry College

Woven into the fabric of Emory & Henry College is the tension between two approaches to learning: a traditional interpretation of the liberal arts that privileges learning for the sake of learning, and a focus on applied learning in which students engage in substantive work. The commitment to using this enduring tension for creative and productive purposes is part of the fiber of this institution. Founded in 1836 to educate citizens for participation in the American republic, the college was named for John Emory, a Methodist bishop, and Patrick Henry, a Virginia patriot during the American Revolution. While Emory & Henry evolved as an institution offering a classical liberal arts education, often at a distance from the world, it also became a place where teaching and learning are connected through service and civic leadership. The educational culture that has grown from this legacy rings true with the college’s original mission, while also charting new directions.

Transgressing Traditional Boundaries

In 1996, Emory & Henry began to act more intentionally to engage the people and places around the college. With a grant from the Jessie Ball duPont Fund, the college founded both the Appalachian Center for Community Service and the degree program in Public Policy and Community Service and began integrating service learning into curricular and cocurricular programming. Positioning participants from both the college and from local communities as coeducators and colearners, these initiatives joined the learning and teaching that occurs in the classroom with learning and teaching that occurs through students’ civic work and lived experiences. The innovations also built on the strengths of longstanding efforts like the school’s Bonner Scholars Program, established in 1991, which was the first program at the college to integrate reflection into its educational work and to structure service for pedagogical goals.

At the time, many faculty members looked with misgiving on changes they viewed as transgressing traditional boundaries of what higher education is and where it is undertaken. Some regarded the reflection embedded in the new initiatives as “feel-good” therapy, lacking in intellectual rigor. Others were adamantly opposed to challenging the traditional teacher-student power structure. Still others regarded those who integrated service into classroom learning as having political agendas. To secure buy-in despite these reservations, supporters of the new efforts organized one-on-one meetings with concerned faculty to work through and address their reservations. By finding and celebrating common ground, building alliances, and engaging in collaborative work, faculty came to embrace the educational rigor embedded in the changes and to regard them as part of the college’s legacy and mission.

A Culture of Civic Innovation

Following internal audits and external reviews, drawing inspiration from the white paper Democratic Engagement (Saltmarsh, Hartley, and Clayton 2009), and with support of the Rensselaerville Institute, in 2014 Emory & Henry conceived of the Appalachian Center for Community Service as the Appalachian Center for Civic Life. Simultaneously, the Interdisciplinary Program in Civic Innovation replaced the Department of Public Policy and Community Service.

The Civic Innovation program’s work is being shaped by an effort to “change the count”: to define the scope of civic engagement using metrics other than the numbers of hours served or people involved. Connecting the educational tensions described above with the college’s mission, our civic engagement efforts represent our attempts to contribute substantively to addressing community-identified needs. Moreover, the Civic Innovation program also challenges the American “can-do” ideology and its focus on quick fixes by teaching students about the complexity of intractable problems facing American society—racism, income inequality, economic disparity, environmental destruction—even as they engage in achieving tangible outcomes for human gain.

A culture in which students take on increasingly ambitious projects to build a strong civic life with community members now flourishes at Emory & Henry. Twenty years after the college’s initial investment in community service, 30 percent of all courses at Emory & Henry have a civic engagement component. Connecting learning and teaching in places and with people beyond the college is now standard practice.

A Commitment to Applied Liberal Arts

Even as our institutional culture of civic engagement is flowering, Emory & Henry is facing an increasingly difficult and complex economic environment. That it was founded to serve a region that is now suffering from profound economic shifts—and that it has traditionally had an exemplary record of
providing educational opportunities for first-generation college students with high financial need—further sharpens the current perils. In order to articulate the essence of who and what we are, and to refocus resources and energy accordingly, Emory & Henry undertook a strategic overlay process in 2014.

For those involved in this strategic visioning, the ampersand became definitional. More than a character in the institution’s name, the ampersand symbolized the connections that Emory & Henry students make in an education focused on integrative learning inside and outside the classroom. Drawing from the work of this committee, the college named the Emory & Henry student experience “Project Ampersand.”

In Project Ampersand, the liberal arts become “Ampersand Learning.” Borrowing from the Integrative Learning VALUE Rubric published by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U, n.d.), Ampersand Learning encourages a mindset “that a student builds across the curriculum and cocurriculum, from making simple connections among ideas and experiences to synthesizing and transferring learning to new, complex situations within and beyond the campus.” Like traditional liberal arts approaches, Ampersand Learning encourages curiosity and passion about an issue or question, fosters interdisciplinary thinking, and depends on critical reflection. But Ampersand Learning also insists on applied learning: putting feet and hands to projects grounded in passion and curiosity. Project Ampersand provides opportunities for students to make dynamic and transformative connections among their personal experiences, their curiosities, their learning inside and outside the classroom, and their individual and collaborative efforts to explore and apply new knowledge to difficult questions and issues.

The Structure of Ampersand Learning

Students are introduced to Ampersand Learning in their first-year seminars, and they pursue project-based learning—now integral across the curriculum—throughout their time in college. Ampersand projects vary from student to student: some projects involve traditional research and reporting, while others involve collaboration with community members to address community needs. Some projects are individual, others collaborative. Many projects are undertaken and completed in a single course, while others extend over several semesters, involve students from a variety of disciplines in a range of responsibilities, and have both curricular and cocurricular elements.

All students build digital Ampersand Portfolios in which they store and present their projects, related reports and presentations, written reflections, and other materials illustrating the connections they make. Both an archival record and an assessment tool, the Ampersand Portfolio offers opportunities not only to document and celebrate Ampersand Learning, but also to assess efforts to address the tension between traditional understandings of the liberal arts and the institutional mandate that students apply their learning effectively.

Students can apply for Ampersand Grants to support unique projects in which they explore major issues, undertake significant artistic expressions, or engage in important civic work. At the end of the spring semester, students present their projects at Ampersand Day, a college-wide event.

A Comprehensive Expression

Project Ampersand and Ampersand Learning, the Appalachian Center for Civic Life and the Interdisciplinary Program in Civic Innovation, and the creative tensions out of which these efforts have grown are all expressions of Emory & Henry’s core identity and values. These initiatives ring true with each other, with the college’s legacy and mission, and with the direction higher education must take in order to address the questions now facing the American republic.

REFERENCES


More than twenty years ago, administrators and faculty at Portland State University (PSU) boldly enacted a comprehensive reform of our general education program in order to create more meaningful and relevant educational pathways for our students. The result was a four-year general education program, University Studies, which mirrors nearly identically the “guided pathway with signature work” model proposed by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U 2015).

Each University Studies course across four levels is required to address four goals: communication, critical thinking, ethics and social responsibility, and appreciation of the diversity of the human experience. During the first year, each student engages in Freshman Inquiry: an interdisciplinary, theme-based exploration of an important topic organized through courses such as Globalization, Race and Social Justice, and Sustainability. Following Freshman Inquiry, students complete three sophomore-level theme-based courses and three junior-level cluster courses, through which they rigorously examine substantial topics in courses such as Leading Social Change, Global Perspectives, Gender and Sexuality Studies, and Design Thinking/Innovation/Entrepreneurship.

In the first and second years, peer and graduate mentors are key to the curriculum, facilitating small-group sessions and enhancing peer-to-peer learning. At the senior level, University Studies culminates in a seminar-style, interdisciplinary, community-based-learning Capstone course, which serves as students’ “signature experience.”

PSU engages over 4,400 students in 220 Capstone courses annually, making ours the largest documented capstone program in the nation. In research conducted at PSU, students overwhelmingly reported that their Capstone was one of the most significant learning experiences in their undergraduate education (Fullerton, Reitenauer, and Kerrigan 2015).

**Transformative Community-Based Learning**

Due to their immersive nature, PSU’s Capstone courses deeply engage students in community-based experiences that require students to cross borders into new territories for learning and transformation. A powerful example of this profound learning is experienced in the Capstone course Metamorphosis: Creating Positive Futures, modeled on the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program (http://www.insideoutcenter.org/programs.html).

In this course, fifteen PSU (“outside”) students and fifteen incarcerated (“inside”) students meet together once a week in a collaborative learning environment inside MacLaren Youth Correctional Facility (MYCF) in Woodburn, Oregon, about a forty-minute drive south of PSU. In Oregon, youth correctional facilities can house youth until age twenty-five, so most students, both “inside” and “outside,” are relatively same-age peers. Together, students study various historical and contemporary social change movements and examine their own roles as agents of change. As a group, students select a social justice issue with which to engage, then develop and implement a project to address that issue in a concrete way.

During one term, for example, “inside” students were concerned about the trees on the MYCF campus. The campus, which is over one hundred years old, was at one time filled with trees that had begun rotting and were being removed by the maintenance department. Together, students researched the benefits to both personal rehabilitation and the environment of having many healthy trees on the campus. They used that research to petition the facility’s administration to preserve the remaining trees, and succeeded in garnering donations from a local nursery of additional fruit-bearing trees for the campus. Simultaneously, building upon the metaphor of trees as personal growth, the students documented their experience in a self-published book, *Metamorphosis: Creating Positive Futures* (Arthur 2015). (See sidebar for one poem from the book.)

Simply by meeting together, students experience an additional layer of learning beyond the content- and project-based learning of the course. This particular place-based educational experience impels “outside” students to reflect upon the correctional facility and their relationship to it; to see “inmates” as colleagues; and to examine, contemplate, and understand policy through the lens of that experience. Likewise, “inside” students benefit from the partnership in transformative ways as the collaborative learning environment allows them to self-identify as successful students and provides them “motional capital,” thereby increasing their likelihood of successful community engagement.
reintegration upon release (Clinkinbeard and Zohra 2012, 237).

Indeed, place-based Capstone courses are the perfect soil for examining and unlearning cultural judgments and developing relationships with “the other” (Eyler, Giles, and Braxton 1997). These relationships, built within a context of shared intellectual inquiry, can serve to dismantle assumptions, familiarize “the other,” and help students develop lifelong skills for addressing unscripted challenges and understanding and relating to complex, diverse communities.

**Ongoing Challenges, New Horizons**

The two most daunting challenges to implementing 220 Capstone courses annually are (1) advocating for seminar-style courses in the era of performance-based budgeting and (2) managing tensions between the program’s focus on engaging interdisciplinary teams of students in problem-solving and the deep interest of several departmental faculty in teaching only single-discipline capstones. Recently, several academic departments have requested that single-discipline capstones replace the interdisciplinary capstone requirement. The data thus far at PSU demonstrate that small, interdisciplinary, community-based learning seminars that allow students to truly learn from one another and contribute together as agents of change across disciplinary boundaries lead to tremendous learning outcomes unmatched by those of large, single-discipline courses. Moreover, the unscripted problems of global warming, racial oppression, multigenerational poverty, economic development, and diminishing worldwide water supplies will never be solved by a single academic department, but rather through creative problem-solving across academic boundaries. Nonetheless, even after twenty years, some departmental faculty find it challenging to acknowledge the value of interdisciplinary problem-solving.

At PSU, we struggle deeply with this issue and are working to enact a curriculum that has opportunities for both disciplinary and interdisciplinary community-based learning experiences.

As we grapple with these challenges, we also dream of a future where we have structures in place to build upon students’ signature work after graduation by engaging alumni in the community. More than half of Portland State alumni remain in the greater metropolitan area after graduation, and we have both the responsibility and the opportunity to galvanize their efforts to create more just and sustainable communities in Oregon and beyond. We have recently formally built this dream into PSU’s strategic plan, and we look forward to working with other progressive universities who are dedicating efforts and funds to continue the engagement of college graduates as civic agents in their communities.

*More information about University Studies is available at www.pdx.edu/unst.*

**REFERENCES**


[CAMPUS PRACTICE]

The Community Narrative Research Project: Harnessing the Power of Reflection for Student Learning and Structural Change

SHANNON HOFFMAN, community service coordinator in the Bonner Center for Faith and Service at Rhodes College
NATASHA MAIN, Bonner Scholar and undergraduate student at Rhodes College
ANNA MANOOGIAN, undergraduate student at Rhodes College
DANI PLATA, undergraduate student at Rhodes College
ELIZABETH THOMAS, associate professor of psychology and Plough Chair of Urban Studies at Rhodes College
MARSHA WALTON, professor of psychology and Winton M. Blount Chair in Social Sciences at Rhodes College

At Rhodes College, a small liberal arts institution in the heart of midtown Memphis, Tennessee, students selected as Bonner Scholars are encouraged to become lifelong engaged citizens by participating in a program that begins with entry-level service in the first year and culminates with capacity building and advocacy work in the senior year. These students engage in meaningful, sometimes intense, ongoing reflection, through which they connect their experiences in Memphis communities to their classroom learning and personal development. To support such reflective practice, and to strengthen civic learning outcomes and assessment across the institution, we created the Community Narrative Research Project (CNRP).

Grounded in principles and practices of developmental, community, and cultural psychology, the CNRP aims to produce interdisciplinary scholarship on student identity development and advance organizational learning and institutional change at Rhodes. At the center of the project is the collection and analysis of narratives written by Bonner Scholars about their experiences during their four years spent working in the community. Over this time period, students engage in a developmental learning process that includes experience, reflection, abstract conceptualization, and implementation (Kolb 1984). CNRP team members engage in a secondary level of reflective practice that has led to changes in programming and research processes at Rhodes.

Project Structure

The CNRP unites individuals from across the college who are interested in how student learning is occurring within the Bonner Scholars program. The project is now in its fourth and final year of data collection, and our research team continues to evolve as some students graduate and others join the team. While individual participants may change, our collaborative framework remains constant, involving psychology and urban studies faculty and students as well as staff and student leaders in the Bonner program. The project benefits from the differences in experience and expertise of these team members.

We have intentionally constituted our research team as an interpretive community (Way 1997). In weekly meetings, we formulate and refine research questions, plan data collection procedures, develop analytic approaches, and consider multiple interpretations of the data. Our collaborative approach is consistent with the goals and underlying philosophy of the Bonner program, in which (1) students develop new skills while simultaneously using their current abilities, (2) reciprocity of benefits among students and community partners is an explicit expectation, and (3) constant reflection promotes program revision and innovation.

CNRP students develop research skills as they share their insights and contribute to the research project. One student, for example, served as a research fellow while also serving as a community partnerships intern on the Bonner student leadership team. Another student completed a psychology honors capstone research project examining organizational learning and change and is now enrolled in a doctoral program in community research and action. These student researchers are pursuing community-engaged signature work and learning alongside faculty and staff mentors over an extended period of time as they connect their scholarly interests, their experiences as Bonner Scholars, and their vocational aspirations and plans.

Seeking Institutional Change

Academic institutions tend to compartmentalize expertise and construct boundaries that minimize communication between faculty and staff. They also tend to encourage hierarchical faculty-student relationships wherein knowledge and insight flow one way, from faculty member to student. We have sought to build a research team that dismantles these structures and practices. To accomplish this, we have positioned the Bonner Scholars and Bonner staff members as full participants in our research team.

There are challenges to making full collaboration a reality. Our commitment to maintaining the confidentiality of the Bonner Scholars who share their stories conflicts with our commitment
to sharing our data so we can benefit from the interpretive insights of students and staff. Our efforts to position each Bonner Scholar as a collaborator are also constrained by the reality that these students hold multiple commitments, on campus and in the community, that may limit their time and ability to engage with the CNRP. We consider these tensions to be part of a productive struggle that enriches our work.

Even with these challenges, we are seeing the possibilities for enhanced student learning in the Bonner program and across campus. Students on the CNRP team have brought insight to aspects of the Bonner program that have seemed cumbersome to Bonner students, including the requirement that students work exclusively with community partners with whom we have long-term commitments. CNRP students have used the knowledge and confidence they gain through participation to advocate for institutional support for the Bonner Program. Finally, our work is helping us develop clearer pathways for more students to complete community-engaged signature work at Rhodes.

**Lessons about Identity**

Student narratives gathered through the CNRP are providing valuable lessons. For example, the narratives have allowed us to examine how students position themselves. How do they describe themselves as learners and thinkers—as individuals developing skills and formulating ideas and plans? How do they describe themselves in relationship to others (clients, professionals, and staff at their service sites; other students; etc.)? And how do they position themselves in relation to larger social and political discourses—as members of communities of practice, or as agents of social change?

The narratives have also revealed several tensions that Bonner Scholars experience. The program puts students in situations where their understanding of self is complicated by differences between their own and others’ perceptions of their identities. For example, Bonner Scholars often hold lower socioeconomic statuses than the majority of Rhodes students, and yet when they interact with economically distressed communities, they are perceived as representatives of a wealthy college campus. This juxtaposition disrupts a linear understanding of self and raises a number of ethical and equity dilemmas for students. The reflective aspects of the Bonner program force students to notice these multiple notions of themselves across different contexts, leading to a deeper understanding of self in connection to place.

Over time, we hope to see changes in how students conceive of their individual identities as well as in how the Bonner program facilitates identity development. We will be able to look across levels of analysis, investigating how students change as they participate in the Bonner program, how the Bonner program changes, and how the college is influenced by these changes. Our work is iterative, a reflective process in itself, and we continue to adjust our teaching and community engagement strategies in response to lessons learned through our participatory, collaborative methods.

**Conclusion**

The Bonner program puts students in community-based settings that greatly affect them intellectually and emotionally. Our investigation of the impacts of these settings on students enables the CNRP team to make structural recommendations to the Rhodes Bonner program. Our commitment to participatory research methods is aligned with the philosophy and goals of the Bonner program, and it informs broader discussions about institutional commitment to civic engagement and to community-engaged signature work—strengthening both the quality of student learning and the quality of civic engagement experiences campus-wide.

**REFERENCES**


In A Crucible Moment, the National Task Force on Civic Learning and Engagement calls upon institutions of higher learning to develop civic capacities and commitments, “not the least of which is working with others to co-create more vibrant communities” (2012, 6). At DePaul University, this call has special resonance in the context of the School for New Learning (SNL), founded more than forty years ago to individualize the educational pathways of under-graduates who are at least twenty-four years old. Adult students returning to college are looking for opportunities to apply what they learn in the classroom to their personal, professional, and civic lives. But their civic goals and impulses are often buried under the weight of multiple responsibilities as workers, parents, and students. SNL is seeking ways to help students unearth their inclinations and develop skills for building equitable and vibrant communities.

**Active Citizens Course**

In 1972, DePaul was one of the first universities to establish a separate college for adults, responding to a growing population of nontraditional students in higher education by pioneering a competence-based approach to learning. In 2013, SNL added a required competence on civic engagement to its curriculum. Students can demonstrate the civic engagement competence by taking an online or on-campus course at any point during their degree-seeking careers, or by articulating learning from their own community-based experiences for prior learning credit. About one-third of SNL undergraduates complete the civic engagement competence by taking an online course called Active Citizens.

Active Citizens draws upon the work of adult-learning theorists (see Mezirow 2000; Keeton, Sheckley, and Griggs 2002) who have advised educators to design learning experiences around “events that directly engage learners in dealing with genuine problems or situations, while reflecting critically upon these experiences in interaction with others” (Marienau and Reed 2008, 62; italics in original). The course encourages students to engage in their communities while reflecting online. Readings and assignments develop students’ understanding of the role of citizens in a democracy and the specific problem of inequality in our nation.

**Promoting Civic Engagement**

In Active Citizens, students first reflect upon their past experiences with civic engagement in order to articulate lessons learned and identify the civic work they find most compelling. Based on these reflections, students design and embark upon projects in their communities. While some students take on ambitious projects—for example, establishing new programs—most start with small volunteer efforts. Many students realize that they have been held back by their sense that such small steps aren’t worth taking, since social problems are so daunting. They find instead that one step leads to another, and that these steps can eventually result in institutional impact.

For example, a student who had volunteered for her church’s food pantry found that after the holiday giving peak, the pantry never had enough food to meet community needs. She approached the parish school principal, who agreed to a food drive, and set up a donation box in each classroom. Teachers encouraged friendly competition between classes, and when food had been donated, the DePaul student asked if eighth-grade students—who were themselves looking for a service project—could help stock the pantry. The experience was so meaningful that the school made the drive an annual event, and eighth-grade students now work at the pantry on a regular basis.

**Prompting Critical Reflection**

Critical reflection plays an essential role not only in students’ selection of projects, but also in their course learning outcomes. Online discussions promote reflection on course concepts. For example, students participate in an online role-playing exercise in which they adopt the perspectives of individuals of different socioeconomic statuses depicted in a documentary about the effects of inequality on health. They also participate in an online debate on the social responsibilities of corporations. Students grapple with the differences between volunteer efforts designed to provide comfort to individuals and activism that addresses the systems perpetuating inequality. The instructor facilitates all discussions and assesses participation using a rubric to evaluate students’ responsiveness to each other’s ideas and their integration of course concepts into their reflections.

Students also engage in written reflection throughout the course, and their writing suggests powerful lessons learned about civic change. In her final reflective essay, the student who arranged the food drive drew upon
Students enrolled in the Promoting Healthy Communities course in DePaul’s School for New Learning designed and completed an oral health resource guide in partnership with a community organization, Enlace Chicago. (Photo courtesy of DePaul University)
[PERSPECTIVE]

Connecting My Academic Studies with Community Practice

KATIE BECK, 2014 graduate of Allegheny College

On the second floor of the historic Market House in Meadville, Pennsylvania, in a central gathering space for artists and citizens, sits Meadville Council on the Arts. After my first year of college, I joined the council as arts program coordinator, a position I filled as a Bonner leader committed to serving the community across my four years as a student. In this role, I taught a low-cost youth theater class and provided other assistance. This work intersected beautifully with my interests in both theater and community engagement, but it didn’t connect to my academic experience as much as I would have liked. It made me wish for an opportunity to connect my academic studies in theater, writing, and Values, Ethics, and Social Action (VESA) with theatrical practice prioritizing the community.

Following my junior year, I found that opportunity through a summer residency with the Cornerstone Theater Company. In the summer of 2013, I traveled with twenty other students from around the country to Salinas, California, to work as assistant director for Plumas Negras (Black Feathers), a play following three generations of women as they worked in the local farm fields. Over five weeks, I studied the theory of community-based theater in the morning and participated in rehearsals at night. The play was created from story circles that Cornerstone facilitated a year before the production, and most cast members were field workers. I was inspired by Cornerstone’s balance of meaningful community engagement and artistic professionalism.

My experience in Salinas was the perfect preparation for my senior capstone project. When I returned to Meadville, I began working with Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church to conduct research for my own community-based theater production. I chose to partner with Bethel AME because of its significant role in the history of Meadville’s black community. The church was enthusiastic about sharing that history and also wanted to grow its network of community members.

I attended church services for several weeks before facilitating a story circle where congregation members shared personal stories about the Civil Rights movement in Meadville. I also researched the role the church played in the Underground Railroad. The stories I gathered about these two periods became the play’s plot. As a white woman collaborating with a community of color, I spent a lot of time learning from the Bethel AME community to ensure that the play’s representations were accurate.

The play’s rehearsals provided much of the research for my senior project. In theater, the rehearsal room is our lab, serving as a place for us to explore; the performance is an experiment where we present our work to an audience. Thus, I gathered data for my senior project by presenting the play in two locations, immediately followed by facilitated community discussions. In this theatrical process, the production is an icebreaker for meaningful conversation. Audience members may experience a production passively, but then become engaged in an active response.

The first performance, on Allegheny’s campus, was pleasant and somewhat stale; the audience responded warmly, but did not engage much in the post-show discussion. But the second performance, in Bethel, was electric. With a diverse audience that included Allegheny students and faculty, Meadville citizens, and, most importantly, Bethel congregation members, the performance activated the space that was essential to the story.

Concluding my time at Allegheny with a capstone that challenged me academically and artistically was the best preparation for the “real world.” Not only did I make new connections with my community, but I also collaborated on a play that facilitated a difficult conversation. Community-based art is beautiful for this reason. Creating my signature work taught me the value of changing, confronting, reflecting, questioning, and engaging the world as an artist.

This year, I founded Gum-Dip Theatre, a community-based theater that creates plays for, with, and about the people of the Rust Belt. I am using the skills I shaped through my signature work in my entrepreneurial ventures. Since graduating, I have produced two community-based plays in different cities, and received a $10,000 matching arts grant. So far, the opportunity to practice theater through community-based research has had a monumental effect on my life.
Discovering the Change Agent in Me

JONATHAN FRANKLIN, 2016 graduate of Wofford College

During my first year in Wofford College’s Bonner Scholars program—a scholarship program for undergraduates involving a four-year commitment to community service—I thought I had it all together. I declared my English and Humanities majors and African American Studies minor early, and I planned to start a career in journalism and activism after graduating. I had an end goal and was determined to reach it. But in reality, I didn’t have it all together: I hadn’t figured out what, exactly, I was passionate about.

It wasn’t until the spring semester of my first year, when I took my first collegiate-level sociology class, Social Problems, that I realized why I needed to be a change agent. I was drawn to the class by the course description, which promised engagement with the inner Spartanburg community near Wofford. The course exposed me to some of the issues affecting society, including racism, poverty, mental illness, and educational inequality. For our final class project, students organized a panel of homeless individuals who shared with the campus community their experiences living in poverty right outside the campus gates. I never could have known that this class would be the start of an ongoing exploration of social justice issues that would extend through my time in college.

Throughout my undergraduate experience, I worked with the Urban League of the Upstate, a nonprofit devoted to equal opportunity in education, housing, employment, and economic development for all citizens, regardless of race or socioeconomic status. This experience allowed me to explore my interests in racial justice and education by connecting with students and residents in the community while gaining a better understanding of best practices for social justice work.

By my senior year, my passion for advocating for African Americans and my interest in educational equality, informed by my own experience as a black student at a predominantly white institution, led me to concentrate my senior honors thesis for my African American Studies minor on “The Understanding of a Single Story: Identities Amongst Black Students at Predominately White Institutions.” Through this thesis, I examined the structure of identities among black students enrolled at predominantly white institutions, the racism experienced by these students, and how these identities and experiences have implications for social identity across the student body. Realizing the difficulties that my classmates were experiencing on a daily basis while learning about the scholarship on this topic, I soon became interested in pursuing investigative journalism with a specific focus on racial and social justice.

Because investigative journalism addresses issues of serious concern and draws attention to economic, social, political, and cultural trends affecting society, investigative journalists must be thorough, committed to quality, and critically minded. I honed these qualities as a senior writer for Wofford College’s student-run newspaper, The Old Gold & Black, when I wrote an investigative piece titled “Can we talk about race?” In this article, I explored the racial dynamics of our campus community, pursuing my knowledge of and curiosity about this topic while establishing a platform for students of color to express their experiences. My work on the article coincided with my creation of a scholarly digital media project for my New Media Theory class, for which I asked students to speak about their experiences being black at a predominately white institution. My article, senior honors thesis, and digital media project all had a huge impact on our campus community, raising awareness of the reality experienced by many students whose voices had not been heard previously. As a result of these investigative journalism is best at detecting changes that need to be made for the sake of humanity—which is what I am passionate about doing, one story at a time.
Resources and Opportunities

Reading Group Design: Senior Capstones and Community-Engaged Signature Work

As part of an institution’s efforts to build community-engaged signature work into the curriculum, campus leaders may want to organize a reading group or learning circle involving faculty, staff, students, and community partners. Several campuses in the Bonner network have used reading groups successfully to advance the integration of academic civic engagement into their Bonner programs. To help colleges implement such activities, the Bonner Foundation has created a guide for designing reading groups on senior capstones and community-engaged signature work.

The guide offers instruction for creating a formalized group of six to twelve individuals who agree to meet periodically. These individuals divide responsibilities for leading discussions, and may be involved in researching other readings and examples from the local community or institution. At meetings held over the course of a semester or year, group members share the readings, discuss themes and ideas, and construct strategies to apply their learning to their own courses, policies, and institutional environment.

The reading guide includes recommended articles, many of which are written by faculty and published in scholarly journals. Faculty members who are interested in publishing their own work may draw inspiration for sharing their models and studies from the reading list. The guide is available online at www.bonner.org/signaturework.

Engage, A Publication of the Bonner Foundation

Published by the Bonner Foundation, Engage highlights inspiring stories, proven models and best practices, and promising research and scholarship on how service, community engagement, community-engaged learning, and public scholarship are transforming students, campuses, and communities. Engage features the work of practitioners and scholars of civic engagement and community-engaged learning, within and beyond the Bonner Foundation’s network, who are contributing to higher education’s campus-community partnerships, civic engagement, and broader efforts supporting a just and healthy democracy. The latest issue is available online at http://www.bonner.org/engage-publication/.

AAC&U Annual Meeting: Building Public Trust in the Promise of Liberal Education and Inclusive Excellence

January 25–28, 2017 | San Francisco, California

The AAC&U 2017 Annual Meeting will respond to the urgent need—expressed by educators from campuses across the country—for more effective approaches to restoring public trust in higher education and improving public understanding of how liberal education and inclusive excellence are valuable “public” and “private” goods. For more information and to register, visit www.aacu.org/meetings.
Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement Calendar

The following calendar features events on civic learning sponsored by members of the Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement (CLDE) Action Network and others. For more information, please visit AAC&U’s CLDE Calendar online at http://www.aacu.org/clde/calendar/.

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<td>Transforming Undergraduate STEM Education: Implications for 21st-Century Society (AAC&amp;U Network for Academic Renewal)</td>
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<td>10–11</td>
<td>Anchor Institutions Task Force Annual Conference</td>
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<td>Interfaith Youth Core Interfaith Leadership Institute</td>
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<td>FEBRUARY</td>
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<td>General Education and Assessment: Design Thinking for Student Learning (AAC&amp;U Network for Academic Renewal)</td>
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<td>MARCH</td>
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<td>Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement 2017 (American Democracy Project / The Democracy Commitment / NASPA)</td>
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AAC&U and the Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement (CLDE) Action Network

As part of its commitment to preparing all students for civic, ethical, and social responsibility in US and global contexts, AAC&U has formed the Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement (CLDE) Action Network. The CLDE Action Network builds on the momentum generated by the 2012 White House release of the report *A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy’s Future*. Coordinated by Caryn McTighe Musil, AAC&U senior scholar and director of civic learning and democracy initiatives, the network includes thirteen leading civic learning organizations that are committed to making civic inquiry and engagement expected rather than elective for all college students. *Diversity & Democracy* regularly features research and exemplary practices developed and advanced by these partner organizations and their members:

- American Association of State Colleges and Universities
- Anchor Institutions Task Force
- Association of American Colleges and Universities
- The Bonner Foundation
- Bringing Theory to Practice
- Campus Compact
- Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement
- The Democracy Commitment
- Imagining America
- The Interfaith Youth Core
- Kettering Foundation
- NASPA–Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education
- New England Resource Center for Higher Education
Upcoming AAC&U Meetings

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<td>NETWORK FOR ACADEMIC RENEWAL General Education and Assessment: Design Thinking for Student Learning</td>
<td>Phoenix, Arizona</td>
<td>FEBRUARY 23–25, 2017</td>
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<tr>
<td>NETWORK FOR ACADEMIC RENEWAL Diversity, Learning, and Student Success: Voices Leading Change</td>
<td>Jacksonville, Florida</td>
<td>MARCH 16–18, 2017</td>
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About Diversity & Democracy

*Diversity & Democracy* supports higher education faculty and leaders as they design and implement programs that advance civic learning and democratic engagement, global learning, and engagement with diversity to prepare students for socially responsible action in today’s interdependent but unequal world. According to AAC&U’s Statement on Liberal Learning, “By its nature…liberal learning is global and pluralistic. It embraces the diversity of ideas and experiences that characterize the social, natural, and intellectual world. To acknowledge such diversity in all its forms is both an intellectual commitment and a social responsibility, for nothing less will equip us to understand our world and to pursue fruitful lives.” *Diversity & Democracy* features evidence, research, and exemplary practices to assist practitioners in creating learning opportunities that realize this vision. To access *Diversity & Democracy* online, visit www.aacu.org/diversitydemocracy/.

About AAC&U

AAC&U is the leading national association concerned with the quality, vitality, and public standing of undergraduate liberal education. Its members are committed to extending the advantages of a liberal education to all students, regardless of academic specialization or intended career. Founded in 1915, AAC&U now comprises more than 1,350 member institutions—including accredited public and private colleges, community colleges, and universities of every type and size. AAC&U functions as a catalyst and facilitator, forging links among presidents, administrators, and faculty members who are engaged in institutional and curricular planning. Information about AAC&U membership, programs, and publications can be found at www.aacu.org.

AAC&U Membership 2016

- **Masters:** 31%
- **Baccalaureate:** 24%
- ** Associates:** 12%
- **Res & Doc:** 17%
- **Other*:** 16%

*specialized schools, state systems and agencies, and international affiliates