Expanding Opportunities for Teaching Civic Engagement in a Bachelor of Public Policy Degree

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Abstract
The mission of the Bachelor of Science in Public Policy degree is to prepare students for roles as good citizens and for careers in the public service. This is a case study of how civic engagement is used to accomplish this mission in three courses within this curriculum. These courses use service learning, leadership, and an internship to teach civic engagement. The experience of the faculty in developing these courses within the undergraduate public policy curriculum may assist other institutions as they seek to incorporate civic engagement in their programs. The lessons for other programs include recognizing the importance of civic engagement in educating students for citizenship, the use of faculty-directed reflection in civic engagement courses, and the continuing challenge of connecting the approaches to civic engagement into a coherent program.

In his book, *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam documents the decline of civic engagement in American society. Putnam argues that although the bonds of community in America have weakened, “it is within our power to reverse the decline of the last several decades” (Putnam, 2000, p. 25). Academic programs in the field of public affairs and administration can be part of this process of reversing the decline in civic engagement. The opportunity to restructure the curriculum to include civic engagement may be among the most important roles for programs in the field. This paper is a case study of the ways to expand opportunities for teaching civic engagement within a Bachelor of Science in Public Policy (BS in PP) degree program in the Department of Public Management and Policy (PMAp), Andrew Young School of Policy Studies, Georgia State University. The curriculum includes a three-part approach to teaching civic engagement through service learning, leadership training, and field experience in an internship.
Background

During the 2005–2006 academic year, the faculty approved a new undergraduate degree in public policy. The curriculum for the BS in PP degree included no opportunities for civic engagement. Students in the new program could take the internship course only as an elective. After a year of operation, the new degree attracted fewer than 10 students. As a faculty committee struggled with how to improve the program, they agreed on a new mission statement and then proceeded to revise the core requirements in response to this new direction. A major objective of this process was to develop a proposal for revisions in the core of the baccalaureate degree to change its emphasis from a program of limited appeal. The mission of the new curriculum is to prepare students for roles as effective citizens and people who work in the public service. While many of the graduates are encouraged to enter careers in the public sector or in nonprofit agencies, all are taught to become active citizens in the civic and public arenas. These curriculum revisions resulted in the introduction of two new courses that, when combined with the requirement of the existing internship course, address the mission of the degree program and provide opportunities for students to learn about the issue of civic engagement. After the first year of the new curriculum, enrollment climbed to 100 students and to 200 students in the second year, indicating the popularity of the new emphasis on civic engagement and preparation for service in public and nonprofit agencies.

The objective of this research is to describe how students learn about civic engagement in the revised BS in PP. The faculty developed three separate approaches for civic engagement, each designed to reach the goal of educating students for citizenship. These courses are Citizenship, the Community, and the Public Service; Policy Leadership; and an internship. The topic of civic engagement is an important one for programs in public affairs and administration. The approach taken could serve as a model for other institutions seeking to give their students more opportunities for civic engagement within their curricula. Each course is described separately and then the connections among them are reviewed.

Course 1: Citizenship, the Community, and the Public Service

The structure of the Citizenship course (Citizenship, the Community, and the Public Service) provides an opportunity for students to engage in service learning as a means of civic engagement. As the syllabus for the course states, there are four learning objectives:

1. Students demonstrate an understanding of their responsibilities as citizens in a democratic society.
2. Students understand the variety of ways they can help shape public policy.
3. Students explore the role of active citizens within the community.
4. Students participate in public and community affairs.
The service-learning component requires that students spend time each week throughout the semester in either a civic or public organization. Classroom time is spent learning about the ways in which individual citizens can influence public policy as well as the constitutional framework for the public and nonprofit sectors. Weekly writing assignments provide opportunities for an ongoing reflection about the students’ service learning as well as their assessment of connections between their experiential and theoretical insights from the course.

The literature on service learning stresses the importance of opportunities for student reflection as critical to the success of the experience (Rubin, 2001). Weekly memo assignments provide opportunities for reflection as students describe their activities during the previous week, explain their feelings about these experiences, and describe the relationship between their service learning and course content. These brief memos are part of the university-wide emphasis on critical thinking through writing. Students also reflect on their service-learning experiences during class discussions and in formal presentations to their classmates at the end of the semester. These requirements contribute to the goal of instilling a commitment to service, civic responsibility, and making a difference on policy issues.

The structure of the class also provides an opportunity for faculty scholarship. As Rubin stated, “Faculty often report that they are reluctant to get involved in service-learning because doing it requires additional time and effort that might not be recognized during retention, tenure, and promotion (RTP) procedures” (2001, p. 18). This class integrates scholarship into the design of the service-learning experience, so that the outcome can be published as discipline-based research that advances knowledge in the field of public policy. The students gather data through their experience as participant observers and use these observations as part of their reflections on the service-learning experience.

The academic content of the class focuses on the legal and constitutional framework for the civic and public sectors; the responsibilities of citizenship at the federal, state, and local levels; the ways in which citizens can participate in civic and public affairs; and the boundary between these two sectors. Students participate in service learning within either a public or a civic organization in order to build their understanding of why people volunteer in these sectors. Class time is divided between the students’ service-learning commitment of 4 hours per week and an hour and 15 minutes of classroom time per week.

The overarching issue for the students in the course is to learn about the barriers to community engagement. Hayes (2007) posed a question whether community leaders experienced barriers between civic and political involvement. His research tested the contrast between Robert Putnam’s theoretical model of civic and political involvement that suggests a strong linkage between civic engagement and political engagement and the opposing theoretical model developed by Nina Eliasoph. In her model, there are substantial barriers between participation...
in the local civic realm and participation in the local political realm (Hayes, 2007). The service-learning requirement for the Citizenship course enabled the students to be participant observers in a research project testing the relevance of Robert Putnam's ideas about social learning and civic engagement in contrast to the work of Nina Eliasoph on the separation between civic and political engagement (Eliasoph, 1998). Putnam suggests that there is a bridge between civic and political engagement provided by the social capital people acquire when they volunteer in one sector (Putnam, 2000).

In their weekly one-page memos, the students offered their observations from the service-learning sites on Hayes's (2007) typology of the boundaries among four zones of engagement that include family relationships, peers and work relationships, civic engagement, and political engagement. Each of these four zones has an invisible boundary that individuals must cross psychologically and behaviorally by shifting their commitment of time and energy to different activities and relationships. The students reported on the type of organization in which they were doing their service learning based on Hayes’s division of civic associations into three categories: (a) social groups devoted to sports or hobbies in which extended peer groups are formed around the social ties developed in the pursuit of some common interest; (b) organizations in which citizens band together to address an immediate, common problem such as an Alcoholics Anonymous group or a Neighborhood Watch; (c) community service groups in which the goal is directed toward some larger community good. Hayes indicates that the second and third categories of civic associations are both potential bridges into the political realm. For example, a neighborhood association may see a need for better police protection, housing code enforcement, or zoning changes that must be addressed by the public realm. Putnam's model would suggest that social capital in the form of skills and attitudes developed by participants in civic associations can be conducive to political action. At this point the citizen must cross the invisible barrier between private, voluntary effort and the arena directed at political engagement. In contrast, Eliasoph argues that there is a boundary between the civic and political zones that many citizens do not want to cross (Eliasoph, 1998). This was the major topic for the participant observation research by the students in their service-learning sites. The students were to determine the extent to which citizens who volunteer in civic organizations also engage in the political zone. Also, for those students who were engaged in a service-learning site in a public organization, the question became, to what extent do people who are working in the public sector organization also participate in civic associations?

Assessment tools for the course included the weekly memos and a final oral and written report. The final examination provided an additional assessment tool to record how students saw the boundary between the civic and political engagement zones. The students in the class were equally divided between those who agreed
with Putnam that volunteer work in the community builds social capital (so that people want to become more involved with political activities) and those who agreed with Eliasoph that there is a sharp boundary between the voluntary community organizations and political groups. Most of the students expressed how the service-learning experience deepened their understanding of the importance of community engagement.

Course 2: Policy Leadership

In contrast, the Policy Leadership course engages students with leaders from the public, nonprofit, and for-profit sectors of society who come to the classroom to share their leadership experiences. The objectives for the Policy Leadership course are as follows:

1. Students will meet leaders from a variety of backgrounds and learn how they led change in their organizations.
2. Students will explore theoretical perspectives on leadership.
3. Students will compare theoretical approaches to leadership with practical applications.

Obviously, students must attend classes in order to accomplish the objectives set for the course. This is encouraged by the completion of Attendance Assignments after each class period. Students must log onto the course website within 24 hours after the end of the class session and write a paragraph in response to a question based on the previous meeting of the class. These Attendance Assignments are reviewed by a graduate student who serves as a teaching assistant for the course. If the student answers the question posed on the Attendance Assignment, he or she is awarded 2 points toward the final grade. Attendance Assignment responses that are not well written are returned to the student to make corrections and to resubmit for review. Students with deficiencies in their writing skills are referred to appropriate support units within the university in order to improve the quality of their written work. This process accomplishes one of the latent objectives of the course, which is to have undergraduate students produce quality writing while working within a structured time deadline.

Recent literature on leadership stresses the importance of leadership as both an art and science that can be taught, in contrast to earlier notions that leadership was an inherited trait (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Northouse, 2007). In the required core course on Policy Leadership, the wisdom of experienced leaders helps students learn how to become part of the next generation of community leaders. In contrast to the Citizenship course that sends students into the community to learn, the Leadership course brings prominent leaders into the classroom. The schedule for the course requires meeting for an hour and 15 minutes twice per week. During the first class session of each week, students meet an invited guest
who has held a leadership position in one or more of the public, nonprofit, and business sectors. The second class period is devoted to time for reflection on the guest speaker's presentation as well as a discussion on the connection between the perspective on leadership shared by the speaker and theories about leadership from required readings. A recurring theme of these class discussions is the civic engagement of guest speakers in other sectors. Speakers such as Ambassador Andrew Young are engaged in the nonprofit, public, and for-profit sectors. These leaders have crossed barriers among the sectors through their own civic engagement and can serve as role models for students.

Assessment tools for students in Policy Leadership include the required Attendance Assignments, a midterm and final examination, and a Leadership Application Paper. The Leadership Application Paper is produced at the end of the semester and requires students to synthesize material from throughout the course. The assignment encourages students to describe how they would lead an organization through a process of change. The paper requires that students identify an organization and describe their role within it. Students must combine insights from the class presentations by the weekly guest speakers as well as from class discussions and the theoretical perspective provided by the course text. In addition, the Leadership Application Paper provides an opportunity for students to demonstrate excellence in their writing skills.

At the end of the semester, students are asked to describe the most important thing they learned about leadership in the course. While responses vary, one theme is consistent throughout the assessments. Students learned they can be “emergent leaders,” who can lead in whatever setting they find themselves without having to wait and obtain positions of authority within an organization. Being emergent leaders is an important lesson for those who are also being given an opportunity to participate in a service-learning assignment in the Citizenship course. This connects the Policy Leadership course to the Citizenship class. Students in the Leadership course engage with business, government, and nonprofit leaders during the weekly conversations with the invited guests.

**Course 3: Internship**

The third course in the BS in PP core that requires civic engagement is the internship course. The role of students as interns is a traditional method of building human capital skills through civic engagement that helps reinforce the learning from the two earlier classes in Citizenship and Policy Leadership. Internships also provide a way for students to leave the classroom and to test the theoretical insights provided by other courses in the curriculum against the realities of the workplace. Students in the BS in PP curriculum are required to participate in an internship of 200 hours for 3 hours of academic credit. It is possible for students to double this minimum requirement and receive 6 hours of credit for the internship if their program of study will permit the additional
elective credit hours. This would require an internship of longer duration or a more intensive experience in the agency setting.

The learning objectives of an internship can vary depending on the needs of a student. Some students without a significant work history need an immersion experience into a particular field of employment, while others might want to develop specific skills related to their career plans. In general, however, the following goals seem appropriate to the internship program of the BS in PP degree program:

1. Students have the opportunity to receive mentoring in their career field.
2. Students receive direct, hands-on experience with work activities related to their educational program.
3. Student interns are better able to plan their next career steps.

As a part of the internship class, the students complete an internship data sheet as they begin their experience. This forces students to learn basic information about the organizational setting in which they are going to serve as an intern. The internship data sheet sets up baseline information from the beginning of the experience, against which the student and faculty supervisor can assess how well learning outcomes are achieved. The intern also meets with the agency supervisor to develop a program plan for the experience. The program plan forms the basis for an internship description that each student posts on the course website early in the semester.

The importance of the mentoring aspects of an internship cannot be overstated. The student should learn something about a field of work through direct contact with someone who does it and is willing to share this experience. Also, the internship should involve the willingness of the supervisor to assess the student’s strengths and weaknesses as they relate to a potential career path. Both the faculty members in charge of the internship program and the agency supervisor play critical roles in this mentoring process. In a typical employment situation, the most important role of a supervisor is to monitor the performance of workers. For an internship, the focus is more complex since a major goal is to help the student learn from the experience. The agency supervisor must provide the tasks that the student is to perform. Even routine, repetitive assignments such as filing can have value if the supervisor helps the intern connect the experience with learning about the operation of the organization. On the other hand, higher-level activities such as dealing with an agency’s clients can have little value if not understood in the context of the student’s learning about the overall mission of the organization. This educational role is often the responsibility of the faculty member who leads the internship since the agency supervisor may be more concerned with the student’s performance than with the quality of the learning experience. Ideally, this should be a partnership shared between faculty and agency supervisors in their role as mentors to the student interns.
Another significant function of an internship is to permit a student to test theoretical insights from the classroom in the practical realm of an agency setting. Thus, the internship should ideally come near the end of the undergraduate program, so that students can enhance their academic experience with the exposure to a workplace in their chosen field. This reality testing is valuable even if the student comes to the realization that he or she is not well suited to the particular agency. As indicated, some students may approach an internship with very specific ideas about what they want to gain from their experiences, while others may be less certain about their career plans. Students in this second group need to gather more information from their experiences as interns. These interns need to answer questions regarding their future that include the skills, knowledge, and work they intend to pursue. This task of weighing the theoretical insights from the classroom against the realities of the agency setting is also part of the educational leadership shared by the faculty and agency supervisor.

One critical element that the internship course has in common with the Citizenship and the Leadership courses is the importance of reflection as a tool for learning. Sweitzer and King (2004) suggest that the process of students looking back over their experience is a key to the success of an internship. Reflection provides the opportunity to connect and integrate the learning in the field with theoretical insights from the classroom. Reflection by students in an internship can lead to growth, learning, and even transformation. Opportunities for reflection by students in the internship course are provided both informally and formally. Conversations among students, faculty members, and agency supervisors serve as informal times for reflection on the learning experience provided by the internship. Formal assignments for the course such as the required journal, the seminar presentation, and the 10-page final report also provide opportunities for reflection by students on the internship experience.

From a faculty perspective, a major question is how to evaluate the learning objectives of the internship. The individualized nature of the internship experience means that it is difficult to assess the learning outcomes of a student’s placement in an agency. For example, how do we assess the mentoring that a student intern should receive in a placement setting? Since much of the process of mentoring takes place in informal ways, this outcome is difficult to measure. Obviously, it is easier to determine if the internship experience is related to the educational program of study. This is assessed in the student’s journal and report, which require that the intern connect ideas from the classroom with the experience in the agency setting. The success of the assessment process often depends on the student’s ability to reflect on the content of the academic experience as related to the observations in the “real world.” Finally, the assessment of learning outcomes from the internship must include what the student has gained from the experience that helps in his or her career planning. Again, this should be a part of the final individual assessment done by the student in the journal and final report.
One concrete demonstration that the learning outcomes of an internship experience have been achieved occurs when the student is offered a job as a result of the placement as an intern. A report by Stateman (1997) indicated that as many as 80% of students in internships were offered permanent employment by the agencies where they interned. This suggests that internships may be among the most valuable tools for students seeking employment that is specifically related to their area of study. Through an internship, a student has the opportunity to gain new skills, make professional contacts, and experience a different work environment. It can provide the key answer to a student’s question—what can I do with my degree?

Throughout the internship, students maintain journals that provide timely records of activities, reflections, and observations about the learning experience in the agency setting. At the conclusion of the internship, students complete their final internship reports, which are the basis for comparison with their initial data sheets. In these documents, students are required to reflect on how well the internships related to their academic programs as well as specific things about the internships that the students liked or disliked. The reports also serve as additional opportunities for students to do more formal reflections about their internship experiences. Anonymous evaluation forms completed by the interns also help identify problems with the internship experiences and assess how well the interns achieved the learning objectives of the course.

The internship provides a different form of civic engagement than the other two courses in the BS in PP degree program. The Citizenship course and the Policy Leadership class help build students’ social capital so that they can become better citizens and leaders. The internship can perhaps better be viewed as fulfilling a different level of Maslow’s (1954) hierarchy of needs. If the Citizenship and Policy Leadership courses are viewed as helping a student’s self-adjustment at the second level of Maslow’s hierarchy, then, perhaps, the internship is capable of moving students toward the highest levels of self-actualization. After all, the goal of the internship program is to provide a path toward a satisfying career related to the student’s field of study. This is a loftier objective than the other two courses, which have more to do with the student’s individual adjustment in learning about civic engagement in the initial stages of a program of study.

Conclusions

A major challenge to any academic program is to make sure that courses are not isolated experiences, but are connected to one another. This is, indeed, a challenge to make completely clear how the parts of the civic engagement courses relate to the whole. How can students integrate their learning about civic engagement from the Citizenship course, for instance, with the Policy Leadership course, and with the internship? This process of integrating knowledge takes teamwork and cooperation among the faculty responsible for teaching the three courses. Bringing
faculty together to understand what students are learning in each separate component and integrating the learning outcomes is time-consuming, but necessary to bring three disparate ways of learning about civic engagement into a more coherent program.

The PMAP faculty has begun this process, and the initial results show that students are accomplishing the learning objectives set for the three courses. The criteria for success developed by the faculty require that 85% of all students will at least partially demonstrate the skills and knowledge in the learning objectives for all required core courses. The reports from the 2007–2008 and 2008–2009 academic years indicate that 89% of the students in the BS in PP performed at the desired level. Thus three required core courses are meeting the goal of providing education for good citizenship by civic engagement. The task of integrating the knowledge of civic engagement from the courses on citizenship, leadership, and the internship is continuing.

What lessons can other institutions learn from the experience of the PMAP faculty in teaching civic engagement? The first is to recognize the critical importance of education for citizenship. If Putnam is correct in documenting the decline in the bonds of community within our society, then the social capital that can be built by students learning how to become engaged in public and nonprofit organizations is a significant contribution that schools of public affairs and administration can make. As a symbol of the importance of this role, the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University displays a copy of the Oath of Citizenship from the ancient city of Athens, Greece. This oath reads in part:

We will unceasingly seek to quicken the sense of public duty; we will revere and obey the city's laws; we will transmit this city not only not less, but greater, better and more beautiful than it was transmitted to us. (quoted in Phillips, 1996, p. 122)

The education of good citizens ought to be recognized as fundamental to the mission of all academic programs in the field of public affairs and administration.

The next lesson is the potential importance of building social capital among students through civic engagement. This process can take several forms, as it does within the undergraduate public policy curriculum. The Citizenship course uses service learning, the Leadership course brings prominent leaders into the classroom, and the internship requirement provides career development opportunities in public and nonprofit agencies. Each of these experiences helps with the development of skills and knowledge related to the role of the students as engaged citizens. A common element among all three courses is the faculty-directed process of student reflection on their experiences. Reflection can be accomplished through journals, weekly memo assignments, or papers and class presentations, but this process is a crucial ingredient in learning about civic engagement.
Finally, once faculty agree on citizenship education as a program goal and courses are designed and taught with appropriate learning objectives, the task remains to coordinate the integration of knowledge from the various courses that use civic engagement. This process encourages faculty to move from thinking about individual courses toward the goal of having an integrated program that emphasizes the mission of building better communities by teaching students how to become engaged citizens. While the PMAP faculty agree on the value and importance of this goal for undergraduate students of public policy, there is a lack of consensus on the role of civic engagement in masters-level degree programs. This situation is probably typical of other public affairs and administration programs. The case study of the role of civic engagement in the undergraduate program in public policy may stimulate this broader conversation among similar programs offering both undergraduate and graduate degrees.

REFERENCES


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