

Bringing Theory to Practice: Academic Civic Engagement at St. Olaf College

Miriam Brown, Dana Goetsch, Breanna Johnson, Isabel Peris, Joseph Schantz, and Karl Turnlund

**SoAn 373 Ethnographic Research Methods
May 25, 2011**

Executive Summary

Abstract

This project was completed in collaboration with a grant received by St. Olaf College through the Center for Experiential Learning to investigate students' development of outcomes through participation in Academic Civic Engagement (ACE) courses. Theoretical research has suggested that that ACE courses aid in making students more democratically engaged and better able to apply their academic knowledge in a career situation. Specifically, St. Olaf's ACE program has a goal of developing students' civic and vocational identity. It was these facets of the ACE outcomes that became the focus of our research. After conducting 41 student interviews we found that most students did develop these outcomes, although there is a potential self-selection bias in our sample. Additionally, we propose that the benefits students received from the ACE courses are correlated with prior interest or experience with the subject matter. To finish, we examine students' recommendations for the program.

- Overall, we found that students did develop the five outcomes we were investigating due to their ACE experience. However, we would like to note that although ACE is a very effective way of gaining these intended outcomes, it is not the only way. Some students also identified gaining these or similar outcomes from previous jobs, internships, or other non-ACE courses.
- We found that, through their ACE experience, students developed the outcome of civic learning. Interpersonal communication skills and the ability to effectively engage someone were frequently mentioned as assets gained by interviewees whose ACE project challenged them to interview or assist community partners.
- Students also developed a sense of civic self-understanding. All were able to identify a wide range of skills and abilities that they acquired by engaging in their ACE courses, and they found that the opportunity to apply their set of individual skills was enlightening and opened their minds to new leadership and volunteer opportunities they otherwise wouldn't have pursued.

- Through our interviews, we found that students achieved a sense of civic efficacy. Many students commented on how applying the theory that had been taught in class gave them a new kind of confidence,
- Civic action was another outcome gained by students who participated in ACE. The trend that emerged in our research suggests that students indeed moved beyond simply recognizing their capabilities and confidence in pursuing action, but actually felt compelled to follow through to achieve a greater good for society.
- Vocational integration was the last outcome we investigated. Some students felt that their ACE course was directly related to vocation, but the key component to whether a student saw their ACE class as vocationally beneficial seemed to be their previous interest in the subject.

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Introduction:

Nationwide, the cost of obtaining a college education is increasing. Simultaneously, the need for a college education in order to be a competitive candidate on the job market has never been greater. Given these facts, and the rising awareness of the nation's problematic economic well-being and cost-effectiveness, a critical lens has been cast on the world of higher education. Theorists from within the sphere of academia have been questioning the value, worth, and the outcomes of a college education. This question is especially pertinent to the liberal arts community where the outcomes students gain from an interdisciplinary education are less immediately applicable in the working world. Integrating academic civic engagement (ACE) into coursework has the desired effect of producing seven specific outcomes that will help students be more engaged and more democratic citizens. Academic civic engagement is a process of

‘bringing theory to practice,’ where students are encouraged to apply the theory they have learned in the classroom to real-world problems in the nearby community. It has the goal of making students feel responsible and connected to situations outside of their personal world. This study examines ACE within the context of our undergraduate institution, St. Olaf College.

Setting and Community

Our research was completed in collaboration with St. Olaf’s Center for Experiential Learning and focused on the experiences of St. Olaf students who had already participated in ACE courses offered by the college. We excluded students who were currently enrolled in their first ACE course, as we were interested in students’ responses after they had had an opportunity to reflect on their participation in the course. Our research was completed on the campus of our small, four-year residential, undergraduate liberal arts school in the Midwest, and focused on currently enrolled St. Olaf students. Because of the nature of the institution, the population of St. Olaf is relatively homogeneous, with most students coming from an upper-middle class, Caucasian background.

St. Olaf College, founded in 1874, states on the school’s website that: “St. Olaf fosters the development of the whole person in mind, body, and spirit,” making it a prime location where ACE courses could be implemented and evaluated. The same website continues on to describe the college as a place that encourages and challenges students to seek truth, to serve others, and to be responsible and knowledgeable citizens of the world (St. Olaf College, stolaf.edu). These ideals suggest the desired outcomes of ACE and form the foundation of different ACE courses that involve community-based research, partnerships with community organizations, and collaboration with community members from the nearby town of Northfield.

The Center for Experiential Learning (CEL) serves the college as a resource for students, alumni, faculty, parents and families, prospective employers, and community partners. The CEL aims to create and facilitate experiential learning that complements the St. Olaf curriculum, enriches students' academic programs, and guides students in the process of pursuing vocational goals. We worked in collaboration with the CEL as we began our research to evaluate the impact of ACE courses on students' civic learning, civic self-understanding, civic efficacy, civic action, and vocational integration. Using the theoretical framework of collaborative ethnography, as described by ethnographer and author Luke Lassiter, we worked in partnership with the CEL on almost every aspect of our project.

The theory of collaborative ethnography is concerned with the power and politics of representation, and confronts the question of who gets to represent whom, and for what purposes (Lassiter 2005:4). These are epistemological problems inherent in qualitative research, often arising from critiques of anthropology as a discipline connected with colonialism and imperialism. Proponents of this theory argue that a methodological shift needs to occur if ethnography is to escape these epistemological issues. Ethnography must be completed and written through the framework of dialogue, so that the researchers are not simply 'looking over the natives' shoulders,' as Geertz suggested, but instead sitting side-by-side with them and reviewing the material together (Lassiter 2005:144). The attempt to write texts that are both responsive and relevant to the public about whom they are written is a response to larger ethical, methodological, and theoretical issues in anthropology. Collaborative ethnography is an attempt to resolve the problems and class and privilege, to address the political disparity between the research academy and the research site (Lassiter 2005:10).

In relation to ACE as a project, we utilized the theoretical framework of collaborative ethnography to ensure that our research would be relevant and useful to the subjects we were researching. For example: the problem identification, the structure of the interviews and focus groups, the study subjects, and the manner in which the information would be disseminated were all decided collaboratively with our community partner in the CEL. This collaboration was most clearly seen when our research team presented our preliminary results at the ACE Showcase, inviting students who had participated in ACE course to comment upon and evaluate the way we had presented their experiences. As our research was completed for a course in sociology/anthropology, Lassiter's words were especially pertinent: "The goals and purposes of anthropology in general seem to be shifting: the discipline's practitioners, both academic and applied, are establishing themselves in streams of practice more relevant, more public, and more accessible to a diversity of constituencies" (Lassiter 2005:73). We completed our research with the understanding that the information gathered would affect our subjects, St. Olaf College, and potentially educational curricula elsewhere. Thus, it was important for our research conclusions to be accessible and available because "In the long run, the production of ethnographic knowledge defeats its own purpose if it does not become available and accessible to a wider audience, including the people we study" (Lassiter:121).

Methodology

We conducted our study in conjunction with a \$10,000 grant received by St. Olaf from the Bringing Theory to Practice Foundation that required the implementation of ACE courses and an evaluation of their impact upon student development (Association of American Colleges and Universities 2010). Of the many outcomes put forth by the faculty committee, we chose five

to evaluate qualitatively. After our project received approval from our college's institutional review board, we contacted our sample initially by email with a brief project information statement. The sample was composed of students who had completed one of the 12 different ACE courses offered by St. Olaf from September of 2009 to January of 2011; many of our students had participated in more than one course. We requested an interview or participation in focus group. We notified them that by agreeing to participate in either interview process, the students were giving informed consent. We could not guarantee anonymity because we met with our respondents face-to-face, but we did guarantee confidentiality by coding the data and removing names when quoting or referencing them in our paper. We chose to include a focus group in our research methodology because, according to Berg, focus groups are appropriate to use in "generating impressions of products, programs, services, institutions, or other objects of interest" (Berg 2009:54).

We conducted two focus groups of seven participants in total, composed of: five females and two male, five seniors and two juniors. Academic majors represented in these groups included Art, Computer Science, English, Marketing, Psychology, and Social Work. The focus groups lasted from 45 minutes to one hour. We then interviewed 34 students over three weeks in which 11 males and 23 females were interviewed for a time that ranged between 15 minutes and 75 minutes. Our sample included four sophomores, 17 juniors, and 13 seniors. These students were majoring in American Racial Studies, Asian Studies, Biology, Chemistry, Chemistry Biomedical Studies, Biomolecular Studies, Chinese, CIS, Economics, English, Environmental Science, French, History, Linguistics, Media Studies, Norwegian, Philosophy, Political Science, Psychology, Religion, Social Work, Sociology/Anthropology, Women's Studies

The interview questions were decided upon prior to the interviews, but the interviews themselves were semi-structured with the interviewer asking probes, delving deeper into respondent's answers, and following a question order that seemed most appropriate to the conversation (Berg 2009). The students interviewed had participated in a variety of ACE courses of varying intensity that approached ACE in different ways. For example: one student participated in ACE by creating a curriculum through which juvenile delinquents from the Northfield Corrections Office could complete their service hours by working on SEEDS, an experimental sustainable farming organization. Another student implemented an intergenerational reading partners program where adults at an adult care center would go into elementary school classrooms in Northfield and read to the students; other students interviewed Asian-American immigrants in Northfield to get a better understanding of the needs and experiences of that community. After conducting the interviews, the information was coded using content analysis. Our categories were the ACE outcomes we were investigating, and the units of analysis were themes that had emerged from the interviews.

One weakness of our study may be the lack of cohesion between ACE courses that students had participated in, and the fact that courses all varied in intensity and the manner in which ACE was involved. Some ACE courses, such as the course on Asian-American history, required only one day of interviewing Northfield community members. In contrast, other courses, such as Ideals to Action, centered on students completing semester-long academic civic engagement projects. This variability in coursework may limit the generalizability of our findings. In addition, students volunteered their time to complete interviews with us, suggesting a potential bias in our results if students who had a really good or really bad experience with their ACE course, were more likely to discuss their ACE experience. Similarly, there might be another

instance of self-selection bias if ACE courses themselves were appealing and drew an audience of students who were already civically engaged and had already developed the five outcomes we were investigating. Additionally, the homogeneity of our sample may similarly limit the generalizability of our findings. Finally, time constraints imposed by a slow IRB process and the semester deadline also presented a limitation to what we could research.

Our methodology relied heavily upon face-to-face interviews, but because of our unique position in being both subject matter and researcher simultaneously, it is important to add that we did conduct some participant observation. In completing this research for a class that included an ACE component, we were also actively participating in what we were trying to observe in other students.

Problem Definition:

Past research has suggested that institutional reform amongst colleges and universities is a growing necessity if students are to graduate as ‘whole people’ with the capacity to participate fully in a democracy (Association of American Colleges and Universities 2010; College Outcomes Project; Jacoby 2009; Musil 2003; Strand 2003). The critique of the current system is rooted in the disconnect between college campuses and the surrounding communities, academia’s narrow definition of what qualifies as legitimate research, and a recognition of the need to help students develop their civic capacity in order to prepare them for active democratic citizenship (Strand 2003). Consequently, there has been a call for colleges to move away from traditional methods of education towards forms that are focused on ‘transformational learning’: a style of teaching that would ensure the student’s development as reflective, thinking, and contributing citizens (College Outcomes Project). In response to this concern, Jacoby recommends an educational focus on civic engagement that can better equip students with skills

for leadership and civic involvement (Jacoby 2009). She defines ‘civic engagement’ as: “feeling responsible to part of something beyond individual interests” which includes community involvement, responsibility, and knowledge (Jacoby 2009).

According to Jacoby, civic engagement can be integrated into the classroom through academic civic engagement courses that address problems and meet human needs; respond to challenges confronting children, schools, and cities; involve social responsibility and leadership within organizations; and combine knowledge and action within the framework of community involvement (Jacoby 2009). In support of Jacoby’s recommendation, past research suggests that “intensive and persisting forms of engaged learning positively affect the health and well-being [of students], in addition to the civic development of students” (Association of American Colleges and Universities 2010). In light of the purported benefits of transformational and engaged learning, there has been a call for more research to explore the impact of such learning upon students’ development and for further evaluation of current programs so campuses can “construct more integrative environments in which educating for democratic citizenship is understood...as a fundamental goal of the twenty-first century liberal education” (American Colleges and Universities 2010; Musil 2003).

Our research builds upon past studies by focusing on a few of the outcomes associated with academic civic engagement courses that bring transformational and engaged learning styles into the classroom. According to the intended outcomes of ACE, ACE courses are meant to be helpful in developing students’ ability to apply academic knowledge and proficiencies in service of a civic/community aim (civic learning), and in developing students’ ability to evaluate their academic knowledge and proficiencies (civic self-understanding) (St. Olaf College). Moreover, ACE courses are purported to increase students’ confidence in their ability to contribute

effectively to civic and community endeavors (civic efficacy), to increase their commitment to pursue civic, community, and work roles that foster the common good (civic action), and to enable students to articulate how they can use their knowledge and skills to contribute in personal, civic, or work roles (vocational integration) (St. Olaf College). These outcomes are also associated with the theoretical framework of transformational learning, suggesting that educational institutions should adopt a liberal arts curriculum with a practical focus, allowing students to make meaningful connections in their learning and then use that knowledge as an engaged citizen (College Outcomes Project). The basis for this theoretical framework are the desired outcomes of perspective-taking, identity, emotional competence, and resiliency. It requires that students develop the skills to make meaningful connections in their learning, and then in turn use that knowledge as an engaged citizen. This theoretical framework works towards producing in students the “optimal, emotional, psychological, and social functioning and a life-long process of positive development” (College Outcomes Project). This is especially pertinent to liberal arts colleges where the curriculum is not directed towards any specific career or job-track, but where the objective is to produce able-bodied and critically-minded citizens. Additionally, in a liberal arts environment where classes are mostly interdisciplinary, more opportunity is available for making meaningful connections that allow students to put theory into practice.

In this way, our own research is answering a call made by theorists and researchers due to a concern about student well-being and development in the current educational system. There is much literature generating and discussing the theoretical framework for transformational and engaged learning, but few studies can offer concrete data concerning the gains and benefits of student participation in academic civic engagement. Researchers Schmidt, Shumow, and Kacker

found that, for high school adolescents, that “participation in any service is associated with positive outcomes where service is voluntary or required.” Students who completed service in collaboration with an organization had better civic outcomes.

We hope that our knowledge on the subject, generated through interviews with students at a small, Midwestern, liberal arts college will help initiate discussion and continue the conversation about the role of academic civic engagement in the curriculum of colleges and universities. Our other goal is more direct, as we hope that our research will assist St. Olaf in evaluating its own ACE program, helping St. Olaf students become ‘whole people’ while helping the society at large by producing able-minded citizens. The issue that our research addresses was brought forth in collaboration with the Center for Experiential Learning at St. Olaf College and the problem definition was reframed and modified within the context of what our collaborator was most interested in. Research was initiated with the knowledge that our data would be used within St. Olaf College to assess and evaluate their ACE program while also being disseminated to other institutions of higher education to inform their curricula. Interestingly, the theoretical framework, which influenced and framed our problem, is simultaneously the subject of our research. As students completing research for credit in an ACE course (SOAN 373: Ethnographic Research Methods), we were working within the theoretical framework of ACE while simultaneously studying the theoretical framework that guided us. We had the unique position of being both subject to, and researchers of, the hypothesis that ACE courses assist students with their civic development.

Findings:

Civic Learning

Civic learning, the second outcome laid out by the faculty committee, is defined as a student's ability to recognize how knowledge or skills gained through academic civic engagement courses can be applied to a civic or community aim. In its simplest, this outcome operationalizes students' ability to see how they might move theory into practice. For many of the students interviewed, however, the concept of theory or knowledge gained through academic civic engagement was not particularly salient. When asked to identify theory utilized or knowledge gained, students often referred to the classroom portion of the course where they learned the background information necessary to complete the experiential component. For two students tasked with interviewing a member of the immigrant community, their in-class lecture and discussion on the history of immigration and the Asian-American immigrant experience helped them to shape their interviews. For students, it was easiest to reflect on theory by framing it as the building blocks for their respective experiential components. One female social work major reflects,

We had a communication workshop in which we reviewed theories from previous (Social Work) courses; engagement and termination, strategies for creating a relationship, how to be an effective listener, being sensitive to population issues, etc. These things translated directly to our work with the elderly population.

Interviewees whose academic civic engagement project challenged them to interview or assist community partners frequently mentioned interpersonal communication skills and the ability to engage someone effectively. For many students, this engagement presented particular barriers to communication that had to be considered given the populations they were working with. Though most agreed that interpersonal communication was a challenge, a number of interviewees pointed out the necessity of this skill as it related to their vocational or career interests.

When you're working with community partners, it requires a more professional manner, your reputation and the reputation of the school are at stake. It forces you to talk to people, get your name out there, and practice some networking skills.

This student in particular, a sociology/anthropology in his final semester at St. Olaf, saw this particular skill set difficult to gain through traditional classroom learning, yet necessary in his chosen career field and therefore an invaluable asset of civic engagement. Another student saw civic engagement as an opportunity to practice the intercultural competency necessary in pursuit of her own vocational interests, yet identified a number of significant barriers.

We felt like this was an opportunity to give people who had otherwise been silenced a voice, an opportunity to speak. This was a chance for him to share his story and for us to learn from that but the experience broke down because of a simple language barrier. I thought there was a role missing, someone to step in and say 'no this isn't working'. So much frustration over the interview made me feel like I wasn't particularly adept at this skill.

For this student who identified academic civic engagement as a route to learn or demonstrate knowledge and skills aligned with her vocational and career interests, barriers to successful engagement limited her own sense of efficacy or preparedness. For nearly all interviewed students, however, the challenges inherent in engaging community partners were reflected in a positive light as well.

Civic Self-Understanding

Listed as the third student outcome in the ACE framework, civic self-understanding involves the student's ability to be aware of, and evaluate one's own, academic knowledge and competencies. These skills may include, but are not limited to, written and oral communication, teamwork, critical and creative thinking, information literacy, and intercultural competency. Among the students interviewed, all were able to identify a wide range of skills and abilities that they previously possessed or acquired by engaging in their ACE courses. A senior female

Sociology/Anthropology and Biology double major commented on how her ACE course fostered the development of many different skills:

I had to learn to communicate with a range of different people. I especially had to learn how to talk with people who are older than me. More than that, though, my teamwork and group work skills improved, also time management, and networking.

Another female Political Science and English double major mentioned how she had grown during her ACE course by saying,

My organizational skills improved dramatically because you are accountable and responsible for a project that people in the community are already so involved in, and have already put a lot of work in to.

A female Sociology/Anthropology major affirmed this by stating,

Group work is a big component of most [ACE] classes, and working in a group long-term in challenging and I think you learn a lot about your leadership styles and what you are good at. You also learn how to manage group conflict resolution. And I think it's different when you have someone [a community member] relying on your results. You're doing whatever project, but it's not that you can make stuff up. Being responsible to the needs of someone else brings out different levels of intensity.

A female Sociology/Anthropology and Political Science double major with an Middle Eastern concentration noticed that in her ACE class,

Thinking on the spot was really important. We had to do a lot of probing during our interviews with community members, and thinking of good follow-up questions was really imperative to getting good information. But I feel most confident in my researching skills, so much so that I can see myself considering a career where I'd be involved in some sort of research.

Students' ability to recognize their skills, and then apply them to real life situations made their ACE experience a very worthwhile endeavor. All the students interviewed found that the opportunity to apply their set of individual skills was enlightening and opened their minds to new leadership and volunteer opportunities they otherwise wouldn't have pursued.

Civic Efficacy

Civic efficacy, defined as the confidence in one's ability to contribute effectively to civic and community endeavors, was another intended outcome of academic civic engagement courses identified by a group of staff and faculty members at St. Olaf College. For one junior female student, a CIS major, "having actually done the things [in the community] gives me a different kind of confidence than just getting feedback from professors. Having done it, you know you can do it, and you see the results of your work in the community." Another female student, a senior Environmental Studies major, also felt this sense of confidence when she worked at a food shelf for her academic civic engagement course. She said that volunteering there "was a good experience because I realized that I'm not just a walking brain. I have hands and feet that can be put to good use."

Students are beginning to realize the importance of going to college not only to learn theory, but also to learn how to apply that theory in real life situations. The importance of academic civic engagement classes, as identified by a number of interviewees, was manifested in that "a traditional class would have just taught us how peoples' minds worked, but not necessarily how [we could best] interact with them." This experience in 'the real world' gave one senior female, Environmental Studies and French major, the confidence to realize that her project with a sustainable farm (developing a curriculum where by juvenile delinquents could complete their community service hours by gardening) was actually implementable. She stated,

One of the goals of ACE is to have what you're doing not be simply theoretical but also implementable. I had this epiphany halfway during our project. I said to my group: "You guys, this could actually happen!" This was a 'real person project.' This could actually help people and bring people from different parts of the community together. You don't get that as much with normal class-work. You can have classes where you just survey or observe Northfield; but what we were doing didn't just stay in the Northfield community.

However, other students believed that it was not only academic civic engagement courses that developed their civic efficacy, but also their participation in internships and other experiences. For one sophomore English and Media Studies major, although her academic civic engagement class helped her gain valuable skills, it wasn't until she used those skills in a more career-like setting that she began to feel most confident. One senior female student said that she "discovered how self-motivated I could be when given a task that people expected me to do . But I just relied on my interpersonal skills that I learned in jobs, internships, and work settings, not in class."

Civic Action

Listed as the sixth student outcome in the ACE framework, civic action moves beyond simple recognition of a given community's need, or the student's ability to meet it, but instead involves an increase in their commitment to actually pursue civic, community, and work roles that foster a common good. Among the students interviewed, many agreed that they gained a sense of civic action from the ACE components within their course. One student, a junior male Asian Studies major who took an Asian history course that involved interviewing Asian-American immigrants in the nearby community stated,

I've definitely wanted to get more involved in the multicultural community as well as with the St. Olaf community [after taking this course]. It made me more sensitive to not just the needs of the Asian-American community, but also to the ways in which the Asian community affects the Northfield community and the St. Olaf community. It's made me look for more effective ways to get the message [of equality] out.

Similar to his sentiment, a female Sociology/Anthropology and English double major who took an anthropology research methods course stated,

When I was using skills and applying them in the theory, I was making deeper understanding and connections in what they meant and my place in theoretical anthropology and my role in society...I guess I have always felt some sense of responsibility but it has shifted in the fact that now I also feel empowered [by her course and by the research]. My responsibility doesn't feel like a burden because I know I can be active to respond to it.

This trend of civic action that emerged in our research suggests that students indeed moved beyond simply recognizing their capabilities and confidence in pursuing action, but actually felt compelled to follow through to achieve a greater good for society. In fact, some students who said they tended to stray away from the other tenets of ACE said that their sense of commitment to pursue work roles that foster a common public or community good still strengthened, as did their confidence in this commitment. A senior male Sociology/Anthropology major identified with this viewpoint stating that,

'ACE' has never really been within my academic purview, I've never really sought out civic engagement courses because I've always sort of done that on my own. I'm civically engaged in everything I do and the way I live my life. It seems weird that ACE has to be a special thing, it should be something we integrate into everything.

At the same time, some students wished they were more supported in their efforts to act on their knowledge and skill recognition from their ACE courses. A senior female Sociology/Anthropology and Religion major stated that, "No support was given for the follow-up or reflection of the ACE projects." If this component was addressed, she may have felt more compelled to act on her application of theory, thus fulfilling the civic action outcome.

Vocational Integration

Vocation refers to a person's passion or purpose in life. This includes, but is not limited to, finding a meaningful career. Vocational integration marks the final ACE outcome, and is the one that we found had the most varied response. For example, some students saw ACE as an

integral influence in the development of their vocation. A junior female Philosophy and Asian studies major with a Chinese concentration reflected on her American Racial and Multicultural Studies Course by stating,

If there was no civic engagement part in this class, the connection between what you were learning and how it relates to the world after college would be a lot less clear. Taking the civic engagement class meshes the two together and makes it immediately coherent and noticeable and shows what ways exactly the issues you study relate to people and what you can do, or how you could feel called to do something about it.

A female junior Sociology/Anthropology and Religion major, upon reflecting on her Christianity and Social Power class adds,

After my experiences with ACE, I'm way more confident in what I value and believe in. Values and beliefs are core to finding a vocation or career. Now that I know what I can find meaningful, I can look for careers knowing that I can approach settings that I can be more comfortable in.

By contrast, other students felt that their ACE course did not emphasize civic engagement as much as they had expected or hoped; consequently finding that ACE did not have positive effects on their vocational growth. A junior male History major who participated in the American Conversation program did not feel like the ACE courses in the program integrated civic engagement to the extent that the students could be fully engaged and impact the community. He expressed that, though he did not come to dislike the program as a consequence of this, the lack of meaningful ACE integration did not positively affect his sense of vocation.

Similarly, there were students that said that their ACE experience affected their vocational growth less, but because they entered their ACE course with a previous conception of their vocation. For example, a senior Sociology/Anthropology, Political Science, and Women Studies major claimed, "I had a good sense of where I wanted to go, but ACE gave me some steps to get closer to achieving that vocational objective. I can't say that it gave me a vocation,

but it definitely helped me get there.” A junior, Middle Eastern Studies, Religion, and American Racial and Multicultural Studies major seconded this notion by saying, “ACE is a stepping stone in the process of figuring out what to do, and more importantly, how to do it.”

At the same time that some students gained vocational growth and some did not, some said that they did not gain vocational growth solely from their ACE course, but instead cited other experiences, such as internships and past jobs that also aided them in gaining their sense of vocation. One senior Sociology/Anthropology and English major with a concentration in Women’s Studies talked about her internship at Global Mamas in Ghana,

In my internship, I felt confident in my writing and communicating in professional ways in the business. I gained skills sets in terms of communicating with supervisors. I felt a stronger sense of vocation because those skills are useful outside of academia. I realized I’m probably going to make an impact after graduating.

The variation present in vocational growth and integration from both ACE courses and ACE skills highlights the variable nature of not only how this final outcome was embodied, but also conceptualized by St. Olaf students. Ultimately, we found that academic civic engagement is one way of reaching vocational integration, but it is certainly not the only way, nor is it a foolproof way for everyone to gain a sense of their larger purpose.

Discussion

We found that students’ experiences in ACE classes, their success in the experience as framed by the outcomes, and their overall enjoyment in the course depended on various factors. The first of these is the level of ACE intensity in the class. Some classes involved a large ACE component that incorporated a significant amount of time and work that involved direct engagement with, as well as time spent in the Northfield community working with a specific population or organization throughout the ACE experience. The students who had taken high

intensity ACE courses were generally those who could speak the most about their ACE experience. By contrast, those students in courses that had a less intense ACE component typically had a harder time elaborating on their gains and experiences from the course. In both cases however, we found that students did develop the five investigated outcomes, albeit to different degrees.

In addition to the intensity of the ACE course, our findings suggest that the outcomes that students gained from ACE classes also depended on whether or not the class topic was in line with their educational, career, vocational goals. Students who had prior interest in the class topic, or ACE in general, were more likely to gain the outcomes to a greater extent than those who took the course for other reasons, or did not expect or understand the ACE addition to the course. For example, many students expressed that if the ACE course was within the framework their academic major, they were more inclined to seek out the benefits of ACE because they were able to incorporate their theoretical knowledge into a concrete framework with which they were already familiar.

Relating to whether or not the ACE course was in the purview of prior interest, another aspect crucial to students' development of outcomes from an ACE course was students' expectations of what they might gain from the experience. Students who enrolled with high expectations worked to see those expectations be met, conversely, those unfamiliar with ACE, or those with little expectations of what they could gain saw little in terms of the development of the outcomes. This was exhibited specifically in situations where students were driven by a previously conceived sense of vocation, or drive for greater social change.

Despite varying ACE outcome strength and fulfillment, students for the most part truly appreciated what ACE offered to the college and the Northfield community. In fact, a number of

students suggested that ACE should be included in the list of St. Olaf General Education requirements. Varying opinions surrounded this notion. In most cases where the students supported the requirement, the student had had a positive ACE experience. Others felt that it would negatively affect students' attitude towards the course, especially if it involved a significant amount of academic work in addition to the ACE component.

This also correlates with a phenomenon that many of our interviewees identified: most St. Olaf students are already civically engaged and do not require an in-class ACE component to help them develop the outcomes our study investigated. As mentioned previously, prior interest in the subject matter was a factor in determining how much a student benefitted from an ACE course, but some of these same types of students also tended to state in our interviews that they already had a strong sense of civic action or efficacy, even before taking the course. They said that though their classes had not helped them develop their sense of the ACE outcomes further, the experience did affirm their desire to contribute in a meaningful to their community.

Student Recommendations for Future ACE courses at St. Olaf:

The issues encountered by students were rooted in St. Olaf's execution of ACE rather than ACE itself. One issue in particular was the lack of a standard definition of ACE. There is no established 'gold standard' as to how much community involvement constitutes ACE, nor is there a standard as to how much of an impact ACE should make on a student. The ambiguity of this standard is especially clear when our findings revealed that many students taking classes in departments such as Education, Social Work, or Nursing, already demonstrated ACE outcomes without needing the ACE label. Many of the students we interviewed did not know that the class they had signed up for had an ACE component and they suggested that it be better advertised

which courses offered this out-of-class experience. Should courses be more prominently labeled, ACE might still lack meaning to students who are not familiar with what ACE stands for or entails.

Additionally, students vocalized the belief that the ACE curriculum needs to be well-connected and integrated to course material in order for the outcomes to be developed effectively. Some of our sample felt that the course they took had integrated ACE to an effective level. A female senior Environmental Studies and French major said,

It enhances the learning you are doing in class. We were reading about social change movements, and then we got to do something that contributed to something greater. It wasn't large scale social change, but it was engagement with people and lending a helping hand. Your assignment is: go do!

However, some students felt that the ACE component did not connect well or align well with their class work and thus they were less engaged and benefitted less from the ACE experience. A female junior CIS (Integrative Justice and Cultural Transformation) major said, "In AMCON (the American Conversation program), the ACE was not as well-integrated as it could have been. It was like, 'Oh, it's time for civic engagement week!'" This lack of cohesiveness between the class material and the ACE component made it harder for students to develop the intended outcomes.

In addition to this, some students felt as if the ACE component of their class was solely an afterthought. Because of this, students felt as if the class had an even larger workload and time commitment than the class would originally ask for if it didn't have the ACE component. As summarized by a senior Sociology/Anthropology and English major,

St. Olaf as an institution and the CEL as the student services office need to be mindful of what the students are already doing. If they ask this, what will they take away? There needs to be some institutional curriculum releases given to students so they have time and energy to do ACE correctly.... It would be such a shame for people to not get everything out of ACE that can be achieved if you put your heart and soul into your work.

Finally, students remarked that they would have benefitted from having class time to reflect upon their ACE experience. They recommended having the professor lead an in-class discussion where students would reflect upon the intended outcomes of ACE and how their experience aligned with those. Such a discussion would help students be able to articulate and vocalize what they had learned and what skills they had gained. Outcomes such as civic efficacy and vocational integration could especially be highlighted in conjunction with staff from the CEL.

Conclusion:

We feel that further study would be highly beneficial in assessing the impact ACE has upon student's civic growth and development of identity. Because we worked with a very limited scope of interviewees, we feel that a broader spectrum of outcomes could be reached with a more diverse representation of participants. In the future, we would be curious to interview faculty members on their perceptions of students' development throughout the timeframe of the ACE course. We also feel that the input of community partners would be significant in assessing the actual impact of students' efforts in the Northfield community. As the ACE program becomes more implemented into the curriculum, it would also be beneficial to interview St. Olaf alumni who have taken these courses to note the impact of the program beyond college and the role these students' acquired skills play in their lives after graduation.

We understand that our study presents a heavy self-selection bias. Because we relied on volunteer interviewees, the students who were willing to be interviewed generally had strong feelings one way or another towards ACE. For future studies, the opinions of all those involved in an ACE course would be beneficial so that there is not these extremes in interviewee

responses. We would also like to see a longitudinal study take place in which a control group is presented, consisting of students who have not taken an ACE course. This would provide a more accurate evaluation of the program because a direct comparison between ACE and traditional courses would be presented.

There are myriad potential uses for our research. Firstly, our findings were condensed into an executive summary that will be sent to the grant funder as part of the evaluative requirement; this executive summary will be used alongside the information provided by other grant receivers to assess the benefits of ACE more generally. Secondly, our research team presented our findings at our college's ACE Showcase, where both students and professors were informed of our preliminary results. We hope that these results, disseminated amongst the student body, the administration, and the faculty, can improve upon the current structure of ACE courses. Our research can assist professors in being effective in teaching and integrating the ACE component into their course; it can assist students by preparing them for an ACE course and guiding the reflection process. For the administration, our research gives material that can be used to better advertise the program; for community members, our research can be used to show what students can bring to projects and also what skills/knowledge students hope to gain from the experience. Our research can be used to build a stronger foundation for the program and as a tool to assist students, professors, and community members in the collaborative endeavor.

Finally, as a research group, we were simultaneously subject matter and researcher. Since we have already noted the importance of reflection in developing the desired outcomes of ACE, we wanted to reflect on our own gains from this ACE project. Like many of our interviewees, we learned how to interview our peers in a professional environment and communicate effectively with our adult community partners. We gained 'real-world' experience in that our research

confronted actual problems residing in the educational system. Our research was meaningful because it had a direct application and the results would actually be utilized. We gained ‘real-world,’ marketable skills by engaging with the ethnographic research process. We learned how to select a sample, contact the sample, conduct interviews, transcribe and code data, and work with a group to write a research paper. These transferrable skills are only one of the benefits of our experience in our ACE course. The seniors in our group identified ACE as way to legitimize their liberal arts education in a very competitive job market. The experience added to our resume ‘real-world’ skills and knowledge that could be reported to potential employers. In conclusion, being both subject matter and researcher gave us a unique perspective on how students benefit from participation in ACE courses.

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