

## Civic Engagement: In and Outside the Classroom

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### Abstract

This article is a comprehensive look at the many diverse ways in which faculty can facilitate civic engagement in academic settings and in students' wider communities. We discuss eight pedagogical principles of experiential learning and four levels of civic engagement, which are (a) exposure; (b) engagement; (c) service learning; and (d) internships. We offer explanations of and examples from each of these levels. Additionally, we provide on-campus resources relevant to various types of civic engagement and faculty support.

### Introduction

A fundamental tenet of a liberal arts education is that students should have the ability to engage with a broader community—a community that goes beyond the boundaries of their job or classroom. Since civic engagement is a critical element of the University of North Carolina at Charlotte’s mission (and thus everyone’s teaching), this chapter seeks to define the nature of citizenship and engagement, outline its importance in Top 40 curriculums, and provide specific examples of what forms active civic engagement can take.

Broadly, civic engagement involves students applying skills learned in the classroom to improve the quality of life in communities of every scale. Given that every student and faculty member is an element of a larger social fabric, we each have an obligation to participate in the maintenance and preservation of that society. Top 40 classes are one of UNC Charlotte’s first opportunities to illustrate this obligation to students. Hopefully, if University faculty are made aware of the importance and relevance of civic engagement, they will impart to students that skills in critical thinking, sensitivity to diversity and political perspectives, and discipline-specific knowledge are powerful components of social change. In essence, this chapter seeks to reinforce the societal value of a liberal arts education and help build social capital among our students and the community.

More specifically, this chapter will revisit the importance of civic engagement (community membership on local to global scales) in the classroom. This will involve (a) illustrating to students the societal significance of liberal arts training and its relevance to the broader community (in contrast to vocationally-oriented training); (b) showing students how their education can be used

to engage their communities; (c) articulating the value of your course beyond the classroom; and (d) developing specific strategies for applying students' knowledge in their communities.

### **Levels of Civic Engagement**

There are various levels of civic engagement that can lead students to think of themselves as actors within their wider communities and to become involved participants. The hope is that these various levels of civic engagement in the classroom will not only meet community needs, but also forge stronger connections of academic knowledge and student commitment to community and civic engagement in the future. For the purposes of this chapter, we divide the levels of civic engagement into four categories: (a) exposure; (b) engagement; (c) service learning; and (d) internships.

Civic engagement on these four levels typically involves experiential learning strategies that have connections outside the classroom (unlike laboratory instruction). Civic engagement activities can range broadly in complexity and scale from individual volunteerism to organizational involvement to political participation. The underlying assumption of these exercises is that students' experiences in the classroom should prepare them to participate comfortably in these various types of activities as an engaged citizen. The best way to ensure that students get the most from these various experiences is to ask them to reflect in written or oral form on how their experiences added, complicated, or confirmed concepts learned in the classroom.

#### **Exposure**

Sometimes we just need to expose our students to the wider community in which they live. This would involve minimal interaction for the students, but may force them to go outside of

their regular comfort zone. Exposure can include reading local newspapers, attending local events and exhibits, taking the local bus, or eating in a local restaurant.

**Engagement**

Engagement should help students learn more about their communities and show them ways in which they can have a meaningful impact. This could include having students write advocacy letters to a newspaper, corporations, or public officials; conducting oral histories; or organizing public forums, performances, or exhibitions.

**Service Learning**

Service learning should help students expand on concepts and information learned in class by exposing them to the complexities of real world scenarios. Service learning includes both exposure and the impact of engagement, but does so in a way that enables students to meet the needs of community organizations or institutions, rather than only completing in-class assignments. However, such learning should be linked to class readings, discussions, and/or reflection assignments. The service can vary in duration and depth. It can be participation in or organization of a single project, putting in a certain number of hours at a non-profit organization, or supporting a number of campus-wide community service projects or activities like Niner Food Pantry, on-campus Habitat Builds, the Community Garden, and Stop Hunger Now food-packaging events. There are many courses that carry the Service Learning (SL) designation, a notation on students' transcripts similar to the one for Writing Intensive (WI). It began in 2012 and signals that the course has a formal service learning component. Faculty who are aiming at this level of civic engagement are encouraged to complete the paperwork that gives their course this

designation. It is a short form that goes through the university course and curriculum committee approval process, and can be found at [Course and Curriculum Procedures and Forms](#).

### **Internships**

Internships usually involve a certain amount of hours per semester, but not classroom time. The organization or business holding the internship needs to be vetted by a representative of the department. Students must have a mentor at the organization with sufficient experience and status and an adviser in their department who will individually check proposals, correspond with the mentor, and evaluate the final product (this could be a paper, journal, or project). UNC Charlotte also offers the [49ership through the Career Center](#), which is similar to internships but more closely aligned with civic engagement. 49erships occur in non-profit organizations and also carry a transcript notation. It is often possible to link these opportunities to discipline-specific courses.

### **Exercises for the Levels of Civic Engagement**

While you may use the resources listed in this chapter, we thought that specific exercises used by instructors of various disciplines at UNC Charlotte and other institutions would be helpful to new and experienced faculty. Some of these exercises can be used for large classrooms, and others may work better with small ones. Where possible, we have added specific assignments.

Additionally, UNC Charlotte is a member of [Campus Compact](#), a national coalition that “promotes public and community service that develops students’ citizenship skills, helps campuses forge effective community partnerships, and provides resources and training for faculty seeking to integrate civic and community-based learning into the curriculum.” Their website has a variety of resource types and includes sample syllabi (organized by field) that

contain civic engagement exercises. They also have excellent resources for reflective writing, including [assessment rubrics](#).

### **Exposure**

**Reading the newspaper.** For an LBST course, the instructor had students read the *Christian Science Monitor* and summarize a national and an international article weekly.

**Cultural field trips.** For an introductory course, the instructor asked students to go to various museums or historic sites. Students took pictures of themselves with ticket stubs at the site and then were asked to reflect on their experiences in a class blog.

**Religious encounters.** For a History of Religion class, students were asked to attend a worship service of a religious community to which they did not belong. This sometimes involved contacting the place of worship beforehand to determine if there were any special rules that they needed to observe and to make sure they would be welcomed. Students were then asked to write a reflection piece that tied the experience to what they had learned about the various ways in which religion is practiced.

**Reading the landscape.** For an LBST class, students learned to observe and interpret the landscape of an area. This included examining both the natural and architectural elements of the environment and applying theories about reading the landscape in a paper on their given place. See [Place Paper](#) for more details.

**The cinema experience.** For the LBST class Arts and Society, students were asked to attend a screening presented by the Charlotte Film Society and then meaningfully reflect on the cultural and societal impact of the film. Students attended screenings in a non-traditional

screening space and were exposed to arthouse and foreign cinema from various countries and various genres.

## **Engagement**

**Writing an advocacy letter.** After reading Michael Pollan's *In Defense of Food*, an LBST instructor asked students to analyze the October K-8 school menu at Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (CMS). They were given an explanation of the new food requirements from the CMS nutrition website, a nutrient analysis and allergens chart, and the United States Department of Agriculture's recommendations for salt and calories by age. Students were taught how to write an advocacy letter and then wrote a letter to the head of the Child Nutrition Services at CMS. A large class had individual letters, whereas a small class composed a letter together, delegating by task and subject.

**Writing an advocacy letter.** Students in a Music Education class were instructed to write a hypothetical two- to four-page letter to the superintendent of CMS and had to defend the statement "Music is basic and should be required of all children, K-12." They needed to incorporate research about how the developmental, emotional, social, aesthetic, and social functions of music contribute to the academic and social success of a child.

**Creating a community archive, database, or website.** The Africana Studies and History Departments did a number of interconnected projects on the former Brooklyn and current Biddleville communities in Charlotte. These included an archive of oral history interviews conducted and reviewed by students. Each student had to conduct three interviews, create a bio, time log, and digital copy for each interview, and transcribe one copy. These were then posted on the [Brooklyn Oral History website](#). Likewise, a Digital History class created a [website](#) that included

a more general history of Brooklyn, but had an archive of digitized documents and educational resources.

**Creation of a play production examining ideas/principles of social justice.** The Department of Theatre and Crossroads Charlotte at UNC Charlotte created a semester-long theatre collaboration course with the stated objective of (a) demonstrating an understanding of the demographic changes within the community and on campus; (b) defining and applying concepts of social capital and social justice including access, inclusion, equity, and trust; and (c) articulating and demonstrating the connection between theatre, community-building, and social change. Students were required to go out into the community and interview subjects relevant to the chosen issue and then create, write, design, and present an original work on that topic. Interview subjects and other members from the campus and local community were then invited to view the performance and have a talkback discussion about their thoughts on both the production and the larger community issue presented.

[Syllabus](#)

[Amendments Aside: This play's all about humanity](#)

[Jumping Mountains Longer](#)

**Conducting surveys.** A number of classes asked students to conduct surveys of various communities to determine societal attitudes, determine when empirical information was needed to create better policies, and assess and meet community needs. In a Criminal Justice class, students were asked to conduct surveys on youth perceptions of connections between violence and drugs. While surveys can be valuable pedagogic devices, UNC Charlotte Institutional Review Board clearance is sometimes necessary.



**Educational outreach.** Students had to go to their own or another local high school and talk to students about the importance of a college education. The STARS Alliance on campus has been doing this for computer science students to promote diversity in computing and have a [website](#) that may be useful.

### **Service Learning**

**Community gardens.** For a small LBST course that focused on food, the instructor required that students spend five hours volunteering in a garden or on a farm. At least three of these hours had to be spent off campus (that year, UNC Charlotte began its own community garden). Students were encouraged to work at the Urban Ministries Garden, and the instructor worked with the head gardener to ensure available hours for the students. Other students worked at Community Supported Agriculture sites and other community gardens, or helped as part of a [gleaning team](#) on local farms. Students were asked to take a picture of themselves working at their site and to reflect in a short essay on their experience and how it confirmed or expanded what they had learned in class.

**Community service.** Many courses in different disciplines asked students to do various amounts of community service hours, from ten or more hours during the whole semester to three hours per week. In a Literature course, students volunteered for three hours per week in a community service agency and kept a journal that described their service experiences and how they enriched their readings. Students were encouraged to connect intellectual and moral issues posed by the readings to service work.

**Music education.** Music Education students at UNC Charlotte were required to complete ten hours of community service supporting a local music program. This could be at a school, a

religious community, or a senior citizen center. Support included either playing or singing with a band/orchestra/choir or providing secretarial and administrative duties for a program. A two- to four-page reflection paper was required. [[Music Education](#)]

**Art-service programs.** These typically involved visual or performing arts participation activities for youth in the community. Advanced art students in all disciplines took the tools and training they gained as part of their education and went into the community to create new community-based works with local and under-funded community arts projects and organizations. This allowed students to continue practicing and teaching their craft, but also allowed them to learn the real world problems and challenges of community artists.

**Bridging the digital divide projects.** These typically involved technology training for low-income residents who may not have experience with digital tools. Some of these activities included assistance with website construction for neighborhood associations or local non-profits. Specific examples of programs which enhance community access to the Internet include repurposing/recycling aging equipment for community access or providing community wireless access.

**Community youth mentoring programs.** Instructors encouraged involvement with community youth via existing programs such as Big Brothers Big Sisters of America. Other forms of youth engagement included tutoring, education, or education components.

**Public service announcement projects.** These projects required development of materials to raise community awareness of specific issues, which is particularly appropriate for media-oriented instruction. Announcements were generally distributed via existing media, although a unique web presence could be developed for distribution purposes.

**Voter registration drives and voter education.** Political Science courses have operationalized theoretical material from lectures and text into community voter registration and education programs. Most commonly, these outreach and education efforts involved a public interface via neighborhood association and community events such as fairs or festivals.

**Fundraising projects.** These projects were typically directed at international aid projects where direct service provision is impractical, such as Stop Hunger Now (a campus-wide initiative). Besides this food-packaging event, money for each meal packaged must be raised, which can be linked to class activities. Sean Langley and the [Office of Volunteer Outreach](#) coordinates Stop Hunger Now.

**Service to the disabled.** Activities have ranged from reading for the blind and supporting the aged (Meals on Wheels) to projects designed to improve community accessibility.

**Community building projects.** Community Planning students have frequently provided labor and expertise to community organizations, planned office advocacy, and assisted in the development of a neighborhood organization. These efforts included data collection, plan preparation, and assistance with community grant submissions for environmental remediation.

[[Engagement Assignment Example 1](#), [Engagement Assignment Example 2](#), [Engagement Assignment Example 3](#), [Engagement Assignment Example 4 -- Semester length](#), ....]

**Editing community publications.** The English Department offers experiential learning in a number of different ways. In one class, students helped publish a regular newsletter with the Uptown Men's Shelter of Charlotte while another class, Editing With Technical Documents, edited this e-book you are reading.

## Internships

**Archival and museum internships.** The History Department has internships for undergraduate and graduate students. Archival and museum internships are mainly completed by graduates in our Public History program and are overseen by the Director of Public History. All sites are vetted and students and the institution create a proposal or contract of intention, which is then signed by the internship adviser, the student, and the mentor at the institution before the internship commences. Students are required to keep a journal and write a paper at the end of the semester. The adviser contacts the mentor at least once in the semester and helps troubleshoot any issues that arise.

**Community-based internships.** The Geography Department has internships for undergraduate and graduate students, which focus on community planning and community development. Tasks include gathering public input on community plans, facilitating the development of community organizations, and the organization and direction of community improvement projects such as playground upgrades, lighting improvements, and organization of community watch programs.

**Skills-based internships in non-profit organizations.** Non-profit organizations are frequently in need of students' applied skills. Examples include preparing documents, archiving, bookkeeping, implementing expertise in selecting locations for expansion, and service provision.

## Principles of Pedagogical Practice

The National Society for Experiential Education offers eight principles of good pedagogic practice in experiential education activities. These principles should be used when developing classroom and extracurricular activities. The principles can also be used to assess the

effectiveness of civic engagement activities and to ensure that they meet the pedagogic and civic goals of the course and program. The principles are explained below.

**Intention**

A clear outline of why an experiential approach is the best way for students to master the learning objective is needed.

**Preparedness and Planning**

To facilitate the connection of experiential efforts to the classroom, background knowledge and experience should be provided before beginning experiential learning activities.

**Authenticity**

The experience must be contextualized so the experiential efforts will benefit the broader community.

**Reflection**

To achieve the desired learning outcomes of the course, it is necessary to encourage students to connect their civic engagement experience to the broad theoretical context of the classroom.

**Orientation and Training**

It is vital that students, instructors, and community participants all share the same background information for the experiential learning project.

**Monitoring and Continuous Improvement**

Observations of how the experiential learning activity meets the learning objectives of the course (and the revisions of the activity) are vital to maintaining the effectiveness of the activity as a learning exercise.

**Assessment and Evaluation**

Objective outcomes should be identified and monitored.

**Acknowledgement**

The documentation and sharing of the project's achievements, along with recognition of community partners, is necessary to create rewarding and sustainable experiential learning opportunities.

**On-Campus Resources to Facilitate Civic Engagement in the Classroom**

Facilitating student engagement with the broader community is a critical element of the University's mission to prepare students for their futures. However, the development and delivery of these activities can require resources that are not commonly available in the University. The effective provision for civic engagement activities may require the following resources:

- Funds for field trip expenses (e.g. transportation and admissions fees);
- Speaker fees;
- Maintenance of listings of independent volunteer opportunities, community-based internships, and other experiential learning opportunities;
- Curriculum development funds specifically targeted for service learning projects;
- Funding for graduate assistants to supervise large-scale community outreach projects.

Assistance with engagement activities can be obtained from the following offices:

- The [Office of Volunteer Outreach](#) (directed by Sean Langley, Assistant Director for Off-Campus and Volunteer Outreach);

- [Campus Compact](#), UNC Charlotte Chapter (meets monthly and is coordinated by Tamara Johnson of Academic Affairs);
- [The Office of Education Abroad](#), the Office of Volunteer Outreach, and [Campus Habitat](#) (for alternative or service-oriented spring breaks);
- The [Center for Teaching and Learning](#) (Faculty Fellow Kim Buch offers Service Learning pedagogical workshops regularly throughout the year);
- The Center for Teaching and Learning and Campus Compact (they co-sponsor an annual Service Learning Showcase for UNC Charlotte faculty and students to share their projects via poster presentations);
- The [University Career Center](#) (the 49ership program and the University Professional Internship Program (UPIP) can be used to hire a student in support of a service initiative);
- The [Civic Minor](#) (an interdisciplinary minor that focuses on civic engagement, coordinated by Susan Harden).

Given that civic engagement activities are fundamental to the mission of UNC Charlotte, it is important to request appropriate resources for these activities from the administration when resources for new projects are not readily available from existing programs.

The importance of engagement or community membership (from local to global) can be reinforced by:

- Showing students the importance of a liberal arts education (as opposed to a vocational education) in a democratic society;

- Using the liberal arts education to engage students' communities (this can include writing letters to editors, writing to corporations, service learning, volunteer work, or starting a petition on [change.org](https://www.change.org));
- Articulating the value of courses in the larger world and figuring out how to tie this value into course objectives;
- Developing or suggesting responses to the implications of what they are learning in the classroom.



## Reference

Gordon mgordon@charlotteobserver.com, M. (2012, Apr 28). Amendment aside: This play's all about humanity - UNCC theater production spotlights N.C.'s ongoing debate about marriage. Charlotte Observer, The (NC), p. 1B. Retrieved from

<http://www.infoweb.newsbank.com/resources/doc/nb/news/13E7BC2ACABE0000?p=AW>

[NB](#)