

**Going Beyond One Class: Applying Civic Engagement
Principles to an Entire Minor Program**

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ABSTRACT

In the *Politics*, Aristotle starts with the assumption that political institutions, such as the state, are communities aimed at the highest good. According to his argument it is only through engagement in this community that citizens can set forth and discuss notions of justice. If one agrees with these basic understandings of politics then one goal of any political science program should be to encourage students across the campus to actively engage their communities. However, this goal can often be difficult to meet within the major itself much less across an entire college campus. Through the use of a case study this paper explores the creation of a civic engagement minor program focused on community-based research that is open to students from a broad variety of disciplines.

The case study for this paper is Lynchburg College, a private liberal arts college in south central Virginia with an enrollment around 2,200 students. However, the author argues that the lessons learned and questions raised in this paper are relevant to any sized public or private institution interested in promoting active engagement among its students. The political science program at Lynchburg College has recently created and is now offering a new civic engagement minor with the goal of helping students recognize and act on connections between their academic talents and specific needs in their communities. To complete the minor students, during their senior year, must engage a community partner in what has become known as a community-based research project. To both raise their awareness of the need for civic engagement and to prepare them for this community based research project the minor also requires students to take courses from a variety of disciplines that will help them strengthen their research skills, build relationships with community partners, and challenge them to think more about important concepts such as community, justice, and citizenship.

This paper employs this detailed description of the civic engagement minor program at Lynchburg College to answer three main questions. First, how can principles of civic engagement, which have often been implemented at the class level, be applied across an entire program of study? Second, how can a program such as this go beyond political science and become interdisciplinary? Third, what future questions and challenges must be overcome to meet the goal of promoting civic engagement among our students?

For as long as humans have pondered political questions they have also thought about and discussed issues related to civic engagement. In the *Apology*, Socrates describes and defends his intimate engagement with Athens, which he argues has been beneficial for the community at large. In the *Politics*, Aristotle argued that it was only through engagement with the polis that humans could set forth and discuss notions of justice. Even at the start of academic political science around the end of the nineteenth century, the “founding fathers”, as Stephen Leonard labeled them, were motivated by ideas of improving citizens through civic education (Leonard 1999, 749). The focus on improving engagement through education has been a continuing theme throughout the history of the American Political Science Association (APSA). Hindy Schachter reported that the APSA created four committees to study civic education in its first 36 years (1903 – 1939) of existence (Schachter 1998, 631). Most recently, the Task Force on Civic Education for the Next Century was created in 1996 because:

Democracies, from nations to small communities, cannot survive and thrive without robust engagement in the political controversies (and the well-earned celebrations) that sustain them. Civic engagement in, and a personal sense of responsibility for, the health of our inescapably political life are the lifeblood of a liberal democracy (Carter and Elshtain 1997, 745).

Given this deeply rooted concern for civic engagement, many political scientists have been dismayed by recent findings that Americans “. . . at this century’s end seem indifferent, cynical, and perhaps afraid of politics. The evidence for the rise of political apathy and cynicism is convincing” (Carter and Elshtain 1997, 745). While it has been widely noted that all Americans are less likely to participate in politics or engage their communities has been noted (for example, Dionne 1991; Putnam 1995), the decline has been most dramatic among young adults. For example, Table One demonstrates that while the overall turnout rate for American

Table One
Turnout by Age in Presidential Elections, 1964-2004

	18-20	21-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+	65+ / 21-24 Ratio
1964	-	51	65	73	76	76	66	1.3:1
1968	-	50	63	71	75	75	66	1.3:1
1972	48	51	60	66	71	71	64	1.3:1
1976	38	46	55	63	68	70	62	1.3:1
1980	36	43	55	64	68	71	65	1.5:1
1984	37	44	55	64	68	72	68	1.5:1
1988	33	38	48	61	67	69	69	1.8:1
1992	39	46	53	64	69	72	70	1.5:1
1996	31	33	43	55	62	68	67	2.0:1
2000	28	35	44	55	62	67	68	1.9:1
2004	41	42	47	57	64	70	69	1.7:1

Source: U.S. Census Bureaus surveys as reported by Martin Wattenburg (2007)

presidential elections has been declining over the last forty years, it has been dropping fastest among young adults (18-34). In 1964 there were 1.3 voters over 65 years of age for every one voter aged 21 to 24, but by 1996 the ratio had risen to 2:1. Others have found that young Americans are reading fewer newspapers (Wattenberg 2007, chap. 1) and are generally indifferent to any media coverage of public affairs (Bennett 1998; Wattenberg 2007, chaps. 2-3). In 2004, the Panetta Institute found that even volunteerism was declining among college students. They reported that only 53 percent of college students say they volunteered in their local communities compared to the two-thirds (68%) of college students who reported volunteering in their local community in a 2001 survey. The same 2004 Panetta survey also found that both college students' belief that political engagement will "bring about a lot of change in our society" and their desire to seek employment after graduation with public service organizations have declined since 2001.

Political scientists have responded to these trends in a variety of ways. We have studied government response and found that “nine states require some study of American government, the Constitution, or civics for students enrolled in public institutions of higher education” (Kedrowski 2003, 226). Some (Wattenberg 2007) have argued for compulsory voting laws. As mentioned earlier the APSA has at many times through its history called for renewed focus on civic education. Not surprisingly, the discipline has been divided in its response to these calls. Stephen Leonard, in response to the “call” of the 1996 task force, argued “. . . that the most significant obstacle to the revitalization of civic education in academic political science is that – sympathies notwithstanding – such efforts are likely to be considered by many, if not most, political scientists, as ‘pure futility and waste’” (1999, 749). Others, such as Thomas Ehrlich (1999), have responded by employing a service learning pedagogy in some of their classes.

The use of service learning to increase students’ limited knowledge about politics and general sense of civic responsibility has received a great deal of attention. While there have been voices on both sides, the criticisms have come from a wide variety of empirical studies including the self-evaluation of individual courses (Ehrlich 1999; Walker 2000) and panel studies of students taking service learning courses at multiple institutions of higher education (Hunter and Brisbin 2000). Despite the variation in the methods, many tend to agree with Mary Kirlin’s assertion that “little evidence supports expectations that service learning encourages civic behaviors such as voting, contacting elected officials, and being active in community affairs” (2002, 571). Kirlin suggests that one reason for the lack of evidence is that “many service and volunteer programs have failed to sufficiently address development of fundamental civic skills such as expressing opinions and working collectively to achieve common interests” (2002, 571). Her suggestion is based on the work of Sidney Verba, Lehman Schlozman, and

Henry Brady (1995) who argued that civic participation by adults requires three “participatory factors”: motivation, capacity and skills, and networks. Interestingly, Susan Hunter and Richard Brisbin¹ found in their study of service learning classes at three West Virginia institutes of higher education that: “A majority of students reported using many academic skills infrequently or not at all during their service experiences” (2000, 625).

The findings that service learning classes are neither developing the “civic skills” in students that are necessary for continued civic engagement throughout adult life nor requiring them to connect their academic skills to the service project might be connected. If students never realize that the skills they have learned in college, which presumably they have confidence will help them secure future employment, can also be used to engage their communities in a productive manner then they are less likely to feel confident that they have an ability to contribute something to the community and, therefore, are less likely to continue their civic activities. For similar reasons it also seems possible that there is a connection between the overall finding that service learning courses are not leading to continuing engagement and the finding that there is a lack of connection between service projects and academic skills. It seems more likely that the “networks” a student develops through the service experience will continue into adult life if they sense a strong connection between those networks and their professional careers. It also seems more likely that a student will be motivated to continue to be engaged as an adult if they make strong connections between their academic skills, which presumably they have some interest in using, and their active engagement in the community.

Obviously, it is difficult for students to fully appreciate how their academic skills can be applied to their communities during the course of one class, especially when the instructor has

¹ Hunter and Brisbin used a pretest/post-test panel study of students enrolled in service learning classes over two semesters (January 1999 through December 1999) at West Virginia University, Fairmont State College, and West Virginia University Institute of Technology to assess the impact of service learning on democratic and civic values.

important goals besides the promotion of civic engagement to accomplish in addition. Unfortunately, based on the subject material for the studies discussed above, most attempts by political scientists to encourage civic engagement seem to come at the individual course level. This paper suggests that it may be more productive to go beyond the single course paradigm through the development and assessment of entire minors dedicated to civic engagement. The rest of this paper will be a case study of the development of one such minor program: the civic engagement minor offered by the political science program at Lynchburg College, a private liberal arts college in south central Virginia with a total enrollment of around 2,400² students and a faculty to student ratio of 14:1.

The Civic Engagement Minor At Lynchburg College

The idea for a Civic Engagement minor at Lynchburg College began in January, 2005 with a trip to the Bonner Foundation in Princeton, New Jersey, for a conference on best practices for creating certificate or minor programs in civic engagement. Subsequently, in July, 2005, LC was awarded a FIPSE sub-grant by the Bonner Foundation to develop a civic engagement minor. In little less than one year, the minor was drafted by a small steering committee that included one faculty member each from political science, nursing and history, and the Associate Director for College & Community Partnerships at the Center for Community Development & Social Justice. During the course of the year the committee periodically sought out feedback from students, administrators, staff, and faculty members. It was decided that the political science program in the School of Humanities and Social Sciences will house the minor and be responsible for its evaluation, and that the steering committee for the minor will approve research proposals submitted for the capstone coursework. The political science program was chosen as the home

² Currently, 2053 undergraduate students.

for the minor for two primary reasons: first, the committee's belief that an understanding of politics is crucial for citizens to engage their communities in meaningful ways, and, second, that the program was already promoting a number of co-curricular activities, such as student issue forums and experiential learning trips to Washington D.C., that would support and enhance a civic engagement program.

In the hopes of encouraging civic engagement beyond the college years by raising students' consciousness of the connection between their academic skills and community needs the committee also decided to require students to engage the community in what some have labeled community-based research (for example, Strand et al. 2003). While community-based research uses the same methodologies as conventional research, it is distinguished by five major characteristics. First, these research projects are generated by needs articulated by community partners who are actively engaged throughout the research process. Second, the research is conducted with and for, not on, members of a community. Third, the goal of this research is not just to produce gains in knowledge, but also to achieve positive social change and social justice. Fourth, the research promotes active engagement by students in their community using multiple skills learned in academia. And, finally, these projects are designed to promote long-term relationships between the academic institution and community partners.

In April 2006 the faculty of Lynchburg College approved the Civic Engagement minor for inclusion in the 2006-07 undergraduate catalogue. In an informational flyer sent to students at the beginning of the fall 2006 semester the minor was described as follows:

The new minor in Civic Engagement will help students to recognize and act on connections between their academic talents and specific needs in their communities. The final goal for the senior year is for students to engage a community partner in what is known as a community based research project (see below for a brief description). Along the way, students will take courses from a variety of disciplines on campus that will help them strengthen their research

skills, build relationships with community partners, and challenge them to think more about important concepts such as community, justice, and citizenship. The minor has been designed to be open to students in all majors on campus.

Table Two lists the eighteen credit hours of classes required for completion of the major. The first section in the table lists the three community-based research courses that each student is required to complete. The first course in the sequence, *Exploring Social Entrepreneurship*, is thought yearly by the Associate Director for College & Community Partnerships at the Center for Community Development & Social Justice. The goal of the course is to introduce students to the personal and professional skills necessary for social entrepreneurship activities leading to social change. Topics include philanthropy, leadership, non-profit fundraising, and corporate social responsibility. Social entrepreneurs from the local community are invited to speak to the class several times during the semester. The second course³, *Applied Sociology* introduces students to a variety of research methods used in the study of social questions. The goal is to provide students with possible tools for their required capstone research projects during the senior year. Finally, *Introduction to Civic Participation and Community-Based Research (CBR)* introduces students to the principles of community-based research and involves them in the process of collaborating with community partners in the early phases of CBR projects. Through this experience students are encouraged to identify possible topics for their capstone research projects.

³ Nursing 310 can be substituted for this research requirement for two reasons: first, the course satisfies the goals of this section in that it teaches the basic research process by focusing on the methods used in nursing research. Second, the nursing program requires students to complete 69 credit hours for the major, which when added to the 51 hours of general education required of all students to graduate leaves nursing majors with very little room in their schedule for minors since students are only required to complete 124 credit hours overall to graduate. Based on the feedback received from the nursing program the committee chose to include this substitution possibility based on its goal to remain as open as possible to all disciplines on campus.

Table Two
Requirements for the Civic Engagement Minor At Lynchburg College

This minor requires:	Credit Hours
Section 1 GS 220 “Exploring Social Entrepreneurship and Leadership” SOCI 209 “Applied Sociology” <i>OR</i> NRSG 310 (for nursing majors only) GS 307 “Introduction to Civic Participation and Community-Based Research”	1 3 1
Section 2 Choose from one course from: POLI 111 “Quest for Justice I” PHIL 204 “Intro to Ethics”	3
Section 3 Choose one course from: POLI 220 “American Experience” POLI 258 “Local and State Government” POLI 290 “American Public Policy”	3
Section 4 GS 415 “Social Entrepreneurship Internship” or any internship approved by the minor steering committee	3
Section 5 GS 311 “Independent Study” or the student’s major capstone course with thesis project approved by the minor steering committee GS 430 “Putting Civic Engagement in Perspective”	3 1
Total Hours Required	18

Source: Lynchburg College Civic Engagement Minor Steering Committee

The second and third sections of Table Two list the courses that are designed to introduce students to the political dimensions of civic engagement. Both the Quest for Justice class offered by the political science program or the Introduction to Ethics course thought by the philosophy program are designed to challenge students with some of the perennial questions underlying civic engagement, such as “What is justice?”, “What are the duties and responsibilities of citizens?”, “What is the role of government?”, and “What is ethical behavior when engaging the community?” Students are also required to take one of three American government offerings

from the political science program designed to introduce the basic processes, especially the policy-making process, of the governmental systems they will be engaging.

The fourth section is the requirement that all students complete a social entrepreneurship internship or the equivalent in their major. More than just an academic internship this is a requirement that the student engage a non-profit or governmental partner in the community. Through this activity students will be exposed to the needs of their community in a professional setting that gives them an opportunity to create networks that may be useful in assisting or promoting future engagement.

Finally, every student is required to pursue and complete a community-based research project before they graduate. Students will experience collaborative, equitable partnerships with faculty and community members as they work together on research studies identified as needed by our local community members. While students complete their community-based research projects during their senior year they will also be required to attend the *Putting Civic Engagement into Perspective* course, which provides an opportunity for students from different majors to come together and discuss their community-based research from a variety of perspectives. They will reflect on the coursework they have completed for the minor and how it has transformed their perspective in terms of ongoing civic participation in their lives as democratic citizens.

Notable Features of the Civic Engagement Minor

The Civic Engagement minor at Lynchburg College is distinguished by five notable features: First, the minor attempts to encourage civic engagement habits that will last beyond a student's time in college by seeking to develop the three "participatory factors" identified in the

political science literature. Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995) argued that adult civic engagement requires citizens have: the desire to engage their community, the ability to contribute something to their community, and some connection to a network of like minded engagers who encourage others to engage the community as well. The steering committee believes that the best way to develop these “participatory factors” is to merge a student’s academic skills with actual community needs in the belief that a citizen who sees these connections will be more likely to be engagers throughout their adult, productive, lives. The committee also starts with the premise that students who develop habits of engagement are more likely to be adult engagers and so moved beyond the single course paradigm and used the minor structure in Table Two.

Second, the minor is also based in principles from the community-based research literature. These scholars criticize contemporary higher education’s “inequitable and unresponsive relationship with the community” (Strand et al. 2003, 1). To correct these problems they suggest the community-based model of research. As discussed above, this research begins with a relationship, an engagement, between student and community partner. In the Lynchburg College model, these relationships are facilitated through the Center for Community Development & Social Justice. Through this relationship, they come to an agreement on a research project that applies the student’s skills to an identified community need. While only in the infant stages⁴, there are a few examples of what this might look like at the undergraduate level. One project idea by a political science major involves applying her social science research skills in a demographic study of the usage of a local food pantry and day shelter. Another possible idea is to find community partners in need of best-practices research and have students conduct surveys of and evaluate the practices used by government practitioners or other

⁴ While there seems to be genuine student and faculty interest in the program, there are only four students officially enrolled in the minor as of January 30, 2007.

actors around the country or even globe. It has been interesting to observe, in discussions with other faculty and staff members not on the committee, the plethora of ideas that can be generated around a variety of majors. For example, even colleagues in theater were excited by possibilities of having students use their theatrical skills to put on performances that called attention to some problem in their community.

The hope to develop this kind of campus wide involvement is the third notable feature of the minor. While the political science department is the programmatic home to the minor for the reasons discussed above, it was always a consideration of the steering committee to make the minor as accessible as possible to all disciplines on campus. As discussed in footnote three, this led the committee to offer Nursing Research Methods as a possible substitute for the required Applied Sociology course in the hopes of attracting more nursing students. The consideration also led the committee to shape the catalogue structure in such a way, see section five of Table Two, that students could use their senior thesis project, which many majors require, as their capstone senior project required by the minor. However, the committee also realized that some students may be seeking further skills, beyond their major, that can be applied to their community situations. This led to the requirement that every student in the minor, except nurses, complete the Applied Sociology course which provides a broad survey of methods and data collection techniques used in the study of sociological problems. The hope is that this will help students further develop Verba's second "participatory factor", the capacity, as Kirlin described it, "to contribute something to the effort" (572).

Fourth, the case highlights the importance of support from outside of academia in creating a successful program. The committee at Lynchburg College was certainly aided by the award of the Bonner sub-grant, but even more important was the intellectual support provided

through retreats designed to share ideas and problems with other schools in the program. Perhaps even more important was the contribution of the College's own Center for Community Development & Social Justice. In 1999, the Department of Housing and Urban Development and the Jesse Ball duPont Fund awarded the CCDSJ grants to establish the Community Outreach Partnership Center (COPC), whose objectives have been carried out through research, consultation, outreach action projects, workshops, lectures, coursework, and a network of partnerships. Neighborhood revitalization and development projects are community driven to assure their usefulness in, and empowerment of, neighborhoods and community based organizations. This community-centered approach is consistent with the principles of community-based research and the fruits of this Center activities over the last eight years will hopefully provide students with the community contacts they need to begin their research projects and to build the networks that will remind them of the important of civic engagement to their lives and the community's well being.

Finally, the committee was practical in its creation of this new academic program. First, they understood that while their primary goal was to go beyond the single class paradigm, there was not the necessary support or resources for a full civic engagement program. Second, the committee tried to build as much flexibility as possible into the overall requirements for the minor so as to attract students from the entire campus. Third, the committee did not attempt to create many new courses, but rather attempted to utilize courses that were already being taught by faculty at Lynchburg College. Only the one credit GS 307, *Introduction to Civic Participation and Community-Based Research (CBR)*, and GS 430, *Putting Civic Engagement into Perspective*, were created by the committee and adopted by the faculty.

Conclusions

The Civic Engagement minor at Lynchburg College seeks to move beyond the one service learning course paradigm by creating a coherent, cohesive minor program that makes use of the many different resources the campus has accumulated over the years. The ultimate goal for this minor program is to prod and inspire, but also to equip students with the desires, skills, and networks that they will require if they want to engage their communities in meaningful and productive ways in the future. At its core this program believes that it is beneficial for the community at large to have more adults who use their professional skills to engage the community. It could be argued that these are the citizens who can effect the most change because they are the most productive members of society. If most of the engagement occurs among the very young or elderly, then it seems that the community is missing the contributions of the most energetic and experienced slice of their population. However, it needs to be acknowledged and discussed that many political scientists do not favor greater engagement by the population as a whole because they either believe many citizens lack the capacity and attention needed and/or that it may be the case that the most beneficial contributions to society come through private actions rather than civic engagements.

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