

COMMUNITY
ENGAGEMENT
BEST PRACTICES
ACROSS THE
DISCIPLINES



Applying Course Content to Community Needs

Edited by **HEATHER K. EVANS**

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Chapter Seven

Beyond Geographic Space

Online Learning and Community Engagement Initiatives

Ricardo Montelongo and Paul William Eaton

For the past several decades, there have been increasing calls for student engagement beyond physical campus spaces (ACPA & NASPA, 2004; Weerts & Sandmann, 2010). Community service, service learning, civic engagement, alternative spring break, and service-abroad all function as forms of Academic Community Engagement. Citing the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, Weerts and Sandmann (2010) define community engagement as “collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity” (p. 632).

Many of the aforementioned models of Academic Community Engagement are predicated on physicality of place and presence—meaning, they often occur in a specific geographic location with people who are physically present. Does Academic Community Engagement require such physical embeddedness and corporeality?

As faculty who teach courses in a fully online professional preparation program, we seek to unpack these questions from theoretical and experiential perspectives. We value the importance of Academic Community Engagement for our geographically dispersed students. Harnessing the power of digital technologies—online learning platforms, social media, and virtual meeting tools—affords new opportunities for envisioning Academic Community Engagement beyond geographic boundaries.

In the digital age, community can be redefined as globalized, digitized networks of human-technological collaborations engaged in learning impacting both geographically bounded and unbounded space. This chapter begins examining mythologies about online learning and exploring the various functional definitions of community and Academic Community Engagement within our professional lexicon of higher education—including campus, professional, and digital community.

These theoretical and conceptual foundations are followed by an exploration of one course in our master's-level preparation program—HIED 5367: Diverse Student Populations—a course we both have taught incorporating Academic Community Engagement projects. We describe our unique approaches to engaging online students in these projects. We conclude by exploring the possibilities and limitations of such engagement for faculty considering similar initiatives in their online learning environments.

ONLINE PROGRAMS IN HIGHER-EDUCATION ADMINISTRATION

As higher education entered the new century, the introduction of distance learning and technology was described as dramatically altering the face of learning and instruction (Rahm & Reed, 1997). Higher-education institutions have increased the use of online learning spaces, now offering students fully online undergraduate and graduate degree programs, first-year experience courses, and even development education courses for those in need of additional academic skill building.

In higher-education student affairs, awareness of the innovative use of technology in student learning dates back to the mid-1970s, when the field's top professional organizations (ACPA and NASPA) provided awareness to members on the rising interest of online learning (Valliere, 2014). A current review of graduate preparation directories from the two national student affairs professional associations found that approximately thirty-two higher-education institutions offer a completely online master's graduate degree program in higher-education administration (Montelongo, Eaton, Cano, & Cardiel, 2016). In addition, there are a number of programs that offer courses in hybrid formats and others who are considering offering online courses in the future.

The importance of effective online course delivery is crucial for student success and program effectiveness in the field of higher-education administration. How these programs produce students and researchers who are competent in their field has been an area of questioning since the start of online education. Since its early inception as a method of instruction in American

higher education, online learning has and continues to be scrutinized in its ability to match the apparent benefits of face-to-face instruction.

DEFINITIONS OF COMMUNITY

Academic Community Engagement involves entangling issues studied, researched, or examined within confines of traditional academic environments, such as classrooms and research labs, with those of larger communities. Higher education has long engaged in such practices, often termed service learning or civic engagement (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996; Gismondi, 2015; Jacoby, 2014; Peters, 2010; Weerts & Sandmann, 2010).

How one defines community is critical to understanding academic-community initiatives as well as their potential outcomes. In our work preparing college student educators and higher-education administrators, we seek to teach students about geographic communities in proximity to college campuses (Wills, 2016), campus communities (Kinzie & Arcelus, 2016), and professional communities of practice (Evans & Ranero-Ramirez, 2016). Increasingly we also incorporate and examine issues of digital community. Digital technologies, from social media platforms to virtual realities, are shifting our understanding of community in ways that become important to discussions of Academic Community Engagement.

Campus and Professional Community

College student educators are intricately entwined with campus community on a daily basis. Whether one is teaching, coordinating out-of-class educational initiatives, advising student organizations, or serving on campus committees, the daily work of college student educators aims to analyze, dissect, and solve problems within the campus community. Thus, we view the campus community as critical sites for Academic Community Engagement.

Our role as faculty in a professional preparation program also entails emphasizing and examining means by which one becomes involved in professional community. Often this occurs through professional associations, networking, and leadership (Evans & Ranero-Ramirez, 2016).

However, professional communities of practice (Blimling, 2001) extend beyond professional associations. Giving back to one's profession often means participating in knowledge exchange; serving as an external consultant, advisor, or mentor; and relying on the expertise of professional networks whose skills, competencies, and experiences potentially enhance your own work.

Ensuring our students understand the role of professional communities is an important part of our own pedagogical approach to academic-community partnerships. Increasingly, we see the importance of such knowledge, skill,

and information exchange occurring not only at professional conferences but also through mediated digital technological environments.

Digital Community

Digital technologies have dramatically altered the ways people envision, practice, and perform community. The advent of digital social media platforms, web-based conferencing, virtual realities, digital learning spaces, and other technologically mediated spaces has opened community beyond the confines of immediate geographic proximity. These shifts are important to consider, particularly in relation to how people engage in dialogues, information sharing, analysis, and problem solving across vast geographic spaces.

Presently our university utilizes Blackboard as a learning platform for online courses. The structure of Blackboard, including various tools and its mobility between web-based and mobile-based technologies, functions to structure the community-building practices within our courses. Understanding the possibilities and limitations of community building within digital learning spaces is one of the unique challenges of moving courses from traditional face-to-face delivery to either hybrid or fully online (Major, 2015).

ONLINE LEARNING AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

We have provided these definitions of community—campus, professional, and digital—in order to best unpack our structuring of Academic Community Engagement processes in our academic program. Rather than foreclosing opportunities for Academic Community Engagement, we argue that online learning spaces open new possibilities for engaging students in important projects related to academic content and community needs. We will harness the definitions of community provided above—campus, professional, and digital—to explore how we have incorporated Academic Community Engagement within one of our program’s foundational courses, Diverse College Students.

Program Background

Sam Houston State University is one of approximately thirty-two institutions who offer a completely online master’s graduate degree program in higher-education administration (Montelongo et al., 2016). By offering instruction in a fully online environment, the program is appealing for those individuals who already work in higher-education student services functional areas who need the degree for further career advancement.

Since 2010, the program has instructed sixteen cohorts of students in “career-related leadership (to be used in) student services, academic affairs and student success, enrollment management, (and) governance” within higher-education organizations (Sam Houston State University, n.d.). More than 120 graduates have received online learning from the program since its establishment, and a network of alumni is currently being developed to further assist future cohorts in navigating online learning and professional career development.

Currently, the program has four full-time faculty members who instruct in a wide range of course topics addressing higher-education administration. Research interests covered by the faculty include assessment, administrative issues in higher education, multicultural leadership and competence, and student identity expressed in digital environments.

Course Background – Diverse Student Populations

In order to respond to the increased presence of diverse student populations that are entering college campuses, master’s programs in student affairs offer and typically require diversity courses as part of their overall programs of study. In 2003, 74 percent of student affairs programs that responded to a survey on graduate diversity courses said that they had such a course in their master’s programs and that it was a requirement for program completion (Flowers, 2003).

Although the percentage could be seen as encouraging, no mention was made of whether the responding institutions were exploring or offering on-line instruction of such courses. As of this writing, there has not been a follow-up to this investigation or as to whether any of the listed completely online programs offer a required diversity course for their programs (Montelongo et al., 2016).

The higher-education administration program at Sam Houston State University offers such a course as part of their degree. The course is required, typically offered each semester during the academic year. Since spring 2014, the course has been under the auspices of Educational Leadership—Higher Education Administration, after moving from Counseling. By making this move, focus was given to higher-education applications of course concepts and use of literature from the field of higher-education student affairs.

The course also aligns to the professional competency of “Social Justice and Inclusion” expressed by the two major professional organizations in higher-education student affairs (ACPA & NASPA, 2015). The current course description states: “Graduate students will explore current demographic trends in higher education student populations. Additional study into student development theory is made to further refine higher education admin-

istrators' understanding of how a variety of students grow and develop in higher education" (SHSU Graduate Catalog, 2016–2017).

Diverse Student Populations emphasizes the core competency of "Social Justice and Inclusion." The competency aims to "create knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to create learning environments that foster equitable participation of all groups while seeking to address and acknowledge issues of oppression, privilege, and power" (ACPA & NASPA, 2015). The competency notes that advanced-level outcomes include social justice-oriented applications where there is a connection between leadership and advocacy (ACPA & NASPA, 2015). Using this definition of advanced-level outcomes, ideas were developed on how to connect an online course on diversity to real-world, real-time campus issues faced by current higher-education leaders who also advocate for social justice and inclusion on college campuses.

In spring 2015, the Diverse Student Populations course utilized a service component in the instruction of key concepts for the first time. The concepts were placed into various class activities where students would be able to apply them in an actual campus setting provided by current professionals in the field. The inclusion of these service activities allows the course to receive an Academic Community Engagement (ACE) designation from Sam Houston State University, which it continues to hold.

Structuring of Online Academic Community Engagement: Instructor 1

For one instructor, the course provided an opportunity to make use of a higher-education professional network that served as a resource to help online students receive a virtual connection to other campuses dealing with real-time issues involving diversity concerns. This network provided perspectives and context that supplemented knowledge expressed in course readings and textbooks. Professionals from SHSU and out of state working in a variety of campus offices from different institutional types contributed the diversity issues used in class.

The instructor offered these professionals the promise of having students serve as "diversity consultants" for any issue that they may be facing that involved a diversity matter. The students would work individually on their approaches and work together with classmates on a group strategy for approaching the issue. By role-playing as "diversity consultants," the class could provide these professionals a fresh perspective on their issues by offering a class take on what was occurring and provided advice based on personal experiences and theoretical knowledge gained from the course.

The contributing professionals would then be provided an executive summary of discussions that transpired in the course utilizing online discussion boards. Once the summaries were delivered, the professional and instructor

then met on video teleconferencing to discuss their initial thoughts on what the student consultants offered in their perspectives, approaches, and strategies for dealing with the issue.

Once the professional and instructor met, the contributing professional would then provide feedback to the student consultants through a video presentation, where names of responses that had an impact on the contributor were featured in the video. These “shout outs” were a way to further connect students to the case study. Featured comments usually were stated to be mentioned in future staff meetings, monthly reports, or part of an overall campus strategy. Thus, students felt that they contributed to the overall resolution to a campus’s dilemma.

The week following completion of the project, students individually provided a paper describing how they approached the task, a summary of their class contributions to the activity, and how the course materials assisted with ideas and strategies to the activity. The paper also provided thoughts on how the activity assisted multicultural competence. By writing about their experiences while it was still fresh in their minds, students actively sorted out feelings and thoughts about their own personal development in multicultural competence. In addition to the reflective paper, students were also asked to provide further reflection on the case study activity using an online journal provided to the class.

To help with their reflection, the instructor offered a writing prompt asking students to state the biggest obstacle that impacted their contribution to the activity and reasons for that obstacle. The prompt made students consider what issues make discussions on multiculturalism difficult, whether logistical (e.g., not knowing enough about an institution) or more personal (e.g., lack of understanding in lived experiences of people of color).

The journals were private and only shared with the instructor, thus allowing students to genuinely, for the most part, share concerns and difficulties in becoming a higher-education administrator asked to perform work on a real-life, real-time diversity issue. The journal reflections were collected by the instructor and used for a one-to-one video meeting with individual students. The meeting further assisted students in their personal journeys in becoming higher-education administrators striving to gain multicultural competence.

The structure of the overall activity reflects Howard-Hamilton and Hinton’s Behavioral Model of Multicultural Competence in understanding approaches and student outcomes (Torres, Howard-Hamilton, & Cooper, 2011). The researchers created this model after teaching master’s-level graduate students in a student affairs program at three different institutions. The model follows a cycle where anticipation and anxiety about approaching diversity topics grows into lifelong learning and appreciation of continued exposure on diversity topics. The behavioral model is used as a framework to

understand the development and actions of students enrolled in this online diversity course.

Project Examples

During the spring 2016 semester, two projects were developed for students. The first involved a request from an institution's professional staff council to have the class develop a "coffee talk" conversation on diversity. The staff council had a goal to take the issues brought forth from the discussion to be reported to the institution's president and provost.

Students in the course worked together to first discuss the audience. Being that several of the students were professional staff members themselves, they addressed what presentation format would be effective and how information would be delivered, with focus on audience engagement. Engagement was seen as a strategy for staff members to comfortably talk about diversity matters that impact them in their work environment.

Students proceeded to pull course material such as demographic information, social constructions of identity, and behavioral responses to diversity discussions to fully construct a presentation that would be used by the course instructor, who served as advisor in development of the talk and facilitator of the information for the final presentation.

The second project involved issues of diversity, inclusion, and access at a selective religiously affiliated institution. The institution was working on how to increase the socioeconomic diversity of the student body in an area known for its expensive living conditions. Students served as consultants to the director of diversity and inclusion at this institution with his questions on an institution maintaining its religious heritage of serving underserved communities and maintaining its financial/fiduciary responsibility.

Students in this project were offered institutional variety and intersectionality of identities (e.g., socioeconomic status, religion and faith, geographic) that are not just focused on race and ethnicity. They were also provided an opportunity to engage with a director of diversity and inclusion at the religiously affiliated institution, who provided professional advice on how to collaborate with other institution functional areas to address complex issues such as the one on which the class provided consultation.

Structuring of Online Academic Community Engagement: Instructor 2

In this course, the instructor refers to the Academic Community Engagement project as the Diversity Action Project (DAP). One guiding philosophy of the instructor's approach to these projects is helping emerging college student educators and practitioners understand the importance of addressing diversity and multicultural issues on campus and highlighting multiple approaches to

“action” that might unfold toward enhancing multiculturalism, diversity, or social inclusion.

In the weeks preceding each semester where the instructor teaches *Diverse College Students*, various digital technological networks, including social media spaces, listservs, blogs, and websites, are utilized to solicit potential institutional sites for community engagement projects. Broadly, the instructor requests interested professionals submit ideas about challenges or issues facing their campus related to the broad topics of diversity, multiculturalism, or diverse college students (see Figure 7.1).

Selected campuses are asked to provide an institutional liaison that can meet with the students virtually and synchronously, assisting in gathering of information, artifacts, historical knowledge, and perspectives on the particular issue being addressed. Campus liaisons often volunteer their campus, office, or programs with the desire and hope of receiving outside perspectives on particular issues submitted.

Students in the course are divided into teams of two to three students and are instructed that they will be serving as diversity and multicultural consultants. Collectively, the team needs to gather information on the stated issue by interviewing the campus liaison utilizing virtual tools (Google+, Zoom, or Skype), gathering artifacts from campus, potentially interviewing other key campus constituents (administrators, students, alumni), and seeking out professional literature in the field to inform potential solutions.



Paul Eaton

August 4, 2015 · Baton Rouge, LA

Higher Ed/Student Affairs Friends - This Fall I will be teaching a course on *Diverse College Students*. One of our assignments will be to place students in teams as part of a Diversity Action Project. I am seeking Project assignments. If you have a diversity-multicultural issue facing your office/unit/campus and would like some aspiring professionals to provide potential courses of action to deal with this issue, please e-mail me at pweaton@gmail.com

Your responsibility will be to agree to meet with the students synchronously at least one time to provide an overview of the problem/issue.

You will receive a formal written report from our students at the end of the term.

THANK YOU!

Figure 7.1. Call for Projects Posted in the Group “Student Affairs Professionals” on Facebook

As students work through their different campus issues, the use of professional literature, research, and applied practice pieces is encouraged. One objective of this structured approach to the Diversity Action Project is providing students with an understanding of applying theory to practice (Quaye & Harper, 2015; Mulhere, 2014; Strayhorn, 2016). Thus, students are instructed that integration of theoretical perspectives, outside research, and additional resources into potential solutions is critical to the success of the overall project.

Each group is instructed to prepare a report for the institution outlining key components of the project. These include: overview of the stated issue; situating the issue within historical, environmental, institutional, and ecological contexts; applying theoretical tenets utilized toward informing potential solutions to the issue; providing multiple action-possibilities to the issue, including potential costs and human and economic resources needed to enact potential solutions-actions; and possibilities and limitations of each potential action.

Inherent to the design of the Diversity Action Project in this course is the importance of providing multiple solutions grounded in theory and research. Preparing college student educators who address issues of multiculturalism and diversity from ethical perspectives necessarily entails providing space so students understand multiple possibilities for enhancing multicultural awareness, decreasing oppression, or working toward more socially just and inclusive campuses.

The aim is that students, and the campuses participating, recognize that there are multiple courses of action that address complex multicultural issues and that many of these potential actions come with possibilities and limitations.

Each group collectively presents their project to other members of the course. This activity, conducted through synchronous virtual video conferencing, gives students the experience of articulating and explaining their issue, potential solutions-actions, and additional insights or lessons learned to members of our course. Additionally, members of the learning community practice providing critical feedforward insight to their peers, which assists in creating their final institutional reports.

Students are asked to prepare a professional working report that they submit to their campus liaison. These reports not only fulfill the objectives of the project, but also importantly provide students with the experiences of applying their learning to the service of another institution. Ideally, the Diversity Action Project helps students understand the importance of contributing their knowledge, insights, and expertise to professionals outside their physical geographic community.

Project Examples

During fall 2015 semester, students completed two projects. One project involved the presented issue of male undergraduate disengagement in professional leadership training, conferences, and other initiatives. Higher education is presently facing what some are calling a crisis of male underperformance and disengagement (Harper & Harris, 2010; Harris, 2010; Laker & Davis, 2011). This project team presented several solutions and potential actions aimed at increasing male undergraduate engagement in leadership initiatives.

A second project involved issues related to undocumented college students. The presenting issue from this campus involved a need for more information and insight into setting appropriate campus policy and procedure to assist undocumented students, particularly in areas of housing, health, financial support, and legal support. This project team presented several solutions and potential actions aimed at educating campus personnel regarding federal immigration policies, such as Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), as well as issues related to financial aid, scholarships, and grants.

POSSIBILITIES, LIMITATIONS, AND PROVOCATIONS

Online environments do not preclude you from engaging in Academic Community Engagement. At the beginning of this chapter, a definition of community was provided that stated that community engagement could also occur in an unbounded space, freed from the physical limitations associated with traditional learning environments. While online educational environments typically have a mixed to neutral reaction on possible student learning outcomes (Rahm & Reed, 1997), instructors of online courses can make valuable use of the limitless boundaries that characterize such learning environments.

The course highlighted for this chapter provides an example of how engagement can be strengthened and enhanced, despite perceptions of online learning. In fact, as students in the course soon found out, they were able to offer service through their online learning technology and still felt that they contributed and made an impact to another institution. Further, students understand the importance of communities of practice in higher education and student affairs.

For an online course focused on diversity skill building and competence, this is especially important. Being able to consider oneself “multiculturally competent” means actively engaging in uncovering biases, asking questions for knowledge building, and putting to work ideas and thoughts on how to engage with diversity issues (Cuyjet, Howard-Hamilton, & Cooper, 2012).

Students were able to effectively participate in Academic Community Engagement from their unbounded locations, assisting actual higher-education institutions that were hundreds or thousands of miles away. The online learning environment offered students possibilities to work collaboratively with their classmates on virtual discussion boards, synchronous videoconferencing platforms, and online teaching platforms that made use of videos, imagery, and written text.

Despite being offered in an online environment, students responded to the activities positively and mentioned in their post-activity journals and evaluations that using such tools and resources helped them overcome the obstacles typically associated in trying to resolve a diversity dilemma. Concerns like lack of knowledge, what direction to take, and who to ask for help were reduced in this environment. Online courses offered immediate collaborations via discussion boards. All voices could be heard through these boards, and sharing of information was made easier due to extensive use of technology already apparent in an online course.

Instructors need to come into the online education environment with a sense that such courses can benefit students by providing innovative and interactive learning. Gone are the days when online courses were impersonal and lacked student engagement. Online learning offers a vast array of teaching strategies that can break down the barriers of engagement contained only in a limited space.

With online courses, opportunities for Academic Community Engagement may be found locally, regionally, nationally, and internationally. The only challenge is how much the instructor is willing to tailor courses to offer such opportunities. In online environments, the possibilities are available and waiting to be used for the benefit of student learning.

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