

ABSTRACT

This current study measured the impact of a one-time semester-long course-based civic engagement activity on student learning and participant impact, particularly participants' willingness to engage in community dialogue and promote awareness of social justice issues within their communities. The service-learning project involved on-campus and online students from three criminal justice courses and a hybrid format event titled "*Finding Common Ground: Social Justice Issues Surrounding Mental Health & Mental Illness & Disorders*" at a Midwestern teaching institution. The two-hour event included roundtable discussions to promote open dialogue about mental health and mental health illness and disorders. Learning and self-impact were measured via self-constructed questions and the Civic Engagement Short Scale Plus (CES²⁺). Results indicated increased endorsement for community engagement and positive qualitative feedback on self-empowerment. The findings provide insights into the potential benefits of service-learning activities, such as mental health community roundtables, for fostering community dialogue, personal growth, and social justice activism. The insights gained from the current study can inform future planning and enhancement of civic engagement initiatives while also contributing to developing community-based education and outreach strategies.

Unveiling the Transformative Power of Service-Learning: Student-Led Mental Health Roundtable Discussions as Catalysts for Ongoing Civic Engagement

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Mental health is a critical social and public health issue that affects individuals across various societal strata, which has become a popular and important topic for community discussion (Swaner, 2007). There are several ways to promote open dialogue and create safe spaces for communities to come together and engage in conversations about mental health. One is through civic engagement activities. Civic engagement offers a platform for individuals to engage in critical discussion with their communities, nurturing a consensus of responsibility through dialogue and education (Gallant et al., 2010). Such activities often communicate essential social and community issues, raise awareness, and facilitate social transformations (Eyler, 2002; Terry & Lockwood, 2020). One particular format of the current civic engagement activity was to utilize community roundtable discussions. Roundtable discussions encourage open communication and mutual learning experiences (Bingle & Steinberg, 2010). They can involve people with diverse backgrounds, encourage everyone to participate and share their views and gather feedback from participants about issues that can be improved within each community. The current study

measured personal endorsement for ongoing community engagement after participating in a one-time civic engagement event—this community dialogue was a student-led mental health roundtable discussion, at a Midwestern teaching institution.

Literature

Intersectionality of experiential-learning, service-learning, and civic engagement

Experiential-learning. Experiential-learning is a broad set of pedagogical practices that captures a range of processes whereby students learn from connecting experience to classroom learning (Kolb, 1984). These processes are different than community volunteerism as reflection is key (Burke & Bush, 2013). It is important to understand the intersectionality of experiential-learning, service-learning, and civic engagement and how these educational strategies work together to facilitate a learning environment that is holistic, participatory, and world ready. The current study utilized Dewey's educational philosophy, which states learning should be rooted in practical, real-life experiences and interactive learning rather than rigid and disconnected from the real-world activities that are overly reliant on mechanical memorization (Jorgensen, 2017). Dewey's educational framework endorses experiential-learning, where learners gain knowledge, skills, and comprehension through active participation (Gleason et al., 2011). An essential element of experiential-learning is reflection, which is instrumental in cultivating career awareness, applying academic theories to hands-on experiences, and dismantling stereotypes (Blair et al., 2014). Recent research on experiential-learning has examined its implementation in diverse settings, from higher education to corporate training (Kolb & Kolb, 2017; Terry & Lockwood, 2020). Studies have demonstrated that experiential-learning can enhance engagement, amplify comprehension of complex concepts, and cultivate hands-on working experiences (Whitley et al., 2017). By connecting experience and reflection into learning, experiential-learning enables students to grasp abstract concepts, hone critical thinking skills, and apply their acquired knowledge in real-world scenarios (Chiang et al., 2021).

Service-learning. While experiential-learning is an umbrella pedagogical term, service-learning serves as one example of this unique form of learning. Service-learning is a type of experiential-learning that connects community service to education and reflection to enhance the learning process, cultivating social responsibilities and community collaborations (McClam et al., 2008). Community service-learning acts as a vehicle for universities to contribute to broader social issues (Butin, 2010; Terry & Lockwood, 2020). This approach encourages students to develop a sense of social accountability by actively contributing to activities that enhance their communities' overall quality of living. It promotes student learning and skill development through hands-on participation in service experiences addressing community needs (Salam et al., 2019). Service-learning activities are designed to benefit both the community and the participating students.

Civic Engagement. Civic engagement activities can function as a form of service-learning when integrated into a more extensive curriculum with reflection and analysis. Within the service-learning framework, civic engagement often encompasses activities that bolster community living standards through political and non-political means (Cress

& Stokamer, 2020). Such activities may involve volunteering in the community, attending public meetings, participating in local government affairs or coordinating community events to promote civic engagement and shared governance. Overall, experiential-learning, service-learning, and civic engagement are interconnected concepts crucial to providing comprehensive educational experiences in higher education. These elements allow students to apply academic theories to real-world challenges, interact with communities addressing diverse needs, and acquire critical skills contributing to their future success (Jonassen, 2000).

Personal Development in Civic Engagement

Numerous quantitative studies have evaluated the impact of service-learning on students through different lenses. Some scholars have quantitatively assessed academic learning (Eyler, 2000), personal and interpersonal development (Eyler et al., 2003), and civic engagement (Eyler et al., 2003). Other scholars have qualitatively examined the influence of service-learning on stereotypical attitudes (Hirschinger-Blank & Markowitz, 2006) as well as multicultural competencies (Root et al., 2001). Though past studies have delved into the impact of service-learning on students' personal growth, there is a need for additional research to assess the effects on students *and* project participants.

Civic engagement activities, like community roundtable discussions, offer distinct opportunities for individuals to engage with issues pertinent to their community. Studies indicate that civic activities focusing on mental health awareness enhance participants' understanding of mental health issues and mental health literacy and the diverse perspectives of others surrounding these issues (Boyd & Brackmann, 2012). Engaging in civic activities, such as community roundtables, can cultivate critical thinking skills by engaging in discussions, challenging assumptions, and analyzing differing perspectives (Nokes et al., 2005).

Raising Awareness through Civic Engagement

Beyond the personal benefits delineated earlier, civic engagement activities revolving around mental health issues can educate the public, reduce stigma, and nurture a supportive and understanding environment. Community-oriented forums can help dismantle stereotypes and misconceptions, leading to a better-informed and compassionate society (Corrigan et al., 2012; Daniele et al., 2022). Mental health issues often suffer from stigmatization, resulting in social isolation and discouraging individuals from seeking help (Martin, 2010). Through open dialogue, communities can work towards demystifying mental health, providing a supportive environment for individuals to seek support without fear of judgment or rejection. Such participation can increase community-based support networks and resources, nurture a sense of acceptance and understanding among community members, and provide a platform for individuals to share their experiences and learn about the resources available to them (Luo et al., 2020). Mental health dialogues can also lay the groundwork for local policy changes and interventions (Rones et al., 2000). Civic involvement regarding mental health issues can bridge the gap between policymakers and their communities, leading to better informed, efficient, and supported mental health policies (Hanney et al., 2003).

In the current project entitled *Finding Common Ground: Social Justice Issues Surrounding Mental Health & Mental Illness & Disorders*, three courses (one on-campus course and two online courses) researched mental health challenges and disorders with slightly different sub-focal areas (e.g., grassroots programs and suicide rates within the profession). The researchers aimed to provide data to inform future civic engagement activities and community-based educational efforts. The current study sought to extend the understanding of service-learning impacts experienced by students and participants. As such, the current study utilized the following research questions:

- Upon participating in the *Finding Common Ground* event, participants will report an increase in endorsement and internalization of making a difference in communities using the CES²⁺.
- Upon participating in the *Finding Common Ground* event, student leaders will report an increase in endorsement and internalization of making a difference in communities using the CES²⁺.
- Upon participating in the *Finding Common Ground* event, participants will report an increase in knowledge about mental health through open-ended questions on the post-test survey.
- Upon participating in the *Finding Common Ground* event, participants will report an increase in personal commitment to continue community dialogue through open-ended questions on the post-test survey.

Methods

Participants

Students from three courses at a Midwestern university were involved in different phases of the service-learning project as part of their course requirements. The three courses included: 1) an on-campus criminal justice class entitled Social Justice: Policy and Action; an online criminal justice course with the same social justice title; and 3) an online criminal justice course entitled Mental Health and the Criminal Justice System. All students completed a series of assignments including: 1) a list of ten peer-reviewed empirical sources; 2) an annotated bibliography of the ten sources; and 3) a brief in-class presentation (for the on-campus course) or discussion board (for online students). Lastly, on-campus students (n=7) (this piece was optional for online students) then led roundtable discussions on their topics in a hybrid format, offering in-person and virtual attendance options. The event was held in hybrid format for a total of two hours during the evening hours of the Fall 2022 semester.

In total, the seven on-campus students along with three online students attended and participated in the roundtable event. In addition to the roundtable student leaders (n=10), there were 43 additional attendees either in-person (n=26) or virtually (n=17). A pre- and post-test were employed, and six surveys were eliminated from the data as the participant completed only the pre or post-test, but not both. While there was a total of 53 individuals in attendance, there were a total of 19 pre- and post-test surveys completed (student leaders: n=6; attendees: n=13). Ages ranged from 18 to 54 with a mean age of 25.5. Race/ethnicity was consistent with the university's mostly Caucasian population. Specifically, 14 identified as Caucasian, one identified as multiracial, one as

Asian, one as African American, and two preferred not to respond to this question. Fourteen participants identified as students, two as staff members, and three identified their role as “Other” but did not specify. Thirteen identified as women, four as men, and two declined to answer the gender identity question. Lastly, ten of the 19 participants identified themselves as living with mental illness while 15 individuals knew of someone close to them with lived experience with mental illness.

Materials and Procedures

The current study aimed to measure the impact of a one-time civic engagement activity, for both the student learning impact as well as participant impact, through self-constructed questions as well as use of the Civic Engagement Short Scale Plus (CES²⁺) (Purdue, 2022). The CES²⁺ was created to assess an individual’s endorsement and internalization of making a difference in communities. The tool is quantitative in nature and uses a 6-point Likert Scale (1=not at all; 6=very high degree) based on Bloom’s Affective Domain. The CES²⁺ is comprised of 14 questions broken down into the sub-themes of: 1) Community Diversity & Culture; 2) Knowledge Analysis; 3) Civic Identity & Commitment; 4) Civic Communication; 5) Civic Action & Reflection; and 6) Civic Contexts/Structures. While sub-themes are provided, Purdue (2022) has yet to establish validity or reliability of the short scales. CES²⁺ was used as a pre-and post-test measure for those attending the *Finding Common Ground* event.

The researchers then developed a self-created list of additional items including both quantitative and qualitative questions to assess the impact of the one-time civic engagement event. These questions ranged from inquiring about training and professional experience with mental illness to prior involvement in similar civic engagement events. Table 1 outlines the additional questions added to the pre-test portion of the project. Table 2 provides a reference for questions added only to the post-test portion.

Table 1: Self-created Pre-test Survey Questions

Have you received formal training on mental illness and disorders in the past?
Will you, or do you, work directly with people with lived experience with mental health challenges?
Have you ever attended a community event similar to the one provided on November 7, 2022, known as the Finding Common Ground event?
If yes to the previous question, in total, how many events similar to this have you attended?
On a scale of 1 through 10, how well do you think you understand the social issues surrounding mental health and mental illness and disorders?
Do you have lived experience with mental illness?
Does someone close to you have lived experience with mental illness?

Table 2: Self-created Post-test Survey Questions

What did/does participating in the Finding Common Ground event mean to you?
Please appraise the quality, value or the importance of participating in the Finding Common Ground event.
If you have one, please provide a goal statement: What you will do as a result of your participation in the Finding Common Ground event?
By participating in the Finding Common Ground event, your knowledge, skills, attitude, or behavior has improved. (5-point Likert Scale provided)
What was your primary reason for taking part in the Finding Common Ground event?
Please provide additional information about the Finding Common Ground event that you believe is important to share.

Results

CES²⁺ Findings

First, to test hypothesis 1, the researchers examined overall differences between pre-event endorsement of making a difference in the community and post-event endorsement. A significant difference was found between the pre-event ($M= 4.24$, $SD= .58$) and post-event ($M= 5.04$, $SD= .31$) endorsement of making a difference in the community $t[18] = -3.44$, $p = .002$ when utilizing the full sample. Overall, participants reported greater interest in internalizing the importance of engagement in making a difference in the community after participation in the civic engagement event.

Second, to test hypothesis 2, a comparison was made between responses provided by students leading the civic engagement roundtable and other participants. No significant difference was found between the pre-event ($M= 4.26$, $SD= .40$) and post-event ($M= 4.92$, $SD= .27$) endorsement of making a difference in the community $t[5] = -2.36$, $p = .06$ for students leading the event. However, for all other participants, a significant difference was found between the pre-event ($M= 4.23$, $SD= .71$) and post-event ($M= 5.08$, $SD= .35$) endorsement of making a difference in the community $t[12] = -2.68$, $p = .01$.

Next, as an extension of hypothesis 2, paired-samples t-tests were run to assess pre- and post-event differences on each of the six sub-themes. A significant difference was found between the pre-event Civic Communication sub-theme ($M= 4.24$, $SD= .58$) and post-event Civic Communication sub-theme ($M= 5.04$, $SD= .31$; $t[18] = -3.44$, $p = .002$). A difference approaching the significance level was found between the pre-event Community Diversity & Culture sub-theme ($M = 3.82$, $SD = .15$) and the post-event Community Diversity & Culture sub-theme ($M= 5.14$, $SD = .02$; $t[18] = -4.14$, $p = .053$). No significant difference was found between the pre-event Knowledge Analysis sub-theme ($M = 4.47$, $SD = .02$) and post-event Knowledge Analysis sub-theme ($M = 5.21$, $SD = .13$; $t[18]= -4.66$, $p = .13$), the pre-event Civic Identity & Commitment sub-theme ($M=4.56$, $SD = .00$) and post-event Civic Identity & Commitment sub-theme ($M=5.15$, $SD = .13$; $t[18]=-2.71$, $p = .11$), the pre-event Civic Action & Reflection sub-theme ($M =4.51$, $SD = .00$) and the post-event Civic Action & Reflection sub-theme ($M=4.63$, SD

= .19, $t[18] = -1.80$, $p = .32$, or on the pre-event Civic Contexts/Structures sub-theme ($M = 3.92$, $SD = .40$) and the post-event Civic Contexts/Structures sub-theme ($M = 4.92$, $SD = .16$, $t[18] = -6.33$, $p = .09$).

Qualitative Findings

To test hypothesis 3, specific to understanding mental health and mental illness and disorders, participants self-identified how well they understood this as a social issue, pre- and post-event participation. Prior to engaging in the event, the average rating on a scale of 1-100 (1= no understanding; 100=complete understanding) was a 75. After participating in the event, the average self-rated score increased to 85. Additionally, the CES²⁺ findings suggest that, overall, the one-time civic engagement activity was effective in increasing one's endorsement in further engaging and promoting the importance of making a difference in one's community. Finally, to test hypothesis 4, the remaining findings outline uncovered themes from the open-ended/qualitative survey questions. Participants were asked to respond to the questions of, "*What did/does participating in the Finding Common Ground event mean to you?*" and "*What will you do as a result of your participation in the Finding Common Ground event?*" Three themes emerged.

Working together. Participants provided written responses about the importance of working together to share ideas. For example, when asked what their participation meant to them and/or what they would do moving forward, the following provides a few examples of this theme:

"Working together to find avenues to help others as well as share some ideas."

"Spreading more awesomeness of mental health in the criminal justice system."

"Working together to find avenues to help others as well as share some ideas."

"The event resulted in me feeling more hopeful about community's working together for change."

Increase Knowledge. Participants noted a key takeaway as helping increase mental health literacy in others. As most survey participants were students, this theme included recognition of being able to speak with groups outside of one's comfort zone, within the classroom:

"I want those in the criminal justice field to know more about mental health issues."

"I want to help others talk about mental health to learn about the topic."

"It gave me a different perspective through conversation with different age groups."

"I will continue to spread more awareness of mental health to those around me."

"I plan on doing events comparable to finding common ground to give people opportunities to understand and communicate better."

Personal Engagement. The final theme that emerged was specific to student growth and involvement due to participation. Some students focused on the importance of being able to further understand the perspective of others while some said they were now more comfortable with themselves:

“Participating in the Finding Common Ground event meant a lot because as a virtual student, I’m not always able to interact with classmates, so when I’m able to meet more people, I consider what they have to say even more.”

It actually meant a lot to me because it helped me with my anxiety and to come out of my shell.”

“This event will help me continue to keep an open mind to ensure I’m taking an active part in positive change.”

“I will continue my own personal growth as well as find more ways to help my community.”

“I want to find ways to help promote mental health in my community.”

Discussion

Through this experiential-learning civic engagement project, the researchers aimed to assess the perceived personal impact of participating in roundtable discussions on mental health topics. The pre-and post-test surveys were used to examine the effectiveness of these discussions as a form of civic engagement that could lead to ongoing interest in participating in community dialogues. As with all projects, this event, and the data collection, had limitations.

Limitations

First, to the best of the researchers’ abilities, it seemed there was a lack of options for a survey to assess the impact of a one-time civic engagement activity. While the CES²⁺ was the best fit given the current project, validity and reliability were lacking, including for the six sub-themes. Second, this event focus (mental health), including the hybrid format, had not been facilitated before. As such, there were some audio barriers for virtual attendees due to the inability to prevent the spread of volume from one roundtable to the next. Therefore, it is possible that virtual participants were not able to engage to the same degree as those in-person. This could also have influenced if they chose, or were aware of, the possibility to complete the pre-and post-survey. Lastly, although the researchers had assistants in place to help facilitate the logistics of the event, it seemed many participants were unaware of the option to complete the pre-test survey. Their lack of pre-test completion subsequently prevented their post-test completion. Additionally, an increased sample size would help to further confirm the effectiveness of a one-time community civic engagement event on endorsement to continue in community dialogue.

Implications & Future Directions

This study yielded valuable insights into the personal impact of participating in a one-time civic engagement activity. Overall, in support of hypothesis 1, findings suggest a one-time event, such as the current *Finding Common Ground* dialogue event, can have a significant impact on one's endorsement to continue community-based conversations. If a two-hour event can inspire one to commit to ongoing community improvement, it seems many universities and other agencies can implement such activities to further spread interest in community dialogue without exerting significant time and labor. Future scholars should replicate the current project and consider if longer involvement in a similar activity would result in even greater endorsement for change. It would also be valuable to measure the sustained endorsement of commitment to civic engagement through a longitudinal design.

Student leaders participated in the project throughout a full academic semester, not just for the two-hour event. They spent many hours and submitted numerous course assignments to prepare. For hypothesis 2, the researchers assumed that an increase in hands-on involvement with the topic would result in higher endorsement for the importance, along with being the event leaders. However, the findings did not support this assumption. It seems their semester-long involvement may have interfered with measuring an event pre- and post-test as possible endorsement for the importance of such a project may have occurred at some point prior the event, during the academic semester. The current methodology cannot confirm this assumption. If future instructors want to implement a similar project within a course, it could be valuable to use the CES²⁺ or similar tool *throughout* the semester, rather than at the event, only.

Qualitative questions provided support for hypotheses 3 and 4. Providing participants with open-ended questions allowed them written expression on the impact the project had on them as well as plans to continue such facilitation or participation. Specifically, participants mentioned the importance of working together, building knowledge on the subject, and personal engagement in ongoing community change.

Conclusion

The project utilized a course-based semester-long project that involved online and on-campus students from several courses and across multiple professors. Campus students were required to complete the full set of assignments, including facilitation of the hybrid event, while the event facilitation was optional for online students. A pre-and post-test survey was utilized to measure the effectiveness in endorsement to further engage in community change. Overall findings found endorsement of engagement in community activities from participation in the two-hour *Finding Common Ground* event. Qualitative responses also favor the implementation of such a project as participants reported personal gains, an interest in sharing knowledge regarding the topic, and a desire for ongoing community dialogue. The study represents a major step towards understanding the personal impact of civic engagement activities, specifically in community discussions on mental health. The findings can help with the planning and improvement of future civic engagement initiatives and can contribute to a body of knowledge that can inform policy and practice in community-based education and outreach.

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