That I May Serve:

Linking community engagement experiences and undergraduate student socio-ethical competence

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Abstract

The paper describes the development and validation of a portfolio of extant and newly developed scales to measure longitudinal change on several constructs related to socio-ethical development of undergraduate students. The design allows for cross-sectional comparisons of participants and non-participants in curricular and co-curricular community engagement experiences. The paper will highlight the implementation of survey-based scales for measurement of diversity attitudes, social justice reasoning, community orientation, community self-efficacy, and volunteer motivations. Scenario-based assessment of community systems thinking will also be described. All of these tools form the foundation of the *Ut Prosim* Index, a suite of tools assembled during the development of a strategic and assessment plans for a university-level center focused on curricular and co-curricular community-based service experiences.
That I May Serve: Linking community engagement experiences and undergraduate student socio-ethical competence

In 2000, the presidents of dozens of American colleges and universities signed the President’s Declaration on the Civic Responsibilities of Higher Education (Ehrlich, 2000). This document stated, among other things:

This country cannot afford to educate a generation that acquires knowledge without ever understanding how that knowledge can benefit society or how to influence democratic decision-making. We must teach the skills and values of democracy, creating innumerable opportunities for our students to practice and reap the real, hard work of citizenship.

To date, nearly 500 institutions have signed the declaration, including community colleges, liberal arts colleges, and major research universities.

Similarly, in 2005, the Talloires Declaration on the Civic Roles and Social Responsibilities of Higher Education signaled an international awareness of the need to invest in civic education initiatives. Ultimately signed by over 300 institutional leaders, Talloires was more direct in its call for change. In many ways, Taillores echoed the 1999 document, stating, “Universities have the responsibility to foster…a sense of social responsibility and a commitment to the social good, which, we believe, is central to the success of a democratic and just society (Tailloires Network, 2005); but, it also contained a much more explicit list of required actions to achieve the change sought by the attendees. These actions included embedding social responsibility in university policies and actions and raising the rigor of community engagement activities to be on par with other forms of scholarship.
These national and international acknowledgments of the civic purposes of post-secondary education seemed to portend a shift in the way that colleges and universities prepared college graduates to lead meaningful change responsive to the needs of communities. Champions of community engagement saw support from institutional leaders as a sign that their scholarship and pedagogy would gain increased legitimacy and garner new resources. Yet, as Hartley (2009), documents, tension remained within the network of engagement scholars and practitioners who were divided by the prospect of aligning service-learning practices with disciplinary expectations or using service-learning as an instrument for profound student and community change. Perhaps burdened by this tension, the engagement movement fueled in part by the President’s Declaration and Talloires lost steam. As Saltmarsh & Hartley (2011) declare, the engagement movement had a very limited effect on curriculum at most institutions, and the number of schools that took their commitment to civic engagement beyond rhetoric was quite small. The failure of the movement to transform higher education was furthered by declines in support from foundations (Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2011) and federal budget cuts to the Corporation for National and Community Service in 2011.

Service-learning and civic education programs and centers have been developed at many colleges and universities, but the work of civic engagement is still primarily occurring at the margins of the curriculum. Very few institution-wide efforts have been made to integrate civic education outcomes into the curriculum; instead, there seems to be an assumption that civic agency is an indirect outcome of college attendance, the entirety of curricular and co-curricular experiences, regardless of the specific curriculum a student completes.

The work that is described in this paper describes efforts to identify a set of trans-disciplinary competencies for college students and to develop a set of assessment tools that can
be applied longitudinally to document change during the development associated with college attendance. This project has the potential to inform a broader understanding of achievement of civic outcomes for graduates and to contextualize that achievement with the variety of student experiences associated with college attendance.

This paper poses three potential learning outcomes for readers. They are:

- Readers will be able to articulate the possible contributions of service-learning as pedagogy in civic education.
- Readers will be able to identify several psychometrically valid and reliable survey instruments relevant to assessment of social and ethical learning outcomes for college students engaged in community service.
- Readers will be able to describe a multi-phase assessment strategy for student social and ethical development that incorporates cross-sectional and longitudinal comparisons.

**Importance**

As many postsecondary educational institutions face increasing external pressure to focus on economic goals for students (e.g., job marketability) (Rawlings, 2013; American Association of State Colleges & Universities, 2014), the civic and social missions of universities often are relegated to symbolic rhetoric (Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2011). While most universities continue to proclaim a commitment to the moral development of their students (Einfeld & Collins, 2008), political and financial realities often favor allocation of resources to revenue generating research activities and academic disciplines with high starting salaries for graduates. Research and economic outcomes are not explicitly in conflict with civic missions, but in the highly political and competitive resource environment faced by most higher education institutions, prioritizing economic goals almost certainly leads to deprioritizing civic goals. These tradeoffs manifest in
many ways, including increasing specialization of undergraduate majors to enhance career prospects (e.g., business data analytics) and gutting of liberal education requirements to eliminate foreign language requirements, exposure to classical literature and art, or the basic skills necessary for active citizenship (Ferrall, 2011).

Parallel to these moves away from the civic goals at many higher education institutions, there is a growing recognition that society needs well-prepared, active citizens in order to address the short- and long-term issues that persist in communities throughout the world. Globalization, economic instability, new and evolving cultural unrest, political polarization, and rapid technological change have all contributed to a set of public issues that are more complex and interrelated than ever before; and, many long-standing issues have not been ameliorated despite technological advances and policy interventions.

In a society struggling with complex problems and deteriorating political dialogue, it is more salient than ever for college students to graduate with the critical thinking and collaboration skills necessary for meaningful engagement in community. As well, graduates who are guided by a public ethic and sense of civic responsibility are clearly needed to take leadership roles as society considers its “wicked problems.” Recent thought leaders and scholars have called for the restructuring of higher education to advance the development of civic-minded graduates who have “the capacity and desire to work with others to achieve the common good” (Boyer, 1996; Steinberg, Hatcher, Bringle, 2011, p20.).

The imperative for higher education leaders, then, is to balance the competing demands for technical expertise and socio-ethical competency by identifying civic engagement and community problem solving developmental opportunities that transcend academic disciplines (Baker, Koliba, Kolodinsky, Liang, McMahon, Patterson, & Wang, 2009). Service-learning
programs have been hailed by some as ways to integrate these trans-disciplinary goals across the university experience (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Mitchell, 2013). Absent the radical curricular transformation and institutional prioritization on civic engagement efforts called for by Taillores, integrative practices like curricular and co-curricular service-learning may carry much of the burden for making sure that graduates are prepared to contribute not just to economic growth but also to the vitality and health of society. Unfortunately, the development of comprehensive learning outcomes, assessment tools, and scholarship that documents efficacy of these practices relative to socio-ethical competence has been fragmented.

Much of the literature on service-learning as a pedagogical approach focuses on the advantage to students in terms of comprehension and retention of discipline-specific technical knowledge (Jameson, Clayton, & Ash, 2013), but there is also a strand of literature that suggests service-learning holds potential in the area of civic education (Bringle & Steinberg, 2010; Antonio, Astin, & Cress, 2000). In fact, authors like Chisholm believe that service-learning is the primary mode by which most universities can “infuse the notion of social responsibility” into the higher education experience (2005, p.97). Peacock agrees that service-learning give students “the competence and confidence” to address emerging social needs in a global economy (2005, p114).

In studies of the student learning associated with participation in service-learning, researchers have found a variety of significant gains compared to students taught via other pedagogies. Antonio, Astin, Cress (2000) found that service-learning was positively associated with several outcomes that have relevance to civic agency, including leadership skills, racial understanding, subject matter knowledge, allocation of concepts to new situations, strengthened critical thinking skills, civic responsibility (i.e., commitment to serving community), interest in
influencing political structure, and engagement with future volunteer work. Other researchers found similar results related to appreciation of ethical issues that affect the world of practice, a better sense of self (i.e., personal values and motives), increased self confidence, a clearer understanding of how to make a difference in communities, and a better understanding of communities and the problems they face (Beere, Votruba, & Wells, 2011). Einfeld & Collins (2008) found evidence that service-learning experiences have the potential to influence multicultural competence. While these studies highlight an emerging body of literature on outcomes for service-learning as a pedagogy, there is still significant criticism of the field for a lack of rigorous methodology, especially as it relates to the quality of scales used to assess outcomes. Additionally, there is a dearth of information on the persistence of attitudinal changes and the long-term behavioral consequences of service-learning experiences.

The work that is described in this paper builds on previous work in the field of service-learning to establish a set of trans-disciplinary competencies for college students at Virginia Tech and to identify a set of relevant assessment tools and an assessment protocol. The goals of this project are to address, on an institutional scale, the outcomes for service-learning pedagogies and experiences and to build a foundation for collection longitudinal data on persistence of attitudinal and behavioral changes for college graduates.

**Background**

This project began in 2012 after a strategic planning process was completed at VT Engage, Virginia Tech’s university-level center for service-learning coordination and co-curricular service programs. Efforts to align existing programs and assessment strategies with new strategic goals made clear that some language in the center’s strategic goals required further

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1 In the interest of readability and brevity, VT Engage is used in place of the unit’s full name, VT Engage: The Community Learning Collaborative.
clarification. Specifically, the plan referenced “core competencies of engaged students” and “student social-ethical competence” (VT Engage, 2012). While there was general agreement that these phrases were important to the center’s work, it also was evident that they were difficult to operationalize. An internal team began the process of designing robust student learning outcomes to replace less meaningful output measures for volunteer programs (e.g., volunteer hours, monetized volunteer hours, and student satisfaction with volunteer experiences).

An intensive dialogue amongst stakeholders and VT Engage staff and a review of relevant scholarship resulted in the identification of several characteristics that were deemed important to measure. These characteristics included: cultural competence, social justice reasoning, confidence to be effective in communities, sense of responsibility to community, service motivation, and the ability to think systemically about community issues. Each of these concepts was selected to capture information about general student attitudes, motivations, and behaviors that were relevant to community service and might be influenced by VT Engage programs. In order to operationalize these characteristics, the department sought to balance the desire for robust measures with the need for efficient avenues for implementation. With no dedicated personnel for assessment and an environment where assessment fatigue often yields low response rates, the decision was made to look primarily for concise, survey-based measures that could be integrated into existing university-wide assessment efforts.

The six characteristics and their respective measurement tools (see below) were collectively named the Ut Prosim Index (UPI). The initiative’s name derives from Virginia Tech’s university motto, Ut Prosim (That I May Serve). The university adopted this motto at the end of the 19th century at a time when compulsory military service and the university’s land grant history were foundational to the university’s identity. In the modern university
environment, the motto is used in a more holistic way to represent an espoused dedication to
service in communities and to others.

Separate from the work being completed at VT Engage, the Division of Student Affairs
launched its Aspirations for Student Learning in 2010. One of the five aspirations identified by
the university was the hope that students “embrace Ut Prosim as a way of life.” The language
associated with the student learning goal continued,

*Virginia Tech students will enrich their lives through service to others.* The university
motto, *Ut Prosim – That I May Serve,* and the *Principles of Community* will stand as a
foundation for the development of personal relationships, physical spaces, and
intercultural experiences, which create communities. Within, these communities compel
students to understand and develop a value system that will guide their decisions and
enable them to offer themselves as responsible citizens of the world.

The aspiration’s reference to the *Principles of Community* refer to the university’s 2005
statement affirming “on-going efforts to increase access and inclusion and to create a community
that nurtures learning and growth for all of its members.”

Clearly, the work of VT Engage, which has subsequently become a unit within the
Division of Student Affairs, and the university’s aspiration to embrace *Ut Prosim* as a way of life
are linked. In fact, the work associated with the *Ut Prosim* Index has a strong connection in that
it provides an assessment framework that can inform the programming associated with this
aspiration.

**Theoretical Underpinnings and Existing Evidence**

Four of the characteristics that VT Engage selected matched closely with existing
psychometrically validated survey scales from the literature. Cultural competence and social
justice reasoning corresponded to the existing concepts of diversity attitudes and social justice attitudes as measured by the Civic Attitudes and Skills Questionnaire (CASQ) (Moely, Mercer, Ilustre, Miron, & McFarland, 2002). The confidence to be effective in communities was very closely related to the concept of Community Service Self-Efficacy (Reeb, Folger, Langsner, Ryan, & Crouse, 2010); and, service motivation was broadly captured by the Volunteer Functions Inventory (Clary, Snyder, Ridge, Copeland, Stukas, Haugen, & Miene, 1998). For the two remaining dimensions, sense of responsibility to community and the ability to think systemically about community issues, no suitable existing tools were found.

The first two dimensions, diversity attitudes and social justice attitudes, were modified from the Civic Attitudes and Skills Questionnaire (CASQ) which was originally developed for evaluation of service-learning students (Moely, et al, 2002). These two brief instruments, five and eight items respectively, were extracted from a larger questionnaire and are self-reported on a five-point Likert scale. Previous research found acceptable levels of internal consistency (alpha=.70, .70), and responses were only slightly affected by social desirability of responses (Moely, et al, 2002). The original version of the CASQ included four additional dimensions, civic action, interpersonal and problem-solving skills, political awareness, and leadership skills; these items were excluded from the VT Engage approach because of worries about questionnaire length and incongruence with internal conceptualizations of the outcomes. Additionally, the leadership skills concept was not identified as an outcome of interest to the team.

The third dimension was tied to the Community Service Self-Efficacy Scale developed by Reeb, et al. (2010). This ten-item, ten-point instrument was shown to have high internal consistency (alpha >.90) and was not sensitive to social desirability. The scale was designed specifically to measure service learning outcomes. The intention of the scale’s authors was to
develop a psychometrically-tested, reliable and valid tool where none had previously existed to measure the concept of students’ sense of agency “to make significant contributions to community through service” (Reeb, et al., 2010).

To better understand service motivation, portions of the Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI) were employed. This tool, developed by Clary, et al. (1998), included five items per function each self-reported on a seven-point response scale. The VFI has shown high internal consistency (alpha >.80) for all sub-dimensions, test-retest reliability, clear distinction between the sub-factors, and strong external validity for each construct. The subdimensions of this tool are intended to explain the psychological needs of individual volunteers that are satisfied by volunteering activities. Getting a better understanding of these factors and how they change over time and context is important to realizing efficiency in recruitment, satisfaction, and retention of volunteers. In choosing only four of the six dimensions from the original VFI, the values, understanding, social, and career functions, potential information is lost. This tradeoff was made in interest of brevity, eliminating the protective and enhancement functions from the inventory. These functions respectively measure, the need to reduce guilt related to relative privilege and the desire to increase self-esteem and self-worth.

Since no existing survey-based scales were identified for measurement of community orientation, a new twelve-item questionnaire (five-point response) was designed. At VT Engage, the concept of community orientation had been described as having two main components: 1) the relative level of thoughtfulness about and commitment to local, regional, national, and global communities and 2) the ways in which that orientation is manifested, either as a propensity to volunteer or to make donations in support of community needs. Initial piloting of the new instrument, named Measures of Community Orientation (MoCO) led to modifications.
Preliminary data reduction through principal axis factoring resulted in elimination of duplicative questions and the addition of questions designed to further refine the community orientation concept. While factor analysis confirms a single community orientation factor encompassing both geopolitical scale and action orientation, additional psychometric evaluation is in progress to affirm the validity and reliability of this concept (Grohs & Kirk, unpublished).

Directly measuring community systems thinking ability proved especially difficult. Tools that were related to the concept either failed to have a strong community focus or did not include the full range of subcomponents that VT Engage had preliminarily identified as important to this concept. Initial attempts to develop a survey-based tool to measure this concept were abandoned after drafts seemed to lead respondents to fairly easily identify desired responses. While there is potential merit in further exploration of a survey instrument, the research team instead favored the development of a tool that would allow direct observation of respondent processes, assumptions, and conclusions. As such, a scenario-based tool was designed to explore variation in a suite of sub-components related to this construct. This tool will be described in detail in a separate paper (Grohs & Kirk, unpublished b).

**Implementation**

In an attempt to remain sensitive to the constant barrage of surveys received by students on the Virginia Tech campus, VT Engage decided to avoid creating a new administration process for the *Ut Prosim* Index. As well, the university’s restrictive policies regarding access to student directory information, including names and email addresses, made the option of administering the survey to large samples of the undergraduate population and alumni an unlikely possibility. As such, VT Engage reached out to the university’s central Office of Assessment and Evaluation (OAE) to determine the best way to reach the largest possible sample of students.
After consultation with OAE staff, sections of the survey were embedded in an existing university-level survey of all graduating seniors. The senior survey is administered to all graduating seniors in the semester that they declare their intent to graduate. By incorporating VT Engage’s work into OAE administered surveys, a high degree of legitimacy with the target population was achieved along with response rates of 42 to 48%. Piloting of the UPI began in fall 2012, and subsets of the tool have been included every subsequent semester. The initial UPI pilot included only a portion of the identified scales, specifically the diversity attitudes and social justice attitudes questions.

To lay the foundation for a longitudinal design, UPI components were also included on a new OAE pre-freshman year survey beginning in summer 2013. This survey is administered to students admitted to the university’s freshman class or as transfer students prior to the start of the fall semester. Concerns about overall survey length led to a new protocol beginning in summer 2014 that assign respondents to groups that receive subsets of the UPI.

Both the senior and pre-freshmen surveys are administered using online survey software. These surveys also gather various demographic, academic, and engagement data for each respondent. Of particular interest to VT Engage’s UPI work are questions on the senior survey that ask respondents to identify experiences that they had during their college careers. For each respondent, in addition to information from UPI assessments, information is collected about curricular and co-curricular experiences, volunteering, residence hall and off-campus living, and academic engagement. These data are allowing VT Engage to begin to show cross-sectional differences for social and ethical competencies amongst graduating seniors who have participated in community engagement activities. In addition to building the foundation of a
research program that will inform scholarly understanding of the impact of the college experience on student development, the data may also prove useful in program design and modification. Future efforts will include longitudinal tracking of Virginia Tech graduates into their early careers. This information will provide a clearer understanding of persistence of prosocial attitudes and behaviors after the experiences are complete.

**Practical Implications**

Results from this work, including preliminary cross-sectional comparisons, will prove useful in understanding student socio-ethical development over time and the factors that influence the magnitude of that change. Strong assessment of social and ethical outcomes for students is essential to institutionalizing support of community learning programs. Broadly, this type of assessment can help administrators and faculty evaluate the relative importance of investments in traditional and community-based pedagogies and in curricular and co-curricular service programming. Collecting and reporting these data also can help institutional leaders articulate the added value of civic and social competence in concert with the academic achievement and economic success of their students.

The initiative described herein is still early in its lifecycle, but it represents a significant long-term opportunity for this institution. The practical implications of this work include the following:

- Social and ethical development of students is critical in an increasingly complex society, but many higher education institutions have not made these outcomes a priority. As such, the responsibility for stewarding civic agency as a learning outcome may fall to units involved in community engagement programming and, specifically, to service-learning practitioners.
• Rigorous assessment and evaluation protocols at the institutional level may strengthen internal resource requests in support of civic engagement programs. As well, these data may become useful as institutions communicate the value of higher education to external audiences, including the general public, prospective students and their parents, politicians, and funding agencies and donors.

• While some valid and reliable measurement tools are available for assessment of student social and ethical learning and development, new tools may be needed to address institution-specific learning outcomes. Since most available tools were developed for assessment of individuals immediately after a service-learning course or experience, additional research is needed to determine whether existing scales have the ability to detect change within a single individual over time. This information is critical to attempts to understand attitudinal persistence and the long-term behavioral impacts of service programs.
References


