

protesting revocation of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) for approximately 800,000 people who came to the United States before they were 16 years old. Revoking DACA would mean these young people could be deported. Here again, young people are responding with action to injustice. Young people are also protesting gun violence in schools and communities. This chapter takes its title, “Imperatives,” because what it describes are urgent, important issues that move people to action. Look for the imperatives that move you in your community-engaged learning and can help set a course for your life using your education for the common good.

2

BENEFITS

What We Gain From Community-Engaged Learning

Beyond the reasons for community engagement that are about making a difference in the world, there are also reasons that are personal, that are about what you gain. What do you hope to gain from your community-engaged learning? If you said a good grade, perhaps you were being cynical. But if we reframe getting a good grade, we can also think of it as one way of acknowledging that when our work really matters, we are called to do our best. So, of course, you should get a good grade. But more important, you should want to do your best work because the community you are working with deserves no less.

Watch the short video in Figure 2.1 (1:26 minutes) to learn about some of the personal benefits from community-engaged learning.

Figure 2.1. Students on the imperatives of community-engaged learning.



Note: See video at <https://vimeo.com/236989704/cae21acae7>

How do the students' reasons help you understand what you might gain from community-engaged learning? We hope that many of these benefits will resonate with you. The reasons mentioned bear further consideration.

I See My Community in New Ways

Too often communities are portrayed as broken, lacking, or troubled. This is a deficit notion of community. Headlines about problems like crime and poverty in a community contribute to deficit thinking. When these images and headlines are about our own community, we know they are not the whole story. Yet even people living in a community are sometimes forced to think in terms of deficits. For example, when making the case for new policy, community activists often have to base their appeal to lawmakers on the needs of their community rather than its strengths. In contrast, community-engaged learning can orient us toward seeing the assets of a community. What are the funds of knowledge, the ways of knowing and understanding that draw on a community's strengths and wisdom? What is the cultural wealth, the art, the stories, the history that exists in the community? What are the ideas, insights, and webs of relationship that exist in the community? What members of the community are leading and contributing to positive change? This shift to ask questions about a community's assets can change the way we enter a community. It can help us see value in places where framing by some media or politicians may too often focus on problems (Kretzman & McKnight, 1993).

It Informs the Way I Engage With the World

Do you understand the causes and responses to social injustice? Do you see yourself as capable of changing the world for the better? Do you see yourself as called to engage? A good community-engaged learning experience helps you develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to engage with the world and leave it a better place.

It Makes Me a Better Student

Better can mean a lot of things, but in this case, it means more aware and a critical thinker. Research shows that service-learning, a type of community-engaged learning, is an example of a "high-impact practice" (American Association of Colleges & Universities, 2018) that gives meaning to course work and creates greater awareness of diversity. High-impact practices also contribute positively to critical thinking and are seen as contributing to student success in college (Kilgo, Ezell Sheets, & Pascarella, 2015). A study by Eyler, Giles, and Braxton (1997) found that students in service-learning courses gained confidence to make a difference as citizens and believed they improved in the skills necessary to make that difference. They gained empathy and open-mindedness.

Because I Want to Contribute to the Good of Our Society

Community-engaged learning can help you think more deeply about defining and serving the common good. Is the common good the sum of each individual seeking to maximize his or her own best interests? That's what a market-driven approach to the common good would tell us. Or is it something that is shared, that benefits all, something that cannot be reduced to a commodity benefiting individuals solely? Your community-engaged learning course should help you develop an orientation toward serving the common good. In some cases, your contributions to the common good may be in the form of direct service, taking action to ameliorate the results of injustice. In other cases, your contribution may address the causes of injustice. Both kinds of action are necessary and valuable. As you reflect on your community-engaged learning, you will gain insight into where you feel called to make your contribution to the good of society.

Because I Learn From Agents of Change in My Community

Knowledge comes in lots of different forms. All that you are learning in the classroom contributes to your ability to theorize and critically

analyze the world. What you gain from community-engaged learning, though, is wisdom from the experience of people living and working in the community, including those working to make the world more just and equitable. Learning at the side of community agents of change contributes to your development not only as a student but also as a participant and leader in democratic community life.

Because I Can Learn More Outside of the Classroom

Learning is more meaningful and more likely to last when it happens in a practical context. The community provides a place where we not only apply what we learn in classrooms but also where we reflect on action and develop our own theories to bring back to classroom discourse. This connection between theory and practice is called *praxis*, the cycle by which knowledge informs action and action informs knowledge. The community is also a site of learning, not just a place where we apply learning. Individuals and organizations will be your coteachers in community-engaged learning. The community is a source of wisdom with its own methods, purposes, and forms of knowledge.

It Helps Me Build Compassion for Myself and Other People

Empathy is an important trait and one that civic and political discourse could use more of. Community-engaged learning experiences have the potential to help us develop an ethic of care. They can teach us to be generous with others as we understand the world from their points of view and with ourselves as we understand our own identities and processes of becoming agents of change.

Community-engaged learning also develops our compassion for self. In fact, self-care and self-compassion are necessary as one works for social justice. In the process, you may find you make mistakes, inadvertently offend others, bump against biases you were not aware of, and face some of your own weaknesses. This is not easy, and it

takes compassion for oneself to work through the discomfort that accompanies this personal dimension of learning. When people say that they got more out of community-engaged learning than they contributed to others, they are often referring to this powerful, personal understanding of self. Self-care and being gentle with oneself help us continue doing meaningful, long-lasting work.

I Believe It's Important to Live Out My Faith

Every faith tradition appeals to followers to serve others, and most religious organizations have community service branches or units devoted to service. Most places of worship are centers not only of worship but also of service to the community. Many of you may have had your first experience of community engagement through service as part of your religious education at a mosque, temple, or church.

Even if you are not a member of a religious faith, you may find some transcendent quality to service and community. According to a study conducted at UCLA, even as students' religious engagement declines, their spiritual qualities grow. Meeting people from diverse cultures and backgrounds through community-engaged learning contributes to students' understanding of others and of themselves and their spiritual growth. Reflection, a key characteristic of community-engaged learning, contributes to this growth as well (Astin et al., 2005).

The Skills and Knowledge That I Gain Will Help Me in My Career

Gaining career skills may not be the primary reason for community-engaged learning, but it is an important benefit. The attributes that employers most want to see in new college graduates include leadership, ability to work in a team, and communication skills. Community-engaged projects contribute to leadership development by giving you opportunities to work with others to

meet their priorities and dreams. This is sometimes called servant leadership because this kind of leader puts the desires of others before his or her own. *Community-engaged learning* by definition involves working with others, and that requires strong collaboration skills. Community engagement calls us to collaborate with people who have very different ideas and work across what are sometimes competing agendas toward a common goal. Strong communication skills across differences in professional settings are highly valued by employers, and you will find yourself practicing this skill with other classmates and community partners (Adams, 2014).

I Build Relationships With People Who Live and Think Differently Than I Do

Community-engaged learning is about relationships, even if the logistics of community engagement—finding a community partner, logging hours, filling out evaluations—focuses us initially on roles. Roles can be limiting if we think only in terms of ourselves being in a position of serving. That puts those we work with in the position of being served, a position that is inherently unequal and less powerful. If we think of being in relationships that are not hierarchical or imbalanced, then serving and being served, learning and teaching are two-directional or reciprocal rather than one-way. These kinds of relationships model a just world. Beneficial relationships in community-engaged learning are also called authentic because they are based on mutuality and respect. They lead to greater feelings of connection with members of the community. These kind of relationships stand in contrast to transactional ones, where parties to a relationship expect to get something out of them but not be changed or transformed in the process.

The Community That I Came From Is the One I Serve

The reality for many of you reading this book is that when you leave the classroom for community-engaged learning, you are working in

your own community. It may be the actual community where you live, or if you moved to a new city or town for college, you may find that the people in the community are similar to those with whom you identify or from where you came. That gives you insight into the particular community's wealth. If you do not, however, come from the community you serve, enter with humility that allows you to look for assets and learn from those who do know it well.

My Assumptions and Beliefs Are Challenged and I Get to Challenge Others

Community-engaged learning goes deep. Whereas some forms of teaching and learning lead to gaining new knowledge that is held only until it is tested, community-engaged learning has the potential to change not only the amount of what we know but also how and why we know things and how we use knowledge. When we challenge our assumptions and beliefs, we set ourselves up for changing our perspective on ourselves, others, and the world. When we build relationships rather than work in roles with others, we are much more open to such change. As discussed already, we can challenge the assumptions that some people have about communities as damaged places. We should challenge the uncritical assumption that service is always good. Although well-intentioned, some service-informing community engagement can have no impact or negative impacts. Our first commitment should always be to do no harm. We can do this by constantly challenging our assumptions and trusting the needs identified by the community.

It Empowers Me to Be an Agent of Change

What does it mean for you to be an agent of change? Who are the people you imagine when you think of agents of change? Are they people who seem larger than life, impossible to emulate, almost intimidating in their ability to single-handedly effect change? Consider how icons of change for social justice, like Rosa Parks or

Harvey Milk, have been presented in history books. For example, although it is inaccurate, you may have heard the story about Rosa Parks as a hero acting alone and on the spur of the moment who was too tired to give up her seat to a White man on a segregated bus. What that story obscures is that she was deeply involved in a movement with others, thinking strategically about how to dismantle segregation (Kohl, 2005). Similarly, Harvey Milk is often portrayed in textbooks as an individual coming from nowhere to win public office and speak on behalf of LGBT rights. That story hides his work to build diverse coalitions of people who saw the interconnections between the rights of one group and the rights of others, including their own (Donahue, 2014). Understanding the pathways taken by heroes like Parks and Milk reminds us that being an agent of change means working with others, taking actions that are part of something bigger, and seeing the long term as well as the moment. Think about how your community-engaged work for your course allows you to develop as this kind of agent of change. You can learn how to work in coalition with others, think strategically, and participate in movements rather than solo actions.

The video opening this chapter ended with a quotation from Uruguayan journalist, writer, and novelist, Eduardo Galeano:

I don't believe in charity. I believe in solidarity. Charity is so vertical. It goes from the top to the bottom. Solidarity is horizontal. It respects the other person. I have a lot to learn from other people. (Barsamian, 2004, p. 146)

What does it mean that “charity is vertical” and “solidarity is horizontal”? Can you think of actions that align with notions of charity or solidarity? Thinking about being an agent of change, what do you have to learn from other people? The people you work with in community? The people, including your professor, in your class who reflect with you on community engagement? The people who write the books and articles assigned in your course? Share your list of what you have to learn and whom you can learn from with others. See how these lists build openness toward learning and contribute toward humility and the kind of solidarity about which Galeano writes.

3

DISPOSITIONS

Who We Are Called to Be as Community-Engaged Learners

Charity and solidarity, as described in the Eduardo Galeano quote in the previous chapter, are examples of human dispositions. Some scholars describe dispositions as filters, comprising people's values, beliefs, cultural backgrounds, cognitive processes, and prior experiences that shape how they take in new information and make meaning of the world around them (Schussler, 2006). Consider how an air filter is designed to remove particles and impurities so that the air has a more desirable composition. This is true of dispositional filters, which process information in a way that elicits particular behaviors and actions. To put it simply, dispositions determine what information you let in, how you make sense of it, and how you act on it. Each person has multiple dispositions that can converge, compete, or even conflict in a variety of ways in different contexts.

To provide an oversimplified example, consider how multiple people can listen to the same presidential candidate's impassioned speech about social welfare programs and have wildly different interpretations of what it meant and how effective it was. Some might filter the speech through dispositions of charity and empathy, others might draw upon dispositions of equity and solidarity, and still others might activate dispositions of individualism and resilience. Some might see the candidate's speaking style as inspirational. Others

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