

# Engaged Pedagogies, Civic Development, and Student Well-Being within a Liberal Learning Context

By **Ronald J. O. Flores**, associate professor and director of community-based learning; **Catherine Crosby-Currie**, associate professor of psychology; and **Christine Zimmerman**, director of institutional research, all of St. Lawrence University

Two years ago, St. Lawrence University and six other Bringing Theory to Practice (BTtoP) campus demonstration sites accepted the challenge of the Association of American Colleges and Universities and the Charles Engelhard Foundation to introduce innovative programming designed to engage the *whole* student in his or her learning experience as a way to understand the complex relationships between pedagogies of engagement, civic development, and student mental health and well-being. With a growing body of scholarship showing student disengagement from the college experience and persistently high levels of alcohol abuse, stress, and depression on college campuses (Harvard 2007), the time for integrating programming and research dedicated to solving these problems was long overdue.

The planning for the project was driven by a number of goals that reflected the underlying philosophies of both the liberal arts and engaged learning:

- To increase the opportunities for agency and intentionality in student learning
- To create programming that speaks to the entire student experience through seamless integration across all components of campus life
- To enhance our campus–community partnerships as a way to collaboratively address community needs and provide authentic opportunities for students’ civic engagement

- To expand activities that expose students to different points of view and to perhaps burst the campus “bubble”
- To develop an assessment protocol that would provide insights into the connections between pedagogy and student well-being

With these goals in mind, we created the Center for Civic Engagement and Leadership (CCEL) and designed an assessment model to measure the relationship between the center and student outcomes such as civic engagement and mental health.

## Increasing Student Involvement

The mission of the Center for Civic Engagement and Leadership at St. Lawrence University is to increase and enhance opportunities for students to be agents of positive social change both on and off campus. The center combines academic and cocurricular activities within a living–learning community in which students work with community partners to develop and direct projects that address locally identified needs. The emphasis of the programming is to develop citizenship and leadership skills through community-based learning (CBL) including course work, independent studies, participatory action research and dialogue training; volunteerism, through which students, faculty, and staff support and enhance initiatives that address community needs; and leadership training that encompasses both



practice and reflection. Because the center emphasizes student ownership, we instituted the Community Mentors (CM) program, in which students, who are paid members of the center staff, work with community partners to identify needs within their organizations and develop partnership programs to address those needs. The CM program empowers students to identify problems and develop programs in collaboration with com-

a liberal learning/advising portfolio. The latter two of these pedagogical methods were used because of the emphasis that each places on student intentionality in learning (Zubizarreta 2004). In our assessment model, these students served as our experimental group in a quasi-experimental design, and their behavior over the semester was compared via pre- and post-test instruments to a second group of students matched

binge drinking among first-year students had increased but had *decreased* for the first-year students living in the center. However, we did not find any notable changes in mental well-being. Although the results appear to be headed in the desired direction, our relatively small sample size suggests that we should temper our enthusiasm until more data are collected. We are currently studying a second cohort of experimental and comparison-group students.

## The average number of drinks consumed per week had *declined* among students living in the center and participating in the course on community and citizenship but increased for students in our comparison group.

Based on the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE 2006), we also found that the first-year students living in the center were more engaged in both academic and cocurricular activities than students in the comparison group and first-year students as a whole. Relative to the comparison group, the first-year center students were more likely to find their academic experience challenging and enriching, to engage in collaborative projects and assignments, to work interactively with faculty, and to consider the campus a supportive environment. We also uncovered very interesting results in the changes in civic development. First-year students that lived in the center and were exposed to CBL pedagogies experienced greater increases in levels of civic engagement relative to the comparison group. However, those same students who participated in CBL activities demonstrated notable decreases in (measures of) leadership, empathy, and self-confidence compared with modest changes (typically increases) among the comparison group. These findings suggest a complex process of self-discovery and growth that is encouraged by

munity partners, faculty, staff, and fellow students. These initiatives resonated with our university's aims and objectives, which include the development of citizens who will contribute to the greater good of society on the local and global levels.

Our project focused on a particular first-year living-learning community of thirty students enrolled in a course on community and citizenship in a multicultural society. Each student was assigned to a campus-community partnership program and spent an average of two to three hours per week engaged in that service. The students were exposed to a variety of engaged-learning pedagogies including community-based learning, collaborative problem-solving projects, a community learning journal, and

across relevant demographic and academic interest characteristics who have not been part of this living-learning community.

### Initial Findings

Our comparison of these two groups after their first semester in college gave preliminary support to our hypothesis that engaged-learning pedagogies have positive effects on student outcomes. For example, we found that during the first semester, the average number of drinks consumed per week had *declined* among students living in the center and participating in the course on community and citizenship but increased for students in our comparison group and for all first-year students. Further, we found that during the first semester, the levels of

engaged-learning pedagogies and that includes a period of self-doubt and perhaps some deep soul-searching.

Mezirow's (1991) theory of transformative learning identifies an early phase during which experiences lead students to question their prior assumptions and become critical of those assumptions. Although such disorientation might suggest regression or negative effects from engagement with the community, this disequilibrium is the necessary precursor to further development, as Piaget's general model of cognitive development predicts (Piaget and Inhelder 1969). These models predict, as we expect, that as students continue to be actively engaged and intentional in their learning over time, their self-confidence will become stronger.

### **Expanding Opportunities for Engagement**

In addition to these encouraging findings, the CCEL has had noticeable effects on and off campus. For example, on the second and third floors of the CCEL, we now have a new living-learning initiative called the Civic Engagement and Leadership Suites. This year, suitemates integrated civic responsibility into their residential life and reflected on these experiences in CBL courses. The suitemates also coordinate Project Democracy, in which students and community members discuss issues affecting the campus and the community. Project Democracy is also tied to CBL course work that offers the critical reflective component of engaged learning.

Another outgrowth of the CCEL is the Akwesasne Semester, offered in the fall, in

which students participate in learn-and-serve programming on the Akwesasne Mohawk Reservation. Students take all their classes on the reservation while interning at local tribal agencies and organizations and then serving as tutors and mentors at the Akwesasne Boys and Girls Club. The program strives to create an engaged-learning environment that enables students to develop an understanding of democratic principles in a multicultural society. The center also sponsors a first-year seminar at the Akwesasne Boys and Girls Club as a community-based learning course that emphasizes an array of engaged-learning pedagogies, including portfolio and journal assignments. All students engage in some form of original research and collaborate with professional staff and fellow students on a grant-writing project designed to locate and secure funding to meet a specific club need. These programs on the reservation have had a visibly positive effect on the children in the club, who have not only received tutoring with their homework and steady supervision during their games and activities but also gained good friends and positive role models.

Through the CCEL, we were able to sponsor a number of new engaged-learning/CBL courses in various disciplines, including psychology, philosophy, global studies, biology, history, sociology, economics, and performance and communication arts. Recently, the sociology department redesigned its major requirements to include a civic-engagement component aligned with CCEL initiatives. All of these courses have been tied to the development

and enhancement of a number of campus-community partnerships that have addressed community needs while facilitating the hands-on experiences so vital to the development of future active global citizens. Next year we will introduce the Civic Engagement and Leadership minor, which will further integrate our engaged-learning initiatives both on and off campus and across academics and student affairs.

After two years we have begun to see signs of important transformations at St. Lawrence University. As more engaged-learning programming threads its way across our campus, we are confident that the effects on student development and well-being will manifest themselves in positive ways. Much work needs to be done, however, because of the complexity we quickly discovered of the relationships among our key variables of engaged learning, civic development, and mental health and well-being. The work is needed; the time is now. ■

### **References**

- Harward, D. 2007. Engaged learning and the core purposes of liberal education. *Liberal Education* 93: 6–15.
- Mezirow, J. 1991. *Transformative dimensions of adult learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc.
- National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). 2006. *Engaged learning: Fostering success for all students*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research.
- Piaget, J., and B. Inhelder. 1969. *The psychology of the child*. New York: Basic Books.
- Zubizarreta, J. 2004. *The learning portfolio reflective practice for improving student learning*. Bolton, MA: Anker Publishing.