A Cure for Student Apathy: Social Responsibility and Freshmen Learning Communities

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Overview

Social responsibility stresses the moral belief that “each person you know about and can affect is someone to whom you have responsibilities” (Appiah 2006). The Social Engagement learning community (LC) – composed of three courses (a first year seminar on “social responsibility,” a human rights course, and a social movements course) – was designed to accomplish both the goals of creating student attachment to the university and to foster social responsibility in our students. While a college education should focus on teaching students the ability to critically understand the ties that bind all people together, and to have empathy for the experiences of others (Nussbaum 1997), we realize that social responsibility, global connectedness, and universal human rights are often separate from a traditional liberal arts curriculum (Andreopoulous 1997).

The aim of this longitudinal research study is to describe how the learning community process at Webster University impacts the current research on LC outcomes, with special attention to student retention and the effectiveness of the LC theme “Social Engagement.” Ultimately, we are interested in how and whether participating in the Social Engagement community impacts students’ interests in social justice issues, decisions related to programs of academic study, career and volunteer choices, and overall interest in issues related to social responsibility.

Methods

- **Pre-tests:** Pre-tests are distributed in the first LC course to test basic human rights knowledge, as well as to assess empathy. Questions about empathy are derived from the research-validated Interpersonal Reactivity Index, with questions selected from the perspective-taking scale and the empathetic concern scale.
- **Basic human rights knowledge** includes a fundamental understanding of human rights frameworks, history, and key concepts.
- Some questions about empathy were modified to emphasize links to social movements and social responsibility. For example, the original question asked if the respondent can imagine him/herself in a novel s/he reads. We ask if s/he can imagine being the subject of an international news story.
- **Interviews and post-tests:** Students are interviewed one year after the end of their LC. Students take a post-test that mirrors the pre-test, and they also answer questions about their educational and extra-curricular activities since participation in the LC.
- **Student records:** Students’ academic records show whether they remained with the university, if they changed their major, and what their GPA is. Academic progress is compared to summary scores on similar measures for students in other LCs and other students who are/were not in an LC.

Preliminary Findings

“**I think before I came to college...it was all about me, me, me.”**

“**Otherwise, I probably wouldn’t have gotten to know anyone right away. It kind of made things easier, transitioning to college.”**

There was a significant rise in basic human rights knowledge following participating in the LC; new students scored a 37% average on their pre-test, compared to an 84% post-test average among former LC students. The first cohort of Social Engagement LC students averaged only a slightly higher grade point average (3.31) compared to students in all other LCs (3.24). The Social Engagement’s first cohort also had a lower retention rate (86.71%) than the university’s freshman average (92.31%).

Data from the Interpersonal Reactivity Index shows that LC participation increased “perspective taking,” or the tendency to spontaneously adopt the psychological point of view of others in everyday life. However, activist orientation and empathetic concern measures were higher among incoming freshmen.

Next Steps

Preliminary data provides “next steps” for this longitudinal study, which is still in an early research phase:

- Continue to gather and evaluate data as LC cohorts progress through their undergraduate programs of study. Currently, the first cohort of students are sophomores at Webster University.
- Consider methodological improvements that could strengthen the quality of data and provide further understanding of how LC participation impacts student behavior.
- Evaluate hypotheses related to academic success, retention, and social responsibility based on trends in the data.
- Implement changes to the Social Engagement LC aimed at improving outcomes and achieving program goals. Such changes may impact course content, teaching methods, LC group activities, and overall program structure.

References