

A Student's Guide to Civic Engagement

What is civic engagement, and why should you care?

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How did you get here?

Well, wait a minute. We should probably clarify that question. Save the philosophical discussions for your EIN credit. We're asking, simply, how you got to St. Olaf. You probably drove in on Highway 19, right? You came around that last curve and saw the wind turbine churning away, generating power for the buildings, just visible above the treeline. You passed the bright-blue sign for the hospital as your parents piloted an over-stuffed minivan up the hill. Pretty impressive stuff when you really sit and think about it - roads, buildings, hospitals, colleges, electrical power. And to think - someone built it all. But... you didn't build it, right?

Well, neither did we. We're students. We don't build these things. Or plan for them. Or design them. Or vote on them. Or pay taxes on any of it. But here we are using it all, just the same. Up until this point, our relationship with society has been pretty one-sided. We've been attending its schools, driving its roads, perusing its museums, visiting its parks. We've been eating FDA-approved foods and taking clean showers. But how have we contributed to this society that's provided us with so much?

Oh. Right. That one time when you volunteered at the nursing home. Never doing *that* again! And you're going to vote in the next election, right? Maybe? But even if you do make it to the polls for the next election, is that all it takes? Unfortunately, the answer is a resounding "no." To be engaged civically requires time and commitment. Unlike tomorrow's lunch plans, things like poverty, affordable health care, and housing can't be solved on Facebook or via text. It's hard to watch YouTube while you vote. It's difficult to keep a city park clean by Tweet alone.

The recent democratic revolutions in places like Libya and Egypt seem to indicate that social media can be a *component* of social activism. However, the real change in those countries came when young people took to the streets and *did* something to re-shape the world they lived in. Fortunately for us, our country has a built-in system for political and social action. The United States was founded on the idea of civic engagement - no violent revolution required (except, possibly, if Rebecca Black makes another music video). But just because participating in our society is possible doesn't mean that it's easy.

Perhaps you've got a head start on it. You've made that twenty minute trek into town and maybe even read a *Northfield News* or two. But why care about this place? Heck, we're only going to live here four years, and if you subtract the summers, it's more like three. Even less reason for us to care, right? Wrong. Because at some point after we've left the Hill we'll be moving somewhere else, and we'll be forced to ask the question: "What kind of community do I want to live in?" And, if we manage that, another question lies

just below the surface - “how do I build that community?”

These questions represent the core of what Civic Engagement is - figuring out how what we know, who we are, and what we learn can help shape the *world as it is* into the *world as it should be*.

What is It?

At St. Olaf there are a variety of courses that allow us to connect community needs with classroom learning. This is known as “Academic civic Engagement.” Fundamentally, Academic Civic Engagement (ACE) is learning that happens in a community context. In a course with an ACE curriculum, you’ll be asked to consider community experiences and issues in relation to your classroom learning. A civic engagement experience will consist of students and the community (read: people outside of the St. Olaf “bubble”) collaborating on a project. Ideally, this project benefits students by becoming an integral part of their coursework, while the community benefits by receiving a useful product or service. Some ACE projects ultimately produce educational materials, while others don’t involve a quantifiable “product,” but involve teaching concepts to local schools or conducting research on behalf of a community partner. Some ACE projects involve careful observation and listening attentively to voices beyond the campus. Sounds pretty good, right? But it’s not that easy. Every community comes with hidden challenges, and engaging in this way requires a commitment to others and a *passion* for the place you call home - for however short a time you’ll be living there.

“Civic passions” are the motivating factors behind successful civic engagement. In order to gain something, *really* gain something, from a collaboration, your energy and passion must come into play. These passions can begin with a cause or skill you’ve enjoyed your whole life. Perhaps you’re a techie with knowledge of audio or video production; you might be the person to record interviews with community members. Maybe you’re a former high-school journalist with expertise in interview skills. Or maybe you’re a budding social worker with an eye towards social equality, or someone who understands how statistics can be applied to real-world situations. In any case, Academic Civic Engagement involves bringing those skills and passions to your classroom and your community.

However, don’t think that passions and interests are only brought *into* civic engagement. We enter Northfield with our passions from home, but stepping into a new community leads to all sorts of chance encounters and an opportunity to develop new skills and interests. From carpenters with a zeal for their trade, to immigrants who beam with pride in their new home, to senior citizens who’ve voted in every election since the Great War, fascinating people and ideas lay just beyond the boundaries of St. Olaf - and perhaps, just outside our comfort zone. Civic Engagement only works if we put our passions and skills into conversation with the real world... and most importantly, if we have an open mind. You may discover that this community has a lot to share, and its stories may fascinate you.

What Does It Look Like?

Here are a few examples of Academic Civic Engagement projects - all undertaken by *real* St. Olaf students (not the ones in the admissions posters):

American Conversations 202 - In 2010, the sophomore American Conversations cohort took on the theme of “Globalization and Citizenship.” Students searched for the effects of globalism locally in NPR-style radio projects that ultimately included investigations of where their t-shirts came from, to the building of handmade musical instruments, to the journey of their morning coffee. The students made connections between Northfield and the global community through an understanding of the local economic and social ramifications of globalization. Community members selected for interviews were individuals with a passion for their hobbies or a specific cause; running the gamut from saving an ethanol plant to building hand-made instruments.

Political Science 350 - In 2011, the Immigration and Citizenship class met with over 30 community leaders to learn how diversity affects the community of Faribault - a city just fifteen miles south of Northfield and a microcosm of the national impact of increased immigration. With the United Way as a community partner, the conversation centered on Faribault’s growing population of immigrants and how this change challenges public services, community relations, and those who are new residents. With input from community members, students considered how Faribault’s discussion fits into a broader context of immigration in Minnesota.

Management Studies 229 - Students in the 2010 Arts Management class partnered with local non-profit organizations to both research possible sources of funding and write grants. The students wrote full working grants for everything from Northfield arts organizations to non-profit childcare providers, to a group that recycles and reclaims building materials. The grants provided the organizations with funding for daily operations, new initiatives, and web development. In turn, the students gained experience in non-profit management and fundraising.

Getting Ready

So how do you prepare for engagement (besides buying a ring)? The first thing you’ll need to consider is how the community perceives you as a college student. Just as we have pre-formed assumptions or expectations of the community, consider that they feel the same trepidation interacting with students. Some community members, for example, may assume students are entering Northfield to try to *fix* the community. But we’re not fixing. We’re figuring out how our interests or skills as students fit into a larger community need - a need much greater than us, but that we’re nonetheless a part of. We, in turn, must consider that we don’t have all the answers and that the community isn’t our civic engagement lab. Instead, the community has something to teach us; only by

listening and learning can we use our skills and energy to generate positive change.

On a similar note, many of us enter college with a litany of volunteer experiences. First and foremost, it's important to eliminate the mindset that civic engagement is simply "volunteer work." Volunteer work is wonderful, and now is probably a good time to apologize to anyone who has volunteered at a nursing home and enjoyed it (because those people do exist...or so we've heard). The message we're really trying to get across is that civic engagement is not a *one-time* interaction with the community. It's not about counting hours to fulfill the Honor Society quota or bolstering a CV for college admissions; we've already been accepted into the St. Olaf community. Now, we're becoming part of the Northfield community and citizens of the world. It's our turn to take an active role.

Go, Get On With It!

As you embark on civic engagement here at St. Olaf and elsewhere, consider a warning from one of the greats of social change, Myles Horton: "It is important to distinguish between this goal of freedom and self-governance and the goals of people who want only to 'Save the Whales' ... those aren't necessarily long-range social goals.... But the goals I'm talking about are ones that can never be reached. It's a direction, a concept of society that grows as you go along."

Sure, saving the whales is a worthy cause. Effective civic engagement, however, comes from having an open mind and taking action where action is needed most. Engaging in our communities can certainly be challenging and change is often slow to develop, but with an open-mind guiding these interactions, our commitment to community will only continue to deepen. And you know what? We've been told since Kindergarten that we're the "leaders of tomorrow." Cliche though that may be, somewhere between recess and the real world - we grew up. And that means that the power and responsibility of caring for our communities is ours.

So the next time you come around that last curve and see the wind turbine churning away, consider the power you're generating and how you can put that power into action.

Have you participated in a meaningful project? Please consider adding your own insight to prepare and orient curious students. Pick up where we left off. This guide, like your civic self, is always a work in progress.

Resources and Suggested Reading

Still have questions? We've picked out a few of the most helpful books on civic engagement (in our humble opinions). These books will provide you with additional ways to consider service, civic engagement, and social change.

"The Long Haul: An Autobiography"

Myles Horton, Judith Kohl, and Herbert R. Kohl. Teachers College Press. 1998. Print

This is the story of Myles Horton, labor organizer and founder of the Highlander Folk School. Throughout this autobiographical book, Horton describes his work with the school and his vision of a society based on equality, where every student has equal opportunity for educational advancement. Horton's focus is teaching collective action for social change, which makes him an ideal model for civically engaged students. This entire text is worthwhile reading, but if you're short on time, try these chapters: "One: Beginnings" p.1-12; "Six: The Beginnings of Highlander" p. 56-81; "Ten: Charisma" p.113-129; "Fifteen: One Battle, Many Fronts" p.175-192;"Twenty-One: The Future" p.226-228.

"Soul of a Citizen: Living with Conviction in Challenging Times"

Paul Rogat Loeb. St. Martin's Griffin. 2010. Print

This inspiring book presents a new model for engagement in social change. Loeb argues for a return to community involvement and social activism, and encourages Americans to take responsible action. After situating us in our present state of civic apathy, Loeb utilizes stories to illustrate how citizenship creates a remarkable sense of both spiritual and personal growth. Here are a few sections to pique your interest, but we encourage you to enjoy the entire book: "Learned Helplessness" p.31-33; "Living with Ambiguity" p. 59-61; "Virtual Villages" p. 213-219.

"Educating for Citizenship"

Caryn McTighe Musil (Peer Review, Association of American Colleges and Universities, Spring 2003)

The learning spurred by civic engagement requires a certain amount of self-reflection. Musil presents six phases of citizenship that characterize common civic attitudes. Many of these "civic faces" are negative, and Musil challenges students to avoid viewing the world from a single vantage point. The phases of citizenship: exclusionary, oblivious, naive, charitable, reciprocal, and generative, are all described in detail, and outlined in terms of community perception. Take a look and see if you fit the stereotypes.

"The Irony of Service"

Keith Morton (Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning, Fall 1995, P. 19-32)

As a counterpoint to Musil, Morton argues that service exists on a continuum, not a progression. He divides service into three categories: charity, project-based, and social change. He argues that this is not a ladder of service or civic engagement, where one moves from charity to social change, but rather that more effective service comes from deeper and deeper commitments within one of these paradigms. To make his case, Morton uses a student survey, interviews, and a critique of other theories.