

Civic Engagement at the Intersection of Pedagogy and Community: Liberal Learning in Action Turns Four

By Greg Bierly and Nancy Brattain Rogers

Abstract

At Indiana State University, students confront civic realities through experiences provided within the Liberal Learning in Action classes. This program empowers students to make connections between community issues and the tools of “liberal learning,” including critical analysis, appreciation of diversity and a strengthened ability to reflect and articulate. This article provides an overview of the design and scope of the program, followed by a detailed examination of evidence relating program outcomes to civic engagement.

Indiana State University has recently embarked on a multi-pronged strategy to more effectively engage students in their academic experience while simultaneously providing an array of human services to the city of Terre Haute and the surrounding region of western Indiana (Bierly, Rogers, and Snider 2006). These two objectives, academic and community-based, coalesce around the common core of student knowledge, disposition and values that we associate with civic engagement. This engagement leads to greater participation in public life among adherents, including advocacy on behalf of other constituencies and collaboration in projects that benefit a common good. Ideally, students bring their academic experience and expertise to bear on civic issues and draw stronger connections between their curriculum and the realities of their community and the larger world.

At Indiana State University, one way for students to confront civic realities is through key experiences provided within classes under the Liberal Learning in Action (LLA) program. The LLA program, funded by the Lilly Endowment, empowers faculty to make far-reaching connections between community issues and the tools of “liberal learning”—the processes of thinking that liberate the mind, such as critical analysis, appreciation of diversity and a strengthened ability to reflect and articulate. Faculty submit proposals that undergo a competitive review process. Projects that best combine innovative pedagogy with demonstrable learning and maximum positive impact in the community are selected for funding. Participation by faculty and students in the LLA program ranges across programs as diverse as history to music, political science to geology.

The Center for Public Service and Community Engagement (CPSCE) has compiled an initial data set of these experiences, including such metrics as number and level of students involved, learning skills acquired, and specific civic and community benefits accrued through the program. In development of these metrics, we followed commonly established goals for service-learning, liberal education and civic engagement (Bringle, Phillips, and Hudson 2004, Battistoni 2002, Gelmon et al. 2001) as well as the established criteria of our general education program. We have also designed measures to assess the level of contribution of each LLA project to specific aspects of civic engagement, such as subsequent student involvement and tendency to recruit/enlist others in community discussions and initiatives. In addition to this short-term quantitative data set, a gradual accumulation of qualitative data has been assembled via project reports, comprising testimony from students, faculty and community leaders about the projects' strengths, impacts and areas for improvement.

In this paper, we will discuss and attempt to measure the relative impact of ISU's LLA programs on students' civic engagement. We will provide an overview of the design and scope of the programs, followed by a detailed examination of evidence collected to date relating program outcomes to civic engagement.

The Liberal Learning in Action Program

Liberal Learning in Action was implemented during the spring semester of 2004 as part of Focus Indiana, a project to increase economic opportunities for college graduates, that was funded through the Lilly Endowment's Initiative to Promote Opportunity Through Educational Collaborations. The purpose of Focus Indiana is to support opportunities for Indiana State University graduates through the strategic placement of interns in the profit, nonprofit and public sectors and development of discipline-related applied learning initiatives. These activities better prepare students for professional positions and to contribute to the economic development of Indiana. Specific goals of the program are to:

1. Increase the number of ISU students completing internships in Indiana.
2. Support economic, cultural and social development through the development and placement of internships in underserved areas, including west-central Indiana and the counties served by the South Central Indiana Education Association and College Cooperative Southeast.
3. Actively engage ISU alumni in the development of experiential learning opportunities, including internships.
4. Develop internships in entrepreneurial organizations and potential growth industries in the state, as well as mission-driven organizations that are creatively meeting the human, social and cultural needs of the state.
5. Challenge academic units to identify and develop programs that contribute directly to students' professional development, statewide economic development, and the creation of economic opportunities for ISU graduates.

LLA was designed as a program to help academic units meet Goal 5 of the Focus Indiana initiative. The purpose of LLA is to support development of experiential, community based initiatives that allow students to improve the quality of life in the community. Selection and subsequent review of projects is shared between the CPSCE and the Office of General Education. Preference is given to projects that provide students with the opportunity to work directly with a community organization or engage in other activities that exemplify how deep interest in improving the public good can lead to a vocation and allow students to develop professional skills. Technical assistance is available from the CPSCE for participants in the program.

Data and Analysis

Quantitative Data

During the period of academic years spanning 2004-2005 through 2007-2008, the LLA program has funded fifty-two projects dedicated to the integration of student learning and community issues. Quantitative data for this paper were extracted from project file narratives for the following variables:

- Number of Proposals: Simple proposal count
- Number of Students: Number of student participants in a particular project or category
- Academic Field: Generalized discipline or academic area (Arts and Comm = all art-based disciplines, literature, humanities, communication; Education; Human Performance = health, human performance, nursing; Natural Science = physical and life sciences; Social Science; Technology). Disciplines not listed were not represented in our sample.
- Liberal Learning Element: Aspects of liberal education, including critical thinking, social awareness/ethics, appreciation of diversity, communication skills, appreciation of artistic complexity.
- Level of Community Engagement: The community engagement literature (Hashagen 2002) suggests several increasing levels of engagement via community interaction, from informing or educating the community (least engaged) to community-initiated projects (most engaged).
- Civic Engagement Element: Recognized aspects of civic engagement (Battistoni 2002): Major issues addressed by activity, volunteerism, organizational preparation for civic activity, recruitment of others into civic activity, involvement in the electoral process, subsequent life change (e.g., increased awareness, involvement) incurred by activity.

Each proposal (alongside its student numbers) was subjected to a binary classification for the above elements (did incorporate the element, did not incorporate the element). The data are presented in tabular form, calculated as percentages where useful.

Results and Discussion

The LLA program has funded fifty-two proposals in its initial four years, with 2,350 student participants (Tables 1 and 2). Notably, social science proposals account for nearly half of the proposals funded (Table 1) and student involvement in these activities (Table 2). Education, natural science and technology contributions to this program lag those of other disciplines in terms of student participants (Table 2). Participation by faculty in the arts and particularly the Department of Communication has remained a steady contribution to the LLA program. Notable, although the number of proposals submitted by participants in the area of Health and Human Performances is relatively small, a large number of students have been engaged in these projects.

Table 1: Number of Proposals

<i>Academic Field</i>	<i>Number of proposals</i>	<i>Percentage proposals</i>
Arts and Comm.	12	23.1
Education	5	9.6
Human Performance	5	9.6
Natural Science	6	11.6
Social Science	23	44.2
Technology	1	1.9
All Fields	52	100

Table 2: Student Participation in LLA Projects

<i>Academic Field</i>	<i>Number of students</i>	<i>Percentage of students</i>
Arts and Comm.	292	12.4
Education	137	5.8
Human Performance	555	23.6
Natural Science	110	4.7
Social Science	1241	52.8
Technology	15	0.7
All Fields	2350	100

An examination of liberal learning components by volume of activity and by discipline reveals that social awareness and enhanced communication skills (both learning components that are allied with civic engagement) are strongly represented in proposals and student participants (Tables 3 and 4). Thirty-four and thirty-six proposals engaged students in increased social awareness and the development of communication skills, respectively (Table 3), while 1,584 and 1,618 student participants were challenged with these specific learning elements. Interestingly, although related to social awareness, explicit diversity content was a much smaller component of total projects and participants. Finally, critical thinking was a significant component of the liberal learning required in projects from most disciplines, whereas the appreciation of art was poorly represented and confined to discipline-specific grants (Tables 3 and 4).

Table 3: Number of Proposals by Liberal Learning Element

<i>Academic Field</i>	<i>Critical Thinking</i>	<i>Social Awareness</i>	<i>Diversity</i>	<i>Communication Skills</i>	<i>Appreciation of Arts</i>
Arts and Comm.	3	6	2	8	5
Education	1	3	0	5	0
Human Performance	2	2	0	5	0
Natural Science	4	1	0	5	0
Social Science	4	22	5	13	0
Technology	1	0	1	0	0
All Fields	15	34	8	36	5

Table 4: Student Involvement by Liberal Learning Element

<i>Academic Field</i>	<i>Critical Thinking</i>	<i>Social Awareness</i>	<i>Diversity</i>	<i>Communication Skills</i>	<i>Appreciation of Arts</i>
Arts and Comm.	75	180	75	205	97
Education	15	92	0	137	0
Human Performance	80	80	0	555	0
Natural Science	61	6	0	100	0
Social Science	435	1226	246	621	0
Technology	15	0	15	0	0
All Fields	681	1584	336	1618	97

The LLA program is dedicated to learning that is fostered through engagement of the community. When measured by the levels of engagement suggested by Hashagen (2002), the LLA program is tilted slightly toward an intermediate amount of engagement, with residents having limited influence on project design or outcomes (Tables 5 and 6). While a large percentage of proposals allowed for some form of community influence in the project (48.1 percent), there were considerably fewer activities that involve community members in planning (13.5 percent) or were actually initiated by community partners (9.6 percent) (Table 5). Over 28 percent of projects engaged the community at a largely one-way informational or educational level only (Table 5). When viewed through the lens of student participants, engagement measures improve toward better collaboration, because the higher order engagement projects involve larger numbers of students.

Table 5: Number of Proposals by Level of Community Engagement

<i>Academic Field</i>	<i>Residents informed of project</i>	<i>Residents influence project</i>	<i>Residents share planning</i>	<i>Residents initiate project</i>
Arts and Comm.	5	5	2	0
Education	3	1	1	0
Human Performance	0	4	1	0
Natural Science	3	1	2	0
Social Science	4	13	1	5
Technology	0	1	0	0
All Fields	15	25	7	5
Percentage of All Proposals	28.8	48.1	13.5	9.6

Table 6: Student Involvement by Level of Community Engagement

<i>Academic Field</i>	<i>Residents informed of project</i>	<i>Residents influence project</i>	<i>Residents share planning</i>	<i>Residents initiate project</i>
Arts and Comm.	77	135	80	0
Education	92	30	0	15
Human Performance	0	24	541	20
Natural Science	55	24	0	0
Social Science	140	766	70	230
Technology	0	15	0	0
All Fields	364	994	691	265

Finally, when elements specific to civic engagement are considered, the LLA program presents a mixed picture. While all proposals identified issues central to civic engagement, only 36.5 percent actually addressed the issue through project activities (Table 7). Correspondingly, only 1,028 students (of 2,350) were involved in the solution of an identified issue through their participation in the program (Table 8). Organizational activity and volunteerism were modestly represented in project activities and involved student numbers comparable to those that were likely to demonstrate lasting changes in their civic-mindedness as a result of the projects' resolution of issues. Slightly fewer proposals and significantly fewer students were engaged in recruitment activities. Finally, the LLA projects in our sample were nearly bereft of any involvement in the electoral process (with the exception of a single project with extremely high student participation).

Table 7: Number of Proposals by Civic Engagement Element

<i>Academic Field</i>	<i>Issues addressed</i>	<i>Volun- teerism</i>	<i>Organi- zation</i>	<i>Electoral issues</i>	<i>Recruit- ment</i>	<i>Subsequent change</i>
Arts and Comm.	1	0	1	0	0	1
Education	4	0	0	0	0	0
Human Performance	3	3	3	0	3	1
Natural Science	2	0	0	0	0	2
Social Science	9	7	10	1	4	6
Technology	0	0	0	0	0	0
All Fields	19	10	14	1	7	10
Percentage of all Proposals	36.5	19.2	26.9	1.9	13.5	19.2

Table 8: Student Involvement by Civic Engagement Element

<i>Academic Field</i>	<i>Issues addressed</i>	<i>Volun- teerism</i>	<i>Organi- zation</i>	<i>Electoral issues</i>	<i>Recruit- ment</i>	<i>Subsequent change</i>
Arts and Comm.	35	0	45	0	0	35
Educatio	107	0	0	0	0	0
Human Performance	510	510	510	0	510	0
Natural Science	25	0	0	0	0	25
Social Science	351	435	650	265	120	195
Technology	0	0	0	0	0	0
All Fields	1028	945	1205	265	630	255

Qualitative Data

Finally, we attempted to glean additional evidence of the civic engagement contribution of the LLA program through qualitative examination of the final project reports submitted by grantees. These reports are intended to summarize and assess the success of funded projects.

Comments from students in a Department of Physical Education project centered on childhood obesity indicate a sense of personal growth and sense of connection to community through project activities. One states, “I realized how much I enjoyed helping to coordinate the event and would love to help coordinate future events. This was an eye-opener for me into a career I would not have thought to be so fun and rewarding.” Another adds, “I have been in Terre Haute for going on three years, and I have never really had all that much one-on-one interaction with the community. I have lived on a college campus, in which, it seems that the university has become its own small community. This experience helped me to realize some of the characteristics of the outside community, where further service could be needed or continued, what some of the town’s overall interests are, and so much more.” A student in a Women’s Studies project observes, “This was the first time I had ever participated in an activist event. I must admit that this has been a life-altering experience. It has not only taught me about myself, but it has also contributed to the betterment of my future person.”

Students in a sociology project noted that it was hard to feel that they were making a difference in the world at that particular point in their lives, but that the LLA project activities had given them a sense that their contribution mattered. One notes, "...we were pleased with our hard work...we looked at it not as competing...but as a team of classmates....it is important to know that we could make a difference in this world."

A Department of Philosophy project challenged students to write letters to the editor of the local newspaper on community issues that concerned them. Students expressed excitement at this opportunity to consider and articulate their views on matters beyond their academic experience. Some students came to a realization that engagement in civic life was critical for their own well-being as well as that of others. One student in a Women's Studies project notes that the project "taught me the importance of giving back to the community and helped me to understand that having a fulfilled life does not happen without giving back."

Many of the projects gave students new insights on the political and social systems in which they function. A project in the Department of Social Work that examined regional poverty found students astonished at what they perceived as the "ridiculous" bureaucracy, complexity and paperwork in social services. They also were moved by the difficult lives of those with whom they interacted, to a degree that they were encouraged to become more involved in understanding the power structure of government.

With regard to the Liberal Learning in Action project that funded collaboration between an oceanography class and community partners to establish and maintain an aquarium in the science building, Dr. Tony Rathburn notes, "A new collaboration with Inland Aquatics in Terre Haute provided a unique opportunity for students interested in science and/or education to be involved in the development of exciting educational and community outreach products...Liberal learning was facilitated, in part, through development of written and oral communication skills, critical thinking skills (through the design and implementation of demonstrations and experiments), experiential learning with the aquarium and in professional settings (local schools and Inland Aquatics), and involvement in community education. This project linked educational outreach with community involvement and liberal learning." Students were powerfully engaged by this experience. Via post project assessment, a strong majority responded positively to questions about improvement in communication skills, increased computer skills, enhanced class learning, and increased appreciation of marine science. When asked if they planned to use/apply the information they learned in class in future classes (teaching others, volunteer work, job, other courses), 79 percent agreed or agreed strongly.

The overall benefits to the students in Dr. Debra Worley's project, which allowed students to develop public relations strategies for six clients, were numerous. They included "the opportunity to negotiate the relationship with the client; determine the needs of the client organization; and develop a comprehensive strategic planning document that will be utilized (if not in total, at least in part) by a real community organization.

“The students provide their services to these clients...learn effective team skills...learn the essential communication necessary to negotiate with a client. The students also have opportunities to implement some of the strategies and tactics during the semester.”

Dr. Worley states, “The relationships between the clients and me are long-lasting and invaluable. The network that I have developed in the last five years with a number of not-for-profit organizations in Terre Haute and Vigo County has been the direct result of work by students in Communications 470. These relationships continue to grow and develop in exciting, often unpredictable, but always positive, ways.”

Finally, faculty participants in the LLA program attest to professional growth through the process. One faculty member describes his experience: “I learned some important lessons from conducting this project. While the project provided a summative and effective way of integrating course content while highlighting experiential learning and community engagement, at the same time, having supervised the project, I now realize that students need even more preparation in order to conduct the interviews effectively. They also need additional preparation in linking experience with course content. I also realize that managing this kind of project requires an investment of more time than more traditional styles of learning, while it also requires a strong and able community partner. I was fortunate to work with the community partner, whose participation was critical to the success of this project.”

Conclusion

Students, faculty and community members have benefited from projects funded by the Liberal Learning in Action program. The cursory analysis of project outcomes described in this study reveals a number of partial successes, in the areas of liberal education, community engagement and civic engagement.

A quantitative analysis of projects to date indicates that the educational benefit is strongest in the development of social awareness and the improvement of student communication skills. Other liberal education goals were less likely to be accrued, particular those pertaining to an understanding of the arts.

The LLA projects most typically provide for some community involvement in their development and execution, but most do not feature a truly engaged partnership with community participants. Conversely, the number of one-way (driven primarily from the university side) projects is relatively small in our sample, indicating a level of maturity associated the concept of engagement at Indiana State University.

Civic engagement receives moderate emphasis through the LLA program when the quantitative data are considered, with only the element of issues identified and addressed occurring in more than a third of proposals. Electoral issues are virtually absent in the explicit narratives of our funded projects.

When student testimony from project reports is considered, the level of civic engagement attained appears higher than that suggested by quantitative analysis of project narratives. In particular students demonstrated attitudinal change, from a relatively naïve, inward-looking mindset to a more mature outlook, appreciative of the complexity of human systems. Students seemed convinced of the importance and effectiveness of activism and organizational involvement. Perhaps most importantly, they began to connect their activity and attentiveness to their community with its greater well-being.

At Indiana State University, our commitment to integrating our academic activities with community and civic issues continues to grow and deepen. It is our hope that, with sustained efforts to assess the quality of programs such as LLA, we can better attune our institutional goals to the needs of the community.

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