

Since the 1990s, national education groups, educational institutions, local communities, and academics have renewed the call for civic involvement, specifically advocating for increased civic engagement in the college experience (Boyte & Hollander, 1999; Colby, Beaumont, Ehrlich, & Corngold 2007; Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont, & Stephens, 2003; Ehrlich, 2000; Jacoby, 2009). In *A Crucible Moment: College Learning & Democracy's Future*, a national taskforce argued that “massive” investments needed to be made in “higher education’s capacity to renew this nation’s social, intellectual, and civic capital” (National Task Force 2012a, 2). The report highlighted the American Association of Colleges and Universities’ Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP) essential learning outcomes and high-impact educational practices, which among other related outcomes and practices included a clear call for “personal and social responsibility,” “civic knowledge and engagement,” and “community-based learning” (National Task Force, 2012). A 2012 analysis of core competencies in civic engagement found 68 active majors, minors, or certificate programs in civic or community engagement, and all twenty-three of those programs that shared learning outcomes identified civic knowledge and civic skills as foundational to their programs (Brammer et al., 2012). At the same time, the AAC&U (2012), the American Democracy Project (2012), the National Conference on Citizenship (2012) as well as individual scholars (e.g. Gotlieb & Robinson 2002; Stokamer 2011) have identified key practices for engaging students effectively and productively in community-based learning.

Focus on developing and implementing civic engagement courses utilizing community-based learning requires accompanying attention to methods to assess student outcomes in such courses and programs. Published articles predominantly reflect semester-based assessments of courses and programs, but little work has been done on longitudinal outcomes. Large scale

studies have documented the development of skills and civic attitude changes as a result of undergraduate student involvement in the community, whether volunteer work (Astin and Sax, 1998; Astin, Sax, and Avalos, 1999; Denson, Vogelgesang, and Saenz, 2005; Humphries, 2011) or course-based civic engagement delivered via service-learning (Vogelgesang and Alexander, 2000; Astin et al., 2000; Keen and Hall, 2008; Keen and Hall, 2009). The studies also show that in both volunteer and course-based community engagement, students gain the most from civic experiences that directly tie to the course material and include opportunities for student reflection. Hurtado and DeAngelo (2012) found that institutional value on service and diversity combined with civic-minded faculty resulted in enhanced student ratings on civic knowledge and abilities.¹

In a review of research on service-learning programs, Kirlin (2002) noted that the data suggests attitudinal (compassion and interest in civic engagement) rather than real behavioral changes (actual community involvement). Kirlin proposed that one reason for lack of behavioral changes might be program design emphasizing service rather than the development of civic skills. In response to this concern, Zaff, J., Boyd, M., Li, Y., Lerner, J., & Lerner, R. (2010) argued that “The absence of productive outcomes of action does not mean that the individual is an ineffective citizen.”

The dearth of post-graduation studies of college impact leaves many unanswered questions about actual outcomes and the overall value of specific programs, such as community-based education. Pascallera et al. (2005) noted that while individual practices and programs have been studied in the short-term, the long-term influences of civic engagement remain unknown,

¹ A number of studies utilize survey instruments from Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at the University of California–Los Angeles. The instruments are widely utilized by a variety of colleges as part of the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP). CIRP surveys contain a rich set of measures

prompting his (Pascallera 2006) call for more longitudinal research. As Pryor declared generally: “We really don’t know much about the long-term impact of college.”

In service-learning, the few studies of student community involvement and attitudes and behavior have utilized course or program assessment surveys, HERI survey results from a number of instruments, and GPA comparison. Most of these studies examine the College Senior Survey or another end-of-senior-year assessment and do not contain post-graduation data. Only one study, Keen and Hall (2009), supplemented college-survey data with alumni-focus groups.

Exploring alumni data presents a number of difficulties. The scarcity of studies makes it challenging to determine which methods are the most effective and efficient to pursue. The large national studies draw upon a number of data sets from HERI instruments (SIF, CSS, LACS), GPA comparisons, and internal college-wide or program-wide surveys for which the survey questions are not available. In these large, multi-method studies, discerning which methods were most valuable in the assessment is difficult. Those conducting the research also have access to large populations as well as cumulative data sets from HERI, which are not readily assessable for most faculty and institutions, even those with institutional appropriate institutional research resources. More broadly, the institutional response rates and results of college HERI surveys create challenges for significance and generalizability. Alumni surveys often have even lower response rates; in in a survey of over 790 students, Keen and Hall (2009) received only 40 alumni responses, a response rate of five percent.

An explicit mission and enactment of preparing students for civic life requires an accompanying assessment of longitudinal influences that can be undertaken by individual colleges, programs, and instructors. In order to determine which methods were best for analyzing a program in community-based learning in civic engagement, we sought to utilize a

number of longitudinal assessment methods to determine the most effective and efficient ways to assess the influence of a specific civic engagement course with a community-based project. This manuscript reports on one portion of the study—alumni survey results.

The Course in Civic Engagement

Fall of 2007, the Department of Communication Studies at Gustavus Adolphus College² implemented Public Discourse, a class in public advocacy with a semester-long community-based practicum in civic engagement. As a requirement for the communication studies and elementary education majors and a general education elective, the course is designed to enroll first year students. As the replacement for the department's public speaking course, Public Discourse emphasizes public speaking, argument, critical thinking, persuasion, and research. The main objectives are to prepare students for meaningful civic life and provide instruction and hone skills in argument and advocacy. The course material is applied through a semester-long, community-based civic engagement project, which requires each student to directly engage with a community.

For the project, students choose an issue in a community of which they are a part, research it fully, weigh alternatives for addressing the issue, and ultimately in concert the community take action to address the issue.³ Two sequenced research reports require students to complete extensive research prior to determining how best to address the issue. On the basis of that research, students complete a number of assignments, including two significant in-class speeches, an action proposal that provides rationale for the best way to address the issue in the

² Gustavus Adolphus College is a private four-year liberal arts institution located in St. Peter, Minnesota.

³ Public Discourse utilizes community-based learning. The project was intentionally created to emphasize students acting as individual citizens within communities of which they are a part. As students individually identify issues within their communities and create their own network of community connections, it does not fit most common definitions of service-learning (Jacoby, 1996).

community, take action in the community to address the issue, and reflect on their project and their growth during the course. The sequenced assignments deliberately prepare students to work collaboratively to take appropriate action in the community. Recent student projects include presenting a plan to a city council to address E. coli in a large regional lake, developing a partnership between a local high school and a university to provide an intensive intercultural training module in a school beset by racially-charged incidents, testifying to a state legislative committee in support of a bill to better regulate alcohol on party buses, and creating a sustainable plan to provide communication technology to a school for autistic youth.

In previous research, a comparison of Public Discourse to Public Speaking (the course it replaced) demonstrated that Public Discourse students had significant gains in argument skills and increased interest in future civic engagement (Brammer & Wolter, 2008). In other assessments, Public Discourse students significantly reduced communication apprehension and developed leadership skills in comparison to a control group of peers not enrolled in the course (Brammer & Wolter, 2010a, 2010b). An analysis of student papers and focus group discussions found that as a result of the course students developed a sophisticated understanding of civic engagement, empowerment, and a desire to continue to be involved in their communities (Brammer & Morton, 2014).

In every assessment, students have enthusiastically, earnestly, and at length commented upon their personal growth, application of skills they learned to other courses, and desire to be involved in their communities. After seven years, the course has an alumni population that can be studied longitudinally to determine whether and how their experience in Public Discourse shaped the rest of their time in college and their post-college lives.

Method

As a small program with limited resources, we turned to assessment methods that could be easily and efficiently used. Despite the gap in literature, a desire to focus on the alumni experience and a vibrant institutional and department connection with alumni convinced the researchers to pursue alumni surveys as one option for assessment.

The study group was alumni of Public Discourse at Gustavus Adolphus College. From 2008-2013, over 400 students who completed Public Discourse graduated. In the study, we also included alumni who graduated between 2005-2010 and had the former Public Speaking course, as it provided a critical point of comparison (course material was similar, the main difference is the emphasis on civic engagement and the significant community-based project).⁴

Based in the HERI Life After College Survey, the researchers crafted an alumni survey that asked questions about potential outcomes related to civic engagement and long-term growth. The survey was sent to both former Public Speaking students and Public Discourse students. The response rate was 17 percent for Public Speaking and 18 for Public Discourse. The survey included space for alumni to write about individual experiences and outcomes; questions included: “what knowledge, skills, and/or attitudes” were gained in the course, “what learning continues to be meaningful in present life,” and “what else would you like to share?” Forty-eight Public Discourse alumni responses were six and on-half pages versus ten and one-half pages for ninety-one Public Speaking alumni. While more pages, the Public Speaking alumni responses were very similar in nature. The narrative results were coded and analyzed for themes. Responses from Public Speaking alumni fell easily into four categories, while Public Discourse alumni responses fell into six main themes, with a number of subthemes for each.

⁴ The department began teaching Public Discourse in fall 2007. Students in prior semesters took Public Speaking. Students who took Public Speaking as first year students in academic year 2006-2007 graduated in 2010.

Based on the data drawn from the surveys, the researchers explored additional questions through alumni focus groups. In attempting to determine the best practices for alumni focus groups, the researchers engaged alumni in both group and individual interviews and utilized both in-person and online settings. In total, twelve alumni participated in three group and six individual interviews. The focus groups provided clarification and added depth to the outcomes described in the narrative data.

Public Speaking Themes

Ninety-one Public Speaking alumni responses concentrated on four themes—public speaking skills, confidence, the application of the course, and negative reactions to the course content or experience.

In their written responses, most alumni articulated that they had learned general skills—“verbal and nonverbal techniques and tools” and “public speaking skills.” A few alumni spoke directly to structure/organization, specific nonverbal communication (tone, body language, gestures), preparation, and articulation. Elements such as argument, audience, and persuasion were not as commonly mentioned. Specific quotations include: “Preparing and giving speeches during this class has helped develop my public speaking skills and self confidence for other public speaking opportunities that I encountered;” “An ability to speak off the cuff and watch my tone, content, and body language while teaching;” and “Effectively organizing my thoughts and beliefs into a compelling narrative/message.”

Within the public speaking skills, alumni reported an increased ability for and appreciation of being concise and clear in their communication. Two alumni specifically noted, “Brevity is key. Whether in writing or speaking, less is always more. The ability to speak and

write concisely while still conveying a complete message is invaluable” and “[I] gained the ability to concisely form my thoughts and sell myself successfully in an interview.”

Public Speaking alumni also wrote about gains in confidence and comfort in public speaking. Many contended that becoming more confident and comfortable in speaking was the central gain from the course. Two longer quotations summarize the general theme of confidence for the public speaking group: “Confidence is key. Always portray confidence, and that can carry you through a variety of circumstances. The ability to speak in front of a group/crowd is rare, and I was glad to further that ability,” and “The skill that I found to be most useful was the ability to overcome my fear of speaking publicly.... I became more confident and now I consider myself to be one of the better public speakers in my cohort.”

Along with gains in skills and confidence, a few alumni specifically spoke to how valuable and applicable these gains were in their lives beyond college. Again, two quotations encapsulate how the public speaking alumni spoke to specific career functions for public speaking: “I present workshops to area teachers on a fairly regular basis—I am comfortable and at ease in front of others, partly because of experiences during my public speaking course,” and “I didn’t like to give speeches before taking public speaking. Now I get up in front of groups all the time to train them on different functions of their jobs.”

Although most Public Speaking respondents listed gains in skills and confidence, eleven reported few if any gains or little appreciation for the course content. Common words were: “bland,” “basic,” “simple,” and “formulaic.” Sample comments were: “The course that I took did little to improve my life. It was not a challenge in terms of a liberal arts education. It was a means to cover a requirement;” “To be honest, I don’t think that my Public Speaking course was as engaging as it should have probably been. It was pretty bland and straightforward;” and “I

know my comments and ratings are harsh but I remember Public Speaking being the second weakest part of an otherwise great educational experience.” Others commented that the course lacked connection to society and termed it not “civic minded.” One negative comment suggested the course be made more engaging because “[a]fter all, isn't that a goal of the course—to help us be more comfortable and try to improve our public speaking skills?” Whether respondents provided positive or negative feedback, they all made it clear that the primary goal of the course had been to improve public speaking.

Public Discourse Themes

Public Discourse narrative responses were drawn from 49 unique individual responses comprising 50 pages of data. The researchers determined themes by first listing responses that were repeated at least four times, and then arranging those responses under headings for larger themes (for example, preparation for public speaking was placed under the public speaking skills sub-theme, while preparation for large assignments was placed under the professional skills theme).

Create Change/Make a Difference

Public Discourse alumni focused on how the skills they learned played a role in seeing themselves as citizens who are capable of and responsible for creating change in their communities.

Survey respondents who took Public Discourse described how the course taught them that they as individuals have the ability to create change and make a difference. They discussed the shift in perspective that occurred during the course: “It opened my eyes to see and really think of community issues and what I could do to help. I never would have thought I could do anything to make a difference in my community and how appreciative people could be of it” and

“Public Discourse taught me that through hard work, and great persuasive skills that even a 19-year old kid can make significant improvements in their community.” One student described how this perspective developed organically through the course: “The course was a nice progression, going from the history and study of rhetoric to how we can create change in contemporary society. One of the most memorable aspects of the course was seeing all of my classmates’ civic engagement projects. It opened my eyes to the number of different ways one can make a difference in the world.”

Responses indicated that this perspective has remained strong for Public Discourse alumni: “It gave me the confidence and advocacy skills necessary to create change” and “I realized that as an individual I can make a difference.” Another respondent expressed that “the most important knowledge that I gained through Public Discourse is that my thoughtful actions can make a difference.”

One respondent contended that her Public Discourse experience taught “the importance of advocacy in my community and fighting for change; I had more influence and power in my community than I thought I did.” Others said that they were able to “recognize injustices in my community” and “identify inequality in the community (however small or large it is).” While recognizing and actively challenging injustice is not a specific component of the Public Discourse curriculum, former students indicate that it was interwoven with the process of identifying and enacting change.

Survey responses show that Public Discourse alumni did not simply leave the course feeling as if they had the **ability** to act – they left feeling as if it was their distinct **responsibility** to do so. For example, former students said: “I strongly believe that if there is something out there I wish to change, I can and should take action rather than simply complain or wish it was

different” and “If I feel that something needs to be improved, I need to do something about it.”

One quotation encompasses this theme of civic responsibility: “Public Discourse helped me recognize that when I care about an issue, it's my responsibility to do something about it. Playing an active role in my community is my responsibility as a citizen and I have no right to complain about something if I am not willing to be part of a solution in some way.” As another former student noted, the course “teaches students to step up and care about their community and to take a good hard look at how it can be improved.”

Personal Initiative

In the responses, a strong theme of personal initiative is present. Some respondents specifically described this theme. For others, it emerged through their stories of acting in their communities. For example, as one former student commented, “For the first time in my life, I realized that I had the power to speak up, take action, and make change when I saw an injustice or a problem in my community.” The respondents’ comments regarding personal initiative are best explained in terms of motivation, overcoming challenges, and seeking answers.

Empowerment

Many alumni expressed that Public Discourse helped them to develop an internal drive to act. Several used words like “empowerment” or “passion” to describe this. One student said: “I think one of the best things I gained from the Public Discourse class is the understanding that intrinsic motivation and self-empowerment are hugely important to activism.” Many alumni explained that learning how to take initiative began with the opportunity to invest in a project they cared about. A respondent wrote: “I think the course really made me evaluate what was important to me and forced me to problem solve a way to address issues that I was passionate about.” When reflecting on the project, one former student contended “Public Discourse

empowered me to take action in my community.” One respondent summed up the experience, “You don’t need to wait for an organization to be formed or to invite you to join to make a difference; you can simply isolate a problem, organize and create a solution, and implement it, not necessarily on your own, but with your own initiative.” With a sense of empowerment and passion for a cause, former students indicate that they were better able to face and overcome obstacles.

Overcoming Challenges

In an involved civic engagement project, students often have tough conversations with community members, deal with the possibility of rejection, and grapple with unpredictable schedules. Public Discourse alumni described the long-term benefits of facing community involvement that pushed them outside of their comfort zone.

A former student explained the relationship between empowerment and challenges, stating that the class provided “the ability to be self-motivating and take an idea and run with it—no matter the boundaries.” Other alumni elaborated on the boundaries they overcame. One stated “age is only a barrier if you make it one,” while another wrote “Public Discourse improved my ability and comfort level when talking to people with authority over me.” Alumni indicated that they developed important skills when they took these steps outside of their comfort zone. One respondent discussed that they gained “the confidence to tackle a project without a lot of prior knowledge and know-how. It encouraged me to take risks and be ready to react along the way.” Another remarked on the value of “dealing with being forced out of comfort zone and developing adaptability.”

In addition, some respondents expressed how challenging experiences required them to use their voice. One said: “most of all, my self-confidence was also boosted by stepping out of

my comfort zone and letting my voice be heard.” For one respondent, stepping up and using their voice after college had not always been easy, but a foundation in Public Discourse provided increased courage:

Never forget that you have a voice, and let that voice be heard. In the corporate world there have been times where I have sat back in the face of injustice—I think that Public Discourse helps you to become more aware of your surroundings. There will be several points in your corporate career where you can decide to take action—this is what Public Discourse can give you the strength to do.

Empowerment and ability to face challenges also found their way into responses that discussed a curiosity and desire to know more about issues and community processes.

Seeking Answers

Responses also illustrated that Public Discourse taught former students to move beyond acceptance and use passion and empowerment to seek answers to problems. Alumni described lessons they learned such as: “asserting myself and learning how to ask tough questions to get the answers I want” and “to challenge the norms and never settle for an answer if you’re not satisfied.” A former student elaborated on the need to ask questions and better understand complex local and global issues: “An attitude that I began to acquire in Public Discourse was an attitude of curiosity—asking what is really going on out in the world, be it across the street or across the ocean, and then being mobile enough and assertive enough to find out.”

Alumni responses on personal initiative in empowerment, overcoming challenges, and seeking answers were often paired with the importance of community collaboration.

Community Collaboration

Former Public Discourse students described how the course taught them significant lessons in community collaboration. They explained how completing a long-term civic

engagement project gave them the opportunity to network, build relationships, develop a sense of belonging, and gain knowledge of a local community.

Many alumni identified “networking and making connections” as a key skill that they gained from Public Discourse. For example, one wrote about the lesson of “connecting to community resources.” For another, lessons in community networking came through “understanding how various organizations work and how to leverage that understanding.” Alumni explained networking outcomes as both professionally and personally beneficial. Therefore, when former students reflected on their Public Discourse experience, they not only expressed that they were able to construct a network, but they also described a strong investment in the community network with which they engaged.

Many Public Discourse alumni wrote about forging meaningful community relationships as a large part of their experience. One former Public Discourse student commented: “I think getting to know and understand community partners was very important.” Another expressed that these relationships pointed to “the power of speaking and conversation in community building.” A former student emphasized how community involvement through public discourse was both practical and deeply personal:

I gained an attitude of pragmatic work. I was driven by a desire for something more than a grade in Public Discourse. When you present to real people, try to make an impact in a real community, it's not about As or Bs. It's about building relationships and doing the things you say you will, and that is the most valuable lesson I took away from college in general.

A former student's project allowed her to connect with a college employee: “Making those connections is important and empowering at that age.” Some students identify that developing a network of relationships with community members increased their sense of community belonging. A former student commented on how the process was conducive to becoming a part

of the college community: “Taking it as a first year also forced me to become an engaged member of the Gustavus community which I am truly grateful for many reasons.” Another student underscored the inextricable tie between engagement and belonging: “Community involvement is essential to living in a community.”

By identifying and collaborating with community resources, they developed a deeper knowledge of local communities. One described this knowledge as “awareness of my community/communities.” Alumni explained that they were pushed to “discover what is important to myself and or community and the reason behind why” and that students “learned that every community has projects that could improve its environment and opportunities for its citizens.” One former student noted that a sustained interest in communities was born in Public Discourse:

I learned about the local government system that I grew up in and the processes by which change comes about in that setting—this has translated to a continued interest in local government as a way to influence those around me. I attend city council meetings and feel that I have a much better understanding than my peers of what is going on around me.

Alumni responses on networking, building relationships, collaborating with community members, and learning about individual communities belie the development and honing of communication and other skills.

Practical skills

Public Discourse alumni identified a wide-range of practical skills that they gained from the class and use in their daily lives. Below only the most frequent responses are discussed.

Communication

In contrast to the focus on public speaking from the other group, Public Discourse alumni generally wrote more broadly about “communication skills;” however, nearly one-third of Public Discourse alumni listed gains in “public speaking skills,” with responses focusing on preparation, organization, verbal and nonverbal skills, and audience. Oral communication skills were discussed more generally as well, such as “Confidence—It also really made me demonstrate courage, one and one, small group, and publicly speaking.” Public Discourse alumni also frequently commented on communication skills; for example, “My communication skills were strengthened through this course, both writing and verbal.” They described learning about professional writing and the importance of revision, with one commenting: “Additionally, it helped improve my writing ability, especially writing for work.” Public Discourse alumni also discussed research as connected to the writing and speaking process, but more often research was linked to critical thinking and problem solving.

Problem Solving

Critical thinking and problem solving were frequently cited as gains in the responses from Public Discourse alumni. Argument skills and research figured prominently in these responses. For example, “What I learned most from this course was how to structure an argument and dig deep into the details to make a strong case.” Others remarked, “it was one of the primary classes that developed my ability to think critically, ask questions, and problem solve;” “[I learned] problem solving (asking appropriate questions related to the problem; i.e. what is the problem, why people should care, what action steps should/could be taken, why this is the best plan of action);” “Public discourse taught me to identify a problem, how to research, and how to solve the problem through implementing a solution. This is something I use on a regular basis;” and “Although the problem may not be one that faces my community, the course

taught me how to critically think about issues and how best to solve them.” Alumni also cited specific exercises, for example:

“As far as knowledge, I liked the activity where you have to write your step by step plan for your public discourse topic. Mine was proactively changing the paint at [the college] to an eco-friendly, cost effective solution. It required me to analyze each stage of the process and what I would have to do for it. I will never forget staying up late with a calculator figuring out the totals for eco-friendly paint vs. the paint [the college] is most likely still using for their dorm rooms.”

Professional

In relationship to communication and problem-solving skills, alumni cited gains in professional and personal skills such as organizational skills—mapping, time management, planning, preparation—, leadership skills, attention to detail, and the ability to reflect on action. The ability to work on a large, long-term project was often cited in relationship to these skills. A respondent noted the use of these skills daily in “looking for metrics to track, setting deadlines, giving status updates.” Confidence—It also really made me demonstrate courage, one and one, small group, and publicly speaking.”

Overall, alumni commented on the development of practical, professional, and personal skills. Many connected the three in their responses; for example, “In addressing these issues, I honed leadership, public speaking, organizational, and problem solving skills;” “Leadership skills, public speaking, professionalism;” “Public Discourse requires problem analysis, critical thinking, resolution brainstorming, and the ability to execute. Learning how to grow in each of these areas during Public Discourse has been extremely beneficial in my personal and professional life.”

Bridging difference and understanding different perspectives

Another large theme within the Public Discourse responses was an awareness of and ability to bridge difference. Words such as “open mind” and “perspective” were often used as alumni discussed other skills and knowledge gained in the course. Alumni reported that they had gained “how to critically think; consider other viewpoints or interpretations of communication” and “An understanding of how to address differences of opinion in a welcome, strategic, and open-minded way.” One respondent specifically noted: “I worked with a lot of different people in my project and I learned how to be patient and cooperative. I learned the importance of diversity and what that means for a community.” Another former student contended, “The way I learned to see the inequalities in communities and ask questions why and how things could be improved have remained with me for the last six years of life as I've studied, worked in different regions in the U.S. and internationally.” A former student wrote of the specific process of gaining perspective: “I did some project on Male Mentoring, and I would never choose that topic again. I learned so much throughout the project that turned me in the direction of feminism and equity. It was truly the process—of exploring something I was interested in or thought was important at the time—that expanded my mind and developed my character.”

Appreciation for course

Utility

As noted in responses to other questions, Public Discourse was frequently cited as important preparation for personal and professional lives beyond college. Many responses were not unlike comments from Public Speaking alumni, such as, “In my work now it is exceedingly important to be able to speak effectively and in an engaging manner to groups of people, often in impromptu scenarios. Experience with public speaking was just as important to me as was experience with self-directed civic engagement;” and “The public speaking skills and problem

solving skills that I developed and honed in Public Discourse continue to serve me well in my post-college jobs as a teaching assistant and paraprofessional. I have to constantly assess my audience to know how to present information and engage my students.” Others discussed how the personal aspect of Public Discourse served as a model for their work with students, for example, “[I] used it as a way to encourage reluctant writers while I was working in the writing center—how could they incorporate something that was important to them into the assignment they were given;” and “[This is a] way to engage in learning certain skills by immersing yourself in a topic you care deeply about and wish to make changes. I’ve used this approach with my own students to foster engagement.” Alumni also noted that their Public Discourse experiences were helpful in job or graduate school applications and interviews.

Others spoke to how it was instrumental in helping them choose a major, yet noted that they wished everyone would have a chance to take the course: “I think it is a very powerful course that could very easily be interdisciplinary. As much as it is a stepping stone class within our major, it would be interesting to develop a higher level course that uses the same framework as this introductory course;” “I loved the course and I thought it was a great introduction to the communication studies major. It made me excited to experience more courses in the major and the potential I would have within the major;” and “I would encourage college students that are not in communication studies to take the class. It has translated to my life as a young professional helping me to become successful.”

Transformational

Many Public Discourse alumni also expressed an overall appreciation for the course, specifically noting that it was “innovative” and “transformative;” for example, “My Public

Discourse experience was transformative, and I would absolutely recommend this course to each and every student;” “Great course! It was tough but I would definitely recommend it to current students. It allowed me to directly apply what I was learning;” “I think every student should be required to do some sort of project like this or even to take this course. There is not enough space to list how this class is valuable and applicable to so many real life experiences. Taking it as a first year also forced me to become an engaged member of the [college] community which I am truly grateful for many reasons;” “It was life changing;” “This course is one in a million—I would recommend it for nearly every student at Gustavus! The way it encouraged me to think critically and to thoroughly assess situations shaped the way I approached almost every paper and lesson plan since.”

Civic Perspective

Further, alumni wrote of how the course has translated into a strong civic perspective. For example, “I learned that civic engagement is essential to being a meaningful and positive contributor to your community and the broader society;” and “I think that this course model is brilliant. The short-term and long-term benefits of building citizens who have the tools to civically engage in a productive manner will help change the world.” Another former student wrote, “I currently work in local government, and want to continue a career in local government, with the ultimate goal of becoming a city manager. I think Public Discourse helped to instill a lot of the values that I hold, especially working in the public sector and doing things for the betterment of the entire community.” An extended example provides a summary of the civic engagement aspects:

“Most recently, I applied the skills and confidence I strengthened during Public Discourse to effectively engage in civic dialogue surrounding the proposed Polymet Mining Project in northern Minnesota that would require over 500 years of water cleanup

post project. I submitted a letter to [the governor] expressing my concern based on the impacts the mine was projected to have on the environment. In my letter, I recognized the benefit that the mining project could have on the local economy, and instead of rejecting the proposal all together, suggested that [the governor] ask Polymet to bring another proposal to the table—one with less harmful impact to the environment.”

Overall, Public Discourse alumni expressed enthusiastic and specific gratitude for the aptitudes and perspectives gained and honed through the course. As in previous research, a few responses were not as positive.

Dissenting views

Of the 49 narrative responses, four individual alumni submitted comments that were neutral or negative. Their concerns were about whether the course was focused on social issues, such as inequality and concerns about the direction of the survey. For example, one respondent wrote, “I truly think it was an over-hyped class. The class offered me a great platform in which I could hone some of my public speaking skills, and that's about it. I learned nothing new about gender, social, or racial equality.”

Two wished that the course had been a general public speaking course, and those two comments were combined with concerns about choosing a worthwhile project. One specifically stated: “By doing a project that I was less than excited about, I felt I wasn’t truly engaging with community, and more than that, possibly even hurting my chances at future engagement or leadership within my hometown.” In that same vein, another student worried that ideals of civic engagement were watered down because not every student was passionate about her/his project.

Conclusion

The responses of Public Discourse alumni articulate both specific and broad gains from the course. The comparison to Public Speaking alumni was an important piece in providing a sense of how enthusiastic and appreciative Public Discourse students are for the course. With

these two groups drawn from the same college and with similar generally good relationships with the college and the department, the differences in response are weighty. Certainly, for the most part, Public Speaking students were also excited and grateful for the course, but the Public Discourse responses were broader in their discussions of learning, more passionate in spirit, and more enthusiastic about the course in general.

The specific nature of the learning, from skills to perspectives, provides an excellent evaluation for Public Discourse as part of our curriculum and as a model for other colleges. Further, the positive evaluations are particularly helpful as we revise our text and coursepack and in our day-to-day teaching. Our alumni have reminded us and provided specific examples of the argument and civic engagement instruction that we intend with the course. Their discussion of community engagement and civic perspective and reported gains in communication, research, and problem solving reflected our intents. Conversely, many other of the specific skills and perspectives they mentioned were not intentional curricular components, but, even in our early discussions of this data, they are finding their way into Public Discourse and other courses we are teaching and will overtime be elements in our text, exercises, and assignments. Further the neutral and negative comments were helpful in emphasizing the importance of topic choice, something that came out of early semester surveys on Public Discourse. Intentionality in guiding students, providing numerous examples, the implementation of the text, and specific assistance from Public Discourse alumni has resulted in better topic choice. Follow up surveys with present Public Discourse students are necessary to ensure that our efforts effective and to look for improvements.

The response rate, while high by national standards, is not ideal and certainly was influenced by the summer timing and short timeline for the survey. Further, because the course

has been taught only seven years, our alumni are in their early careers, which may influence responses regarding their perceived gains in skills and perspectives. As we dig more deeply into the quantitative questions on our survey, we may find other interesting patterns that highlight civic involvement in tandem with the qualitative narrative data.

Alumni surveys served us well in assessing the long-term influences of the course. While the responses were inspiring for us, we are aware that there is more work to be done in further refining the course. With this and other assessment informing our choices, we will continue to improve the course to provide the best possible community-based learning experience for our students.

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