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Community Leaders’ Perceptions of University and College Efforts to Encourage Civic Engagement

Richard A. Brisbin Jr. and Susan Hunter

“Students who volunteer in the community often end up staying or coming back after they graduate because they find out they can make a difference,” reports one economic development director in West Virginia. He and other community leaders agreed that getting college students involved in community activities not only had short-term benefits for the community but that often their experiences led to long-term gains for community life. This finding is important in a time when scholars, politicians, and pundits argue that a crisis of civic disengagement affects American politics. As a partial remedy for this crisis, educators have linked partnerships with community organizations with various experiential teaching techniques to edu-
cate university and college students about the value of civic engagement. For example, as part of its proposal for a learning society, the Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities recommended that higher education institutions improve student learning through "partnerships with government, business and professional associations." Further, it argued: "Teaching methods that involve students in active learning, such as undergraduate research, service learning, and workplace internships should be viewed as among the most powerful of teaching procedures, if the teaching goal is lasting learning that can be used to shape student's lives and the world" (Kellogg Commission, 1999, pp. 19, 29).

Despite these goals, concrete information about existing relationships between higher education and community organizations is slim. This article offers evidence about the nature of the relationships and partnerships between experiential higher educational programs and the development of civic engagement by students who serve community-based collective organizations, by which we mean local governments, local voluntary associations, and local nonprofit organizations. Also, it offers several recommendations for changes in the relationship that are designed to sharpen the general advice offered in reports like that of the Kellogg Commission.

**Civic Education and Civic Engagement: Assumptions and Knowledge**

In recent years social scientists have engaged in a debate about civic engagement and social capital. Sociologist James Coleman (1988) conceptualized social capital as a "variety of different entities," or institutions and networks *and* shared behavioral norms that produce or facilitate actors in the achievement of "certain ends" that enrich society and the lives of individual. Social scientists have developed Coleman's examples to argue that trust-based social networks and institutions, such as schools and voluntary social organizations, help build social capital. In particular, investment in the development of social capital should include education with the following characteristics:

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*Clean Water Acts* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1996), and more than 20 articles on environmental and regulatory politics and political science pedagogy. Partial support for this study came from a grant awarded by Pennsylvania and West Virginia Campus Compacts funded by a Corporation for National and Community Service Learn and Serve Grant. The authors thank Jill Kriesky, Martin Maldonado, Elissa Rhodes, and the staff of the West Virginia University Department of Political Science for their assistance. Address queries to Richard Brisbin at the Department of Political Science, West Virginia University, Box 6317, Morgantown, WV 26506-6317; telephone 304-293-3811 ext. 5296; fax: (304) 293-8644; e-mail: Richard.Brisbin@mail.wvu.edu.
1. It should encourage collective interaction—participation and voting—and the sharing of knowledge about community concerns, or civic engagement.

2. It should stress democratic enlightenment to foster trust in social norms governing interpersonal behavior in a community.

Education that enhances the development of social capital should produce two kinds of outcomes: (a) such public goods as peaceful, cooperative problem-solving, mutual acceptance of obligations and social tolerance, and a community's enhanced material welfare; and (b) such private goods as the egalitarian opportunity for self-actualization or "happiness," both psychologically and materially (Coleman, 1988; Edwards & Foley, 1998; Morgan, 2000; Newton, 1997; Nie, Jun, & Strehlik-Barry, 1996, pp. 11-38; Putnam, 2000, pp. 18–24; Sandefur & Laumann, 1998).

Although some have critiqued the argument about the decline of civic engagement and social capital (Ladd, 1999; Pew Partnership, 2001), the decline of the social capital thesis has influenced American higher education. It especially has resulted in calls to colleges and universities to direct their attention to civic education (Elshtain, 1997; Kellogg Commission, 1999). Today many institutions now offer courses with an experiential component to socialize students in the value of civic engagement and to teach why civic responsibility is a worthy and important value. Behind these pedagogical techniques is an important assumption: experiential civic education of college and university students will enhance their commitment to civic engagement and help build social capital (Battistoni 1997; Boyte 1993; Rimmerman 1997).

Despite these efforts, many questions remain about the effectiveness of educational methodologies designed to develop civic engagement and foster the formation of social capital. In particular, the studies of various forms of experiential learning have completely ignored both how students who participate might either benefit collective organizations and how the organization affects their values. To explore this topic more closely, this article will address the educational and sociopolitical effects of student-university interaction with community-based organizations.

To do so, the article addresses four questions:

1. Do the leaders of collective organizations perceive a crisis of civic engagement?

2. Do these leaders of collective organizations have contacts with universities or colleges in ways that might educate students about civic engagement or use students, faculty, or other college and university resources to encourage civic engagement in their communities?

3. If the leaders of collective organizations employ the assistance of students enrolled in experiential programs, what do they perceive as the expected benefits and costs of such student service and assistance?
4. Do the leaders of collective organizations perceive that student involvement in collective organizations changes students' sense of appropriate civic engagement in meaningful ways? And if so, what do the collective organizations' leaders report as the effect of service in their organization on students' attitudes?

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

To gather information on the relationship between college and university experiential education programs and collective organizations, we devised a two-stage research strategy. First, in December 2000 and January-June 2001, we held four focus groups with community leaders who hold positions in collective organizations in western Pennsylvania and northern West Virginia. Those invited to the focus groups held (a) elective office at the local or county level, (b) a civic service appointment or one in a local government agency, (c) a leadership position in a nonprofit organization, especially organizations that served youth and the disadvantaged, or (d) a position of student leadership in a public high school. The communities in which we held the focus groups were all below the national average in income and apparently in need of the development of social capital. Two groups, one with ten and one with nine attendees, included community leaders in the nonprofit sector drawn from areas of rural poverty and decaying industrial areas in Harrison, Marion, and Monongalia counties in West Virginia. The third focus group included county and municipal officeholders from across the state of West Virginia. A fourth focus group of eleven was held in Wilkinsburg, Pennsylvania, an urban community most of whose people are African American. A majority of this group's attendees were also African American. All of the focus groups had nearly equal numbers of men and women. Although we used a series of questions to stimulate discussion, the discussions all tended to be quite free, characterized by fresh ideas from the attendees and the interjection of our additional questions.

From the information provided by the focus groups and interviews and our review of the literature on civic engagement, we then constructed a questionnaire to permit a comprehensive inquiry into the relationship between college and university experiential education programs and collective organizations. We mailed or e-mailed 2,000 questionnaires to a randomly chosen group of local government and public school officials and the directors of nonprofit organizations in West Virginia (population 1.8 million) and seven counties in western Pennsylvania (population 2.3 million), which included Pittsburgh and its suburbs. We received 457 usable responses—a 22.5% response rate. Of the respondents 39.4% were in government positions (elected, appointed, or employed), 15.4% were public educators, 40.2% were with nonprofit organizations (directors, staff, or volunteers) and 5.5%
were business people. Because we found almost no significant differences among responses on the basis of location, size of community, gender, or race, our results are generally reported for all respondents rather than broken down by state or other demographic variables.

Civic Engagement and Higher Education

Do the leaders of collective organizations perceive a crisis of civic engagement and a decline of social capital? Their responses to this question provide insight about the settings in which community leaders might support a higher education institution’s experiential learning policies or use experiential learning students.

In the focus groups, the community leaders estimated that only a small percentage of community members become engaged in civic activities. Additionally, they largely perceived a crisis of public engagement with some collective activities and organizations—what one official called a “disinvestment” in selected community activities. Responses to the survey of community leaders partially confirmed these comments. More than half of the respondents, 50.4%, thought that most people were “involved with only one or two civic activities that affect their families directly, such as athletic program boosters or scouts.” Another 22.3% of the respondents felt that most people were involved in a wide range of civic and political activities, and 13.7% believed that people were generally involved with one or two activities to assist others. The consensus of community leaders seemed to be that most people do participate in civic life but only in a narrow range of activities related to their family’s life. Because the community leaders perceived that public support is slipping for nonprofit agencies that provide broad-based support for the community’s welfare or the public schools, such as United Way, volunteer fire departments, Rotary, or Parent-Teacher Associations, they find that the “trend has not been positive” for civic engagement. As one civic leader stated at a focus group, there is “definitely less” engagement today than in his past experience. Also, they saw a need to remedy this trend.

The community leaders attending the focus groups identified the main reasons for volunteering as an “innate” sense of caring for “fellow human beings,” the desire to “do a civic duty,” and a need to “connect” with others. One participant reported that people “want to feel like they can make an impact” on others. Modern employment, she noted, does not always allow a person “a sense that they are touching other people.” Another person commented, “I was raised to believe that when you live in a community you always give something back to the community.” A student leader remarked on the influence of church activities on the choice of service-oriented activities at school. The student participants also indicated that their parents
tended to be involved in community activities. Indeed, as one participant concluded, the volunteers who do best are those with an unselfish objective—a desire to contribute or make a difference—that is learned early in life. Table 1 illustrates the connection survey respondents reported between changes in participation and reasons for participation. They connected increased participation with a desire to help others, attributing the trend toward less participation with self-interested adult participation.

The community leaders at the focus groups also addressed the problems of recruiting and retaining volunteers. One person mentioned: “You have to get folks involved young, as young as possible” because such activity “gives them a sense of ownership of the community.” Participants did not fault educational institutions for the decline in volunteerism but instead identified the demands of contemporary family life and changes in community population. One official also noted that “somewhere along the line . . . we have failed—the older generation—to pass on some of our patriotism to our country and our loyalty to our fellow men . . . to the younger group. They don’t have the feeling of belonging to the community.” Another noted that many people did not have faith in their community’s potential or had developed a distrust of government from watching television and thus had lapsed into apathy. Survey respondents reported that a lack of time (43.5%) followed by “a lack of a sense of need for a connection to others” (22.8%) were the primary causes of nonparticipation in civic and political activities. Also, while some leaders indicated that people did not participate because they were not invited (5.6%) or did not know how to participate (10.3%), 61.7% also indicated that no organization in their community directed people to civic or political activities that best fit their skills and interests.

### Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trend</th>
<th>Perceived Reason for Participation</th>
<th>Perceived Trend in Participation by Perceived Reasons for Participation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>To Help Others N = 117</td>
<td>Commitment N = 101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Much more participation</td>
<td>7.7%</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More participation</td>
<td>14.5</td>
<td>9.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stable levels</td>
<td>38.5</td>
<td>42.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less participation</td>
<td>35.0</td>
<td>39.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Much less participation</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>5.9</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Chi square = 56.7
P = .000
Despite the decline in civic engagement and recruitment of civic volunteers, the community leaders attending the focus groups noted that the need for voluntary assistance is increasing and that so is the need for civic associations to engage more individuals in their activities. As one public official stated, in resource-poor communities, the lack of public money means that they require a "high level of citizen participation... to make it [the community] work." Public officials therefore desire linkages to higher education and other nonprofit civic organizations, value the attendance of citizens at public meetings about improving the physical environment, safety, and quality of public schools, and appreciate citizen observation and commentary on the work of public employees and contractors. When these linkages and forms of participation occur, they believe that people become "more comfortable in dealing with [community] issues." Focus group participants then linked such "comfort" with the community to, for example, increased calls to police—or "participation by people on the public safety side"—and the improvement of social order as a measure of enhanced social capital. Also, several public officials saw a need to develop the practice of community service at the high school level. They suggested that colleges and universities could assist high school service programs through mentoring or educational programs.

Consequently, the majority of community leaders comprising both the focus group and the survey respondents perceive that civic engagement, both in political and general community affairs, is in overall decline. Yet the leaders see civic engagement and education about civic duties and democracy as essential to a better community life. Given these circumstances, what, if anything, do they believe colleges and universities could specifically do to address these trends and contribute to improved communities? We now look at the interaction of higher education institutions with community leaders.

**Student Contributions to Collective Organizations**

Do these leaders of collective organizations have the types of contacts with universities or colleges that might educate students about civic engagement? Do they use students, faculty, or other college and university resources to build social capital in their communities? In the focus groups, most participants acknowledged very infrequent contacts with college and university students, staff, and faculty. Of the survey respondents, 53.5% had no contact with a college or university. Leaders from smaller communities with fewer resources had the least contact with colleges and university students and programs. Also, as indicated in Table 2, survey data revealed that respondents from communities with organizations or a "coordinator agency" to direct persons to civic activities had significantly more contact with col-
leges and universities than those without such organizations. The use of college or university students, we suggest, is therefore, more frequent if there is a community organization or network that coordinates assistance to civic or political organizations.

Focus group participants reported that most contacts were with nearby higher education institutions and involved the use of student interns and volunteers. Even so, the number of student volunteers or interns who otherwise served their association was small. Because students had no powerful incentive to help people in the region where they attended college or university, one leader commented that students placed classes, social life, and jobs ahead of civic engagement and community service. Another participant remarked that no one attempted to educate students about the potential value of civic engagement on their careers, the personal satisfaction they could receive, or their responsibility to serve others. Focus group participants and the survey respondents also addressed several more specific questions about contacts with higher educational institutions.

What is the overall pattern of contacts between collective associations and colleges and universities? One local official noted that the "benefits of [higher education] institutions don't flow into the communities that need them. When you have neighborhoods that are closest to the medical center and the infant mortality rate is the highest ... it seems ... that what the universities have to offer on the whole is not coming into the community." He also saw a need for universities to "look at the economy, the educational system [and] health" of the surrounding communities. To better serve their missions, the community leaders attending the focus groups reported that they needed much more extensive contacts with colleges and universities.

Some West Virginia public officials noted that they would initiate contact with an institution of higher education either by calling its president or the state university's extension service, but others did not know whom to contact. Another noted that no college or university had a "hotline" or single contact point for community-based organizations.

Although group participants generally had some independent contact with college and university student internship programs or extension services, usually they saw "very little of the faculty," whom they perceived as very busy teaching classes. Indeed, they comprehended the role of faculty in experiential education as restricted to the preparation, placement, and advising of student interns, volunteers, and service learning students. They also received few telephone calls from faculty. A few participants at the focus groups had addressed college or university classes about their organizations and their need for student assistance. We asked survey respondents who had no contact with a college or university but who had a college or university in their community if they were aware of any programs offered by the college to assist their collective organization. An overwhelming majority of these respondents (74.6%) said no.
Survey respondents who had contact with a college or university reported that their most frequent contact was with students who worked with them as a part of course, internship, or graduation requirements (60.9%), followed by contacts with student visitors and observers (45.5%), individual student volunteers (44.9%), college or university participants in assistance and leadership training programs (44.9%), and college or university administrators, faculty, or staff who served as unpaid consultants to the collective organization (42.3%). Less frequent were contacts with student clubs and organizations that provided assistance to the organization (32.7%), presentations by the community leaders to college classes (31.6%), college and university faculty who participated or held office in the collective organization (28.0%), the use of paid university or college consultants by the collective organization (27.1%), and formal partnership agreements between a higher education institution and a collective organization (22.6%). Even less common were contacts such as college and university administrators who participated or held office in the collective organization (19.8%), collective organization personnel who consulted with a college or university (15.9%), and college or university staff who were given paid leave to participate in civic activities (3.9%).

Additional analysis found that contacts with the university and college students varied by the status of the respondent. Public educators (51.7%) and nonprofit organizational personnel (53.6%) reported that they had significantly more contact with individual student volunteers than did public officials of all sorts (25.0%). Also, public educators (51.7%) and nonprofit organizational personnel (39.6%) reported more contact with student clubs and organizations (9.9%) than did public officials (9.9%). However, these
patterns did not appear to be as significant for students who were required as part of a class or program assignment to provide assistance to civic or political leaders. Also, some significant variations in respondents’ contacts with students were related to the size of the community. Respondents reported less contact with individual student volunteers in communities (31.9%) with fewer than 5,000 people as opposed to communities with more residents.

Interestingly, of respondents with a contact with a college or university, the vast majority thought that regular faculty involvement or oversight of student participants mattered greatly (52.4%) or somewhat (40.0%) to the collective organization. The community leaders responding to the survey also perceived that students did not participate in civic and political activities because of (in this order) competing interests (69.6%), lack of awareness of collective organizations’ needs (44.6%), and the difficulties of scheduling civic and political service (35.1%).

What would community leaders like colleges and university students to do? Beyond informing them about available student assistance and the encouragement of civic engagement, the community leaders attending the focus groups reported needs that required more than just student and faculty assistance. First, they wanted higher educational institutions to educate students about socio-political problems in the local community and, in some respects, to teach civics. Additionally, they wanted higher education institutions to provide them with specific programs to mentor teenage youth in need of self-esteem and attention outside of fixed institutional settings or time periods. They desired student assistance with both “good” and troubled teens—encouraging personal enrichment and the development of a wide range of interests. They needed help to arrange new programs such as sports leagues and neighborhood councils that encouraged community volunteerism, to meet the needs of senior citizens and the disabled, to help local governments improve the delivery of services through computerized record keeping and the design of management and information systems, to collect environmental data, to help with disaster relief, and to assist in the development of cultural activities and cultural enrichment programs for youth and adults. The public officials also reported a need for advanced students to help in writing grants.

The community leaders’ comments and survey responses indicated that a gap exists between collective organizations and colleges and universities. Much of the contact that they reported between collective organizations and higher education institutions involved interaction with students rather than with administrators or faculty and took the form of students assisting organizations in larger communities proximate to their campus. Higher education institutions, they reported, did not provide collective organizations with much guidance about additional services that their faculty, staff,
or students can provide. Community leaders indicated that their organizations need more than acts of civic engagement, experiential education assistance, and service from students. They would like higher educational institutions to help them by providing expert and professional services. Indeed, this pattern of comments and responses suggests that college and university administrators and faculty need to do much more to consider what community leaders need from them and their students, to better inform community leaders about the services offered by the institution and its students, and to provide services to community leaders over a broader geographical expanse.

**Using Student Assistance**

If the leaders of collective organizations employ the assistance of students enrolled in experiential programs, what do they perceive are the expected benefits and costs of such student assistance? Again the community leaders’ responses addressed several specific questions.

What have been the experiences of collective organizations with student assistance? In general, the community leaders attending the focus groups reported positive experiences with interns from the Americorps program funded by the Corporation for National and Community Service, local college and university internships, specialized volunteer programs, and service learning students. Examples included an intern who “spearheaded the organization of block clubs,” an intern who established a database for local code enforcement, and interns who assisted the public schools in after-school tutoring, mentor programs, and field trips. A civic leader reported finding that most student assistants had “good attitudes,” were “eager and want to contribute,” and “want[ed] to learn.” The community leaders also appeared willing to live with student assistance that was bound to the schedule of the school year. However, the specific training necessary for some volunteer programs or the length of commitment needed from students precluded from some collective organizations using student assistance very extensively.

Most survey respondents indicated that student assistance was either helpful (53.4%) or contributed modestly (34.5%) to the completion of their organizational mission. Confirming focus group participants’ comments, they did not cite students as either essential (10.1%) or troublesome (2.0%). The community leaders reported that the most desirable quality in student assistants was a “sense of responsibility to fulfill duties on a regular basis” (45.9%), an understanding of the organization’s mission and tasks (29.7%), and the personality and an ability to relate to others (11.5%) rather than specific disciplinary knowledge or skills (6.8%). Also, the community leaders responded that they thought a community gains most from students’ new ideas (78.9%) followed by their ability to expand organizational assis-
tance or programs (62.6%), and to help deliver the organization's routine services (56.8%). Finally, they reported that their organization benefitted from the youthful energy (80.4%) and fresh perspectives and ideas of students (75.7%) more than from students' skills and knowledge (52.7%) or from their dedication to a cause (31.1%). In sum, the collective organizations appear to have had very positive experiences with college and university student assistance. They gained even more from the students' energy and ideas than from the added programmatic assistance that the students bring to the organization.

Do collective associations perceive differences among students who serve for different reasons? When the collective association involved them in contacts with people that they found rewarding, the community leaders perceived no significant difference between "coerced" volunteers (students who were filling a service requirement for a college and university course) versus walk-in student volunteers. The community leaders regarded college and university student as raw material to "jump-start" or "kick-start" programs or events. Some students who showed up for a service requirement "just tried to get through," but often they became more involved and made a greater effort if they interacted with organizational clients, saw the client as a person, and developed personal relationships with people in need of services. Individual personality and interaction with others, the leaders judge, were the most important reasons for showing up and for student success for any category of volunteer. Although a majority of survey respondents (51.2%) noted some differences between required and volunteer student assistance, cross-tabulations did not find any statistically significant association between the reasons for students' service and measures of the community leaders' perceptions of the importance, benefits, or problems associated with student assistance. Apparently the differences surfaced in students' attitudes or other variables that we did not measure.

What problems affect collective organizations' use of student assistance? The primary problem with student assistants, the focus group participants commented, was a lack of "personal responsibility" or a work ethic and dependability. Student assistants, one civic leader remarked, need to be instructed that other people depend on their showing up and providing assistance: for example, a child needs tutoring at a specific hour; the sports program needs a coach for a specific event. Students need to know that "volunteerism is making a commitment and fulfilling that commitment."

The community leaders indicated a need for both the college or university faculty and the collective organization to cooperate in training students and assigning their duties before they started their service or internship and also to cooperate in their continuing supervision to avoid management problems. As a school principal commented, for students to become successfully involved in a mentor program they "needed direction . . . to tell
them exactly what we need and how much we need on a regular basis." A nonprofit association director noted that such preparation and supervision was costly, however, and "we just don't have the time to give . . . them the things that we . . . expect them to be prepared for." An official noted that, in his small community, there was no person available to supervise student volunteers. Also, the collective organizations felt a need to be informed about what they can expect from student assistants. They know that they need to tell students "why their efforts are important." If they employ student assistants, they also perceive that they might need to make a better effort to accommodate students' schedules. Although such preparation is often difficult because of the collective organizations' crisis-orientation mentality and limited staff and resources, the organizations need to plan for meaningful service from student assistants.

What problems affect collective organizations' interaction with colleges and universities? The community leaders pinpointed several problems in the administration of college and university experiential education programs. They argued for close coordination of the collective association with college or university units that are a source of student volunteers so students can be effectively used or so students' skills can be tailored to organizational needs. Also, as one public school principal stated, they appreciated college and university staff who asked, "'What can we do for you?' as opposed to 'This is our program and you had better do this.'" This and other statements implied the value of more formal partnership agreements negotiated between the collective organization and the college or university.

The community leaders expressed the opinion that colleges and universities need more extensive effort at outreach and marketing the creative use of students. They reported that most contacts developed out of personal connections between local community leaders and specific faculty members or departments at a college or university. As one leader informed us, the relationship needed to be "institutionalized" so that the relationship "did not suffer" if one person left a position. Another suggested that coordination might avoid "turf wars" when competing faculty or college or university units wanted to conduct a program with a collective association.

The community leaders also thought that nonprofit civic associations and governments need to be better informed about how and what office or offices to contact at the college or university to arrange for volunteers and interns, community leadership development, and associational program support. They stated the need for centralized orientation and tracking of student volunteers and interns by the college or university, especially to encourage a work ethic and to reduce the cost to community groups of fitting the capabilities of the student volunteer to organizational needs. Also, they thought that a computerized database of information might help in referring civic organizations to the appropriate people at universities.
Although a few leaders reported various difficulties with the use of student assistance, such as police background checks and special documentation to satisfy insurance company requirements under liability policies, these were not common problems. Most civic organizations reported that they could find the money to support the training and overhead costs for student assistance but not to pay them. Transportation of student assistants to service sites posed a greater difficulty. However, the perception was that the value of the help was usually more than any costs, so the organization “tried to make it happen.”

Survey respondents reported that their greatest problem was effectively scheduling student participation (cited by 62.6% of respondents). Less troublesome were the costs of overseeing students (35.4%), students’ immaturity (25.2%), transportation of students to organizational activities (27.9%), and students’ lack of expertise (24.5%). Insurance and liability problems (cited by 12.9%) and costs of training (cited by 4.1%) were much less frequently problems for the collective organizations.

Overall, community leaders greatly valued student assistance. The expectations and experiences of community leaders led them to several conclusions. They pointed out that students brought energy and new ideas into civic organizations’ basic duties or services. In most instances the community leaders did not demand great expertise from students but could use almost any student help. What the leaders wanted most was students who showed up at assigned times and exhibited a work ethic. The community leaders wanted college and university personnel to prepare students to act responsibly and with a sense of duty toward the organization and its clients. The community leaders also wanted the college or university to cooperate more effectively with the organization in scheduling and managing student assistance.

The Effect of Experiential Education

Do the leaders of collective organizations perceive that student involvement in collective organizations changes students’ sense of appropriate civic engagement and interpersonal trust in meaningful ways? Although change in student behavior is not easy for community leaders to assess and their responses tend to be anecdotal, a few themes surfaced in the focus groups and questionnaire responses suggesting that they see value in the experiential education of students in ways that make them likely to support such programs in the future.

In the focus groups, community leaders reported that they sometimes see change in students’ career plans and attitudes, particularly as they have longer and “deeper involvement” in the program and more contact with organizational clients. They commented that volunteering helps raise self-
Esteem, especially of youthful volunteers. They thought that change in students’ attitudes occurred less frequently when students had limited involvement with the clients served by the collective association and in less planned and well-directed service programs.

Respondents to the survey thought that service to the community most frequently changed students by giving them a stronger commitment to help others (cited by 81.0% of respondents), and increased their involvement in civic or political issues (69.4%). They also reported that the service experience developed students’ career-related skills (68.2%) and their sensitivity to issues of race, gender, and class (62.8%), but they also thought that the experience much less frequently increased students’ tolerance of opposing viewpoints (45.3%) and attention to politics (27.4%). Responses to an open-ended question about the longer-term effects of students’ civic involvement also indicated that the experience seemed to change students by giving them a “stronger commitment” to serving others, a better understanding of civic issues, democracy, and “how things work,” and a greater sensitivity to the needs of others.

The community leaders attending the focus groups thought that students fed off the experiences of others and learned from reflective discussions and the sharing of journals about their experiences. Indeed, when supervising students, the community leaders reported that they frequently listened to students’ suggestions (76.4%), attempted to explain the role of their organization in the improvement of community life (73.0%), and encouraged interactive discussion among student assistants (66.9%). Yet, less frequently they asked students to reflect on their activities with organizational staff (41.2%). Consequently, despite the community leaders’ belief that reflection was an important element in changing students’ attitudes, they did not appear to go out of their way to encourage such reflection. Changed student attitudes thus seem to come more from the student’s personal service experiences and sensibilities than from the direct efforts of community leaders and organizations to have students think about their civic attitudes.

Some focus group participants regarded students as transients who provided temporary assistance to the community but not long-term benefits. However, answers to an open-ended question suggest that community leaders perceive that student assistants are more likely to remain in the community after graduation. Indeed, a respondent commented that service also means that students “develop emotional ownership” of a community. For rural communities and communities in economic difficulty, like many included in this study, student assistance might have the long-term effect of reducing the drain of college graduates to growing urban areas. Although this conclusion is speculative rather than backed by data, the retention of well-educated individuals might enhance social capital in economically
marginal communities. When coupled with what students seem to learn about others and about power in communities, civic leaders regard the student service experience as a form of civic engagement with the potential to build better communities. Therefore, community leaders regard student assistance and experiential education as a useful—though indirect—means of broadening political knowledge, expanding social capital, and appreciating civic life. Their responses suggest a willingness to work with institutions of higher education in the future, too.

**Proposals for Change**

The focus groups and questionnaire responses suggested several ways to change the relationship between higher education and collective organizations, especially employed in programs designed to engage students in the community. We have identified four basic changes in civic education with relevance for both higher institutions and faculty, from their suggestions, each generating specific proposals for action.

*First, change the objectives of college and university's interaction with collective organizations.* Overall, the community leaders conveyed a need for universities to change their perspective on the communities in their region or state. Too often, they stated, the college or university's approach is to study the community as an object of academic research, to serve or interact with community members only on a limited range of topics such as traditional agricultural extension programs or teacher education, to "dump" interns on agencies, and to address community issues only when it is politically necessary. The community leaders believed that they knew how to build social capital—building a local supermarket, developing a mentoring program for young women so they could avoid pregnancy, establishing a local bank that would loan money for mortgages, or adding swings and slides at a playground. What they want is expert help from diverse disciplines and student assistance and knowledge from all majors that can contribute to concrete changes: improved recreation and police services, changes in the physical and ecological environment of the community, technical management or economic advice to spur business, or new programs for youth. Yet student assistance too often cannot provide such aid, and students thus serve as useful and often energetic "warm bodies," not all that different from adult volunteers. Based on these comments by the community leaders and their responses to the survey, we propose that:

1. Higher education administrators and faculty should attend local council or other governmental meetings and meetings of business and community organizations or networks to familiarize themselves with what communities and collective organizations need from students and college or university personnel.
2. Higher education administrators should consider how every academic discipline might address the problems or issues drawn to their attention by community leaders.

Second, use or build networks to better inform the collective organizations about the student assistance available from colleges and universities. The community leaders reported a need for college or university contacts with existing civic networks (such as the Wilkinsburg Intercommunity Network and less formal meetings of community organizations in several West Virginia communities) or local representatives of universities "on the ground" in a community to provide information and advice about college or university student resources to public, educational, religious, and nonprofit organization leaders. Also, because many of the leaders of collective organizations are part-time or volunteer personnel who otherwise lack the opportunity to develop networks and coordinate service efforts with other civic associations, universities could promote and support the development of civic networks. Or, higher education administrators could at least collect and disseminate information from a database of information about civic associations' and local governments' volunteer needs. The network could then become a source of referrals for student volunteers and student internship assistance. Based on these comments by the community leaders and their responses to the survey, we propose that:

3. Higher education administrators and faculty should encourage the development of and participate in local networks of government, business, and community leaders.

4. Higher education institutions should establish a referral office with a toll-free number and inform collective organizations of the various forms of student and faculty assistance that they can provide.

5. As organizers and participants in such networks, higher education institutions should provide collective organizations with detailed information on the range of available college or university faculty, staff, and student assistance.

6. Higher education administrators and faculty should invite community leaders to campus to advertise the need for student assistance in their programs, to advise faculty on student preparation for experiential education, and to discuss topics of common interest with student audiences that might spur students' civic engagement.

Third, cooperatively plan the use of student assistance. The community leaders communicated a need for contacts between civic organizations and colleges or universities during the fiscal planning process. When local governments, public schools, or nonprofit groups develop plans and budgets for the ensuing year, they especially need the knowledge and ability to ask the college or university for help, including service learning and internship students. Likewise, the college or university must try to predict and plan for
the use of the student resources it will have available. Such planning, one civic leader noted, might allow the collective organization to know when and what form of student assistance is available and to make better use of student assistants. Also, the community leaders commented that they themselves needed to change their behavior: They should ask for more ideas from students as well as from college and university faculty and staff about what would improve community life, their own participation in the community, and that of their parents. Therefore, we propose that:

7. Higher education administrators should arrange regular meetings of their representatives (staff, faculty, and students) with collective organizations to establish a plan to guide the regular provision, placement, and oversight of student and other assistance provided by the college of university.

Fourth, enhance efforts to improve collective organizations interaction with student assistants. From the focus groups and the survey, we learned that there is often little coordination of college and university contacts with collective organizations. Also, faculty members tend not to participate in the civic engagement programs offered to their students. Faculty have not made improving experiential education a major item on the agenda of college and university curricular change. The consequence seems to be what might be styled as a need for better design of university and college contacts—especially in operating experiential education programs—with collective organizations. Therefore, we propose that:

8. Higher education institutions should establish a single coordinator for all experiential learning programs, including student volunteer activities.

9. Faculty should carefully prepare students for both the intellectual demands and the responsibilities of experiential programs by the development of training sessions in consultation with collective organizations.

10. Faculty should monitor students’ performance in experiential programs through weekly meetings with the students and the collective organizations.

11. Faculty and community leaders should schedule multiple opportunities for interaction and discussion of experiences among experiential learning students and with organizational staff and faculty.

12. Higher education institutions should provide incentives such as funding, redesigned teaching duties, and tenure or promotion rewards for faculty who develop, prepare, and oversee experiential programs, reflect on experiences with students, and engage in community-based research, service, and teaching.

Are these recommendations feasible? We believe so. Most involve meetings and the cooperative exchange of information, not investments of additional resources. The coordination and oversight costs might mean some shifting of resources among existing internship, service learning, and ex-
tension activities, but not major new investments. Freeing faculty to engage in community-centered activities and providing them with incentives might involve more costly investments in additional faculty and always controversial changes in faculty assignments and evaluation procedures. However, we believe that committed administrators can overcome these obstacles.

CONCLUSION

If colleges and universities define their mission to include students’ service to their community and experiential education as well as traditional undergraduate classroom instruction and academic research, these proposals for change point to the need for a more informed conversation between colleges and universities and collective organizations in the state or region that surrounds the campus. At present the evidence presented in this paper indicates that communication about civic education between its providers is far from perfect. Additionally, from the perspective of the collective organizations reported in this article that might employ such student assistance, the college and university experiential education programs are but an add-on to the missions of the organizations.

The evidence illustrates that student assistants can help expand the services and effective management of a local governmental program or nonprofit organization. However, the use of students is far less than optimal, and it generates costs for the organization. Also, the collective organizations, which might need and employ student assistance, require better organizational structures, and more resources devoted to effectively planning programs that use students for richer and longer experiences. Clearly if colleges and universities and collective organizations are to encourage civic engagement and the possible accumulation of social capital, more resource investment, more extensive student participation, and more cooperation between the college or university and the collective organization seem essential.

REFERENCES

political science (pp. 9–14). Washington, DC: American Association for Higher Education.


