Bringing the Global Local:

Implementing Service-Learning in a General Education Course

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Abstract

All Wingate University students are expected to complete the general education course *Global Perspectives in Politics and Economics* during their second year. Many students begin the course not understanding why it is relevant to their lives, and it is possible that even those who come to enjoy the course may leave without realizing how the issues they learn about globally may apply to our local area and their own lives.

In order to better help students understand how these global issues may apply to their everyday lives and encourage their participation in political and civic life, Dr. Chelsea Kaufman implemented service-learning in one section of the course during the Spring 2021 semester. Students were able to choose from working with four different community partners targeting local needs in Union County, including the issues of domestic violence, food insecurity, and economic empowerment.

Students met with representatives from each of the community partners to determine what the authentic community needs were and then proposed service projects to conduct during the semester to address those needs. As a result, they are now working to apply what they have learned about global issues to their own local communities.

Problem Statement

As part of the Wingate University core curriculum, all students are required to complete the course *Global Perspectives in Politics and Economics* (GPS 220), which introduces students to various economic and political systems across the world. Typically, students take the course during their second year. One objective of this course (as well as other courses in the *Global Perspectives* component of the curriculum) is to help students develop an appreciation for civic engagement, community activism, and political awareness. Students often begin the course not understanding why it is relevant to their lives, uninterested in the subject matter, and unprepared for civic engagement.

For example, at the beginning of the course, Dr. Kaufman surveys students so that she can learn some basic information about them, including their concerns for the course. Common concerns include being able to understand the content and contribute to discussions because the students indicate they are unfamiliar with and uninterested in politics and economics. Students also indicate that they are concerned about political conflict (both in the classroom and in their daily lives). It is clear that students do not generally engage with these topics nor do they have the experience and knowledge required to feel confident in doing so.

For those students who are interested in the subject matter - or who develop an interest during the semester - it is still possible that they do not make a connection between the "global" and the "local." Because the political and economic systems and related issues from several countries are examined in the course, students may come away with the impression that these issues occur somewhere else. Political and economic issues are present everywhere, however, including here in Union County, NC. Dr. Kaufman wanted students to be able to make this connection, so that they could see additional relevance of the course to their everyday lives and understand their role in addressing these issues through civic and political engagement.

Background

A core lesson that students should take away from the course is the relevance of politics to their everyday lives. Public policy decisions impact us all, and we all have the power to effect change (though the impacts are felt more strongly by some and some have more power than others). Classes that include service-learning or other forms of community-engaged learning teach students about the problems facing their communities, the limitations of current policies and institutions to address them, and new ways to address the problems (Lee et al. 2019). Students subsequently become more aware of these issues and more willing to engage in political and civic life in order to address them.

Furthermore, these courses may play a vital role in helping all students to develop a sense of political efficacy. A person with a high level of political efficacy believes they have the competence to understand and participate in politics, and also believes that government authorities respond to them as citizens (Niemi, Craig, and Mattei 1991). Political Science courses in general can develop this sense of political efficacy - but, concerningly, there is some evidence that this is only true for white students (Centellas and Rosenblatt 2018). Students of color, on the other hand, may actually develop a *decreased* sense of political efficacy, as they come to feel that the government does not respond to them as citizens. Service-learning may provide a solution: this approach also develops political efficacy among students in both predominantly white institutions and institutions serving more diverse populations (Barnett 2018; Levy 2011).

Finally, incorporating service-learning into a course in order to achieve these goals can strengthen our democracy. Democracy requires an active, informed, and engaged citizenry. As noted by Harris (2012), political science educators often strive to provide our students with a strong foundation for participation in political and civic life, and there is evidence that service-learning can help to achieve this goal. Not only can service-learning courses encourage students to participate, as previously noted, but they also strengthen our civil society by building connections between the citizens and community stakeholders who are trying to address the same public policy issues.

Solution

Implementing service-learning in GPS 220 was, therefore, an ideal solution. As previously noted, service-learning courses can help students to connect politics to their daily lives, increase their sense of political efficacy, and build a habit of civic and political participation (Barnett 2018; Harris 2012; Lee et al. 2019; Levy 2011). Others have also incorporated service-learning into general education courses within political science in order to help increase students' interest in the subject matter and develop these traits with success (Maloyed 2016).

Fortunately, the Cooperative for the Common Good (CCG) offered an opportunity to learn how to implement service-learning projects into the course. GPS 220 is also an ideal course in which to implement a CCG project as it inherently addresses economic, social, and ecological issues due to its focus on global political and economic issues. During the Fall semester of 2020, Dr. Kaufman and others met monthly to discuss principles of service learning and plan the implementation of the projects into their

spring semester courses. During the Spring 2021 semester, Dr. Kaufman then implemented the projects into one section of her GPS 220 course.

Students began by learning what service-learning entails. For the purposes of this class, it is defined as an approach that includes academic integrity (completing the project is integral to achieving the academic learning objectives), apprentice citizenship (students and community partners work together), and student ownership (students have some degree of autonomy over the projects). They were then able to connect with community partners to learn more about their work here in Union County, and choose one partner to work with. Each group of students then met directly with the partner to learn about their authentic needs and propose a relevant service project to address those needs. Students also complete several assignments connecting the service-learning project to the course material throughout the semester.

Currently, the student groups are in the process of completing the following projects:

- The students working with Turning Point plan to address the needs of resources and awareness by holding a donation drive on campus. At the donation drive, they will also have information available about the services provided by Turning Point. Information about the drive should be available soon!

- The students working with Hunger Corps VISTA plan to address the needs of food insecurity and a lack of information about how to address it by hosting a food drive and researching information on food insecurity policies for both members of the public and the Union County Food council. Information about the drive should be available soon!

- The students working with Common Heart plan to address the need of getting more information about programs out into the community by helping the organization with their social media presence. They also plan on volunteering with the organization to learn more about its needs and assets as part of this project.

- The students working with the Union County Government Women, Infants and Children (WIC) Program plan to address the need of continued participation in the program, as many families cease participation after about one year. They plan to create flyers to post around the community and on social media with information about the program, including information about policies that may have changed to promote participation.

So far, the students seem very passionate about the work and have reported learning many details about these issues in our local communities. Later this year, Dr. Kaufman will report more information about what they have learned and experienced as well as the impact their work made in our local community.

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