Community Engaged Scholarship: Impact on Student Retention and Success

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Introduction
Through experiential learning, community engagement activities contribute to student success. This research investigates the relationship between community engagement and student learning, development, retention and success. Participants are students enrolled in Social and Behavioral Sciences courses with the University of Southern Maine’s Lewiston-Auburn College, and were surveyed at the end of the Fall 2017 and Spring 2018 semesters.

Background
The USM LAC Druker Office of Community Engagement (DOCE) undertakes this research based on anecdotal evidence that supports the hypothesis that community engagement has a positive impact on non-traditional students. Specifically, community-engaged scholarship provides the potential for a number of beneficial experiences: construction of strong relationships; provisions for mentoring; enhancement of student esteem, competency and sense of purpose; and the facilitation of intellectual capacity and growth. This developing research seeks to evidence whether such a relationship exists and to better inform community engagement best practices to enhance the positive relationships between faculty, students and community partners and minimize challenges.

Objectives:
• Determine the relationship between student demographic variables (age, work experience, income, first generation college status, native language, family care responsibilities, etc.) and community engagement experience as they relate to positive outcomes, such as: planned perseverance in college, feelings of belonging, and understanding of course material.
• Better understand the mechanisms and mediating factors by which community engagement activities increase students’ confidence, learning, perseverance and success.
• Determine whether and how community engagement activities contribute to student success, perseverance and well-being at USM.

References

Theoretical Framework
One could quote Confucius; “I hear and I forget -- I see and I remember -- I do and I understand” to eloquently describe the theory of experiential learning. Coker and Porter (2015) describe experiential learning as an evidence based practice that supports student learning, competence, persistence, appreciation of diversity, and professional networks (p. 66). Courses that incorporate community engagement activities as part of course work, are engaged in experiential learning. Community engagement work, at all levels, exposes the student to real-world experiences where they are able to apply course concepts in a meaningful way.

Next Steps:
• Conduct the updated survey in the following community engagement courses at the end of the spring 2018 semester:
  • SBS/LOS 430 Applied Social Policy
  • SBS 347 Youth Community & Higher Education
  • SBS 310 Childhood & Society
  • SBS 375 Infant Mental Health
  • LAC 370 Toward Global Ethics
  • SBS 304 Food, Culture & Eating
  • SBS 308 Medical Anthropology
  • SBS 411 Counseling & Psychotherapy
• Present the results of these findings to help support and inform community engagement activities at USM.