

## ***The Devil is in the Details: Defining Civic Engagement***

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### **Abstract**

For “civic engagement” work to have meaningful and long-term impact upon students, partners, and postsecondary institutions, each institution must undertake the difficult work of defining civic engagement for itself such that the definition aligns with the institution’s educational mission and local context. We argue that civic engagement is inherently political and that definitional dilemmas have arisen from the conflation of the terms *service-learning* and *civic engagement*. Here we present lessons we have learned from using service-learning to teach citizenship and applying essentially political definitions about *community* and how *citizens* should behave, and offer insights from an extended community-building project that we analyze for its revelations concerning universities’ and communities’ limited capacities for undertaking long-term civic engagement projects. We conclude by placing the problem of definition in a broader context of issues regarding cost and other limitations universities still need to consider to achieve and sustain civic engagement.

### **Introduction**

**A**t Butler University, a private university of approximately 3,800 students located in Indianapolis, Indiana, the Center for Citizenship and Community (CCC) coordinates civic engagement activities and assists the institution’s effort to assess the outcomes and costs associated with civic engagement. Founded in 1997, the CCC predicates its work upon the belief that education is key to social transformation and that an informed and active citizenry can exercise a measure of control over the political, social, and economic factors that affect all of our lives.

As we developed both the center’s mission and programming, two important factors influenced our thinking. First, we envisioned the CCC as bringing university faculty, staff, and students into partnership with community members in order both to accelerate our students’ application of disciplinary concepts and to educate our students for citizenship. We therefore adopted the service-learning pedagogy because we could adeptly use this teaching method to involve faculty, staff, and students in the work of the center and

because a service-learning approach can readily raise our students' political consciousness, an argument we develop in this article.

The second factor that influenced our thinking was our desire to find a way to commingle university resources with community assets. From 1999 through 2006, CCC operations and programming were shaped through the philosophy of and funding from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development Community Outreach Partnership Centers (COPC) and COPC New Directions grants.<sup>1</sup> This funding enabled us to conduct community-based programming and research designed to both meet the educational mission of Butler University and meld the university's resources with local neighborhoods' and communities' resources to improve the lives of citizens on and beyond the Butler campus.

Many of the activities we set forth in our original COPC grant proposal were accomplished as we had planned, yielding the desired outcomes. In other activities, however, we encountered obstacles that arose from a variety of causes: optimism affected our vision, partner organizations lost funding, fledgling entrepreneurs went

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out of business, academic administrators came and went, and came and went. Antagonistic behaviors by neighborhood members, often spurred by racist and sexist attitudes, and, tragically, the mental illness of more than one area resident, also caused program implementation delays. In light of these challenges, the CCC staff maintained the practice

of reflecting upon and evaluating the progress and effectiveness of our programming through continuous consultation with our partners and the CCC Advisory Board.<sup>2</sup> Some programs were refined while others were eliminated because their purpose was fulfilled or their focus so altered by our community partners as to make them inappropriate for us to pursue. Our ability to adapt to the realities of working with both community and university partners has also been enhanced by a contingency planning strategy we jokingly refer to as “The Plooey Factor”—how we respond when something goes awry. We have become nimble at identifying new partners and implementing alternate strategies that have enabled us to pursue civic engagement goals and refine the CCC's educational programming.

As we became more agile in responding to the vicissitudes of “doing civic engagement,” we also learned what we *should* be doing in terms of developing worthwhile and sustainable partnerships and which partnerships we *ought* to be pursuing as a university committed to the ideal of civic engagement. Our experience has led us to conclude that the devil is in the details—that there is no definition of civic engagement that fits all institutions, although there may be similar forces driving universities and colleges to assume a greater role in maintaining the economic, social, and political health of their respective communities. (For a concise overview of the particular factors impinging upon urban colleges and universities, see Dobelle 2006.)

In this article, we contend that if “civic engagement” work is to have any meaningful and long-term impact upon students, partners, and postsecondary institutions, each institution must undertake the difficult work of defining civic engagement for itself. If the definition does not reasonably and coherently align with the institution’s educational mission and local context, resources will be squandered in the pursuit of engagement for engagement’s sake.

In what follows, we present three examples from our efforts to refine our understanding of civic engagement, an understanding that is local to our institution but contains guiding principles that can be useful for other institutions. The first section deals with terminological issues and traces our conception of the inherently political nature of service-learning and the definitional dilemmas that have arisen from the conflation of the terms service-learning and civic engagement.

Second, we focus attention on the lessons we learned about using service-learning to teach citizenship and applying essentially political ideas about what constitutes *community* and how *citizens* should behave as we developed partnerships with our local community and neighborhood organizations.

Third, we present an extended community-building project to explore the enormous amount of time, patience, and trust that must be invested in each partnership if academic, as well as civic, goals are to be achieved. We analyze this example for what it reveals about the limited capacities and commitments of both universities and community partners to undertake civic engagement. We suggest that our experience is a metaphor for other problematic projects and partnerships both within and beyond the academy that go nowhere despite the investment of time, energy, and money.

In our conclusion, we place the problem of definition in a broader context by raising issues about the costs and other limitations universities still need to consider in order to achieve and sustain the goals of scholarly civic engagement.

## ***I. Citizenship and Community: Working toward Definitions***

Since the early 1990s, colleges and universities have been reexamining their roles in extensive and measurable societal change. The reawakening of postsecondary institutions to their responsibility to explicitly address a range of social, political, and economic issues is often attributed to two seminal publications by Ernest Boyer. The first publication was *Scholarship Reconsidered*, the 1990 report from the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching in which Boyer and his coauthors “proposed a new paradigm of scholarship, one that not only promotes the scholarship of *discovering* knowledge, but also celebrates the scholarship of *integrating* knowledge, of *communicating* knowledge, and of *applying* knowledge through professional service” (Boyer 1996a; see also Boyer 1990 and 1996b). (For an interesting chapter on Boyer’s leadership and impact in the field of engagement and insights into those who worked with him in the field, see Glassick 1999.) The second publication was Boyer’s article “The Scholarship of Engagement,” wherein he challenges academicians to consider the connections between their teaching, scholarship, and responsibilities to constituencies beyond the academy. In concluding this essay Boyer writes:

At one level, the scholarship of engagement means connecting the rich resources of the university to our most pressing social, civic, and ethical problems. . . . But, at a deeper level, I have this growing conviction that what’s also needed is not just more programs, but a larger purpose, a larger sense of mission, a larger clarity of direction in the nation’s life. (1996b, 19–20)

Boyer’s call to action is inherently political, directing the attention of scholars to “pressing social, civic, and ethical problems” and suggesting such activity must contribute to “a larger purpose, a larger sense of mission, a larger clarity of direction in the nation’s life” (1996b).<sup>3</sup>

Many educators responded to Boyer’s challenge by designing, implementing, and assessing service-learning and civic engagement opportunities for their students, institutions, and respective

communities. (Sandmann 2006 provides a brief but useful history of the relationship between civic engagement and higher education that followed Boyer's call to action.) Within these myriad programs, the term *service-learning* is often used as a synonym for *civic engagement*, making it difficult to separate discussions of service-learning from the broader discussion of civic engagement. Although this commingling of terminology is productive in that it has yielded a wide array of engagement definitions and practices, we believe that this blurring of terms also obscures key distinctions between service-learning and civic engagement. In particular it obscures the inherently political dimensions of these practices as they relate to the civic sphere and behaviors of citizenship.

Within the context of our argument, we use the term "political" in the broad sense of *civitas*, a term that reaches back to Plato and Aristotle but extends beyond the narrow geographic and historical confines of the Greek city-state. Following Aristotle, we link the goal of politics to the discovery and maintenance of the "good life," while extending his concept to those who were denied the good life in his fourth-century BCE world, most noticeably women and men lacking education and wealth. Our concept of politics is also influenced by the definition of politics offered by Norman Jacobson in *Pride and Solace*, in which he writes:

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*"[T]his blurring of . . . service-learning and civic engagement . . . obscures the inherently political dimensions of these practices as they relate to the civic sphere and behaviors of citizenship."*

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By politics I mean . . . that body of ideas, conventions, practices, institutions, and relationships directed toward carrying on the affairs of the public—in the absence of a knowable, definable, objective, immutable, transmittable common good. In the *absence* of something. (1978, 9)

In other words, politics is more than imposing order. It is about making meaning and finding within that meaning a good life accessible to all. Granted, defining the exact contours of the "good life" is the subject of another article, but presently, we see the good life as one that can be lived by individuals who are embedded within communities that both protect and acknowledge the individuals' rights and obligations within and to that community. This means

that individuals must come to view themselves as a part of a collective whole and value their well-being as connected essentially with the welfare of others. By focusing in this way, we enter what folklorist Jay Mechling has called “the civil sphere” (1997). Scholars such as political theorists Richard Dagger (1997) and Benjamin Barber (1998) and classicist Martha Nussbaum (1997) would recognize Mechling’s definition of the civil sphere as the “realm of society that stands apart from the state, from the market, and from the home world” (115). Like his colleagues in political theory and classics, Mechling appreciates the fact that “a vital civil sphere is crucial to the health of democracy” (115).

From a historical perspective, we understand the civic engagement movement emerged from the extant service-learning movement.<sup>4</sup> We view the service-learning pedagogy to be the root system in an educational reform movement that has been growing in the United States for over two decades. Using the ancient metaphor of the tree of knowledge, we identify four branches of educational outcomes that are associated with the service-learning reform movement: enhancement of disciplinary-based competencies, development of social and personal responsibility, fostering intercultural competencies, and civic engagement. We concern ourselves in this particular essay with civic engagement.

While the popularity of the term “civic engagement” is evident in that it is now attached to many postsecondary programs, agreement regarding the meaning and purpose of such programming is hardly unanimous.<sup>5</sup> For example, not all programs that institutions place under the general rubric of civic engagement seek to address the *civics* of engagement.<sup>6</sup> In a survey of the literature on engagement, for example, Lynn Swaner identifies “two distinct definitional strands” (2007, 19) that suggest institutions pursue engagement in very different ways. The first strand, “the *involvement perspective* of engagement, posits that students are engaged in educational experiences that lead to better learning outcomes” (2007, 19). She notes, however, that the “involvement” approach to learning does not necessarily invoke students’ identity as citizens or increase their understanding of theories or practices of citizenship, a finding similar to that of Marilyn Smith (1994, 40–41). The second definitional strand Swaner identifies is “civic engagement”—which we assert is inherently political. According to Swaner, this strand “holds that students are engaged with larger communities beyond the campus” and “entails the development of both citizenship capacities necessary for participatory democracy and social responsibility necessary for community membership” (19).

For institutions where civic engagement, as a *modus vivendi*, is intended as a fundamental outcome of engagement programming, the conflation of service-learning with civic engagement hinders the full understanding and implementation of service-learning by obscuring a number of issues.

The first of these issues deals with what it means to be “civically” engaged. Debates within academic circles have created a kind of terminological soup as scholars and practitioners attempt to define and refine their understanding of what it means to address the civic dimension of service-learning and civic engagement. This literature often frames the issue as a need to educate students for citizenship. For example, an entire chapter in Eyler and Giles’s book on service-learning is devoted to the discussion of how well-designed and integrated service-learning “contributes to [the] attainment of . . . elements of citizenship” they label “values, knowledge, skills, efficacy and commitment” (1999, 163). More recently, in her essay “Educating for Citizenship,” Musil reiterates the call for a “newly understood *civic learning*,” a term she suggests has emerged from three related though distinct reform movements: “the diversity movement; the civic engagement movement; and the movement to create more student-centered institutions” (2003, 5). She notes these movements share significant commonalities:

All three argue that students need to be prepared to assume full and responsible lives in an interdependent world marked by uncertainty, rapid change, and destabilizing inequities. Each recognizes the societal and cognitive development that results when students step out of their comfort zones into contact zones. All emphasize student-centered pedagogies that foster engaged, participatory learning dependent on dialogue and collaboration. (2003, 5)

In another essay, Musil asserts that civic learning is an approach that explicitly links interest in education about democracy and citizenship with issues of diversity. While these connections are not always part of engagement programs, she argues that civic learning and diversity might be better integrated if practitioners “move from the language of service to the language of justice and social responsibility” (2005, 13), language that invokes the political dimensions of civic engagement.

Saltmarsh (2005, 53) argues that “civic learning includes: knowledge—historical, political, and civic knowledge that arises from



both academic and community sources; skills—critical thinking, communication, public problem solving, civic judgment, civic imagination and creativity, collective action, coalition building, organizational analysis; and values—justice, inclusion, and participation.” Exploring the shift in terminology to civic learning, Saltmarsh argues that civic learning is consistent with “civic professionalism,” which points to the public purposes and social responsibilities of professional education and practice.” He also delves into the nature of civic learning and suggests that “Civic learning outcomes need to be thoughtfully constructed and carefully assessed if there is a serious interest in knowing that students are learning the knowledge, skills and values for active, engaged civic participation.”

These discussions of terminology are useful in exploring the role of civic engagement in cultivating within students an ethos of citizenship. However, the proliferation of terms raises questions of what we really mean by the terms “citizenship” and “civic.” In addressing these questions, for example, Westheimer and Kahne delineate three visions of citizenship: “the personally responsible citizen; the participatory citizen; and the justice-oriented citizen” (2004, 239). We acknowledge that the connection between politics and engagement efforts makes some service-learning practitioners uncomfortable. We contend that it is precisely because *civic* is a political term that people, whether intentionally or unintentionally, muddle its usage and its purpose because they do not want to admit that civic engagement really is about being politically engaged. Studies conducted by scholars like Smith (1994), Astin and Sax (1998), and Harkavy (2004) reveal that both faculty-level resistance and institutional lethargy are at play when it comes to guiding and instructing our students in the art of civic, *political* engagement. Politics can be controversial, and though we may value pedagogies that are transformational, service-learning may not be an approach that works well for all institutional members because it rests upon, as Plater argues, a process essential to civic engagement: “social action for a public purpose in a local community” (2004, 10). Consequently, if institutions want to claim the civic engagement mantle, they need to do more than attach the words to their mission statement. (Other collections and essays on civic engagement philosophies and strategies include Astin and Sax 1998; Jacoby 2003; Bringle, Games, and Malloy 1999; Checkoway 2001; Colby et al. 2003; and Percy, Zimpher, and Brukardt 2006.)

Even when political awareness and activism are not intended outcomes of service-learning or civic engagement, they may be



unintended consequences of these pedagogies. For students, engagement in the community often raises questions related to such issues as social justice, injustice, inequality, poverty, and so forth—questions that we suggest derive from the inherently political nature of service-learning and civic engagement. Where institutions choose not to pursue political issues related to civic engagement, they must still be prepared to deal with these issues in some significant way.

Admittedly, service-learning is not the only method for imparting an ethos of citizenship that is attuned to the protection and maintenance of the commonwealth. (Within the context of our argument, we use “commonwealth” to denote a more expansive political notion than the concept of commonwealth associated with liberal democratic theory that derives principally from the writings of the eighteenth-century British political theorist John Locke—where his primary focus is on the protection of the individual’s liberty, individual conscience, and judgment.) However, when curriculum and cocurricular activities are deliberately structured to teach citizenship skills, the multifaceted service-learning pedagogy is one that can be used to educate students holistically, such that their cognitive and affective learning takes place within the context of applying what one has learned for the betterment of self *and* others. Privilege and wealth do not guarantee a democracy’s survival, but a well-educated body of political actors, of engaged citizens, increases the likelihood that a democracy will endure over time. (For more on the ways in which service-learning reflects the goals of such educational reformers as Thomas Jefferson and Paulo Freire, see Brabant and Hochman 2004.)

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## **II. Service-Learning and Civic Engagement in Community Context**

Our choice to adopt service-learning as the pedagogy for our work in the CCC came as a result of our commitment to two goals: enhancing student learning and educating our students for social responsibility and citizenship. In making this choice we understood service-learning’s dual purpose: (1) to stimulate students’ interest in, and ability to digest, course content as they relate theories to practical experiences beyond the classroom and (2) to

aid in the process of inculcating values we deem essential to the well-being of any *civic* construct—humility, efficacy, and empathy, because without these values, students cannot learn to serve or lead effectively.

Yet, while service-learning is inherently political in that it encourages students to view themselves as effective moral actors, teaching citizenship is not as simple as placing students in community-based organizations with the expectation that they will intuitively display various behaviors associated with citizenship. These include an understanding of self as embedded within or connected to a larger or more comprehensive collectivity; a willingness to forgo immediate gratification for the sake of communal well-being or safety; the fortitude to build social, political, and economic structures that support life generally; and a reciprocal sense of justice. Of course, we are not alone in noting the dissociation between programming purportedly designed to develop civically inclined behaviors and what students report they learn. As long ago as 1994, Marilyn W. Smith produced evidence that led her to the following conclusion:

If [educational] institutional or national influentials' [e.g. politicians, policy makers] goals are to enhance students' citizenship/civic responsibility, they cannot assume that students automatically connect their service participation to concepts of civic participation. If our purpose is consistency between national policy, institutional mission, and outcome for service participants, it is imperative that we embark upon a more collaborative process of goal setting to insure that strategies that connect service-learning and citizenship are developed. (1994, 42)

Through our experience in developing service-learning programs, we realized that teaching the skills of citizenship is complicated by what we came to understand is a disconnect between the theory and practice of “community” and “citizenship.” This discovery caused us to reflect critically upon our field experience so that we might more fully understand how our goal of teaching citizenship could fit into practice within a local context.

In the initial years of our work within the framework of the COPC philosophy, for example, we assumed a definition of community similar to that used by sociologist G. Hilléry: “community consists of persons in social interaction within a geographic area and having

one or more additional ties” (*qtd. in Fielding 2005, 466*). The service area of our COPC grants included the neighborhood known as Butler-Tarkington where Butler University is located. There seemed to be no problem in conceptualizing the neighborhood as our community partner since Butler-Tarkington is a well-defined geographical area with an abundance of “additional ties” to help sustain a sense of community.

Many Butler-Tarkington residents proudly assert that their neighborhood is served by the Butler-Tarkington Neighborhood Association (BTNA), said to be the oldest continuous neighborhood association in the nation. Founded in 1956, the BTNA was established to “conserve and improve the area by promoting cooperative efforts among residents, schools, churches, and civic interests” with the express purpose of maintaining and promoting diversity within the neighborhood’s boundaries (*Polis Center 1996, 22*). BTNA’s founding members successfully prevented block busting, segregation, and urban flight from the area during the 1950s through 1970s.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the neighborhood association is credited with securing for Butler-Tarkington its “reputation as one of the city’s more stable neighborhoods . . . and as an example of successful integration” (*Polis Center 1996, 5*). Many of the original members of the BTNA who still live in the area rightly speak with pride about their efforts to maintain the unique qualities of their community and point to its harmonious ethnic diversity as a key facet of their identity.

With BTNA as a community partner we began a series of programming and research projects in order to better understand how a university can commingle its intellectual and financial resources with community-based assets in order to more effectively reach its educational goals while supporting and sustaining local communities. (Insights into the role that postsecondary institutions may fulfill in their communities can be found in Bringle, Games, and Malloy 1999.) As students of the assets-based community-building theory and practitioners of service-learning, we conducted academic research on relevant urban issues (*Kretzmann and McKnight 1993*). (Building and Social Housing Foundation 2003, 1–44, offers an overview of the assets-based community-building method.) We consulted with, and heeded the advice of, neighborhood leaders and organizations both in planning and executing outreach activities. Yet, despite our efforts to work collaboratively, many CCC initiatives met resistance from some neighborhood members who maintained that the activities arose from a narrowly focused university-sponsored agenda or served the interests of an elite segment of the

neighborhood. Some charged that ulterior motives lurked behind programming we considered benign (e.g., a university-sponsored autumn carnival for neighborhood children). Still others asserted that we failed to understand the deeper interests and needs of the community as a whole.

Taking the criticism seriously, we realized we needed to expand our knowledge of the community we were trying to serve. Therefore, in 2001, we undertook an ethnographic study of the neighborhood that focused upon the needs, desires, dreams, and beliefs of the neighborhood residents. At the outset of this study, we adopted a view of place akin to what Lucy Lippard in *The Lure of the Local* defines as “The external world mediated through human subjective experience” (1997, 7). From this perspective, we sought to understand the place of Butler-Tarkington as residents understand it. Because of our respective scholarly training as folklorist and political theorist, we were also interested in the dynamics of place, in how individuals create, share, negotiate, and attune their conceptions of place not only to formulate a shared sense of “community” but also to formulate “civic memories” that unite residents and nourish “the sense of civic identity that is essential to citizenship” (Dagger 1997, 165).<sup>8</sup>

The interviewing process proved enlightening—providing a critical perspective on neighborhood identity, dynamics, politics, and place that is rooted in face-to-face encounters, in the “interaction order,” to use Irving Goffman’s term (1983). We discovered that claims about a unified neighborhood are somewhat exaggerated, although the ideals of integration and stability are genuinely desired by many area residents. In her 1999 study of the Butler-Tarkington neighborhood, Lisa Wheeler noted that while the area considered as a whole is indeed diverse, there remain entrenched racial attitudes that threaten to undermine “the stability that is the foundation of Butler-Tarkington’s cohesion” (65). This finding still holds true today.

While our analysis of our particular involvement with the local stabilization efforts of the BTNA does not fully examine the various institutional forces that can either cause resegregation or aid in maintaining desegregated neighborhoods, it does provide insights into how area residents perceive the diversity of the Butler-Tarkington community to be more complex than race—blackness or whiteness—although we do not want to minimize the importance of race in the neighborhood.<sup>9</sup> Butler-Tarkington is composed of a fascinating blend of people, many of whom care deeply about maintaining a richly diverse community but differ significantly in

terms of their thinking and approach to the world. These various beliefs and perceptions necessarily give rise to differences, for example, in terms of how individuals conceptualize the boundaries of their community and the connections that link individuals to each other.

The complexity, diversity, and often recalcitrant attitudes we discovered in Butler-Tarkington can lead to problems when community members or representatives of outside organizations (like a university) make assumptions that *the community* is synonymous with geographical boundaries.

As is the case in Butler-Tarkington, community members often function within multiple, intersecting communities that defy easy identification. “Invisible neighborhoods” exist within the boundaries of Butler-Tarkington (Wheeler 1999, 19) and hold within them individuals of diverse sensibilities and socioeconomic class and status.

Insight into how we could bring university resources into partnership with the Butler-Tarkington community and teach students principles of civic action—ranging from critical thinking and clear communication to formulating political coalitions—came after a May 2001 workshop hosted by the CCC. This workshop brought together residents, police, and university personnel to explore not only research methods used to conduct community-requested studies, but also the results of the crime and safety study the CCC completed the previous year.<sup>10</sup> One resident reacted so negatively to the process and findings that we ended the workshop early and few of our workshop goals were achieved. Shortly thereafter, we met on the front porch of another workshop participant where we were joined by five of her neighbors. We addressed the neighbors’ concerns regarding the survey and answered questions on a wide range of issues regarding the university’s involvement in the community. This front-porch meeting lasted three hours. Two more meetings occurred at this neighbor’s home over the next few weeks, yielding increasingly positive results that included a growing trust and respect between participants and a more precise understanding of how university resources could be blended with community assets to improve life for all area residents.

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During our front porch meetings on those warm June afternoons, we witnessed people *practicing* community—coming together to talk about matters of common concern and seeking solutions to problems through civil discourse. We were also reminded of how individuals' stories reveal conceptions of self while delineating what a given place means to them both as autonomous human beings and as members of a common endeavor. This experience led us to reconsider how community is sustained, why people choose to get involved with their communities, and what we learn from this process about the practice of citizenship.

As a result of our ethnographic study, we learned that *community* is not a hierarchical structure. Speaking with the designated leaders of the neighborhood associations does not necessarily mean that they in turn share the information with their constituents or that the constituents think their associations' leaders represent their views accurately or adequately. We also learned that the role of face-to-face interactions—on front porches or at local meeting places such as businesses and restaurants—in fostering and maintaining community cannot be overestimated. In fact, the lack of interaction between subgroups, where one group may have little or no knowledge of the other(s), may play a significant role in the perceived North/South, racial, or economic divides that constantly threaten to unravel the racial integration that has been achieved in sections of the Butler-Tarkington area.

This and other insights that emerged from our ethnographic study had a profound effect both on how we understand and define our role as a university seeking to develop civic-engagement initiatives and on how we design service-learning outreach programs so that students might more fully witness and participate in the process of citizenship at a neighborhood level. Our findings can be summarized by saying *citizenship matters*. Yet it must be remembered that the performance of one's civic responsibilities occurs within a pluralistic society that ideally adheres to democratic governing principles and that the *practice* of citizenship is conflict-riddled because it involves a constant negotiation of wills and worldviews. As Lippard notes:

A peopled place is not always a community, but regardless of the bonds formed with it, or not, a common history is being lived out. . . . Community doesn't mean understanding everything about everybody and resolving all the differences; it means knowing how to

work within the differences as they change and evolve.  
(1997, 24)

We have consequently come to view citizenship in terms of the idea of civic mindedness—a reflective disposition that informs action. As we use the term, civic mindedness involves a developed awareness of others that engages our moral imaginations and enhances our sense of efficacy and empathy as human beings who dwell in civil society. From our perspective, civic mindedness is an essential attribute of the identity of individuals who see themselves as citizens and choose to participate in the cooperative process at the heart of civic community. Citizenship, if understood as a mindset, can be a practice individuals use to “work within the differences”

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that make up the complexity of places like Butler-Tarkington. This notion of citizenship also aligns with Rhonda Halperin’s description of community as “not just a place . . . but a series of day-to-day, ongoing, often invisible practices” (1998, 5).

The notion of civic mindedness has become a foundational component of how we define and practice civic engagement and service-learning at Butler University. From this perspective, we now seek to develop service-learning experiences that engage students in the process of citizenship in all its complexity. Where students become more aware of the diverse interests, conflicts, and negotiations that take place in practicing citizenship, we believe they are developing their capacities for being active citizens within their own local communities as well.

### **III. Groundhog Day—Sustainable External and Internal Partnerships**

In the course of developing civic engagement programming we learned that an enormous amount of time, patience, and trust must be invested by all partners. We also learned that despite our efforts to convince community partners of our good intentions, distrust of our “agenda” did not dissolve easily, and continual efforts to shore up trusting relations were necessary. As noted by Harry Clark Maddux and colleagues, “building ‘trusting mutual



partnerships' is an ongoing process that takes time and listening and frequent shared meals" (2006, 73). Participants must also be willing to undertake the difficult job of examining and reexamining how their organizations' respective missions and resources might be knit together in common cause. When this preparatory work does not happen, or when there is limited commitment to a project even where partners' missions and goals seem to align, the desired outcomes may be impossible to achieve. We learned a number of lessons about the factors that can cause partnerships to unravel from one particularly difficult community-building project. We call this project "Groundhog Day," a name that we use metaphorically to refer to other problematic projects.

In 1997, eighteen months prior to applying for the COPC grant, and during the period when Brabant was the sole face of Butler's Center for Citizenship and Community, she initiated conversations with neighborhood residents and neighborhood association boards, city officials, and developers, including the executive director of the area's community development corporation (CDC). Brabant heard many area residents express keen interest in revitalizing two commercial nodes in a residential area south of the university, and within the designated service area of the CDC. At that time, Marion County, in which Indianapolis is located, contained fifteen nonprofit CDCs that shared the broad mission "to make communities safer and more stable through home ownership" (*Indianapolis Star* 2002, A16). In addition to the technical and funding support provided by Local Initiatives Support Corp. (LISC) that aided the CDCs' efforts to secure community development block grants (CDBG), urban revitalization dollars were available through a variety of other sources, including the Lilly Endowment, which used Indianapolis Neighborhood Housing Partnership (INHP) as its venue for funds distribution. As urban problems grew, demands upon CDCs increased, but performance standards remained relatively lax. Through 2001, CDCs could expect to receive approximately \$100,000 per year from the INHP to offset their operating costs with very few accountability strings attached.

It was into this environment of entitlement and turf that Brabant began, in 1999, to lead the university's efforts to collaborate with the BTNA, the city's Department of Metropolitan Development (DMD), Historic Landmarks of Indiana, two small business owners, and private investors in an economic revitalization project. Brabant immediately encountered numerous obstacles to the project, including the obstructionist efforts of the area CDC's director and members of the BTNA-sanctioned task force

that was formulated expressly to spearhead the commercial node's redevelopment.

The task force initially sought to nudge the CDC to embrace its stated mission: "community revitalization to improve the quality of life for the community we serve" (*Martin Luther King Community Development Corporation 1999*). Time and time again these efforts were stymied by the CDC's executive director, who insisted that he could not make money on housing rehabilitation or with some far-fetched idea of combining commercial use with housing. Although the task force considered seeking CDBG dollars without the CDC, city officials explained that these dollars were available to only a handful of other nonprofits in the city. For months the task force members were told that they would have to work through the CDC in order to secure CDBG money. Eventually the CDC director hired a business manager with a nebulous job description, but no progress was made toward rehabilitating the corners. Nothing changed, including the conversations and the players. Brabant began to feel as though she was a character in the popular 1993 film, *Groundhog Day*, starring Bill Murray. In the film, Murray plays an egotistical newscaster who is unable to leave to Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania, after reporting on the Groundhog Day activities. For several mornings, the newscaster awakens at 6:00 a.m. to the clock radio emitting the Sonny and Cher song, "I Got You, Babe." Murray finds himself reliving Groundhog Day, with the day's events unfolding in a fixed pattern, and it is not until Murray's character learns important lessons regarding the ways he interacts with other human beings that he finally awakens to a new day and is able to leave Punxsutawney.

People on the task force argued vehemently because their different visions for neighborhood revitalization did not coincide. The cohesiveness of the task force, always fragile, began to disintegrate as some members sought to terminate the CDC director's term, while other task force members asserted that no progress could be made with city officials without the support of the CDC. This internecine fighting also depleted the energies of BTNA board members who were charged with overseeing the activities of the task force.

As the struggle between the BTNA board and the task force worsened, the CDC director undermined the revitalization effort both subtly and explicitly. Despite the continued effort of the BTNA board and the majority of the task force members to partner with the CDC director in putting forth a joint request for CDBG money, backroom politics between the director and city bureaucrats won the day, and in July of 2000, just two weeks shy of the CDBG grant

proposal deadline, the task force again met with the CDC director and business manager. The two men announced their refusal to support the joint grant proposal, stating once again that they viewed the task force activities as competing for a shrinking pool of funds. Tempers boiled, voices rose, and a fistfight was narrowly averted. Months of work ended with no progress toward the goal of revitalization. It was still Groundhog Day.

Within a week of that July meeting, Brabant sought counsel from the university's legal staff and composed a letter stating why she would no longer work with the staff of the CDC but preferred instead to work with the board of the CDC. One month later she received a copy of a nasty letter crafted by the CDC budget manager that had been sent to Brabant's boss, the president of Butler University. After consulting with the university's president and attorneys, it was decided that no more time would be wasted working with a dysfunctional organization. Brabant resigned from the task force but did not withdraw the CCC's support of the area entrepreneurs with whom the CCC had established partnerships. The CCC continued to provide them with technical support in the form of architectural drawings, contact with possible investors, and a partnership with the city. It was still Groundhog Day. The task force struggled on for another two years but accomplished little.

As of spring 2008, the commercial nodes at these two corners appear virtually unchanged although several businesses have come and gone during the past seven years and one building no longer exists. While the conditions in the area appear as though it is still 6:00 a.m., the CCC staff no longer looks at the same clock because we learned important lessons concerning the use of university assets and their exhaustibility.

Prior to committing to any civic engagement activity, we assess the feasibility of projects and programs and do not act until we are fairly certain we, and our partners, can succeed. We also realize that some problems defy solutions until certain personalities depart, leadership changes, or infrastructure changes occur. We understand the importance of evaluating the effectiveness of the partnership early in the engagement process, and we have become willing to walk away from organizations that are not truly committed partners. Commitment means a willingness to articulate one's expectations, sharing resources, and seeking a shared vision of process and outcomes. We also humbly acknowledge that no one institution or group of individuals can single-handedly transform environments poisoned by racism, sexism, political ineptitude, and financial corruption.

We have also come to understand that monitoring the health of external relationships and partnerships will not, in and of itself, prevent a recurrence of Groundhog Day. Our experience suggests that such retrenchments may occur within the academy as easily as in communities external to the academy. For example, in 2003 the Butler faculty revised its faculty handbook to broaden its language of scholarship to reflect the values associated with the scholarship of engagement. The president and board of trustees approved the changes in 2006, and tenure and promotion decisions since that time are supposedly being made with these guidelines in mind. For a period of time, this change in definition and policy suggested that our institution had responded to Boyer's recommendation that scholarship be given "a broader, more efficacious meaning" (1990). Yet the university, like the neighborhood we serve, seems inclined to revert to old, familiar patterns. The university's approved definition is not even as expansive as the definition proposed by scholars such as Sarah Kuhn and Ernest Lynton (Kuhn credits Lynton with influencing her ideas). Indeed, Kuhn suggests that Boyer's "four-fold classification" still serves "to reinforce the notion that teaching, research, and service [are] separable categories." She calls for a truly radical change: "to relinquish this entrenched trinity in favor of a single category, *scholarship*, that would be the basis for evaluating all faculty professional activity" (2005, 13). She argues that such a change in categorization might finally lead to the recognition of "the potential for deep interconnections between teaching, research, and service, and the fact that in many excellent and scholarly professional service activities the three can be inextricable" (2005).

We doubt we will live to see the consolidation of the tripartite evaluation scheme into a single category, or even refigured into a trinity of equal value, because resistance to change is fierce within the academy. In our own institution, we are even now resisting new administrative personnel who have aligned with old-guard faculty to reassert that Boyer-like scholarship is "just service." They seek to reinstate a very traditional and narrow of definition that includes only publication by peer-reviewed top-tier disciplinary journals and major university publishing houses. Ironically, the retraction is occurring as our university attempts to implement curricular reform that includes a "community requirement" for all students. It feels as though Groundhog Day has come round again.

Students too can precipitate Groundhog Day. In 2002, for example, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) began a project titled "Liberal Education and America's

Promise: Excellence for Everyone as a Nation Goes to College (LEAP).” As described by Debra Humphreys and Abigail Davenport, the LEAP campaign was interested in “exploring what different constituents know and think about” the value of liberal education, and, as part of this work, the AAC&U “commissioned a series of student focus groups in four locations in different regions of the country . . . held with public high school seniors . . . [planning] . . . to pursue a baccalaureate degree” and “advanced college students at both public and private colleges and universities” (2005, 36).<sup>11</sup> The results of the focus groups are troubling because students did not view the activities and values associated with civic engagement as important components of their education. Humphreys and Davenport write:

Nearly all the students we interviewed regarded civic engagement as something that might be important to some individuals, but not as something that a college education should address. Some of the students went so far as to suggest that activities like service-learning might distract from the more important work of their own *individual* self-development—the primary reason they gave for attending college. (2005, 41)

Indeed, in Humphreys and Davenport’s list of student rankings of “important outcomes” associated with a college education, “appreciation of your role as a citizen and an orientation toward public service” came last (40). The perception that service-learning and civic engagement are unimportant is particularly troubling in light of the growing recognition in the academy of the need for institutions to better understand their responsibilities to the communities that lie beyond their respective campus boundaries.

It may be that we as faculty, administrators, and community partners are failing to model the very behaviors we say we want our students to emulate because we do not really want radical social transformation. Perhaps we are too wedded to educational methods that maintain class structures and privilege and do little to actually question social injustice, let alone formulate models for radical economic, social, and political change.<sup>12</sup>

As a consequence of our Groundhog Day experiences, we have worked to define the meaning of civic engagement on our campus and continually monitor requests for CCC services that come from parties external to the university to determine how closely the requests align with the university’s educational mission and

academic programs. We maintain viable partnerships by assessing the strength of our relationships through regular discussions, as well as adjustment of programming goals and resource allocations. However, despite our efforts to learn from our mistakes and avoid unproductive engagements with both internal and external parties, we continue to grapple with the definition, development, and maintenance of civic engagement programs that fit with the capacity of the university's curricular offerings, learning objectives, and budgetary realities—what James Trostle and Richard Hersh describe as the “corporate and academic sides” of an institution's operations (2003, 16–19).

#### **IV. Conclusion**

We believe that the future of civic engagement efforts will depend on how well institutions are able to define what they mean by this term within their own local and institutional contexts. Definition, however, is only the first step in a process of conceptualization, implementation, institutionalization, assessment, and support for engagement efforts. The further viability of civic engagement will depend on how well universities can address a host of issues that may impede the advancement of the civic engagement movement. A great deal of scholarship has already been devoted to identifying the challenges facing proponents of civic engagement. Sandmann (2006), for example, succinctly summarizes ongoing efforts to advance civic engagement through the “key issues [of] assessment and documentation, policy and advocacy, faculty engaged scholarship, [and] professional development” (44–47). By way of conclusion, we add to this discussion by encouraging civic engagement adherents to consider the relationship between politics, partnerships, and the costs associated with the movement.

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*“The further viability of civic engagement will depend on how well universities can address a host of issues that may impede the advancement of the civic engagement movement.”*

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First, the academy's conservative tendencies often cause faculty, administrators, and educational governing bodies to resist pedagogical reform that can aid in the process of empowering students to accept their civic responsibilities. As noted earlier, civic engagement is about *civic* knowledge and behavior, fundamentally political ideas. If civic engagement efforts are to be successful, and

students are to be educated for social responsibility and citizenship, faculty, administrators and, by extension, university/college governing boards must genuinely relinquish a portion of their control over the information students are expected to absorb. As Kenneth Hoover and Todd Donovan assert, “the control of information is one of the fundamentals of political power” (2008, 139). Furthermore, definitions of “expert knowledge” need to widen to include individuals whose experience may not have been earned or honed within academic circles, but is equally valuable in aiding the process through which our students learn to think critically and act socially.

Second, sustainable civic engagement programs that seek to develop civic mindedness must be built on common goals and interests, and these goals and interests should be articulated and understood by the respective partners—within and beyond the university. Partnership configurations must also reflect the basic principle of reciprocity so that no partner feels misused or unappreciated. One of the most important lessons we have learned through a decade of civic engagement work is that relationships of trust are difficult to germinate, tender in possession, and easily injured by good intentions. (On the issue of social trust, see Butin 2007 and Toole 2002.) Additionally, partnerships, like any organic being, grow and change, live and die. Therefore, we must continually assess and adjust our programming so that it remains relevant to the partners involved. Within colleges and universities, connections to the institution’s academic mission are crucial, but so too should any center or program associated with civic engagement activities be linked to both academic and student affairs personnel. Only when we truly approach student learning holistically can we expect students to adopt the civic behavior we hope to model.

Third, being able to define civic engagement within an institution’s local context and to discern which curricular programs should be linked to broader community activities has become increasingly important as institutional budgets tighten amidst the increasing pressure to be engaged. In 2003, for example, the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools established a fifth criterion for accreditation: “Engagement and Service.” Although this criterion and its core components are vague and open to interpretation, North Central’s message is clear—get engaged. (For the full accreditation criteria, see NCA 2003.) Yet we have learned that collaboration costs. If universities and colleges are to respond effectively to the call to become and remain civically engaged, then we must also be able to account for the costs associated with such



engagement and the value of our contributions to maintaining the commonwealth. Where analysis reveals that a given program has no significant benefit for the university's academic mission or where the direct and indirect costs of a program exceed the direct and indirect benefits, we have learned that investment of time and resources is not prudent. Similarly, community partners should analyze their engagement with a given university or college to determine whether the benefits they derive from the partnership are worth the costs.

Budgetary allocations and institutional incentives must be restructured to align with a university's stated values and to support the type of interdisciplinary and intercollegiate collaborations necessary to provide students with meaningful community-based learning.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, resources will need to be directed toward assessment of civic engagement activities from a range of perspectives. Sandmann's (2006) report on the 2006 Wingspread conference, for example, notes that conference participants agree that it is important to "capture the impact of engagement" and that this can be done by "measuring the impact [of engagement] on the communities themselves" (45). However, such measurements can be extremely costly, and we are uncertain whether most universities and colleges can afford to create and implement assessment tools that will generate meaningful data about the movement's impact. Similarly, building a "cohesive public policy agenda around engagement" (45) or encouraging "engagement's quality and impact" (52) will require significant investment of faculty time and institutional dollars.

The academy's greatest resource—our intellectual resource—is precious and is increasingly sought after as a solution to a host of problems that plague societies locally and globally. We think it important for postsecondary institutions to be ever cognizant of their educational missions and to be wary of undertaking the work that has, in the recent past, been within the purview of government agencies at all levels—federal, state, and local. These entities cannot abnegate their responsibilities to nurture, maintain, and protect the commonwealth through the levying, collection, and appropriation of tax dollars. The power to tax, however, is only one power people entrust to their governing agencies within a democracy. Elected and appointed officials should be expected to combine their expertise and authority with educators at all levels, to teach what Derek Bok reminds us is "that which must be learned . . . civic responsibility" (2006, 172). Just as raising a child is not a task that one person ought be expected to do alone, so too should we not hold

one institutional or governing body singularly accountable for our democracy's health and future. We must, as a nation, seek points of alliance between governmental, educational, and private enterprise bodies that can share the burden and joy of teaching civic responsibility and further the practice of democratic principles in our daily lives.

## **Endnotes**

1. For a historical account of the COPC program, see Carriere 2006.
2. The CCC Advisory Board began as a constituency-building group and has evolved to serve as a program advisory board with a measure of fund-raising responsibility.
3. Not all scholars are enamored with Boyer. For example, Jayne R. Beilke argues that "Boyer's idea of the common good is hegemonic. Social problems are not problematized, and solutions are perceived as corrections to aberrations of the status quo. Essentially, Boyer sees the world as one that is acted upon by elites" (2005, 140).
4. Other scholars discern the beginnings of the civic engagement movement in the "philosophical roots of adult education" (Saddington 2000) and the social justice principles championed by writers such as bell hooks, C. W. Mills, and Thomas Jefferson (Koliba, O'Meara, and Seidel 2000; Brabant and Hochman 2004).
5. Sandmann (2008) provides an initial analysis of what she terms the "definitional anarchy" of "civic engagement" as the term has been used in the *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*.
6. We do not mean to imply that there is consensus on what the "civics of engagement" means. For example, John Saltmarsh has attempted to distinguish between the terms "civic engagement," "civic learning," and "civic knowledge" (2005).
7. The phenomenon of white flight has been extensively documented. For example, see Suarez 1999; Williamson, Imbroscio, and Alperovitz 2003; and Seligman 2003.
8. Our approach was also informed by earlier research by Braid with the Travelling People of Scotland. In grappling with the concept of community for Travellers, Braid writes: "For Travellers, community is a fluid construct that is rooted in the dynamics of the face-to-face encounters between individuals that take place whenever and wherever they meet. These encounters are informed by past experience, memory, and underlying family relationships. They provide a place where an individual's experience with the world can

be displayed and compared with that of other individuals, where individual constructions of worldview, identity, and difference can be shared, negotiated, and attuned. I believe these interactions, and especially the perceptions of identity that take place in these interactions, can provide a foundation for a sense of community. But a sense of community involves more than just a recognition of shared identity. Community implies the recognition of a deeper interconnection—an awareness of relationship that transcends individual encounters to include a continuity of interaction over time and the expectation and desire for interaction in the future” (2002, 147).

9. In her study of the neighborhood stabilization movement over a thirty-year span (1950s–1980s) in the United States, Julie Saltman defines “neighborhood stabilization” as the “organized effort to maintain racial integration in urban neighborhoods.” Saltman explains that “participants in this movement sought—and still seek—neighborhood integration as a way of life. What they confronted, however, were massive institutional forces propelling their neighborhoods towards resegregation” (1990, 3).

10. The study was conducted by Dr. Kate Novak, Butler University, Department of Sociology and Criminal Justice, in 2000.

11. Much like the term “civic engagement,” “liberal education” is a term with multifarious meanings. Within the context of their article, Humphreys and Davenport define it as “a philosophy of education that empowers individuals, liberates the mind from ignorance, and cultivates social responsibility” (42). For an in-depth account of the classical liberal education and its implications for twenty-first-century students, see Martha Nussbaum 1997.

12. According to a story in *USA Today* (Marklein 2007), UCLA’s Cooperative Institutional Research Program released a report that found “Freshmen in 2005 reported median family incomes 60% higher than the national average. . . . In 1971, incomes were 46% above the national average.” This widening gap has serious implications in terms of accessibility, diversity, and student behavioral issues, issues that lie beyond the scope of this article.

13. For more on overcoming institutional boundaries to pedagogical change and commentary upon the academy’s resistance to change, see Brabant and Hochman 2004.

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