

Learning Communities Redux: The Value of Experiential Learning within a Learning Community

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Abstract

The terms *experiential learning* and *learning communities* both appear on current lists of high impact practices in higher education. But while internships have consistently been the subject of pedagogical study over the past fifty years, the study of learning communities, after an initial flurry of activity in the 1990s, declined precipitously. With our institution's Washington D.C. Summer Study Program as its focus, this study proposes to use qualitative and quantitative methods to analyze the quality of students' internship experiences, asking the question "How does an internship completed within a learning community increase a student experiential learning and subsequent civic engagement?" We also hope, through focus groups, to better understand the underlying causal process between the students' experiences and their subsequent civic engagement and long-term career success.

Introduction

The College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University's Washington, D.C. Summer Study program began in 1979 under the faculty leadership of Dr. Bob Weber, who was inspired by the APSA Congressional Fellows program to encourage students to intern on Capitol Hill over the summer, living together as they worked in different offices. In the 1990s, the program came under the leadership of Dr. Kay Wolsborn, who redesigned the program as a learning community, embedding learning goals that ensured student application of academic knowledge and self-reflection for professional and personal growth. Initially integrated into the political science major as an upper division elective, subsequent program directors have broadened the learning goals of the academic portion of the course so that the program is more interdisciplinary and attractive to non-political science students. Over the past decade, the program has attracted students from various majors, including economics, sociology, and environmental studies completing policy internships, history majors interning at the archives and museums, and even STEM majors interning at sites requiring data analytics and policy compliance.

The CSB+SJU D.C. Program thus encompasses two forms of high-impact practice: learning communities and experiential learning through internships. In addition, the program's focus is civic engagement – exposing students from a wide variety of majors to the political institutions, structures, and processes that make our democracy work. In terms of its mission and learning goals, the program is a model for prioritizing civics education in higher education as called for by the AACU (McCartney 2013, 3-4) and because the program intentionally incorporates political learning and civic engagement into the experience, the program bridges a recognized gap between internships that provide work experience and service learning that provides community engagement (McCartney 2013, 13).

In over forty years of its existence, the CSB+SJU Washington D.C. Program has enabled scores of students from a variety of majors to live and work in Washington D.C. and develop their professional, personal, and civic skills. Anecdotally, we know that students benefit enormously from their experience. Almost a quarter of our D.C. Program graduates return to Washington D.C. immediately after graduation to start their professional careers in policy and political fields, while others find work in state and local governments and still others move on to graduate study. Our

conversations with these “D.C. Alums” we are assured that the program enabled them to develop their professional skills, link their coursework to a set of practical skills, focus their career goals, and enable them to build relationships and thus a valuable professional and personal network. We are thoroughly convinced of the professional value of the D.C. Program to our students, but we have not systematically gathered and analyzed data to assess those outcomes.

We have even less evidence that the D.C. Program provides significant improvements in civic engagement and political knowledge than would internships outside of a learning community. While we have reason to suppose that a learning community provides intense benefits for student engagement, reflection, and connection to their community, we have not yet answered the central question: *“How does an internship completed within a learning community increase a student experiential learning and subsequent civic engagement?”*

Internships

Experiential learning is not merely “learning by doing” but rather, as John Dewey framed it, connecting past learning to a current experience (Illeris 2007, 85). Experiential learning in the form of an internship is one of the most common forms of applied learning within the undergraduate curriculum. As such, internships are a recognized high-impact practice involving integrative applied learning and are valuable because, when done well, they focus student effort on a single project, forcing them to interact with a new environment and new people, respond to feedback, and integrate prior knowledge in that new context (Kuh 2009). But not all internships are created equal. To qualify as high-impact practice, internships must be a *quality* experience: they must require that students invest considerable time and effort in their internship, which should engage them with a diverse range of individuals with whom they can build substantive relationships, and students must be provided with frequent performance feedback, and students must be applying prior knowledge in new situations (O’Neill 2010, 4-5). In addition, for internships to provide a truly high-impact educational experience, academic internship programs must be intentional in terms of connecting prior and concurrent academic coursework (Seider et al. 2011, 622) as well as the professional development opportunities before and during the internship, with the internship experience.

The role of the professor coordinating the program, therefore, is vital to its success, since that individual ensures those intentional connections between academics, personal development, and experience (Benavides et al. 2013, 338). For students engaging in political and policy-related internships, a faculty member’s mentorship and supervision of the internship is essential to ensure that the student understands important political science concepts (such as understanding institutional constraints and the non-linear nature of policymaking) that are relevant to their internship (Pecorella 2007). and to guide professional development before, during, and after the program is completed. The reflective component of an internship is essential in assigning students in connecting their classroom knowledge to their internship experience and thus creating meaningful learning (Qualters 2010, 95) and for developing “metacompetances” (Raelin 2010, 44) so that students can continue to develop skills after the internship is completed.

Within the political science context, internships are important because they increase students’ civic engagement (Anderson 2014) which is a central focus of the scholarship of pedagogy within political science. Internships provide both a habit of participation and political skill development, and it is these two effects that are most referenced in lists of benefits to political internships (Owen 2000; Bennion 2017) although students’ self-reported data confirm that political internships hone a wide variety of skills, including critical thinking, and interpersonal skills, including increased empathy and decreased prejudice (Shewizer 2006; Simons et al. 2012). Other less commonly recognized

effects, however, may be even more important. Developing a student's political skills provides a measurable increase in a sense of efficacy and expertise and a reduction in political apathy (Beaumont et al. 2007 122-142). Internships in which students participate in the political system decrease young people's sense of alienation (Freie 1997) and provide students with political information in context (Dudley and Gittelsohn 2003) increasing student's sense of political efficacy (Evans 2015 113) as well as positive attitudes to the political system (Eyler and Haltzman 1981, 28). By increasing students' political knowledge, internships can have a number of beneficial outcomes beyond increasing self-reported sense of efficacy, including increasing trust in government, promotion of support for democratic values, and most importantly a promotion of political participation (Galston 2001).

To be truly high impact, however, political and policy-related internships must go beyond simply increasing political knowledge, and focus on the development of "civic skills" for accomplishing political tasks. Students need to develop skills, including understanding the political context by paying attention and analyzing news sources, identifying decisionmakers and stakeholders, understanding the processes involved in democratic political systems, and thinking critically about issues (Kirlin 2002, 572). To benefit fully from an internship experience, therefore, students must engage in professional development opportunities that are focused on these civic and related professional skills. An optimal program will include practice, reflection, connection of coursework to practical experience, a reflective component, and a component that encourages active experimentation (Stirling et al. 2017). The quality of the program matters.

Thus, to ensure that an internship is providing these wide-ranging benefits for students, internship programs must be structured to provide feedback and assessed to ensure that students are benefiting in terms of skills development, professional development, and knowledge integration (Qualters 2010, 59). A high-quality internship program requires adequate preparation of students and monitoring by faculty, and must be structured in such a way that it ensures that students are prepared for the professional setting in which they might find themselves, have the opportunity to engage fully with their supervisors and others at their work site and their immediate surroundings so that they can build constructive relationships, and have the opportunity to reflect and respond to their learning throughout their internship. To keep so many balls in the air, an internship program must be intentional about creating those opportunities for preparation, connection, and reflection.

Learning Communities

Learning communities are a high-impact practice that combines small-group and collaborative learning which is both interdisciplinary and active (Smith and McGregor 2000, 19). In essence, learning communities aim to move the college undergraduate curriculum from a focus on passive learning, with emphasis upon memorization and where knowledge is transferred from professor to student, to an active learning environment where knowledge is jointly constructed by student and faculty.

Learning communities are "any one of a variety of curricular structures that link together several existing courses, or restructure the curricular material entirely, so that students have opportunities for deeper understand and integration of the material they are learning, and more interaction with one another and their teachers as fellow participants in the learning process." (Gabelnick et al. 1990). These practices take several forms, including linked courses, where a cohort of students take one content-based course and one writing course, learning clusters, in which three or four courses are taken by the cohort, first-year interest groups, which are linked courses often attached to academic majors and including a peer advising component and weekly seminars, federated learning communities, in which a cohort of students and a faculty member takes a theme-based series of courses as well as a seminar led by that

faculty member (Kellogg 1999). Learning communities respond to the need to build a sense of community for undergraduates and empower students within that community with opportunities for active learning (Smith 2001).

Although learning communities in the undergraduate setting are highly resource intensive, involving complex scheduling for students, small class sizes, and intensive teaching by faculty, they are effective at addressing many of the Boyer Commission recommendations, which aimed to improve undergraduate education by encouraging interdisciplinary education, active learning, and preparing students for professional life after graduation (Boyer Commission 1998). Learning communities provide students with the opportunity learn through direct inquiry and interdisciplinary, problem-oriented, and cooperative approaches to develop teamwork skills and a sense of community. They encourage students to have a focused interaction with faculty in the context of active, rather than passive, construction of knowledge (Smith and McGregor 2000). Self-reported data of outcomes for students in the learning community model find that student experiences are very positive, with students in political science-oriented residential learning communities reporting that they have significantly increase political knowledge and skills on several measures (McTague in Matteo et al 2017, 252-254) Assessment of learning outcomes indicates that learning communities have a significant impact on student learning, at least in the short term (Ma-Kellams and Kwan 2022).

The learning community model provides enormous benefits and opportunities for students and for faculty engaged in designing and developing curricula that encourage students to connect their classroom experiences to practical experiences and to connect their subsequent learning to their future lives within communities.

Internships in a Learning Community

Most of the learning community literature focuses on on-campus experiences with cohorts of students taking similar classes. However, it is possible to create a “learning community” through an intentionally structured internship program with a single course component, and there are potentially enormous benefits for doing so. Learning communities provide students with a focus of learning, emotional and intellectual support, and faculty mentorship at essential points throughout a summer internship experience.

The CSB+SJU Washington D.C. Summer Study Program has most in common with the FY Interest Group model, since students in the program are required to take a four-credit (political science) course over the summer, live together, and undertake weekly seminars. As with the FY Interest Group model, there is a strong peer- and faculty-advising component to the D.C. Program. The program does not fit neatly into this model, however, as students take the program from many majors and typically undertake the program in the summer between their junior and senior year, not as first-year students. Nevertheless, our D.C. Program comprises a strong model of a residential learning community that connects classroom study with practical experiences and encourages collaborative learning.

The learning community aspect of the program provides a means by which students can connect with others and reflect on their experiences. While internships are extraordinarily valuable in building skills, they can be very isolating for students who are encountering new professional experiences as individuals. For example, in Washington, D.C. many student interns live in small apartments or dorms with very little structured engagement between them and other students and thus very little opportunity to discuss the challenges of these new experiences. In their workplace they may be one of a small group of interns who lack opportunities to meet and learn about the work of other students outside of their organization, and even if these opportunities exist, many students would be reluctant to admit to any discomfort or inadequacy to someone within their office. A learning community, which allows interns to live with students they know and with the mentorship of a known and trusted faculty member provides them with the

ability to learn from and support one another so that they can interact in “personally and intellectually stimulating ways” (Smith and MacGregor 2000, 77). O’Neill (2010) points out that, to be educational, internships must be a collaboration and ensure communication among students, faculty, and the industry professionals at the internship site. Learning communities are coherent way of ensuring that the internship is education in these terms.

This approach is a novel one; there is no literature examining the unique experiences of students participating in this kind of academic program linked to a residential learning community. We hope to begin a conversation about this unique opportunity, assess its benefits, and perhaps offer it as a model to other institutions.

Description of the CSB+SJU D.C. Program

The College of Saint Benedict and Saint John’s University’s Washington D.C. Summer Study Program involves a year-long process of engagement for students and faculty. In the fall of the academic year, students apply to be accepted into the program; they must make an argument as to why they want to be in the program in addition to providing a resume, writing sample, and list of potential internship sites. The faculty leading the program evaluate these applications and select a cohort of students to participate. While sophomores do occasionally participate in the program, the program is designed for juniors who can take their experience into their senior year and make connections that may help them find a job after graduation. Once accepted, students meet periodically as a cohort to revise their resume, write cover letters, develop interview skills, and learn about other professional development skills. Students begin applying for internships, often over winter break and during the spring semester. Students are guided by faculty to assemble an application packet that includes their cover letter, a letter from one of the faculty directors of the program, and their resume, writing sample, and letters of recommendation. Faculty work with students to pay special attention to who application packets are addressed to and carefully review all materials to help the student create strong applications. Faculty also connect with CSB+SJU alumni, often also alumni of the Washington, D.C. program, to assist with the application process. This process is a valuable learning experience; students are often humbled by sending out numerous applications and never receiving a response. Faculty work with students to put these experiences in perspective and search out additional sites. While some students may receive offers for internships with only a handful of applications sent, on average students each send out twenty to thirty applications. Cohort building begins during this process; students can relate to the disappointment each other feels when they do not hear anything and share in the joy once offers begin coming in. While the calendar often stretches out through April, the majority of students receive and accept internship offers by the beginning of May.

Once students have accepted internships, the real work of planning for the summer begins. Students meet together with recent alums of the program to learn the “unwritten rules” of Washington, D.C. (like stand on the right and walk on the left of the elevator in the Metro). The faculty works with our housing provide to secure either a group house or apartments (in close proximity to each other) and students learn about the neighborhood. They learn about basics, like grocery shopping, navigating public transportation, and norms of dress and behavior at their internships. They also begin booking flights and coordinating travel with other students in the cohort.

After arriving in Washington, D.C. (usually over Memorial Day weekend), students settle in and learn how to use various transit options to get to their internship sites. Over the summer, faculty directors will visit the students for weeks at a time (four weeks over the eight-week program). Initially, a faculty member will arrive at the same time as the students, assist them with any questions, and send them on a scavenger hunt of the city. This is another important cohort building moment as the students survive through the heat and earn thousands of steps walking all around the city.

Over the summer, in addition to students' internships, the students enroll in a class. The faculty member schedule seminars, generally on weekday evenings, to expose students to different career opportunities available in Washington, D.C. Most of the seminar speakers are alums of CSB+SJU and work on Capitol Hill, at the State Department and other federal agencies, or at any number of non-profit and/or lobbying organizations. Students are given an agenda in advance of each seminar so they can learn about the speakers and develop questions. These seminars are extraordinary opportunities for the students to connect one-on-one with professionals in all stages of their careers. Moderated by the faculty member, these evenings help students develop their confidence in engaging with others and networking skills. Seminar speakers, for an evening, also take on the role of a faculty member, educating students about their field and mentoring them on how to seek out opportunities. Many alumni cherish these interactions, and students often reflect fondly on these conversations for the rest of their academic career.

At the same time, students are also completing readings about various functions of Washington, D.C., including policymaking, lobbying, implementation, and program assessment. Students complete weekly journals, reflecting on what they are doing at their internship sites and events they are witnessing just by being in Washington, D.C. For many years, the students' housing has been in close proximity to Capitol Hill and the Supreme Court. The students have front row seats to some of the most momentous events in the city. At the end of their experience, students complete a paper, reflecting on their experiences and what they have learned. They also create an executive memo on their internship site, which will help future students when they decide where to send applications.

Faculty members assess the student's experiences over the summer and evaluate whether they achieved the learning goals of the program. These learning goals align with the objectives of learning communities and internships. Students must demonstrate:

- Thoughtful integration of field experiences with classroom study of U.S. national government and international relations.
- Ability to live and work independently and responsibly in an urban setting.
- Application of transferable skills to accomplish political tasks.
- Evaluation of a variety of career goals.
- Acceptance of career development responsibility.

One of the less tangible benefits but most significant aspects of the program is that students learn from each other. This aspect best reflects the insights from the scholarship of learning communities – by living with one another and sharing their experiences, students learn both from their own internship but also from the internships of others. The program is also unique in that students must apply to many internship sites as an individual. There is significant mentorship through the process, but the program does not “place” students in prearranged internships. While the program has long-standing relationships with some sites, the student must earn their position on their own. This feature has expanded the number of sites that have hosted CSB+SJU students and allowed students to learn more about and build relationships with many stakeholders and organizations involved in policy making in Washington.

Our goal with this project is to take our anecdotal understanding of the benefits of the program and to turn them into observable measures. As higher education faces challenges, programs like these that do involve significant resources face increased scrutiny. We hope to illustrate the benefits of the program and discover areas where we can continue to improve and adapt to the constantly changing environment of Washington, D.C., as we serve students from a wide range of backgrounds.

Data Gathered in 2010

Beginning in 2010, the co-directors implemented a pre-test designed to assess civic engagement, interest, and activity. The questionnaire includes:

1. General background questions, including the student's year in school, majors and minors, whether or not they had completed an internship or participated in a service-learning program, and whether they had voted in the last election and anticipated voting in the next election;
2. Six questions adapted from the National Election Study survey instrument regarding political efficacy and trust;
3. The Bonner civic engagement questionnaire. This survey instrument was developed and implemented nationally by the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) and measures civic engagement factors including community problem solving, electoral indicators, and indicators of political voice (CIRCLE 2006). Because this is a nationally fielded survey, we are able to compare civic engagement trends of CSB+SJU students, including those applying to the D.C. Program.

Students who applied to the program over the next several years were given this survey instrument as a pre-test. The same questionnaire, along with the student course evaluation survey, was administered as a post-test at the end of the program. In 2010 and 2011, the questionnaire was also administered to 200 other students to give us a baseline from which to measure D.C. Program students.

The directors of the program also sent an initial qualitative survey, asking alums to explain what they found valuable about the structure of the program and explain how it was important to their career development. This brief survey was sent to D.C. Program participants over the past three years of the program we received 12 replies.

Findings on Civic Engagement – Increasing Political Knowledge and Efficacy

The initial data analysis in 2010 found that students on the program reported higher levels of efficacy and civic knowledge than other students. Of the D.C. Program alumnae surveyed in 2010, 76%, felt that they had “a lot” or “a great deal” of knowledge about the U.S. Political System. Only 16.1% of the wider sample of CSB+SJU students who had not participated in the program felt the same. The survey results also indicated that other civic engagement indicators were also strong. Students who participated in the D.C. Program were more likely to report feeling that they could have an influence on government. Almost 62% of the D.C. Program graduates surveyed in 2010 agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that “there are many legal ways to successfully influence what the government does” while only 25% of the larger student sample felt the same way.

CSB+SJU D.C. Program graduates reported a higher degree of trust in the U.S. political system and a high degree of political knowledge and political efficacy than their fellow students who had not spent a summer in the nation's capital. Encouragingly, these students were more likely to believe that “the people have the final say about how the country is run, no matter who is in office.” Almost 43% of D.C. students agreed or somewhat agreed with this statement, while only 14% of the other students felt this empowered. Students who had spent the summer in Washington D.C. were thus less cynical about government power than their peers – certainly a hopeful sign.

Students who had completed the program were also more likely to disagree or somewhat disagree with the statement that, “in this country, a few have all the political power, and the rest of us are not given any say about how the government runs things.” While 67% of program alumni disagreed with this statement, only 58% of the students who had not completed an internship disagreed.

While we are able to measure the D.C. Program's impact on several aspects of civic engagement and political knowledge, this data did not allow us to measure other important program outcomes. The initial survey seemed to indicate that the internship program in Washington D.C. increased student civic engagement and political knowledge. That data set was not able to tell us whether the learning community aspect of the program provided benefits for students in terms of increased civic engagement, sense of political efficacy, and political knowledge.

We are also interested in the program's ability to serve both women and students from economically less-advantaged backgrounds.

Additional Areas for Exploration

As we began thinking about further formalizing assessment for this program, and discussing some of our part participants and outcomes, we saw potential patterns we'd like to explore. While these have been examined in the context of civic engagement and internships, we suspect that in combination with the program's learning community our program generates exceptionally beneficial experiences for students.

Career aspirations and advancement

Our goal as a program and as political scientists is to increase students' engagement with the civic life of their communities and beyond, but as a small, Midwestern liberal arts college, we also recognize that many if not most of our students are drawn to the program and need the career development opportunities provided by the program. There is an extensive literature that points out the long-term economic advantages of having an internship experience (see Cullinane and Montacute 2018). As the 2009 Milburn Report pointed out, "Undertaking an internship is an important access point for entry to a career, ... yet by an large, they operate as part of an informal economy in which securing an internship all too often depends on who you know and not on what you know" (99). While anecdotally we know a great deal about the successes of a number of our students, we would like to better understand whether and how students see their internship experience undertaken within a learning community as influential in their eventual career path.

Examining gender disparities of access and outcomes

Doherty (2013) points out that "Accomplishing gender mainstreaming through experiential learning serves the purpose of reemphasizing different group perspectives in all types of student learning while demonstrating the 'uniqueness of the effects of policy on women.'" Doherty points to her previous work that found that female student interns placed with female legislators changed the political perception of young women so that they saw that they could be successful within the political system. Thus, women's placement in political internships overcame what Lawless and Fox (2005) found was a serious hindrance to women's political ambition: that women cannot see themselves as viable candidates for office, even when they have more eligibility characteristics than their male contemporaries.

Building on Doherty's work, Jessica Preece (2016) conducted an experiment designed to increase women's self-efficacy. She found that a relatively simple intervention, providing women supportive feedback on a simple politics quiz and offering a comparative assessment of women's and men's performance, both increased women's self-efficacy and decreased men's self-efficacy. She concludes, "These results point to the significant influence gendered patterns on self-efficacy have on political engagement" (199).

Much of the work on women's self-efficacy is focused on interventions specifically focused on gender or designed for women. However, Foos and Gilardi (2020) raise questions about this approach, particularly a focus on gender stereotypes. Using a research design in which students were invited to a panel including women politicians, they find that while exposure may increase interest about politics, it did not increase women's willingness to run for office. They also note that hearing directly from women who continue to face challenges (work-life balance, discrimination, harassment) may deter women from considering a career in politics.

There is some evidence that suggests experiences not based on gender can increase women's political self-efficacy. Kalla and Porter (2022), using a religiously based program aimed at training young people to be effective political advocates, examined the potential for increasing women's political ambition. The program was open to men and women and the researchers conducted pre- and post-experience surveys. After a few days of workshops learning political skills and then meeting with their political representatives, women showed increased willingness to consider running for office. While they are cautious about overreading their results, they note "women who completed the program were roughly as ambitious as men reported being before they participated in the program.

Studying Equity of Access and Outcomes

Recent research and discussions post-covid note the importance of internships for future career opportunities. Hindmoor (2010) notes "Employers favour candidates with internship experience. If universities do not provide these opportunities, many well-off parents will compensate by using their own contacts to organize an internship for their child or will pay a company to do so on their behalf" (484). Internship experiences, which are often unpaid, require the student find affordable housing, have adequate resources for appropriate clothing, transportation and food for the duration of the internship, and forego summer income from another job. Over the past several years, we have made an intentional effort to ensure that all students can access our program. While the number of paid internships is increasing, even this pay is not sufficient to support a student living in the very expensive environment of Washington, D.C. We want to understand the challenges students faced in taking advantage of this opportunity and how they benefitted in the long term from their participation.

Expanding the Study – Alumni Survey and Deliberative Polling Focus Groups

To build on our current data and further explore the potential influence of the learning community, we plan to field a survey with alumni of the DC Program from 1990-2022. Building on Doherty's 2011 study, we hope to ask questions about group housing, self-efficacy, political ambition, career path, and civic engagement. Using these qualitative responses, we aim to discover the causal relationships (if there are any) between the program and these variables with particular attention to gender and race/ethnicity. We can follow up the survey with a deliberative poll, randomly selecting individuals who completed the survey and inviting them a zoom session. We would post some initial questions in the chat, but then let the discussion evolve among the participants. This session would allow for a deeper analysis in the causal mechanisms that we aim to understand.

While the research in this area is limited and the studies have varied widely, we want to better understand the influence of the Washington, D.C. Program on our alumni.

Conclusions

The CSB+SJU Washington D.C. Summer Study Program is a unique program that we think is a model high impact education experience for students. It provides enormous benefits for students in terms of their self-reported political knowledge, efficacy, and civic engagement. Further study of program outcomes will allow us to adjust our process to ensure excellent and equitable civic engagement and professional development outcomes for all participants, and provide us with evidence to fight for resources so that we can provide access to the increasingly valuable professional development and career access opportunities provided by the program.

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