Collaborative co-education as a facilitator of high impact learning experiences

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Abstract

Research has demonstrated that high impact practices – including community-based learning, research, collaborative work, and capstones – may be even more impactful when they operate together. However, designing and executing student learning experiences that employ more than one high impact practice can be challenging and burdensome. This paper uses examples from the Social Policy Analysis (SOPA) Capstone program in the Department of Political Science at Rice University to consider how a collaborative and co-educational pedagogy may help to support the creation and delivery of multi-faceted high impact student learning opportunities. Students in the SOPA Capstone conduct civically-engaged research projects in social policy design, evaluation, and implementation.The program's co-educational approach brings community partners, graduate students, and undergraduate students together with course instructors as co-educators, with each participant taking on both teaching and learning roles. I propose that, despite notable challenges, this approach alleviates some of the burdens that come with facilitating high impact experiences while also providing students with opportunities to learn and practice democratic forms of citizenship and governance.

Introduction

As educators, we seek to create learning experiences that encourage our students' engagement – their interest, motivation, sense of connection, and active participation in curricular content. High impact practices – including undergraduate research, community-based learning, collaborative projects, and capstone programs – can be particularly effective ways to deepen student engagement in and outside of the classroom while contributing to overall student success. Within the field of political science, we also seek to enhance our students' civic engagement – their sense of public belonging and their active participation in democracy. In this paper I describe how a Capstone program in Social Policy Analysis at Rice University employs a co-educational pedagogy that brings community partners, graduate students, and undergraduate

students together with course instructors as collaborators in civically-engaged research projects. I propose that, despite notable challenges, this approach alleviates some of the burdens that come with facilitating high impact experiences while also providing students with opportunities to learn and practice democratic forms of citizenship and governance.

Background

High impact practices (HIPs) are learning-intensive experiences that have been shown to have strong positive effects on student learning, development, persistence, and success, especially for first generation and underrepresented students (Kuh, 2008, 2017). HIPs include a wide range of learning experiences, such as undergraduate research, community-based learning, collaborative projects, and capstone programs, and each type of HIP has its own associated set of learning outcomes (Kuh, 2008; Chittum, 2022). There is evidence that HIPs have greater positive effects on student learning and development when they are combined within experiences (Chittum, 2022). Not surprisingly, university administrators and faculty are increasingly looking for ways to embed HIPs across the curriculum (Najmabadi, 2017).

There is much to be excited about when it comes to HIPs, but facilitating "high-impact practices can be exhausting" (Halonen and Dunn, 2019; see also White, 2018). Designing and implementing HIPs require a lot of resources. Managing students in group projects, organizing and facilitating community-based learning activities, overseeing student research, and providing detailed feedback on student work all make heavy claims on faculty time and effort. Indeed, many of us may find ourselves wondering if it is reasonable or even possible to fit the demands of creating and delivering HIPs into the scope of our job responsibilities. For those of us who are motivated by the potential that HIPs hold as transformative educational experiences for our

students, Halonen and Dunn (2019) offer a helpful list of suggestions for managing instructor time and avoiding HIP burnout, including selective grading, using rubrics, and staggering deadlines. I propose that theory and best practices from the field of engaged scholarship may provide another way to lessen the burden on instructors of integrating HIPs into their curriculum.

The scholarship of engagement takes a constructively critical approach to why and how universities produce knowledge. It challenges traditional notions of the purpose of academic knowledge production by championing work that is intentionally public in its creation and directly responsive to social issues, policies, and communities (Barker, 2004; Beaulieu et al., 2018; Boyer, 1996). And it calls for the process of knowledge production to be more collaborative, bringing together university and community participants in partnership for common good (Beaulieu et al., 2018; Bullock and Hess, 2021; Jackson et al., 2021; Stanton, 2008). Together, these principles have democratizing effects on the process and products of knowledge production. Calls from within political science to embrace civically-engaged research (e.g., Bullock and Hess, 2021; Dobbs et al., 2021; Institute for Civically Engaged Research, 2025) place even greater emphasis on the potential for such work to actualize democratic principles.

Across fields, needed attention has been paid to the roles and relationships of faculty and their non-academic collaborators in engaged scholarship (e.g., Beaulieu et al., 2018; Barker, 2004; Boyer, 1996; Stanton, 2008; Udani and Dobbs, 2021). Proponents of engaged scholarship emphasize that such collaborations bring a wider and more diverse set of expertise, perspectives, and insights to knowledge production on social issues (Beaulieu et al., 2018; Stanton, 2008). They also remind us of historic power dynamics between universities and communities, and of

the importance of ensuring that decision making and project benefits are equitable and reciprocal for university and community participants (Reyna et al., 2021).

While engaged research has been conceptualized primarily as collaborative work between faculty and non-academic partners, there has been growing interest and initiative around students' participation in civically-engaged research (e.g., Downey, 2018; Greenberg et al., 2020; Paul, 2009; Schmitt et al., 2023; Snydor et al., 2021). Snydor et al. (2021) propose that students can gain experience in evidence-based decision making and develop a sense of "civic empowerment" by conducting research that is designed for public knowledge and benefit. They recognize civic engagement as a high impact practice that can benefit students in a number of ways, including long-term civic participation (Snydor et al., 2021). And they highlight the ways in which undergraduate research, also a high impact practice, has been shown to improve students' confidence in their social scientific skills while enabling them to forge connections with faculty mentors (Snydor et al., 2021; see also Lopatto, 2010). As a student learning opportunity that synthesizes these two HIPs, civically-engaged research enriches the pedagogical potential of civically-engaged learning for students by operationalizing that engagement within a framework of systematic inquiry (Snydor et al., 2021).

While the literature on how HIPS benefit students continues to grow, discussions about how they can be effectively designed and implemented have been more limited. Considerations have focused largely on recommendations, like setting appropriately high performance expectations and providing frequent, timely and constructive feedback, and on associated assignments and activities, such as open-ended questions, portfolios, and reflection (Kuh and O'Donnell, 2013). Of course, much more is involved in the development and implementation of HIPs, and the bulk of those responsibilities typically falls on instructors.

In the illustration that follows, I describe a civically-engaged, team-based Capstone program in Social Policy Analysis that uses a collaborative and co-educational approach to teaching, learning, and research. The program enacts practices from engaged scholarship – namely, academically-rigorous and community-responsive research that is interdisciplinary, inclusive, and reciprocal (Beaulieu et al., 2018) – through the collaborative and co-educational work of a diverse set of participants, all of whom serve roles as teachers and learners in the program. I highlight some ways in which empowering graduate and undergraduate students and non-university partners as co-educators and research collaborators democratizes the delivery of high impact practices, redistributing responsibilities often borne solely by instructors. I suggest that by convening and empowering a wider circle of co-educators, instructors can simultaneously share the work with others while also enabling students' to learn and practice civic skills that help undergird democratic society.

The Social Policy Analysis Capstone Program

Social Policy Analysis (SOPA) is an interdisciplinary major within the department of Political Science at Rice University. The SOPA Capstone is a required, two-semester course sequence co-taught by two SOPA faculty and serves as the culminating experience within the major. The Capstone courses provide students in their senior year (and occasionally juniors) with hands-on experience conducting research on social policy design, evaluation, and implementation. Capstone students work in teams of four to five on a year-long research project with a community partner organization and a graduate student project mentor. The program has approximately 35-40 students and eight to ten projects and community partners each year.

Capstone students design and conduct research projects in one or more policy analysis areas: needs assessment (determining a need for new, different, or expanded services for a target population); policy development (developing an intervention to meet the needs of a target population); and program evaluation (measuring the effectiveness of an existing policy intervention). The projects involve primarily quantitative data analysis, which reflects the required methodological curriculum of the major, although some are mixed methods projects that include qualitative alongside quantitative data and analysis.

In the fall semester, students develop a research design report that includes their background research, research question, methodology, and plan and timeline for implementing their design. In the spring semester, students complete their research projects and produce a research report, a summary document (e.g., fact sheet, blog post) for their community partner, a presentation to the partner organization and other stakeholders, and a lightning talk to the university community, including other students in the major.

Capstone community partners include nonprofit organizations who provide programs and services to target populations, municipal and county government departments and offices who enact policy and/ or oversee or administer policy-driven programs and services, policy research institutes, and civic for-profit agencies, such as a civic data science consulting firm that works with nonprofit and government clients. The partners work in one or more areas of social policy that anchor the SOPA major – income and employment, housing, healthcare, welfare, education, and the justice system – and Capstone projects reflect those issue categories, with many projects involving more than one social policy issue area.

During the spring and summer prior to a Capstone course sequence, SOPA faculty engage in conversations with new and returning partners to determine interest in and fit for the program.

Faculty reach out to potential new partners whose organizational work aligns with SOPA curriculum and program priorities, sometimes following referrals or recommendations from university or community contacts. These include recommendations from students in the SOPA major who have worked with nonprofits and government offices through other courses or internships. Prospective partners may also contact SOPA faculty with interest in program participation. Many partners return for multiple program cycles, and current and former partners commonly refer other potential partners to the program.

Co-education and collaborative research in the SOPA Capstone

The SOPA Capstone program is a collaborative teaching and learning environment in which undergraduate students conduct research with graduate students, community partners, faculty, and each other to produce knowledge of public value. The program disrupts traditional models and hierarchies of both teaching and research. Unlike the traditional pedagogical model in which only the faculty member occupies the role of teacher, SOPA Capstone's co-educational pedagogy positions community partners, graduate students, and undergraduates alongside faculty as co-educators, with each participant contributing to the learning process and helping to enable program learning outcomes for students. The program also upends the traditional organization of research projects, in which faculty serve as project directors, and graduate students (and sometimes undergraduates) take on various supportive roles within the project hierarchy. By contrast, SOPA Capstone projects are driven by community partner questions, and teams of undergraduate students are responsible for developing research questions and methodologies, collecting and analyzing data, authoring reports, and presenting their findings and

recommendations to diverse audiences. Community partners, faculty, and graduate students play advisory roles to the undergraduate students as they design, execute, and present their projects.

SOPA Capstone participants

Community Partners

Although students are the primary researchers in the SOPA Capstone, the projects themselves reflect community partners' interests and are developed in collaboration between the partners and SOPA faculty. Between February and July prior to a Capstone course sequence, each partner proposes one or more research topics of interest to them and collaborates with SOPA faculty to outline a project that: is of value to the partner organization and will enhance their organizational capacity; will foster student learning and application of skills and knowledge, including SOPA major student learning outcomes; can be carried out by students using appropriate social science research methods; and relies on relevant and accessible resources, such as existing data sets that are publicly available or that the partner can make available to students, or data that the students are able to collect themselves, for example, through surveys or interviews that partners can help facilitate. This process builds on the principles of shared decision making and reciprocity that undergird engaged scholarship, including developing projects that serve the needs of a community partner. It adds to that work considerations of the pedagogical goals, timeline, and structure of the SOPA Capstone program and the curricular training of SOPA majors.

Community partners not only are the generators of research projects for students, they are active co-educators within the Capstone courses. Partners meet with their student teams bi-weekly, offering purpose, direction, and advice throughout the arc of the program. And they

play essential co-educator roles in the initial stages of the projects, when students are learning about their issue spaces and working to understand the problem that will anchor their research question. Capstone partners have more knowledge about their issue spaces than SOPA faculty and bring special insights into their local contours and the networks of relevant stakeholders that enable deep and nuanced student learning. Partners support student learning by sharing materials and resources, connecting students with stakeholders with whom they conduct informational interviews, and engaging them in regular discussions. Students synthesize what they learn from these resources and conversations into a background research major course assignment. That assignment prepares them to draft their research questions, which determines the scope, purpose, and direction of their projects and the remainder of their Capstone work.

Partners are also encouraged to provide students with project-related experiential learning opportunities. For example, a partner representative from an affordable housing organization took a student team on neighborhood tours so that they could better understand the quality and quantity of available housing stock. Partner representatives from a county official's office had their students attend a full staff meeting so that they could better understand the purview of the office and how their project fit into that work. Another student team joined their partner alongside local community and government leaders for a ribbon cutting event for a new mobile health clinic that was central to the students' research. As with other forms of community-based learning, these partner-led opportunities offer students direct experience with the issues they are studying and chances to apply what they have learned in the classroom to real-world situations (Kuh, 2008). These experiences also deepen connections between the Capstone students and their partners and allow students to better understand their project purpose and goals in relation to their partner organization and the communities they serve.

Through these and other interactions, partners help students understand why, how and for whom the work they are doing matters. Because Capstone projects are designed to help partners do their work better or to expand what they do to better serve communities, the partners are well – and, arguably, best – positioned to speak directly to students about the value of their Capstone work. Such reminders are especially meaningful to hear when students are focused on more technical or mundane tasks, like deciding which kind of methodology they should use to answer their research question, cleaning and organizing data, or transcribing interviews.

In addition to these essential co-educator roles and responsibilities, Capstone partners often provide other forms of mentoring and advising for their student teams, including giving feedback on draft work; mentoring students on professional behavior and expectations (this instruction is especially valuable to students who are preparing to graduate from college and join the workforce); and providing references and letters of recommendation.

Graduate student project mentors

Each SOPA Capstone student team has a graduate student project mentor.[1] Project mentors are Ph.D. students recruited from across the School of Social Sciences, and especially from Economics, Sociology, Political Science, and Psychological Sciences – disciplines that most directly shape the interdisciplinary major of Social Policy Analysis. Each project mentor advises two Capstone project teams, and project mentors meet with each of their teams outside of class on a bi-weekly basis – often together with the community partner. They also attend select class meetings where they provide guidance on course assignments and project components, facilitate critical reflection activities, and help students prepare for presentations.

[1] Prior to AY 2024-25, faculty members served as SOPA Capstone project mentors.

The co-educational role of project mentors complements that of the community partners. Although project mentors occasionally bring relevant social issue knowledge to their projects (for most, the role is an opportunity to learn about a social policy issue from partner organizations), their primary roles are advising and supporting student teams on research design and methods, project management, communication, and teamwork. Building off the partner-supported background research that students complete as the first phase of their projects, project mentors advise students as they craft research questions, select appropriate methodologies, and create feasible timelines for project execution. Project mentors are also important resources for students as they prepare their IRB submissions – a task that each student team must complete for their project, and which often requires rounds of revision and resubmission. Additionally, the course curriculum includes opportunities for project mentors to lead class-wide workshops on topics that reflect their expertise and that would benefit multiple teams and projects; these have included data merging and cleaning, qualitative coding, programming surveys, and effective teamwork.

The embedded position of project mentors within their projects make them especially valuable resources to the student teams. Project mentors spend more time than either community partners or course instructors meeting directly with individual teams. Although they provide their teams with essential project support and feedback, project mentors (unlike the course instructors) play no role in assignment or course grading and (unlike community partners) have no personal or direct stake in the outcomes of projects. Not surprisingly, project mentors are typically students' first stop when they have questions or run into difficulties designing or conducting their project work.

By working within projects and closely with student teams, project mentors also serve as communication facilitators between students, between students and community partners, and between students, partners and course instructors. Project mentors promote effective collaboration within student teams by facilitating critical reflection and dialogue activities and meeting one-on-one with students when specific issues arise. They also enable communication between students and their community partners by helping students ask, interpret, and address questions that may arise regarding partner expectations and course requirements.

Partners and project mentors often meet together with the student teams, and project mentors are encouraged to communicate directly with partners (rather than channeling back through the course instructors) regarding regular project and team-related matters that require some discussion or attention. Project mentors also provide course instructors with updates on projects and teams during scheduled meetings and more immediately when larger questions or concerns arise. These communications allow the instructors to have greater insight into what is happening within each of the projects and student teams, and enables them to collaborate with project mentors (and sometimes partners) to respond appropriately and in a timely manner when significant challenges arise or when project mentors feel that they are not prepared to address a particular question or situation.

Undergraduate students

The interdisciplinary SOPA major has a required set of courses: an introductory social policy course, three methods courses, and the capstone. Students fulfill other major requirements through electives in three core areas related to social policy – groups and identities, institutions, and policy processes and outcomes – which they select from a slate of courses offered across the

School of Social Sciences and beyond. Most SOPA students also have a second major as well as one or more minors or concentrations in fields as diverse as Sociology, Computer Science, English, and Engineering. As a result, students enter the Capstone program with a common core of knowledge and skills and an incredible diversity of knowledge and skills gained through their individual curricular, co-curricular, and personal experiences. This diversity serves as a foundation for students to take on co-educational roles within the Capstone program.

Students begin reflecting on their potential as both learners and teachers in Capstone before they are assigned to projects. During the first week of classes, students complete a self-inventory reflection in which they consider and describe their relative experience, strengths, and areas for growth regarding each of the SOPA major learning outcomes.[2] For example, a student might describe the "substantive knowledge" about healthcare policy they have gained by taking courses in different departments, participating in a health policy hackathon, and serving as an intern for a healthcare provider, but express a lack of confidence in their "empirical analysis" skills. Another student might feel very confident about the "empirical analysis" skills they have gained through their second major in Statistics, but may have little experience or confidence in their ability to "communicate to diverse audiences" or work with others toward "collaborative impact." After completing this reflective activity, students review the project summaries and partner videos and write statements about their top three project preferences that incorporate the personal insights they have gained. The course instructors use these statements, along with

[2] There are five SOPA major learning outcomes: (1) Substantive Knowledge: Develop a broad interdisciplinary understanding of social problems, the social policy pillars (education, health, housing, income and employment, welfare, and the justice system) and the role of evidence-based policy interventions in solving social problems in the U.S; (2) Critical Thinking: Develop the ability to apply key knowledge, theories, and research about social policy to understand and critically analyze contemporary policy problems; (3) Empirical Analysis: Demonstrate the ability to design, implement, and analyze an empirical evaluation of a policy intervention; (4) Effective Communication: Strengthen written, oral, and visual communication skills in order to effectively present policy research and findings to a wide range of stakeholders; and (5) Collaborative Impact: Develop the knowledge and skills necessary to work collectively with others to promote positive social change.

students' self-inventory reflections, to form Capstone teams that will allow each student to continue to develop knowledge and skills while contributing to the growth of their teammates and the success of their project.

Once they have been assigned to a project, students work with their new teammates to create a team resume. This is a collaboratively-produced document that recognizes the individual and collective skills, knowledge, and experiences that students bring to their Capstone project. This shared document allows each student to recognize what they can learn from their teammates and what their teammates can learn from them, and becomes an important resource as teams plan and delegate their project work. Students who bring to their projects knowledge in the issue space, experience working with communities or practitioners, interviewing skills, policy expertise, survey design experience, high-level data skills, graphic design, or strong communication skills will likely find that their teammates will look to them to take the lead – and serve as a peer educator – on some aspect of their project.

Course Instructors

The SOPA Capstone course sequence is co-taught by a faculty member trained in political science with expertise in research design and quantitative methods and a faculty member trained in anthropology with expertise in community-engagement, qualitative methods, and public policy. The instructors highlight their different but complementary backgrounds, inviting students to think of them as the "data person" and the "people person," so that they can engage them accordingly for advice and resources. Although the course instructors provide periodic individualized feedback to student teams – especially on their course assignments and major products for the Capstone – on a day-to-day basis, they operate primarily at the programmatic level, providing in-class instruction and guidance across projects.

Arguably the most vital role that the instructors play in the Capstone program is as the conveners and coordinators of its many participants. Before the start of the fall semester, the course instructors hold two half-day workshops – one with only the graduate student project mentors and a second with the project mentors and the community partners. The workshops are opportunities to bring program participants together for shared learning and relationship building, and are designed to widen the circle of co-educators by further introducing the concept of co-education and facilitating discussion and activities that help the project mentors and community partners work together to map out the roles and responsibilities they will take on within their specific projects. A similar, but shorter meeting with community partners and project mentors is held before the start of the spring semester course, and helps participants reflect on their experiences in the fall semester and anticipate and prepare for the second half of the program. During each semester, the course instructors meet several times with the graduate student project mentors and once with the community partners to discuss project and team progress and challenges, recommend approaches and strategies for addressing challenges, and share with each other any questions or concerns that have arisen.

Some challenges of the co-educational approach

The greatest asset of a co-educational approach – that it brings a larger and more diverse set of participants together for common purpose – is also the source of real challenges. At the most basic level, having more than a dozen adults (if we count, as we should, the course instructors, community partners, and project mentors) serving as co-educators, not to mention the co-educational roles played by the undergraduate students, makes for a lot of teachers and a lot of learners in a single program. And under the umbrella of that program are a collection of

different research projects, each with its own goals, designs, trajectories, interpersonal dynamics, and outcomes that shape the experiences of those involved and which can, and often do, pose difficulties for their participants along the way.

Community partners sometimes have difficulty acclimating to their roles and responsibilities in a civically-engaged research project with students, as they are usually quite different from those of their regular professional lives. Many community partners have never worked with students before, and those who have sometimes default to an internship approach that can pull students' attention away from their research projects toward other organizational matters. Some do not fully realize the pedagogical value of meeting consistently with their team, a practice that provides students with the resources, direction, and feedback they need to be successful. On more than one occasion, the point person from a community partner organization has left their position to take another job during the Capstone program, requiring a new person to come onboard, build relationships, and learn new roles and responsibilities amidst an ongoing project. Partners who do not regularly conduct evidence-based research can be surprised and even frustrated by how the specificity of research questions, the richness and availability of data, and requirements of Institutional Review Boards can affect the scope, timeline, methodologies, and types of answers that projects can offer. Some of this burden falls directly on partners, who are largely responsible for arranging access to proprietary datasets and preparing internal data for student use.

SOPA Capstone projects also challenge the graduate student project mentors, who are more used to conducting research themselves or doing so under a faculty advisor, sometimes with their own supervisory responsibilities over undergraduates. In the SOPA Capstone, the undergraduate students are the project leads, and the graduate students have to remind

themselves (and sometimes need to be reminded) that their role is to support and advise the student team, not to design or conduct the research themselves. Although some project mentors have prior experience as teaching assistants or course instructors, few have mentored upper-level undergraduate researchers or done so in a team setting. Despite some pre- and in-program training and guidance, project mentors are often actively learning (and learning from) their roles as they perform them.

The most challenging and challenged participants in the Capstone program are the undergraduate students. Although each student comes to the program with relevant skills and knowledge, almost none have experience designing and executing an original research project. And although all have worked in groups with their peers in some capacity, successful team-based collaboration on a major project requires more maturity, patience, and perspective than many students have developed by the time they enter Capstone. The students must collaborate not only with their peers, but also build professional working relationships with their project mentors and their community partners. And while the real-world, community-based nature of the Capstone projects is what excites many students about the SOPA major, they often express confusion, frustration, and disappointment about things like: the relationship of their common course assignments to their individual projects; the relative enthusiasm or work ethic of one or more of their teammates; the difficulty of developing research questions that are both answerable and useful to their community partners; a carefully designed survey that has low response rates; the fact that none of their advisors – course instructors, community partners, or project mentors – has "the answer" to many of the questions that arise during their project; and how limited the likely impact of their work will actually be on a social problem that they care deeply about. All of these types of challenges (and many others) affect the co-instructors, who must work with graduate

student project mentors, community partners, and undergraduate students to facilitate communication and help to clarify roles, responsibilities, goals, and expectations at various points throughout the program.

Discussion and Conclusion

Despite these challenges and others, the co-educational design of the SOPA Capstone program makes it possible for two faculty instructors of record to provide every SOPA major with a structured and guided opportunity to design, execute, and communicate the outcomes of a year-long, data-driven, civically-engaged research project. The Capstone program incorporates three recognized high impact practices (community-engaged learning, undergraduate research, and collaborative projects) housed within a fourth high impact practice (the capstone courses themselves). I have argued that the co-educational approach to teaching and learning, which includes important roles and responsibilities for community partners, graduate students, and undergraduate students, comes with its own, very real challenges, but that it ultimately lessens the burden of work on the course instructors and makes this educational experience both possible and (largely) manageable.

I have also shown how this co-educational model emphasizes the different expertise that each participant brings to the program, and that this approach works to productively narrow and focus the roles and responsibilities that instructors play in this learning environment. In this co-educational configuration, the instructors serve as two among many who have knowledge to share, and whose expertise is – like other participants – strong in certain domains, but not others. Rather than spending their time as the sole or even primary disseminators of knowledge, the

course instructors take on other roles as convenors and coordinators of the diverse set of co-educators who are facilitating student learning (and each other's learning, as well).

This co-educational approach to program design can serve as a practical technique for integrating multiple high impact practices into course and program curricula. In the case of the SOPA Capstone, it enables students to participate in community-partner initiated, policy-based research projects that are extended exercises in civic-engagement. These projects are designed in collaboration with community partners and with the explicit purpose of having a positive impact on policy and governance. Through the research process, students learn about social problems and the communities they affect, assess whether and how well current policies and programs are addressing those problems, and make recommendations for how practitioners and policy makers might improve processes and outcomes in order to contribute to social wellbeing. In this regard, SOPA Capstone projects fall easily within Bullock and Hess's (2021) definition of civically-engaged research, as the "systematic and rigorous production of knowledge that directly engages current civic problems in a reciprocal partnership with individuals and/or organizations who are directly affected by those problems."

But the program's design operates as a form of civic engagement itself. Its co-educational structure asks that all participants – including the students – recognize and appreciate the strengths and capacities that each participant brings to the project; hear and consider diverse, and sometimes competing perspectives; engage in sustained and purposeful dialogue; make collaborative decisions; and take shared responsibility for the successes, shortcomings, and failures of collective work. Carol Schneider's (2001) discussion of relational learning is helpful here for understanding the "civic potential" of this and similar types of pedagogies. She describes relational learning as "grounded, not in one individual's experience of

understanding alone, but rather in the joining of multiple and disparate experiences and in collaborative dialogue about the meanings of those experiences." And she posits that:

> The implications of a relational approach for educating citizens are subtle but significant. Where, in the traditional model, the academy works to develop an individual's analytical intelligence, this newer model develops collaborative capacities--for analysis, for action, and for learning from the consequences of actions. Students who have significant opportunities to learn in this mode internalize crucial skills of citizenship. Specifically, the ability and willingness to work with a group to analyze a problem, plan and implement a strategy, and work with others to evaluate the results.

We might even take a step further to recognize that, despite the threats they pose (to student learning outcomes, viable research, university-community partnerships, and interpersonal relationships), some of the most common and the most pernicious challenges in the SOPA Capstone program and its collaborative research projects are also ones that most closely resemble the heterogenous, multivocal, sometimes contentious, and often messy nature of democracy. Working with others to find a mutually-agreeable way to address those challenges helps students and their co-educators build vital civic skills that can help grow and sustain healthy democracies.

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