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Citation Details

Osborn, David; Alkezweeny, Jennifer; Kecskes, Kevin. (2015). Beyond the University: An Initiative for Continuing Engagement among Alumni. *Metropolitan Universities, [S.l.]*, v. 26, n. 3, p. 171-187.

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Beyond the University: An Initiative for Continuing Engagement among Alumni

David Osborn, Jennifer Alkezweeny, and Kevin Kecskes

Abstract

In an effort to leverage students' positive community engagement experiences as they transition to and become alumni, Portland State University (PSU) embarked on a pilot "Continuing Engagement Program." This article provides a rationale for this effort, an overview of the programmatic elements, lessons learned, and future engagement strategies. The authors situate the Community Engagement Program (CEP) in the current alumni engagement literature, share findings from the PSU program, and hope to inspire additional creative thinking and action to support alumni and other community members' persistent engagement for positive community change.

There is tremendous potential for leveraging students' college and university-based community engagement experiences as they transition to and become alumni. While much has been studied and written about the impact of community engagement on student learning (Astin et al. 2000; Musil 2003; Colby et al. 2010; Boyte 2008; and others), there is a dearth of research about how to sustain this community engagement for alumni. In 2012, while others in the field were also recognizing the absence of alumni in the student engagement conversation, Portland State University (PSU) launched a pilot program to explore ways to extend the transformative experiences of students in University Studies capstone courses. Program designers developed strategies to increase student motivation, skills, and agency to sustain their engagement as alumni and to encourage existing alumni to be more civically active. This programming, referred to here as the Continuing Engagement Program (CEP), consisted of a series of initiatives designed to support the ongoing engagement of students, alumni, community members and partners, and faculty in intentional, life-long community-based work for positive change.

Quality Programs, Persistent Engagement

We are in an era of "wicked" unscripted problems that challenge our society and globe in new ways and require us, as scholar-educators, to support the development of our students to be high-capacity civic agents who can address the most pressing social and ecological issues present today (Geary Schneider 2015). Responding to this need for deeper engagement, over the past three decades, the community engagement movement in higher education has shifted in focus from volunteerism to service-learning to community engagement (Harkavy 2015). There have been many positive impacts of this movement; still, there remain important opportunities to embrace and

expand institutional community engagement, defined by Carnegie as “collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity” (New England Resource Center for Higher Education n.d.).

In their comprehensive review of three well-established postsecondary community engagement programs, Mitchell, Visconti, Keene and Battistoni (2011) determined that (1) students’ civic identity (Knefelkamp 2008) developed in well-formulated undergraduate programs persists in their lives after college, and (2) that engaging in collaboration with others, specifically as a cohort, positively affects student learning. Mitchell and co-authors (2011) cite several studies that demonstrate the need for persistent engagement, a sustained accumulation of community experiences over time, in order to deepen students’ knowledge of and commitment to civic action and leadership. The study determined that participation impacted career choice for over half of the students in these programs; indeed, the researchers found that at the time of the study 39 percent were in community-connected jobs and an additional 26 percent were employed in K-12 schools (Mitchell et al. 2011). This study adds significant empirical weight to the increasing body of literature that discusses and explores the impacts of curricular community engagement in higher education (Astin et al. 2000; Musil 2003; Colby et al. 2010; Boyte 2008; and others). Looking forward, Mitchell and co-authors (2011) make a strong appeal for (1) developing engagement programs that go well beyond the current practice of one-time service-learning experiences in order to connect students with their civic passions repeatedly over time, in part by (2) helping students create more sustained cohort communities, particularly among themselves, as well as with off-campus partners (Mitchell et al. 2011).

Portland State University— Let Knowledge Serve the City

PSU has achieved widespread success with student engagement and is recognized as a national leader in service-learning/community-based learning (CBL) practices. Nearly thirteen thousand students engage in CBL at PSU annually; the University Studies capstone program (the interdisciplinary general education program at PSU that has been discussed throughout this special journal issue of *Metropolitan Universities*) (<http://capstone.unst.pdx.edu/>) alone offers over 240 community-based, seminar-style courses partnered with 130 community organizations involving over 4,300 students annually.

Extending and deepening student interest and commitment to important public issues has guided PSU’s capstone courses and other community-based learning efforts for decades (Kecskes, Kerrigan, and Patton 2006; Kecskes and Kerrigan 2009; Wiewel, Kecskes, and Martin 2011). However, until the inception of the Continuing Engagement Program, PSU had not tested the idea of systematically supporting alumni to continue their engagement after graduation.

The CEP required planners to conceptualize engagement approaches on a larger scale than previously undertaken, given its goal of encouraging engagement among tens of thousands of PSU alumni, 65 percent of whom remain within the metropolitan region after graduation (Portland State University 2015a). Building on the nearly quarter century of PSU experience with community engagement, CEP designers chose to focus on how to support the *continuation* of engagement of students as they transition to alumni, thus increasing civic activity in communities as well. Specifically, designers aimed to a) connect current students to engaged alumni in theme-based communities of practice, b) provide training and support for both groups to engage in social change actions, and c) sustain continued engagement going forward by creating digital communities and providing other electronic information resources.

Alumni: An Untapped Resource for Sustaining Engagement

While civic engagement efforts have been increasing nationally in scope and depth, these efforts have been largely focused on students currently enrolled in the university. Vogelgesang and Astin's (2005) comprehensive national study clearly demonstrated that undergraduate community engagement activities were associated with stronger civic values and dispositions during the college years; however, their study also showed that, for some students, engagement activity just after the college years decreases. Of the alumni who did continue to engage with the community post-graduation, this study found that most (82.5%) do so to help other people, while only 6.9% report working to change laws or policies. While helping people is honorable and important, the community-university partnership and engagement efforts at PSU intentionally aim to move students beyond service activities toward a deeper contribution to community progress and systemic change. Encouraging and facilitating the persistence of deep engagement for positive social change beyond graduation was the primary focus of the CEP pilot project.

Much of the historic literature about "alumni engagement" focuses on fundraising. In the last few years, growing interest has emerged in viewing alumni as vital "public workers" (Boyte, 2013). Additionally, alumni have been envisioned as resources to enhance the education of current students, thus moving "beyond the tokenism and the momentary feel-good payoff of the standard alumni association day of service" (Ellison 2015, 53). Individual universities are exploring the idea of alumni engagement as community engagement, such as the Princeton AlumniCorps (<http://home.alumnicorps.org/>), St. Olaf College's "Community Connection" effort (<http://wp.stolaf.edu/president/about-main-street/>), Rochester Institute of Technology's focused community engagement effort for its alumni (as included in their 2015-2025 strategic plan, https://www.rit.edu/president/pdfs/greatness_through_difference_long.pdf), and others (<http://www.citizenalum.org/membership/member-campuses-and-centers/>). Additionally, the Kettering Foundation has explored the potential benefits of alumni interaction with currently enrolled students in its 2014 Higher Education Exchange publication, in which Adam Wienberg raises the question, "Why not expose students

to alumni who are working throughout the professions to build meaningful lives where public work is infused throughout their work lives?" (Boyte 2013, 39).

The most prominent and wide-reaching alumni community engagement effort, "Citizen Alum," was initiated in 2011 at a meeting for the American Commonwealth Partnership. Citizen Alum targets alumni as "doers, not (just) donors" and provides a framework for a national network of campus teams focused on "building multi-generational communities of active citizenship and active learning" (Regents of the University of Michigan n.d.). Citizen Alum aims to serve as a national civic engagement initiative, now reaching alumni from thirty colleges and universities around a "common goal of reframing their approaches to public engagement in ways that support robust intergenerational connections—civic engagement" (Regents of the University of Michigan n.d.). Citizen Alum cites five goals for this engagement: (1) deepen and broaden campus cultures of engagement, (2) enrich student learning, (3) support college-to-life transition, (4) benefit alumni and the localities and regions where they live and work, and (5) value the civic agency, diversity, and creativity of alumni (Ellison 2013).

Hearing the Call for Continued Engagement

Concurrently with these national conversations, PSU was developing its own innovations that align with and extend the national movement. While the primary focus of Citizen Alum seeks to highlight the experiences of alumni as points of reference and inspirational models of engagement, CEP was designed to provide direct support (i.e., skill development, resources, analysis, etc.) in order to foster the continued engagement of alumni, as well as to formally connect current students and alumni in thematic communities of practice focused on creating positive social change. PSU's motivation for launching the CEP was similar to that of the Citizen Alum initiative: both programs seek to "strengthen communities by identifying ways to support the situated lives of publicly active graduates who reside in them" (Ellison 2015, 53).

PSU's Continuing Engagement Program was envisioned as part of a broader effort to create an integrative approach to community engagement within and beyond the context of University Studies, PSU's general education program. The working hypothesis undergirding this initiative is that the development of lifelong change agents requires continuity of community-based activity in the curriculum from the first year onward. The CEP was designed to provide that continuity for students around community engagement experiences that might otherwise seem fragmented. This conceptual framework and its associated set of activities support PSU's institutional goal of graduating empowered and activated citizens who have a well-formulated toolkit to act as change agents in the world.

The overarching strategy of CEP was to mobilize and create new connections among faculty, students, alumni, and community partners in order to sustainably address the most pressing issues facing our region. Toward that end, and drawing on extensive community-engagement experience, CEP developers sought to answer these questions: How can PSU structurally facilitate and encourage the engagement of students and

alumni, who have previously completed community-based learning courses, in ways that will continue to catalyze their passion for community change-making? How can PSU create resources to support their ongoing engagement? How might PSU engage students and alumni through the use of new technologies and social media that encourage community engagement?

Building the Foundation

To lay the foundation of the program, initiative architects developed two models based on community engagement experience: “Theory of Agency” and “Continuum of Social Change.”

Theory of Agency

Before implementing the CEP, it was necessary to identify and formalize a working “theory of agency.” Guiding reflective questions included the following: How do people move from passivity to action? What are barriers to doing so? What motivates persons to act? What components are required for individuals to remain engaged in social change work on an ongoing, sustained basis? The working model (Diagram 1: Theory of Agency) that was developed includes four critical components necessary for sustained participation in social change:

- Examples: Individuals must encounter examples of effective action.
- Agency: There must be a (re-)discovery of personal agency; an understanding and an experiencing of one’s actions as affecting and shaping the world in which we live.
- Community: Finding and actively building a sense of community with others is critical to experiencing a collective space in which effective social change may happen, as well as receiving the support that is needed to sustain participation.
- Analysis: A clear analytical lens must be developed, allowing for individuals and groups to understand their successes and failures and to be able to reflect on them in generative ways.

Diagram 1: Theory of Agency

WHAT SUSTAINS OUR INVOLVEMENT?



These four foci were utilized to establish CEP components during the developmental phase. The program was designed to intentionally support ongoing community engagement as a counter-weight to one-time, or episodic, community engagement experiences. This theory and the underlying conceptual framework addressed below were developed through engaged reflection in an iterative, collaborative design process.

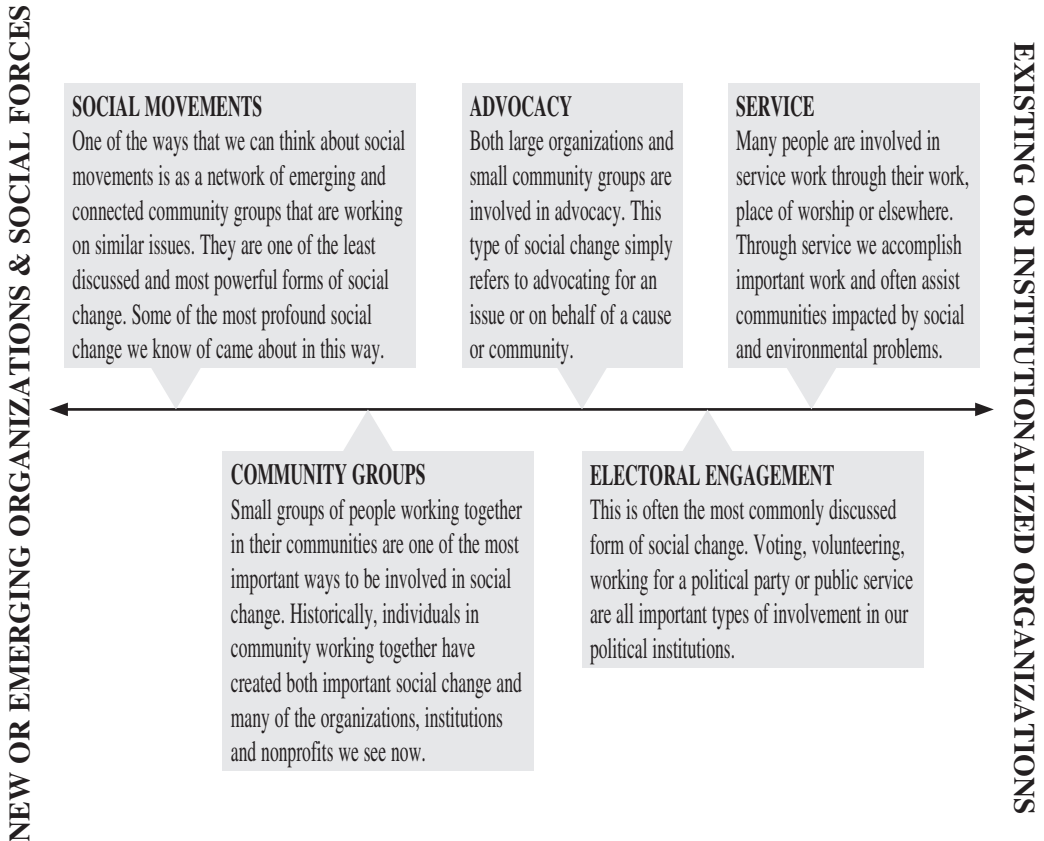
Continuum of Social Change

To help students (future alumni) begin to understand the more complete set of engagement options open to them, the “Continuum of Social Change” model was developed (Diagram 2). This spectrum illustrates examples of engagement strategies, ranging from direct provision of social service to emerging grassroots forms of involvement, including social movements for change.

Diagram 2: Continuum of Social Change

CONTINUUM OF SOCIAL CHANGE

This continuum helps us think about the different ways to be involved in social change. Over time it is natural to move from one place to another along the continuum. Sometimes it is necessary to shift your position to be able to do the work you want to do. Different types of involvement are placed on particular parts of the continuum to reflect the places where they typically arise. However, it is important to keep in mind how they can shift and might be placed on different parts of the continuum depending on how we engage in them.



On the right end of the continuum, activities include attending events and volunteering or otherwise supporting the work of pre-existing organizations. This form of action is generally non-controversial, featuring little to no participation in significant decision-making or initiation of work or projects, nor significant ownership over work that occurs. At the left end of the continuum, actions generally include starting new groups or initiating focused action with other community members; issues at this point of the continuum may also be more contentious in nature. Individuals tend to have a higher involvement in decision-making, and the innovative nature of the public work may require more of an individual's agency and abilities (i.e., civic skills) to act upon and shape the world in which they operate. These forms of participation often take place within the context of new or emerging organizations and social forces. This is where the CEP focused its engagement efforts.

The theory of agency and the continuum of social change informed the CEP's approach and served to emphasize the dynamic nature of engagement as an individual moves around the spectrum, as their engagement in a particular issue is sustained and deepened, and/or as they encounter new areas for engagement. These two models were used as a springboard for discussing community experiences and supporting engagement with social issues at increasingly deep levels. Building from these two models, programmatic elements of the CEP were crafted to encourage sustained engagement along the continuum of change.

Program Design

The CEP pilot evolved over a period of two years, beginning in 2012. While the primary motivation was to engage alumni, there was also a desire to enhance current PSU students' engagement experiences by improving their connection to engagement-related resources and opportunities within and beyond the university, as well as to provide continuing education for community members seeking to deepen their own community engagement. Elements of the program included communities of practice, workshops, a two-credit seminar, and the use of particular communication tools. These elements are discussed below.

Communities of Practice

In order to move beyond direct service to focus on continuing engagement that leads to community change, faculty, students, alumni, and community partners engaged in thematic groups called Communities of Practice (CoP). Building from community psychology theory, Lawthom (2011) argues that CoPs can shed light on engaged relationships between community and university members. In general, CoPs are described as an aggregation of participants with common goals and practices who learn together by working collectively on matters of consequence. The CoP was the overarching structure for supporting thematic continuing engagement work in the program.

In AY 2012-2013, two CoPs, "Educational Equity/Development" and "Social Justice/Engagement," were initiated. The Educational Equity/Development CoP consisted of a cluster of five faculty focused on shaping curriculum to include a continuing

engagement focus (purposefully identifying how students could sustain engagement throughout their education and as alumni), developing cross-curricular products (such as common learning goals across their courses and common assignments), and identifying opportunities to engage alumni within their current classes (both directly and through social media). In the Social Justice/Engagement CoP, a group of students and faculty explored the theme of social justice.

During AY 2013-14, three interns (one undergraduate student, one graduate student, and one alumnus) worked with the program coordinator to facilitate CoPs for students, faculty, alumni, and community partners. These thematic CoPs centered around issues of social justice and de-gentrification, transportation equity, and food equity. The interns added significant capacity to this work through meeting with faculty, facilitating CoPs, and otherwise assisting in program implementation. This resulted in heightened impact of the CoPs and an expansion of the model. For example, the social justice and de-gentrification CoP engaged a group of a dozen students and community members in multiple meetings in which they explored plans for community engagement and collaboration. Within their thematic areas, the interns also engaged with forty faculty via class visits and spoke to approximately four hundred students about these issues, while sharing their personal stories of engagement. Each intern completed their own continuing engagement work within their CoP theme.

Workshops

Observing that alumni and students need to be directly supported to develop their capacities for sustained civic engagement, skill-based workshops were designed on a range of topics. These workshops were advertised to students, alumni, faculty, local activists, and community members via departmental listservs and through the distribution of a printed resource guide. The majority of the workshop facilitators were experienced community leaders for social change. Topics ranged from basic engagement strategies and structures, culturally specific topics, collaborative approaches, and leadership development. Select topics included the following:

- So You Wanna Change the World: Understanding Social Change
- Process as Practice: Honing Your Facilitation Skills
- Legislative Advocacy: When and How to Turn a Good Idea into Law
- Weaving a Strong Web: Values, Agreements, and Accountability Culture for Groups
- Skills for Strong Groups and Collectives
- Getting in the Way: Ways for Artists and Activists to Work Together
- Why Should I Care? Stories for Social Change
- Developing and Sustaining a Global Perspective through Solidarity and Collaboration
- Finding Ourselves in Charge: Collective Leadership and What We Need to Know to Build Progressive Movement in the Pacific Northwest
- Building Leaderful Movements
- Refugee and Immigrant Solidarity

Two-Credit Seminar

A two-credit seminar was developed to build students' skills in transitioning from the highly structured and supported community engagement courses at PSU to more autonomous and independent engagement. The description of the seminar is as follows:

UNST 407 Skills for Social Change is a two-credit, 400 level seminar to support you and your continuing engagement in social change. The course is designed to build on previous and ongoing community engagement, such as that which begins in a capstone course. Current involvement in some form of social change work (volunteering, community group, activism, advocacy, etc.) is required to participate in this course.

This course is a space in which to continue the “What’s next?” conversation in regards to continuing to be effectively engaged in creating positive change in our world. The first half of the course will explore different understandings and analyses of social change, case studies, and skill-building opportunities that seek to complement the work you are engaged in outside of the course. The second half of the course will be designed based upon the needs and interests of the students enrolled. Throughout the course we will create a space to reflectively look at and bring into the classroom the work we are doing so that we can create community to support one another in our continued engagement both at and beyond the university. (Portland State University Communities of Practice for Social Change n.d.)

Participants were recruited to this seminar primarily through email outreach and distribution of a printed resource guide. The primary goals of the workshop were to provide a supportive environment to deepen community engagement skills and foster continued engagement. Assessments of the seminars were consistently positive. In the second year of programming, the seminar was opened to alumni and community members at no cost.

From this seminar, a new student-organized community engagement group developed, in which participants shared and received feedback on specific aspects of their social change work in ways that harnessed the collective knowledge and experience of the group. One participant shared confidentially that the experience created “a foundation to continue learning about social change...[giving me] the perspective needed to learn a lot from my future experiences in order to keep improving and developing my talents and perspectives.”

Communication Tools

Complementing the CoPs and seminars were various tools supporting communication and the exchange of ideas connected to the CoPs and seminars.

- **Website**

The website (socialchange.pdx.edu) provides a virtual location for digital community to develop. Included on this site are a blog platform for the sharing of information connected to the CoPs; a calendar of program workshops; a database of community organizations doing work connected to the CoP themes; a listing of relevant on- and off-campus community engagement organizations, books, and resources; and the resource guide (see below) in an online format.

- **Listserv**

The CEP listserv was created to enable targeted communication regarding events, CoPs, and the broader alumni engagement effort.

- **Resource Guide**

The “Resource Guide for Continuing Engagement in Social Change” (Osborn n.d.) was developed to present the foundational framework pieces (Theory of Agency and Continuum of Social Change) and resources for engagement beyond the university (i.e., the programmatic elements described above). This guide was written primarily for PSU seniors completing their capstone courses in order to support their transition from students to alumni, with a target to engage them in the Continuing Engagement Program.

Results

Over the first two years of implementation, the CEP experienced enthusiastic interest and engagement from faculty, students, alumni, and community partners. For example, the Educational Equity/Development CoP engaged five faculty members. Asking faculty to take on this new, innovative approach to collaboration required time that was in short supply. While some success resulted from giving small stipends to participating faculty as a way to initiate the work, it did not translate into sustained engagement despite their recognition of the high value of the collaboration and subsequent curricular engagement. In the second year, in which there were no stipends for faculty participation, the Educational Equity CoP did not convene. The Social Justice and De-gentrification and other CoPs engaged several dozen participants and began a collaborative process among students, alumni, and community activists. While we believe there would have been significant interest in continuing this programmatic element, funding did not exist to continue to support the interns who convened the CoPs. Therefore, the CoPs are no longer meeting, although some documentation of CoP work is available on the program website (socialchange.pdx.edu).

During the implementation period, over thirty-five skill-building workshops were delivered to over 525 participants. Clearly there is interest among students, alumni, faculty, and community partners in the topics addressed by the workshops. To sustain program activity once financial resources were exhausted, three of the seminars were recorded and can be viewed on the program website. These online seminars have benefited an additional 329 individuals. The two-credit seminar was offered four times, involving forty-five students, alumni, and community members.

To date, the website has had 6,598 visits and thirty-one entries on the blog from participants. Interestingly, 60 percent of the listserv membership's 850 registered users are from non-PSU email addresses. This may be an indicator of both community and alumni interest in the program. In addition, over four thousand copies of the resource guide have been distributed to PSU students. While hard copies are still available at PSU, the guide can also be accessed from the program website as an interactive document for alumni and the general public.

Lessons Learned

As can be the case with pilot programs, funding for the CEP lagged compared to growing interest. The program is currently sustained through its website presence. Program leaders recognize through reflection that there was valuable support offered for the development of these new models and strategies initially, but that much of the intensive programming needed to match participants' interest will require additional infusions of resources. This work has sparked continued interest in alumni civic engagement at PSU; as of this writing, for example, the current working draft of the 2015-2020 PSU President's Strategic Plan (Portland State University Office of the President 2015) includes a significant provision for attention to alumni engagement strategies.

Benefits

The following components of the program functioned well and may be of interest to the national conversation on alumni engagement:

“Skills for Social Change” seminar. The semi-structured format of the seminar provided a critical opportunity for students to continue and to deepen civic engagement work as they prepared for graduation and alumni life. Participants were students, alumni, and community members who were highly engaged and had some critical experiences that activated their civic agency but who needed on-going support to nurture and develop their engagement.

Use of student interns. The interns added tremendous value to the communities of practice. Utilizing support in this way throughout the year added administrative capacity for CEP and deepened on- and off-campus connectivity.

Resource guide and communication tools. The resource guide and communications infrastructure were essential in making visible these new, and sometimes unexpected, opportunities, and reaching large numbers of students, alumni, and the public.

Challenges

Two things in particular did not work as well as anticipated by program designers. The Communities of Practice were a useful structural tool and began to take on a more dynamic life with the addition of the interns. However, they did not take on their full

form as quickly or effectively as hoped. The amount of coordination required to identify, recruit, and provide programmatic support for the students, alumni, faculty, and community members was a significant challenge. Caution is also warranted regarding the website, digital CoP engagement, and other online components. While essential and effective at some level, they are inserted into an oversaturated landscape of online resources and information, making it difficult for participants to find and use the resources. In addition, online resources can operate in conflict with and draw energy away from the important face-to-face direct engagement that is essential to ongoing community-based social change work.

Another primary challenge for this type of innovation is located in higher education's intense focus on curricular engagement among current students. As noted earlier, alumni engagement has historically been approached as a fundraising endeavor, facilitated largely by development professionals who often oversee alumni association activities. New efforts to direct university resources to the community at large (as was accomplished through opening up the seminar and on-going workshops to alumni and other public community members) can be difficult in the context of traditional views of alumni involvement. However, it is clear that opportunities to foster collaborations with alumni and development offices by using engagement activities to deepen and cultivate alumni relationships are gaining interest and will continue to grow.

Hope for the Future

Through the Continuing Engagement Program, PSU piloted approaches to extend the impact of civic engagement by encouraging and supporting continuing involvement of students as they become alumni. These nascent efforts may help to inform a field that is poised to take its next evolutionary steps at the same time that social and ecological issues on a global scale demand that higher education direct its intellectual resources towards addressing "wicked" problems. Fortunately, civic engagement in higher education has evolved to a current, stronger position of acceptance as an important mechanism of scholarship and institutional strategy. Perhaps this greater level of legitimacy, coupled with the desire to engage alumni beyond donor status, will be the basis for a concentrated agenda that responds even better to the challenges of the times in which we live.

This initiative included the direct investment in supporting the continuing engagement of not only students as future alumni, but also existing alumni and community members. Looking ahead, we at PSU intend to explore areas that may be of interest to the larger civic engagement community interested in deepening alumni engagement. Specifically, we anticipate the following:

- Developing and maintaining an alumni speakers bureau (similar to that of Citizen Alum), with individuals who would be available to address classes, speak about how they continued their engagement after it was initiated at PSU (or elsewhere), and be available as mentors;

- Collaborating with community activists and organizers so that, with support from faculty, they can write and publish on areas of their social change experience and expertise as well as interact directly with students and alumni; and
- Exploring funding possibilities to design and implement mini-grants for students and alumni that incentivize and support their joint participation in a variety of pre-existing social change and civic engagement opportunities in the local region and beyond.

Conclusion

The Community Education Program pilot expanded Portland State University's community engagement model to include continuing alumni engagement. The experience demonstrated the demand for this approach among faculty, students, alumni, and community members. Students and alumni participating in the program offered insights through program feedback that the components they had participated in "ensure[d] that [I'm] able to stay involved in the long-term" and have "given me encouragement to feel empowered to help make the positive changes that I wish to see in my lifetime."

The continued expansion of community engagement beyond the university has the potential to create a more holistic student and alumni experience that can further empower individuals to be change agents in their communities. It also works toward ensuring that engagement begun in university-based civic engagement experiences becomes more of a lifelong pattern, an impact that amplifies existing programmatic outcomes. We have offered our experiment with the hope that others may learn, as we have, from our experience in and reflection on these efforts to help push and expand civic engagement in higher education beyond the university, and that it may be a resource for innovation and action in the challenging times in which we live.

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