

CEL's Pedagogical Rationale for Increasing the Support for Community Engagement

Were Sewanee to design a curriculum around its Statement of Purpose, CE would be central. Or, were our standard defined by what works educationally, CE would again be integral. NSSE has identified “high-impact practices” and a recent AAC&U report pinpoints five. One is service learning. And the other four readily lend themselves to CE. Moreover, when we dig down to see what makes these practices so effective, we find it’s “engaging pedagogies that are active and collaborative in nature, including . . . experiential learning, and problem-based learning.” That’s the crux of CE. It’s a burgeoning national movement for a reason.

Why does CE work so well? It taps energies that modern education needlessly closes out of the curriculum. Instead of frustrating the moral and civic energy of today’s youth and faculty, CE channels it into coursework. And instead of allowing only secondhand knowledge, CE taps the natural human capacity to learn directly from experience. Of course CE is not a revolution but just a corrective to overly institutionalized education. Opening a door doesn’t raze the classroom. To the contrary, properly integrated into coursework, CE energizes classroom learning and the conventional curriculum.

Community engagement puts the liberal arts into practice. Understanding a person or group holistically requires us to put together what academic logic tears apart. That rending—dividing knowledge into disciplines, disciplines into courses, courses into classes, classes into facts—is the specialization that threatens the liberal arts. Ironically, that’s also the logic that organizes our current curriculum. Are we working against ourselves? Arguably our students learn the liberal arts nonetheless because they, and we, insist on putting our curricular pieces together. That’s built into effective CE.

Like any school, Sewanee walks a narrow line between the costs and the advantages of specialized coursework in closed classrooms. Have we found the right balance? Certainly a good liberal arts education will always separate learning from life to some degree. Yet does our current distance work as well as it once did? We doubt it. Knowledge, students and faculty are all changing, but our curricular logic hasn’t. We discuss these points in turn.

The Changing Character of Knowledge: Our era delights in interdisciplinarity. Research once devoted to discrete fields now unfolds in discipline-dissolving projects. Wherever that leads us, it’s the scholarship that engages faculty as well students. To attract the best faculty and develop today’s student, Sewanee needs to address this trend. CE can help.

CE courses tap life’s natural interconnectedness. Any community and each individual combine what our traditional curricular logic separates. We might list parts, saying every person and group functions as a moral, aesthetic, economic and political whole. Or we could dissect a whole like ‘health,’ recognizing how it has chemical, biological, psychological, religious and cultural components. Either way, the closer learning gets to life, the less disciplinary lines matter. CE has natural pedagogical and intellectual advantages for teaching the liberal arts as an interdisciplinary practice.

The Changing Character of Students: Our students are also changing. Many did community service in high school, and most expect the active learning pedagogies they’ve had since kindergarten. Certainly some learn best that way. Not surprisingly, then, today’s students often want courses that connect classroom to community, that tie the liberal arts to life.

Students not only want CE courses but they need them to discover their gifts. Engaging the wider world gets them asking ‘what are my gifts?’ and ‘where do I fit?’ in ways regular courses rarely can. Happily our best students often already have a strong sense of where they’re going and why. Indeed, that’s one explanation for why they’re so successful. Yet what about the others? Answering life-course questions is harder and more important than ever before. CE courses should be part of our larger strategy to address these needs. We need to do more. We’re fortunate that Sewanee already scores high on NSSE, but curricular reform should target weak spots. In particular CE could help us address two cautionary findings in their 2003 site visit:

- NSSE found that “the one cluster of effective educational practice where Sewanee underperformed” compared to peers was “active and collaborative learning”[emphasis added]¹
- Their report also concluded that, despite our “obvious commitment to serving the community,” we trailed peers in the percentage who participated “in a community-based project as a part of a regular course” [emphasis added].²

The Changing Character of Faculty: Some older and many younger faculty want to teach CE courses. It’s a grassroots movement emerging from how faculty want to develop as teachers and scholars. What’s behind the change? Are global inequities inspiring local involvements? As faith in progress wanes, do faculty seek to make a difference here and now? Whatever the reason, the shift to CE is not done lightly--it’s demanding work that takes one’s professional best.

If faculty want to teach CE courses, why are they in short supply? Our current curriculum creates serious scheduling and staffing impediments. Some CE projects should span semesters while others are best done as short, full-time experiences. Neither is readily possible today. Our current calendar lacks the flexibility for CE to prosper. Insufficient staffing also hinders innovation and expansion of CE courses. We make no allowance for more demanding preparations like CE or other innovations (e.g. student/faculty research, or college/community seminars). That inflexibility follows from staffing our general education requirement. Its unstated principle--the idea that piecing together disparate discipline-specific courses will somehow create an educated person—takes up so much staffing that little remains for innovation.

CE’s Other Benefits: Other than effective teaching and adapting to changing conditions CE has some potential benefits that we shall just list:

- Redirecting Campus Life: Giving CE a larger presence on campus will encourage service as an alternative to partying. A thriving CE program will also attract some of the nation’s top students. CEL has established a liaison to Admissions, a brochure is almost ready to go, and for four years we have hosted a Merit Weekend dinner for CE-interested students.
- Developing Teaching: CE helps teachers grow. It breaks us out of the classroom’s comfortable conventions, gets us back to teaching’s basics, and has us solving problems alongside students. That makes us better teachers in all our courses.

¹ NSSE Institute for Effective Educational Practice. 2003. “DEEP: Documenting Effective Educational Practice.” Interim Report. Bloomington, Indiana: National Survey of Student Engagement. p.14

² Ibid. p.23

- Improving Student Engagement: Sewanee already scores high on NSSE, but CE could help us address two cautionary findings in their 2003 site visit: NSSE found that “the one cluster of effective educational practice where Sewanee underperformed” was “active and collaborative learning.” Their report also concluded that, despite our “obvious commitment to serving the community,” we trailed peers in the percentage who participated “in a community-based project as a part of a regular course.”
- Building Faculty Loyalty: CE builds a faculty that identifies with Sewanee and its students. That’s not inevitable today. In fact, the pull of a career in research rather than an institution is stronger than ever. How do you counter that? Get everyone working together on what all share: the surrounding community and investing who they are in what they’ve done here.
- Enriching Diversity: A strong CE presence in the curriculum will be attractive both to existing faculty and students and will be helpful in recruiting faculty from various backgrounds who either themselves would be interested in participating in CE classes, or in teaching at a college that supports such teaching.
- Attracting the Best and Brightest Students: CEL faculty also believe that Sewanee would benefit from an Admissions recruitment program focusing on attracting students who have an interest in becoming involved in the various forms of curricular and extra-curricular forms of CE. To this end, CEL proposes that Sewanee join the Bonner Foundation's natural with the specific goal of recruiting 40-60 students, Bonner Leaders, who will support Sewanee faculty, Outreach, and local community partners in their CE and service activities. CE can also promote racial diversity on campus. Recent studies have shown minority faculty value alternative pedagogies like service learning.³ Moreover, while these courses benefit all students substantially, they are especially valuable for minorities.⁴

In addition to these general arguments for supporting community engagement, we also have benefited from Helen Bateman’s Evaluation of Faculty Responses to Teaching in CEL (CLECE).

Faculty teaching courses in CEL in the years of 2007-2009 reported the following general perspectives on their experiences (see table copied below.) 100% agreed that the CE component of the course helped students to see how the subject matter they learned mattered to everyday life, and 90% did not believe that students would have learned more from the class with less time spent on community work, and more in the classroom. Although subjective, these are responses by trained teachers with an average of twenty years experience teaching in their fields. Faculty also felt that developing a CE class helped them to engage students in active learning. 70% felt that CE should be practiced in more courses at Sewanee. Together these results indicate positive results and strong support for CE by faculty teaching in this program.

	Percentage	Percentage	Percentage	Percentage	Percentage
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³ Saltmarsh and Zlotowski. 2011. *Higher Education and Democracy*. Temple University Press.

⁴ Harper, Saun R. 2009. “Race-Conscious Student Engagement Practices and the Equitable Distribution of Enriching Educational Experiences.” Liberal Education 95, 4:38-45.

	of participants	of participants	of participants	of participants	of participants
Item	<i>Disagree</i> <i>Strongly</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Neutral</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Agree</i> <i>strongly</i>
The community participation aspect of this course helped students to see how the subject matter they learned can be used in everyday life.	0%	0%	0%	30%	70%
I feel that students would have learned more from this course if more time had been spent in the classroom instead of doing community work.	30%	60%	10%	0%	0%
The idea of combining work in the community with university coursework should be practiced in more courses at this university.	0%	10%	20%	30%	40%
Developing a community service component to this course has helped me gain a deeper understanding of the subject area.	0%	0%	50%	20%	30%
Developing a community service component to this course helped me engage students in active, hands-on learning.	0%	0%	0%	30%	60%

In public discussion of community engagement, some faculty that have not taught CE classes wonder whether rigor of the class is sacrificed in the name of service. One important result of Professor Bateman's study worth paying attention to is that faculty interviewed felt strongly that students would not have learned more had less time been spent in community engagement. While not addressing the whole range of questions that might come up around the issue of rigor, this result suggests that this worry may be an abstracted worry not shared by faculty that have actually experienced teaching CE courses.