

## CHAPTER 9

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# PLANTING SEEDS THROUGH SERVICE

## A Qualitative Approach to Assessing Student Civic Learning Through Community Partnerships

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### ABSTRACT

This chapter considers how institutionalizing community engagement through cocurricular service-learning programs can strengthen community–university partnerships. This qualitative study assesses student civic learning outcomes while serving in the yearlong Student Engagement Fellows program, a cocurricular service-learning experience at the University of Mississippi. An ethnographic sensibility (Polin & Keene, 2010) approach was utilized to understand student civic learning in programs structured to bring about transformational partnerships through democratic engagement practices. Exploring student reflections on a partnership with a rural community in the impoverished Mississippi Delta, findings from this study suggest four key student civic learning outcomes and offer considerations as to how stu-

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dent civic learning can be harnessed to enhance the integrity of community–university partnerships.

This student engagement project demonstrates how a community–university partnership in a historically struggling region of Mississippi can empower university students in developing a social justice practice rooted in the development of civic learning (DePaola, 2014). Community–university engagement strategies allow higher education to realize a world “in which all students are prepared for lives of engaged citizenship, all campuses are engaged in strong partnerships advancing community goals, and all of higher education is recognized as an essential building block of a just, equitable, and sustainable future” (Campus Compact, 2016, para. 14). While some community engagement scholars (Weerts & Sandmann, 2008) argue that organizational structures communicate a set of values and have meaning beyond the individuals they impact, this study seeks to understand the work taking place under the auspices of these enabling institutional structures, namely how student civic learning can be harnessed to enhance the quality of community–university partnerships.

The primary purpose of this research is to present the findings from a study of civic learning outcomes among students participating in a year-long cocurricular service project housed at the McLean Institute for Public Service and Community Engagement at the University of Mississippi. These findings have resonance for community engagement practitioners and scholars seeking to understand the trajectory of civic learning when situated in a project-based community partnership that addresses societal needs while impacting UM students. The expectation is that civic action on the part of the students will support the co-creation of knowledge and facilitate control on the community’s end. The community, in turn, will support community development and action projects they help to create through the student engagement program.

The mission of the McLean Institute is to advance transformative service throughout the University and fight poverty through education in Mississippi. Guided by this mission, the McLean Institute works to institutionalize community engagement practices in a way that impacts quality of life in partner communities. The staff at the institute relies on student involvement and community partnerships to fulfill its statewide mission. Student contributions and the guidance of community-based organizations provide needed capacity and insight to fulfill the organizational mission.

The Student Engagement Fellows program provides students with an introduction to the principles and practice of community engagement with an emphasis on cultivating mutually beneficial community partnerships. Student engagement fellows receive a \$2,000 scholarship for the academic year and a \$500 project budget. Fellows participate in a competitive application

process, and apply on behalf of a registered student organization. Each cohort of Student Engagement Fellows is expected to work collaboratively, involve members of their student organizations in community programming, and tailor their projects to community needs. While the program is cocurricular, the McLean Institute staff provide assigned readings, lead discussions, and facilitate project planning. McLean's director and coauthor for this chapter is a sociology professor and community development scholar.

Informed by a university-wide survey on student engagement, the Student Engagement Fellows program at UM emerged out of a desire to nurture partnerships among student groups and community-based organizations. The McLean Institute recognized the opportunity to align service-oriented student groups with community partners seeking a closer relationship with the university. By housing the program at the McLean Institute, university staff sought to provide continuity of relationships and conceptual framing to encourage sustainable and long-term commitments to community-based organizations.

## SETTING

Mississippi has the highest poverty rate in the nation, with the Mississippi Delta having the highest poverty rates in the state (U.S. Census, 2010). Arguably the Mississippi Delta can be characterized as the poorest region in the United States. Representatives from Cartersville, a community in the Mississippi Delta, first approached the McLean Institute seeking partnership in January 2015. This community is a town of approximately 1,200 people, 98% of whom identify as African American, with 500 housing units occupying nearly 4/10 of a square mile. Median household income is approximately \$18,000; half of the population lives below the poverty level, and over 60% of children live below the poverty level. While nearly 65% of the population holds a high school diploma, less than 5% has completed a college degree (U.S. Census, 2016). In this community, exposure to college students can present possibilities for future educational pursuits that youth may not otherwise observe in their community. Consequently, this community was a natural fit for developing a partnership with the Student Engagement Fellows program.

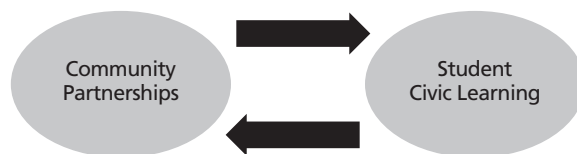
Fourie (2003) underscores the importance of attending to local community needs and context in setting a shared agenda for community development efforts. After receiving initial contact from a community leader, the McLean Institute initiated meetings to learn about the place from the community members themselves, including leaders and youth who were active in afterschool programming. Seeking to adhere to a democratic engagement approach of reciprocity in a localized context (Saltmarsh, Hartley,

& Clayton, 2009), Student Engagement Fellows approached community partners as the authorities on how to identify and respond to community challenges. These meetings sought to understand, validate, and respond to the local epistemologies that Fourie (2003) recognizes as critical to service-learning partnerships. The programming for each year was developed collaboratively with community members, and sought to address their concerns, namely a lack of enrichment opportunities for youth in this rural Delta community.

Based on meetings with community partners, the Student Engagement Fellows organized a series of events, including a (a) youth nutrition workshop, (b) composting and recycling workshop, (c) garden and greenhouse work days, (d) community health fair, (e) ACT preparation sessions, (f) financial literacy and resume building workshop, and (g) young women's empowerment workshop. As they considered the sequence of events, the Student Engagement Fellows realized that the topics began with personal choices such as what to eat, and culminated with an empowerment session focused on caring for oneself and one's community. Similarly, the garden work session would begin with planting seeds in a greenhouse and proceed to transplanting larger plants. Seeing this progression, the Student Engagement Fellows identified a common theme for their workshops, which was "Planting Seeds through Service."

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The development of the Student Engagement Fellows program was inspired by literature on cultivating mutually beneficial community partnerships. The related research agenda emerged out of a desire to understand how student civic learning progresses in the context of project-based community partnerships. A commitment to reciprocal community partnerships underpins the Student Engagement Fellows program, and this sensibility is rooted in scholarship on democratic engagement principles (Saltmarsh et al., 2009), particularly with respect to cultivating transformational community partnerships (Enos & Morton, 2003). Inquiry into student civic learning is guided by the civic learning spiral described by Musil (2009), which maps a progression of understanding that encompasses the self, communities and cultures, knowledge, skills, values, and public action to address community concerns. As a whole, the research project seeks to understand how a program modeled on reciprocal partnerships influences student civic learning, and how that civic learning can, in turn, enhance the mutual benefit of a community partnership (see Figure 9.1).



**Figure 9.1** Program Design.

## Service, Partnerships, and the Public Good

Many colleges and universities promote community service as part of their engagement platform. In considering community service as a cultural phenomenon in the United States, Morton and Saltmarsh (1997) identified the chasm between notions of charity and justice in the practice of community service. As Enos and Morton (2003) wrote, “the neighbors of colleges and universities, we believe, are asking for justice and receiving charity” (p. 23). This observation strikes at the tension in doing work that may be convenient for colleges and universities, but not necessarily aligned with the needs or demands of the immediate community.

John Dewey recognized the danger inherent in providing acts of charity *for* (rather than *with*) another—particularly how that transaction can alienate the subordinate “other” as a passive recipient of charity. As Dewey (1932) reflected, “the objection of this conception of charity is that it too readily becomes an excuse for maintaining laws and social arrangements which ought themselves to be changes in the interest of fair play and justice” (as cited in Morton and Saltmarsh, 1997, p. 142). Rather than promoting acts of charity, service becomes a call to pursue justice by challenging the prevailing social order.

In the community engagement literature, Dewey’s work has inspired recent writing on democratic engagement. Saltmarsh et al. (2009) wrote an influential white paper in which they found consensus around the idea that higher education must play a role in addressing social problems and, relatedly, that the civic engagement movement in higher education has not yet reached its full potential. To remedy this shortcoming, the authors proposed democratic engagement as an inclusive and collaborative framework that involves university and community stakeholders working together to cocreate knowledge and solutions to matters of public concern. The principle of reciprocity, as well as taking an inclusive, collaborative, and asset-based approach to addressing problems in a local context (Saltmarsh et al., 2009, p. 11), inspired the design of the Student Engagement Fellows program.

This cogeneration of intellectual activity vis-à-vis community work also dialogues with what Enos and Morton (2003) identified as a transformational partnership between community and campus entities. Bringle, Clayton, and Price (2009) took this framework one step farther by delineating a spectrum of community–campus partnerships ranging from exploitative to transactional to transformational. Exploitative partnerships imply a cost or burden to one or both parties. While both parties benefit in a transactional partnership, transformational partnerships provide the opportunity for all partners to grow. Transformational partnerships possess high levels of closeness (frequent, varied, and influential interactions), equity (where results are perceived as proportional to what is invested), and integrity (value alignment and shared vision) (Bringle et al., 2009, p. 4). In this way, transformation occurs for each partner through the process of creating meaning and knowledge, and also at the societal level, because these efforts are, ultimately, rooted in the pursuit of justice.

Several concepts in the community youth development literature were also helpful to this study. Community development is a social process involving community residents acting on their behalf to improve their quality of life. Some of the initial research efforts embracing this approach focused on poverty at the turn of the 20th century. Today the consistent theme is to involve public participation in the decisions affecting local communities (Robinson & Green, 2011)—this inclusive and participatory practice also resonates with democratic engagement approaches (Saltmarsh et al., 2009). Wheeler and Thomas (2011) argued that

community youth development has strong ties to identity development. To fully engage in community development work, youth need to understand that they possess strengths and assets to offer their community—who they are, what they believe, where they came from, and what their heritage offers them. This understanding allows young people to appreciate their own identity, understand how historic injustices affect them, and make positive changes. At a collective level, understanding and engaging with the history and identity of a shared place—the geography, physical and cultural, of a community—unites diverse groups of individuals. In many cases, this collective understanding may lead to healing. (Wheeler & Thomas, 2011, p. 221)

This passage suggests the mutual growth that can take place when individuals reach across the boundaries separating campus and community, and the possibility of cascading levels of identity development and social action that can occur for university students and community youth alike.

The McLean Institute’s advancement of transformative community engagement and its fight to eradicate poverty in Mississippi became one of seven key priorities in the university’s 2020 strategic plan (University of Mississippi, 2015). In the 2014 Fall semester, the McLean Institute surveyed

UM students' community service, including participation in service-learning courses and cocurricular service activities (McLean Institute, 2014). All 17,000 students on the main campus were surveyed through a Qualtrics platform, with 1,089 completing the questionnaire. Survey items reflected community engagement outcomes such as social responsibility, civic involvement, personal development, active-learning, personal satisfaction, social integration, and retention and social awareness.

These internal findings indicated that UM students who had enrolled or participated in a service-learning course or cocurricular activity were much more likely to believe that their service changed the way they viewed poverty, with the assumption that the 40% marking agree to strongly agree had improved views. This study also indicated that approximately 73% ( $N=793$ ) of UM students who completed the survey desired more cocurricular opportunities at the university, and 61% ( $N=659$ ) desired to have more interaction with people of diverse cultures, beliefs, values, and traditions. The responses to this survey, informed by requests from community organizations, inspired the McLean Institute to establish the Student Engagement Fellows program to address institutional goals, student learning objectives, and community need.

## Conceptual Framework

The study was grounded in a conceptual understanding of community engagement and its community–university partnerships serving on the forefront of social change through cocurricular service-learning in higher education (Weerts & Sandmann, 2008). Long term engagement from both community partners and university students with high levels of passion for what they are doing are highly effective for transforming communities struggling to provide opportunities for their most vulnerable members. We argue that the Student Engagement Fellows' civic learning and resulting transformation in perspective occurred during their year-long community practice, developing the critical lens necessary to see the structural issues of social justice, and challenging their own system of assumptions about reality. This shift in perspective can, in turn, be channeled by centers of engagement to enhance the integrity in partnership practice.

The UM Student Engagement Fellows program seeks to effectuate transformation at the individual, institutional, and community levels. The program design was intentional in seeking to connect university students to local youth as near-peer role models. Of interest to the present analysis is student transformation, particularly along dimensions of civic learning. Musil's (2009) civic learning spiral provides a framework for understanding and assessing student learning outcomes in this project.

Civic engagement can be explained as democratic engagement in action at the individual level. Musil (2009) describes civic engagement as

acting on a heightened sense of responsibility to one's communities that encompasses the notions of global citizenship and interdependence, participation in building civil society, and empowering individuals as agents of positive social change to promote social justice locally and globally. (p. 58–59)

Musil (2009) diagrams an interactive and integrated civic learning spiral that consists of the following elements: “self, communities and cultures, knowledge, skills, values, and public action” (p. 60). These six domains of learning are connected to one another and, as they develop, build to a disposition towards civic awareness and, ultimately, action in pursuit of justice.

The civic learning spiral outlines a set of learning outcomes for each dimension of the frame (Musil, 2009, p. 62–63). Civic learning about the self addresses an understanding of the self in connection with identity, relationships, time and place, and the desire and ability to stand up for passionately held beliefs. Civic learning about communities and cultures encompasses a curiosity about and appreciation for the diversity of local and global communities and a knowledge of their civic traditions, the ability of communities to limit access, and the disposition to gain access to communities outside of one's comfort zone.

Civic learning about knowledge pertains to its fluid nature, social construction of knowledge itself, and the power dynamics therein. Learning outcomes in this domain also include fundamental principles, arguments, and social movements around democracy, and an understanding of intellectual debates around civics in the student's chosen major. Civic learning about skills includes critical thinking, conflict resolution, cooperation, dialogue to advance community building, cultivating a civic imagination, and working across differences.

Civic learning about values involves examination and reflection of personal values and how those can advance the common good—specifically how character, integrity, empathy, and hope can advance equality, opportunity, liberty, and justice for all. Civic learning about values also has a learning objective regarding the “ability to negotiate traffic at the intersection where worlds collide” (Musil, 2009, p. 63). This negotiation is at the heart of work that bridges campus and community, such as the Student Engagement Fellows program. Finally, civic learning about public action involves constructive participation in one's community; planning, implementing and reflecting on public action, including strategies such as service, advocacy, policy change; taking risks to advance the public good; and an ability to raise ethical questions about public life.

The elements of the civic learning spiral can be used to assess outcomes for the Student Engagement Fellows program because the program is designed to stimulate inquiry, action, and reflection in several of the six domains. Civic



learning is action-oriented, and an experiential learning format such as the Student Engagement Fellows program is well-suited to facilitate praxis, “the reflection and action which truly transforms reality” (Freire, 1970, p. 81).

This research project contributes to research on student civic development in the service-learning context (Musil, 2009), while addressing the gap in ethnographic-inspired approaches to assessing service-learning experiences (Polin & Keene, 2010). Additionally, this project shares the perspective of one key community leader who was instrumental in establishing the community–university partnership.

## STUDY DESIGN

The research design for this study was inspired by Polin and Keene’s (2010) “ethnographic sensibility” approach to study service-learning experiences. They utilized focus groups, autobiographical accounts, reflections, and open-ended interviews, but not a formal ethnographic assessment because that was not the goal of their study. An ethnographic sensibility offers the opportunity to explore the richness of qualitative data and thus deepen understanding of a particular program. As a program evaluation strategy, an ethnographic sensibility can illuminate the process by which students make meaning out of their experiences bridging campus and community while executing community-driven projects. For this particular study, the ethnographic sensibility is used to examine student civic learning—probing the development of critical thinking around identity, systemic injustice, and one’s own set of assumptions about reality—to draw insights on how that learning can strengthen partnerships with community-based organizations.

The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do students perceive their involvement in the Student Engagement Fellows program?
2. How does civic learning unfold for students engaged in community partnerships modeled on democratic engagement practices?
3. How can civic learning be harnessed to strengthen community partnerships?

## Participants

The participants for this research project are the Student Engagement Fellows themselves: Tamika, Jalisa, Priya, Sonia, Deirdre, and Scott.

- Tamika was a senior majoring in psychology and social work, representing a historically Black Greek letter organization.
- Jalisa was a junior communication science disorders major representing a women's empowerment organization.
- Priya was a sophomore psychology major representing a service-oriented honor society.
- Sonia was a junior communication science disorders major representing a health professions honor society.
- Deirdre was a sophomore geological engineering major representing a sustainability group.
- Scott was a junior dietetics major representing a nutrition association.

Sister Anne, a close collaborator with the Student Engagement Fellows program, provided a key informant interview to illuminate the community perspective. Sister Anne, a White female, came to Mississippi nearly 30 years ago, and has longstanding partnerships with high schools, colleges, and universities from around the country that spend a week or more doing service projects in the Delta. Until one of Sister Anne's former students reached out to the McLean Institute on her behalf, no schools from Mississippi had ever been involved in her work.

While scholars such as Mitchell, Donahue, and Young-Law (2012) have noted that service-learning is disproportionately sought after by "White, middle-class, traditional age, college students who are not also juggling jobs, debt, and family responsibilities" (p. 12), the Student Engagement Fellows represent a diverse group: four African-American females, one Indian-American female, and one White male. This demographic makeup also provides an opportunity to explore perspectives on cocurricular service-learning among students who may more readily identify with groups that are historically underrepresented in higher education. In a mixed-methods study of low-income, first generation college students, York (2016) found a combination of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations to become involved with service-learning, including encouragement from faculty and staff, service-oriented programs and curriculum, and a predisposition to serve. The insights shared by students in the present study offer an opportunity to deepen understanding of how low-income, first generation students of color experience civic growth and development in a service-learning experience.

## Analytic Process

The analytical process was designed to explore the elements of Musil's (2009) civic learning spiral: self, communities and cultures, knowledge, skills, values, and public action. Student Engagement Fellows completed

three written reflections (before service project implementation, after service project implementation, and at the conclusion of the academic year), participated in a key informant interview in the middle of the spring semester, and took part in a focus group at the end of the academic year. Participant observation and field notes, as well as surveys of UM students and community participants, provided additional data to corroborate initial findings. The community partner interview provided an external perspective on the program.

The analysis of qualitative data employed an inductive approach. Thomas (2006) asserts that “the primary purpose of the inductive approach is to allow research findings to emerge from the frequent, dominant, or significant themes inherent in the raw data, without the restraints imposed by structured methodologies” (p. 238). The inductive process calls on researchers to approach the data with “an openness to whatever meaning emerge[s]” (Hycner, 1985, p. 280).

After receiving the reflection papers, the authors identified codes—what Hycner (1985) refers to as units of general meaning. As researchers, the authors’ preference with coding is to retain the original language of the respondents (Hycner, 1985; Thomas, 2006), which serves as a prompt to recall the context around each code. This approach led to a large number of codes—468 in total—but also allowed for greater objectivity as the researchers were not inserting their words to paraphrase another’s.

In moving from codes to categories, the authors worked to identify “clusters” in which to group the codes, or units of relevant meaning (Hycner, 1985). The codes in this research project clustered around 14 categories. The final step identified clusters among the categories and assembled them into themes; four themes emerged from these data. Within this framework, attention was given to address the particular research questions regarding program involvement and student civic learning.

The community partner interview with Sister Anne was used as a means to support the findings reported by the students, and to seek greater insight into the community perspective on the collaboration. As Fetterman (1998) asserts, “Working with people day in and day out, for long periods of time, is what gives ethnographic research its validation and vitality” (as cited in Creswell, 2007, p. 208). Since 2015 the researchers have developed trust with Sister Anne and her program participants, engaged in ongoing community meetings, conducted participant observation during weekend workshops in the community, and have hosted students from Cartersville on campus on multiple occasions. The authors engaged in peer review to validate their interpretations of the findings (Creswell, 2007).

## FINDINGS

Analysis of the written reflections revealed 14 categories, which coalesced into four themes addressing the Student Engagement Fellows' perceptions of their involvement with the program, and suggesting ways in which student civic development evolves throughout the program. These themes address motivation to learn and lead, the opportunity to develop sustainable models of community involvement, examination of self in connection with others, and the sense that community-based learning can be a site of personal and systemic transformation. Each of these themes illustrates at least one aspect of civic learning as described by Musil (2009). The community partner interview dialogued with each of these themes, and illuminates dimensions of student civic learning that can be harnessed to enhance community partnerships.

### Motivation to Learn and Lead

This theme encompassed student motivations to join the Student Engagement Fellows program, concerns prior to implementing the workshops, programmatic goals and outputs, lessons learned in the course of leading programmatic work with youth, and a sense of satisfaction with program involvement. These findings align with Musil's (2009) outcomes for civic learning about self and skills.

In the initial reflection, three of the six Student Engagement Fellows expressed a desire to learn about service and enthusiasm about the opportunity to lead their own service project. Each of the Student Engagement Fellows brought a different passion to the program, ranging from nutrition and sustainability to college preparation and youth empowerment. The desire to channel these passions into workshops in Cartersville reflects a propensity to become involved in matters that a person deems important, which Musil (2009) identifies as an outcome aligned with civic learning about the self.

As members of the second cohort of the Student Engagement Fellows program, the fellows were aware that there was a history of relatively low participation—approximately 10 or fewer participants—at each workshop. As a result, four students noted the “low participation history in Cartersville” (Priya, Reflection 2) alongside optimism that their events would be well attended. After leading two ACT preparation workshops, Tamika noted that “many factors in small communities will affect an event's level of community participation. I learned that the first weekend administering this course there was a funeral in the town as well as a community basketball tournament” (Reflection 2) which reduced attendance. After a disappointing turnout at the first of two ACT preparation workshops, Tamika and her group decided to shift the start time back in order to better accommodate

the schedules and availability of local youth. This evidences a desire to allow the community to dictate the parameters of the project, attending to the relationships and social location that Musil (2009) identifies as outcomes for civic learning about the self.

Students connected the development of project management skills to an ability to effect change at the community level. For successful project execution, Student Engagement Fellows noted the importance of preparation and contingency plans, having sufficient materials, flexibility around the use of technology, the challenges of engaging a youth audience, and effective communication with the community partner. Along those lines, Kirlin (2002) identified the civic skill of “interacting with other citizens to promote personal and common interests” (p. 574), along with underlying skills, including the “capacity to articulate individual perspective and interests; work with others to define common objective; [and] create and follow a work plan to accomplish a goal” (p. 574). The project planning and implementation activities of the Student Engagement Fellows program allowed the students to develop these underlying skills, which is an important building block for cocreating community change.

Resolving unexpected conflict and working cooperatively with peers and community partners are dimensions of civic learning about skills (Musil, 2009) that the Student Engagement Fellows grappled with during the year. Scott had piloted his program at an elementary school in Oxford, which proved to be an effective strategy for replicating the logistics of his workshop in the Mississippi Delta. He noted, however, that while students in Oxford were familiar with different types of melon, students in Cartersville had never tasted or heard of a cantaloupe. This underscores the ability to work across difference, a learning outcome for civic learning about skills (Musil, 2009).

Another dimension of leadership that emerged was of Student Engagement Fellows taking on a teaching role among their student organization peers. Sonia noted that

as for my student organization members, I think I educated them in a way I had not thought of. Student organization members had never been to a primarily African American community or a community with so few resources. Several members from my organization had never heard of Cartersville and had never been to anywhere in the Mississippi Delta. (Reflection 2)

Here, Sonia recounts what it means to be a student of color helping her majority peers to navigate their first experience in a primarily African American community. Civic learning about the self (Musil, 2009) surfaces here as well, as Sonia is reflecting on how her identity is shaped by and connected to where she was raised (inherited identity) and by her peers in her student organization (chosen identity). In fact, Sonia may have challenged

her peers to reflect on their own identities in relationship to a rural Delta community located just an hour from campus.

### **Opportunity to Develop Sustainable Models of Community Involvement**

Students considered the opportunities inherent in working with student organizations—namely the ability to increase collective impact in a community—alongside the challenges of sustaining active involvement from membership. Student Engagement Fellows recognized their own capacity as leaders to inspire involvement from their peers, and underscored the opportunity for institutions of higher education to play a problem-solving role with communities. These reflections speak to civic learning about communities and culture, specifically a “willingness to move from the comfort zone to the contact zone by transgressing boundaries that divide” (Musil, 2009, p. 62). Ultimately, the students concluded that meaningful relationships are critical for building sustainable and reciprocal partnerships. For her part, Sister Anne identified the vibrant contributions that student groups can make, alongside the recognition that sustained contact is needed to make a lasting impact.

While Student Engagement Fellows noted that they had learned about approaches to service and community engagement during the yearlong experience, they also expressed an awareness of the cyclical nature of student organizations and, thus, community involvement. As Deirdre put it, “I think it’s important to be consistent and not just to visit one time, but to show how invested we are to this community by returning once again” (Reflection 3). This was echoed by Tamika’s observation that “too often, students go into communities and begin providing services, but over time students and their organizations stop going into those communities” (Reflection 3). These reflections, while indicating an openness to invest in communities through consistent involvement, also suggest an awareness that sustained contact and connection will be most transformative. Episodic service involvement also runs counter to the goal of developing a long-term relationship with the community.

As an example of a contribution that both campus and community stakeholders have invested in, Sister Anne spoke of the greenhouse built by the Student Engagement Fellows. She recalled,

We would not have the greenhouse we have had they not built that . . . [A]t the original meeting we had we talked about various things that would be nice to have, and that was one of the things that everybody was interested in because we have a community garden. (Interview)

The greenhouse was planned by students from a sustainability group, who then drove the component parts to the community. The university students worked hand in hand with local youth, and together they assembled the

greenhouse on site. The plastic siding, however, did not withstand the heat of the long Mississippi summer. In the interview, Sister Anne recounted how she challenged the group of boys who tended to the garden to write a grant requesting funds to replace the siding on the greenhouse. They were funded by a longtime supporter of Sister Anne's work, and her brother visited from out of state to install the new greenhouse siding.

Community engagement scholars Bringle and Hatcher (2002) have written about the parallels between community-campus partnerships and personal relationships, and note that interpersonal relationships underpin these organizational partnerships. Deirdre echoed this sentiment in connection with her peers, asserting that her student organization colleagues "realized that it was more important to interact with the students than to just come and complete a project" (Reflection 3). This speaks to a genuine interest in learning about and developing relationships with the youth in Cartersville, another outcome for civic learning about communities and cultures (Musil, 2009). The development of authentic, caring interpersonal relationships can, hopefully, inspire a deeper sense of commitment from student organizations to develop a long-term relationship with partner communities. Moreover, connecting with community youth can promote the collective understanding and healing that Wheeler and Thomas (2011) recognize as a potential outcome of community development efforts.

The Student Engagement Fellows saw their opportunity to capitalize on the nascent relationships and commitment to urge consistent involvement of their respective student organizations:

I have taught several members of my organization about the things I learned as a Student Engagement Fellow. Because I will not be here forever, I thought it would be beneficial to tell members of my organization about the McLean Institute. I expressed to them how I thought it would be great if one of them wanted to continue the great work of keeping our organization involved. (Sonia, Reflection 3)

Courting the involvement of student organizations is not, of course, without its challenges. Both Deirdre and Jalisa wrote about their challenges with unreliable volunteers from their student organizations, while Scott considered that popular student organization activities, such as fundraiser, may have only scratched the surface in terms of addressing community need. He wrote, "I look back on other fundraising events I have participated in, and wonder if the big check we delivered at the end really worked to resolve the problem we were fighting" (Reflection 3). Ultimately, Scott concluded that the opportunity for student organizations to impact communities is part of a larger community-campus relationship, where "a healthy relationship between the town and university may stand to benefit both parties as they grow together" (Reflection 3).

## Examination of Self in Connection With Others

Student Engagement Fellows reflected on their sense of identity, values, and passions in connection with one another, the Delta community, and their motivation to pursue community-based work. These reflections resonate with outcomes identified in Musil's (2009) civic learning about the self and values.

Several Student Engagement Fellows noted that Cartersville reminded them of rural and primarily African American communities in Mississippi where they or their friends had grown up, which strengthened their sense of identification with the community. In the words of Jalisa, "It was easy for me to identify with some of the conditions in Cartersville being that this is something that is common in a lot of rural African American communities" (Reflection 3). For Tamika, this was an opportunity to inspire the youth of Cartersville and serve as a near-peer role model in her interactions with the community. She wrote, "I wanted students to see that because I share common experiences with them, they are able to reach the next level in life just like I did" (Reflection 3). This conviction can be recognized as the "ability to express one's voice to effect change," in this case in the life opportunities of community youth, another outcome for civic learning about self (Musil, 2009, p. 62).

Sister Anne noted that while her organization receives groups of high school and college-aged volunteers from around the country, "the foundation for giving back and to have students from Mississippi coming here is probably a greater impact on our kids than the groups that come from outside" (Interview). She also noted that prior to meeting with representatives from the McLean Institute, no other college or university from Mississippi had been engaged with her work in Cartersville. Sister Anne recognizes the contributions of all the volunteers who visit the community, but identified a particular resonance with college students from Mississippi. While she works to promote service among all stakeholders, she reflected that involvement from Mississippians "does make a difference. So it deepens that original purpose, I think, more than the other volunteers..." (Interview). This may also challenge UM students to channel multiple facets of their identities as college students, native Mississippians, products of the Mississippi education system, or some combination of these selves.

Bringle et al. (2009) identify the qualities of closeness, equity, and integrity as characteristics by which to determine the extent to which a partnership becomes transformational. Sister Anne, for her part, has cultivated partnerships very effectively, both at the University of Mississippi and with schools across the country. At the same time, her organization does not rely on the involvement of students from Mississippi to advance its work. As Sister Anne remarked, "We'll live without it [the partnership], but it's so



much better with it” (Interview). This approach—and the baseline level of organizational capacity it reveals—also helps to guard against developing an exploitative relationship with any partner, which Bringle et al. (2009) identify as a risk when a community-based organization becomes overly dependent on a university partner.

The Student Engagement Fellows sensed an opportunity to serve as role models for youth in Cartersville. Given that they self-selected into a cocurricular service-learning program, they expressed an orientation towards service and social justice, passion for education, inspiring others to reach their potential, and fostering a culture of environmental sustainability. Scott also considered the transformative power of education, noting that “education has the capacity to enhance lives well after time as Student Engagement Fellows has ended” (Reflection 1). This reflection on core values and translating those values into action to promote the greater good are identified by Musil (2009) as civic learning outcomes around values.

Furthermore, the students noted a strong sense of purpose with regard to strengthening their own skill set in a way that would serve the community—echoing, appropriately enough, the “planting seeds through service” theme they had identified for their community projects. Sonia identified a “goal to learn more about improvement in myself and ways to improve my community” (Reflection 1). She also identified strongly with the immediate community of Oxford, as did Scott, which suggests the possibility that service-minded college students can develop a sincere identification with and commitment to communities beyond campus. As Sonia put it, “It is like they [the university and immediate community] are two separate communities, but in fact, they are the same community” (Reflection 3). This is an intriguing finding, as it invites the possibility that engaged students can also identify as residents of a particular community. The sense of community identification espoused by these two students offers additional nuance to the SOFAR framework created by Bringle et al. (2009), which positions students, community organizations, faculty, administrators, and community residents as key stakeholder groups for analyzing partnerships and assessing the dyadic relationships among each of these groups.

### **Community-Based Learning as a Site of Personal and Systemic Transformation**

In this final theme, Student Engagement Fellows discussed insights drawn from community-based learning and the impact on their personal goals and vision for the future, including how they might be agents of social change. These reflections speak to Musil’s (2009) outcomes for civic

learning about public action, particularly intentional involvement in one's community and implementation of and reflection on public action (p. 63).

Tamika and Sonia were particularly focused on the community dynamics in Cartersville, perhaps facilitated by their familiarity with predominantly African American communities in rural, under-resourced areas. Tamika wrote,

Many of the older female students each weekend brought younger siblings and cousins. I've always known that older female teenagers are often responsible for younger family members, but it did not become a reality for me until some of the young ladies brought the youth in which they were caring for. (Reflection 2)

Tamika's reflection underscores a desire to understand the local context in order to enhance the effectiveness of her program. The decision to shift the start time of the ACT workshop was driven largely by those realizations. Sonia's focus pertained more to the realities of life in a medically underserved area:

Something that has stuck with me and I can relate to as a Student Engagement Fellow is the lack of money to afford healthcare in Mississippi... I also heard this inability to afford health care in Cartersville. Recently I have been thinking about ways I could as a doctor help people who can't afford it. (Reflection 3)

In the final reflection, all Student Engagement Fellows discussed a desire to pursue community-based or public service work in the future, referencing a more intentional and theory-based orientation as the reflections progressed. Multiple students echoed the transactional and transformational framework for community partnerships developed by Enos and Morton (2003), which was the subject of extensive group discussion at the beginning of the program:

I feel that I have developed a new passion for transformational service and how this can shift dynamics in communities for the advancement of that community... I know now that the school supply drive alone is a transactional community service project. I've learned that I don't want to just hand things to people, I want to dig down in communities and be an agent for change. (Tamika, Reflection 3)

[Old patterns of thinking] were challenged as a Student Engagement Fellow as we were continually asked to try and solve the source of the problem, and not just the symptoms. More often than not, this ended with education based programs. (Scott, Reflection 3)

The focus on education is intriguing, because expanding educational opportunity can be accomplished through extracurricular enrichment like that offered by the Student Engagement Fellows as well as through policy change to reform the public education system. Musil (2009) identifies service, advocacy, and policy change as multiple levels through which public action can be effectuated, and Scott demonstrated at least emerging steps along that continuum of change.

Ultimately, the Student Engagement Fellows expressed a commitment to serving their communities in the future, and a clear understanding that their personal involvement would be consequential. According to Deirdre, “The main reason [I hope to be involved] is because you can’t complain about the issues unless you are trying to change things” (Reflection 3). This desire to speak out and potentially take a risk to further the public good is another dimension of civic learning around public action (Musil, 2009).

## DISCUSSION

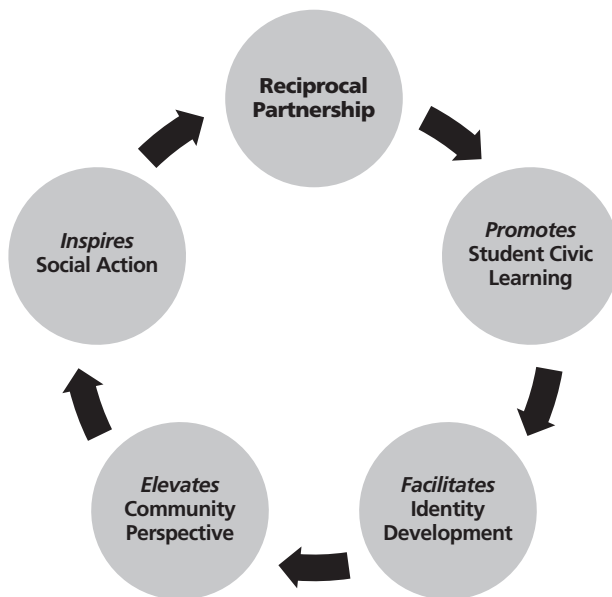
The student reflections offer insights into how cocurricular service-learning programs contribute to student civic development and strengthen community–university partnerships. In the course of the yearlong cocurricular service-learning program, Student Engagement Fellows displayed civic learning and reflection around a motivation to learn and lead, the opportunity to develop sustainable models of community involvement, examination of self in connection with others, and the sense that community-based learning can be a site of personal and systemic transformation. These themes intersect with several dimensions of Musil’s (2009) civic learning spiral, including civic learning about self, communities and cultures, skills, values, and public action. Reflection on relationships, passionately-held causes, stepping out of one’s comfort zone, conflict resolution, working across difference, personal values, a commitment to justice, and taking public action all evidence growth along Musil’s (2009) civic learning framework (p. 62–63).

These findings suggest a possible model for how student civic development in the context of reciprocal partnerships can deepen the practice of community–university partnerships. Students initiate community work in a reciprocal partnership and, guided by a university center for engagement, experience civic learning. Identity development—including reflection on one’s self, skills, and values—can lead to a broader sense of identification with the community. In the case of the low-income, first generation students of color in this study, the community setting had much in common with where they had grown up, which led to reflection on how those students could simultaneously educate their majority peers and serve as role models for community youth. Finally, embracing community perspective

and concerns inspires social action, which then enhances the partnership practice and can lead to greater program sustainability and deeper learning over time (see Figure 9.2).

The program design, including the emphasis on reflection and shared meaning making, sought to nurture students towards “epistemological complexity, self-understanding, and the ability to engage in respectful relationships with others that are characterized by mutuality” (King & Baxter Magolda, 2011, p. 216). The two Student Engagement Fellows who discussed their identification with the community outside of campus invite additional nuance into the SOFAR model developed by Bringle et al. (2009), which suggests that intentional, long-term engagement with community partners may inspire students to broaden their identity, and therefore their circle of concern, beyond the physical boundaries of campus. A sincere identification with the community—and the social action it inspires—is consistent with York’s (2016) study of low-income, first generation college students. York (2016) found that LIFG students possessed an intrinsic motivation to serve, and at least one student in the study addressed how growing up in a low-income family inspired a desire to redress societal wrongs.

The student reflections, dialoguing with Sister Anne’s perspective on the partnership, reveal some important considerations for how such community–campus collaborations can enhance partnership practice on several fronts. Fourie (2003) addresses the how micro- and macro-perspectives on



**Figure 9.2** Reciprocal partnership and civic learning feedback loop.

development work in concert to inform theories of participatory development; this approach recognizes that systems operate at the macro level as individual lives unfold at the micro plane. In attending to human concerns at the individual level, Fourie (2003) acknowledges that a people-centered approach “presupposes that development does not only imply the satisfaction of basic needs, but also the right to live a meaningful life” (p. 33). When university students and community stakeholders, including nonprofit leaders and youth, meet to discuss and envision enrichment workshops, they are working together to articulate and implement opportunities to enhance learning and life satisfaction.

It is important to note that at the organizational level, Sister Anne has a 28 year track record in the community, and has deep partnerships with many educational, religious, and civic organizations across the country. The inherent capacity in her leadership is entrepreneurial thinking that is not diverted by challenges, but instead sees deteriorating plastic siding on a greenhouse as a grant writing opportunity for youth in the community. Sister Anne’s response to the community–campus partnership—while imbued throughout with deep gratitude and appreciation—underscores an important point: The work of her organization will continue without the involvement of the University of Mississippi. She acknowledges that the partnership offers an opportunity to enhance and deepen her work, but the baseline capacity of her organization and its other partnerships guards against an unhealthy distribution of power in the partnership (Enos & Morton, 2003).

Even with this baseline organizational capacity, Sister Anne is clear in her desire for additional involvement from the University of Mississippi. Her organization offers programming during winter and summer break, which fills an important enrichment gap for students when school is out. However, these dates tend to clash with the 9 month academic calendar of higher education, and that dissonance echoes the one of the logistical challenges of short-term service-learning. While Student Engagement Fellows make a yearlong commitment, which Martin, SeBlonka, and Tryon (2009) identify as a promising practice, two semesters of involvement does not guarantee that students will be available to engage with the community partner over winter or summer break.

## LIMITATIONS

As a qualitative study, the findings herein may not be generalizable to a broader setting. They do, however, illuminate the impact on student civic learning and community programming in a rural context. Also of note is that is that the Student Engagement Fellows program began as a pilot and

the structure and content evolved each year, thus complicating the ability to compare student learning outcomes each year. Finally, the community perspective in this study is limited to the one community partner who worked most closely with the Student Engagement Fellows program over the course of 3 years. While this interview was used to support findings from the student reflections, it should be noted that the heterogeneity of community is such that there are multiple voices to consider in identifying a community's interests (Dempsey, 2010). While Sister Anne convened youth and adults to meet with university representatives and set the shared agenda for the collaboration, she is but one leader in Cartersville working to improve quality of life in the community.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The findings from this study contain several implications to enhance both student civic learning and the practice of cultivating reciprocal community partnerships. Centers for engagement have an important opportunity to structure programming in a way that enhances student civic learning and deepens partnership practice. This includes a focus on place-based strategies, ensuring continuity with community partners, including accountability mechanisms in cocurricular programming, encouraging reflection around systemic causes of injustice, and attending to the baseline capacity of community partner organizations.

The Student Engagement Fellows expressed a clear desire to serve as role models, particularly the low-income, first generation students of color who identified strongly with the youth in Cartersville. Goertzen, Greenleaf, and Dougherty (2016) identified an outcome in their study of community-campus partnerships that speaks to the power of community-campus collaboration involving community youth. They write that “many of the projects relevant to this outcome [kids/family] were impactful simply because kids were given an opportunity to interact with the college students” (Goertzen et al., 2016, p. 46). This finding reinforces Sister Anne's notion that a little care and concern can make a big difference in people's lives, and that the interventions in this instance can be amplified by the presence of students from Mississippi as accessible role models. This suggests the power of place-based strategies and interventions that, due to relative proximity, can be sustained over time. This can be of particular importance in the case of large public universities that draw heavily from a local or in-state population: university students can plant the seeds of higher education in underserved communities, and this can open up access to new cohorts of first generation students.

Centers for engagement can address another sustainability concern which is that of the ebb and flow of involvement in student organizations. While some student organizations have sought involvement with the Student Engagement Fellows program each year, the McLean Institute worked to deepen those relationships by providing continuity with the community partner and offering a framework for practice. The greenhouse and community garden are the best examples of how a center for engagement can keep momentum going in between semesters and academic years so the seeds that sprout in a greenhouse can be planted in a steadily expanding community garden.

The Student Engagement Fellows program has two features designed to enhance the quality of engagement. The first is the integration of assigned readings to frame community engagement as a concept and to prepare students for community entry. These assigned readings surfaced repeatedly in the student reflections about their involvement with the program and in the community. The second is the provision of scholarship funds, which takes the place of a grade as an accountability measure. The scholarship serves as an incentive to fulfill program requirements, and each installment is paid at the conclusion of the fall and spring semesters. Additionally, the Student Engagement Fellows demonstrated an openness to reflecting on their engagement efforts and theorizing about their practice, and this learning can be enhanced by having support from an engagement unit on campus.

While the student reflections clearly demonstrate that students acquired the skills to manage community-based projects, they stopped short of deliberating about and seeking to influence public policy issues, additional civic skill areas identified by Kirlin (2002). This suggests opportunities to introduce a more explicit focus on public policy issues pertaining to poverty and social mobility in future iterations of the program. Similarly, civic learning about knowledge was the one area that the Student Engagement Fellows did not address in their reflections; this domain pertains to the social construction of knowledge, key arguments about democracy, and familiarity with key social movements (Musil, 2009). While this domain was not specifically addressed in the reflection prompts, it suggests an area for further program development in future years.

Finally, moreover, campus-based stakeholders should attend to the reality that community partners desire yearlong engagement, and would be wise to ensure that the capacity for sustained community involvement exists when students are away from campus. The other critical component of capacity to consider is that of the community partner: Organizations like Sister Anne's, which do not rely on university volunteers to sustain basic operations, are less likely to develop power asymmetries. This baseline level of capacity and how that informs the desired partnership are important characteristics to diagnose at the outset of a partnership (Bringle & Hatcher, 2002).

## CONCLUSION

This study contributes to previous research in student civic learning by demonstrating student civic development in a cocurricular service-learning program, as well as supporting the use of qualitative methods to deepen this inquiry. Participants in the Student Engagement Fellows program demonstrated civic learning and reflection around a motivation to learn and lead, the opportunity to develop sustainable models of community involvement, examination of self in connection with others, and the sense that community-based learning can be a site of personal and systemic transformation. Moving beyond individual civic growth and development, the impact of cocurricular service-learning programs such as Student Engagement Fellows can reverberate throughout a campus and partner communities by engaging “faculty, students, and community [as] mutual learners in the process of discovering solutions to persistent public problems” (Roberts, 2011, p. 462). This approach resonates with the social change model of leadership development (Komives, 2011), which integrates individual values, group values, and society/community values in service of social justice.

Citing the work of Battistoni (1997), Doolittle and Faul (2013) define a civic outcome as a learning outcome in which “individuals learn how to become partners in their communities, working with others to solve community problems” (p. 2). When university students have the opportunity to participate in reciprocal community-campus partnerships, they develop a common understanding of civic engagement and social life, learn new leadership skills, and join the local community in making inclusive decisions. In this context, community service acts as a key step towards deepening community engagement and strengthening the local infrastructure in diverse places like the Mississippi Delta.

The reflections demonstrate that as students explore and reflect on the self, communities and cultures, skills, values, and public action, students can begin to identify as members of both the campus and broader community, suggesting that future research might probe the integration of these identities at large campuses situated in similarly sized population centers. The Student Engagement Fellows program also provides an example of how a community-campus partnership can nurture the development of individual development (civic learning in college students and extracurricular enrichment for K–12 youth), support the ability of an institution of higher learning to fulfill its public mission, and enhance the capacity of a community-based organization to expand its programming.

A final area of future research could delve into how students of color engaged in cocurricular service-learning might play a role in disrupting the “pedagogy of whiteness” described by Mitchell et al. (2012). These research



findings show how this teaching role came naturally to some Student Engagement Fellows as they guided their peers through engagement programs in a predominantly African American community. Future research might investigate how best to facilitate the peer educator role in a way that supports the student educator's civic, identity, and leadership development along with that of her peers.

This research project demonstrates how a reciprocal partnership can set the stage for civic learning that broadens identity development to embrace community concerns and inspires sustained action to promote the public good. The Student Engagement Fellows who participated in this project demonstrated great pride in the projects they helped to create, and in engaging their peers and community youth in the process. The power of the community–university partnership lies in the commitment of community members to initiate local action projects to redirect their futures, and the alignment with students who seek to act as change agents. When community–campus partnerships are deepened by a consistent practice of student civic learning, the community development process of empowering student action with community partners makes the shared goal of fighting poverty become a reality.

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