

University of Dayton's Fitz Center: Leadership in Building Community

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Abstract

The University of Dayton's Raymond L. Fitz, S. M., Center for Leadership in Community has a long history that is emblematic of its mission to "initiate and sustain partnerships with urban neighborhoods and larger communities by working at comprehensive community building and providing a context for connected learning and scholarship" (Raymond L. Fitz, S. M., Center for Leadership in Community 2005). As the centralized unit for the University of Dayton's civic engagement efforts, the Fitz Center demonstrates the necessary and sufficient qualities that has made it an exemplary model of Campus Compact's Mechanism and Resources indicators at a comprehensive, urban university.

"It is when the activities of our colleges and universities are aligned with the highest priority needs of society that we will have the greatest positive impact" (Kent 1998).

Campus Compact's Indicators of Engagement Project (2002) developed multiple themes and indicators to help colleges and universities evaluate effective civic engagement at their institutions, assessing both organizational strengths and weaknesses. This paper illustrates an exemplary model for civic practice at the University of Dayton in Dayton, Ohio. I examine the University of Dayton's Raymond L. Fitz, S. M. Center for Leadership in Community (Fitz Center) in connection to Campus Compact's theme of Mechanisms and Resources and the related indicators: (a) enabling mechanism; (b) internal resource allocation; (c) integrated and complementary service activities; and (d) student voice (Campus Compact Indicators of Engagement n.d.). These indicators are of particular importance in that they identify several necessary and sufficient qualities to sustain civic practice effectively at a college or university. As noted in the description of Mechanisms and Resources, successful civic engagement "depends not only on institutional culture and faculty self-understanding; it also depends—rather directly—on the concrete and specific resources the university is willing to commit to civic engagement" (Campus Compact Indicators of Engagement n.d.).

The University of Dayton does not shy away from a commitment of resources to civic engagement. One of the ten largest Catholic universities in the nation and Ohio's largest private university, the University of Dayton maintains a tradition of community service, which is embedded in its mission: "a comprehensive Catholic university, a diverse community committed, in the Marianist tradition, to educating the whole person and to linking learning and scholarship with leadership and service" (University

of Dayton n.d.). Their commitment is transparent in its dedicated Mechanisms and Resources that support a sophisticated and advanced practice of civic engagement.

Enabling Mechanism

The University of Dayton developed a centralized organization on campus—the Fitz Center—that demonstrates the Campus Compact indicator of an enabling mechanism, which is the “form of [a] visible and easily accessible structure (i.e., centers, offices) on campus to assist faculty with community-based teaching and to broker community partnerships” (Campus Compact Indicators of Engagement n.d.). At the University of Dayton, the Fitz Center makes operational the link between scholarship and service for the university, engaging faculty and students in community building initiatives. The center has coordinated civic engagement for over 20 years. The operation grew out of a 1974 initiative called Strategies for Responsible Development. A series of amalgamations led to the formation in 1997 of the Institute for Neighborhood and Community Leadership, and in 2001 this formalized institute became the Center for Leadership in Community. During this period of development, the university formed collaborative relationships and alliances with Dayton neighborhoods, community members, and non-profit and government organizations and associations, efforts that enriched the quality of life for thousands of citizens within Dayton. In 2002, the center was renamed in honor of Brother Raymond Fitz, upon his retirement from the university. Brother Ray served as president for 23 years and dedicated substantial time to developing relationships in the Dayton community that enabled the University of Dayton to successfully carry out its mission of leadership and service.

The Fitz Center’s 20-year history is that of a model enabling mechanism that has successfully sustained its mission: “to initiate and sustain partnerships with urban neighborhoods and larger communities by working at comprehensive community building and providing a context for connected learning and scholarship” (Raymond L. Fitz, S. M., Center for Leadership in Community n.d.). This mission reflects the university’s commitment to leadership and service and has provided a central purpose for the center that has led to a sustainable model. The success of the model is correlated with the length of its existence. In other words, the Fitz Center has become a learning organization, having developed the internal agency and capacity to secure its own future at the university (Senge 1990). The learning has come from its engagement with the neighborhoods, resulting in the creation of internal expertise that understands Dayton’s contextual landscape. Administrators and faculty acquire a deepened understanding of the needs of their community through experiential learning, often lacking the real-world knowledge necessary to address the issues (Wergin and Braskamp 1998). Furthermore, the Fitz Center has established trustworthy relationships with partners that contribute to the effective delivery of its mission. Together, the campus and community create a systemic structure in which the key relationships influence the behavior of the campus and the community. The system of reciprocal influence creates necessary sustainability of the university’s civic engagement and signs of productive social progress. The Fitz Center’s developmental

progress since its inception suggests a level of commitment by the university that supports much of the leading literature on civic engagement that calls for a return to a civic mission and criticizes institutions for their disengagement (Bok 1982; Boyer 1996; Checkoway 2000; Ehrlich 2000; Hearn and Holdsworth 2002; Neave 2000; Wagner 1993). In contrast to the criticism, the University of Dayton's establishment of the Fitz Center, a visible center for community building, has strengthened relations with their community, and which has resulted in effective campus-community partnerships that best serve the university's community of learners and the city of Dayton. Their civic engagement activities have developed civic skills in students, inspired engaged citizenship, and promoted a civil society. Exemplifying a scholarship of engagement (Boyer 1996; Bringle, Games, Ludlum, Osgood, and Osborne 2000; Rice 1996), they have prioritized teaching civic values and student citizenship (Hollander and Saltmarsh 2000; Zlotkowski 1996).

Internal Resource Allocation

Campus Compact defines the indicator of internal resource allocation as a necessary quality for "establishing, enhancing, and deepening community-based work on campus for faculty, students, and programs that involve community partners" (Campus Compact Indicators of Engagement n.d.). The Fitz Center meets this indicator by having developed the financial base and the human resources that contribute to enhanced civic engagement. The center leadership has secured a diverse funding base, including substantial financial support from the central university's operating budget. This resource allocation is critical, providing the center with the financial resources to focus on mission-critical projects. The director of the Fitz Center, Dick Ferguson, recognizes that a university needs to provide approximately 50–60 percent of a university-based center's budget in order for a center to sustain its mission; otherwise mechanisms like the Fitz Center that are not funded at this level by their host institutions often become overly influenced by alternative funding sources that can lead them in directions that are not aligned with their mission. The Fitz Center's formula for funding comes from multiple sources: 40 percent from the university general fund; 20 percent from endowment and annual gifts; and 40 percent from grants and contracts. The center thus receives the necessary 60 percent of its funding from the university.

The center achieved this formula for sustainability by strategically positioning itself as a valuable and powerful resource for the University of Dayton. Key decision-makers at the university are familiar with the work of the center and its alignment with the university mission, making it possible for students to take advantage of the opportunities for leadership and service the center offers. These internal decision-makers include deans, vice presidents, the president, and the board of trustees. Their belief in the mission of the Fitz Center helps ensure that the funding formula remains stable. The university's dedicated funding enables the center to coordinate numerous programs annually that deepen community-based work, including VISTA AmeriCorps Volunteers, Semester of Service Program, Community-Based Service Learning, Dayton Civic Scholars, Family and Children First Research Division, Community

Summit on Eliminating Racism, Anytown Youth Leadership Program, Kids Voting, Citylinks Neighborhood Conference, National Issues Forum, Rubicon House, Predatory Lending Alternative Program, and Leadership in Building Communities Seminar. These programs directly engage faculty and students in civic learning, providing opportunities for community-based research. In addition, the Fitz Center's role at the university becomes increasingly important as it proves to be a mechanism that strengthens scholarship and builds community. The many positive outcomes produced through their coordinated efforts consequently enhance the identity of the University of Dayton, increasing community respect, trust, and appeal for the university as a whole.

Integrated and Complementary Community Service Activities

Campus Compact's third indicator for Mechanisms and Resources is integrated and complementary community service activities. This indicator is defined as "weav[ing] together student service, service learning, and other community engagement activities on campus" (Campus Compact Indicators of Engagement n.d.). As the governing body on campus for civic practices, the Fitz Center effectively and successfully achieves this outcome. While unique in its focus on the external community in comparison with more traditional university departments, the Fitz Center is not an isolated division on campus. In fact, the Fitz Center is clearly aligned with academic affairs to ensure community-based teaching and service-learning. The academic affiliation is evidenced by the center's official location within the University of Dayton's College of Arts and Sciences. More than an affiliation of convenience, the location within the Colleges of Arts and Sciences results in a direct influence on undergraduate education at the university, positioning the city of Dayton as a laboratory for student learning. In addition to providing opportunities for students that weave together learning, service, and research, the Fitz Center actively develops programs and partnerships to address community needs. Hence, the integrated learning produces relevant outcomes for the community.

Furthermore, the director of the Fitz Center is afforded faculty status, even though the position is primarily administrative. As a result, the director serves on faculty council and participates in academic dialogue and processes concerning student learning. This linkage reinforces that the Fitz Center is operational within the academic system at the university. In addition to the director informing faculty council, the center reports with senior leadership at the university and shares progress in newsletters distributed on campus. Their communication strategy informs the university's broader internal community, demonstrating the positive impact on both the students and the Dayton community. For instance, the center can share the success of an integrated and complementary community service project such as Rubicon House. The Rubicon House project is a community-development initiative aimed at revitalizing a specific neighborhood in Dayton. The project mobilizes faculty, staff, and students, along with local businesses, schools, and neighborhood associations to facilitate the project goal

which is to initiate and sustain community-building activities and organize social capital in an effort to address difficult issues. The project created a neighborhood center, Rubicon House, which serves as a place for people to come together to talk about ways to build a healthy community.

For the past three years, the Rubicon House project has acted as a catalyst for various community initiatives. In the fall of 2000, twenty-two University of Dayton professors, in partnership with dozens of community members, led 19 courses that provided experiential learning opportunities in Rubicon Park for hundreds of students. Their collaboration resulted in a strategic analysis of the business district based on survey research that focused on priority concerns of residents, education of school children and their families about lead paint, a record of oral histories made by long-time residents, classroom experience for future teachers, tutoring, and a strategic analysis of tourism prospects in Rubicon Park (Raymond L. Fitz, S. M., Center for Leadership in Community n.d.). This project intentionally and productively aligns campus activities with community needs, illustrating a successful example of involving multiple perspectives and participants from campus and community in collaborative processes.

Student Voice

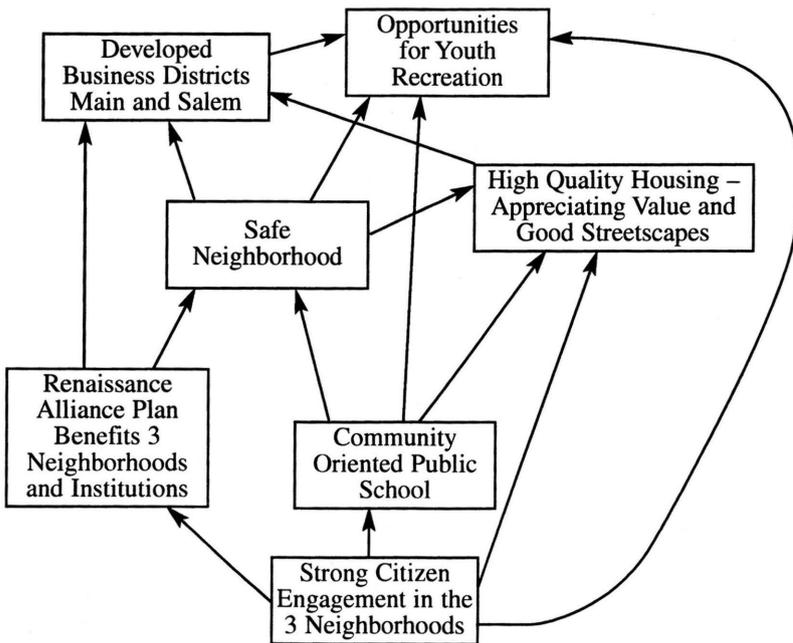
Like Rubicon House, the majority of projects orchestrated by the Fitz Center involve students directly, making them central partners in the community-building process. Hence, the Fitz Center is superb in achieving Campus Compact's indicator of student voice. This indicator recognizes that students are "key partners in their own education and civic development and [the university] support[s] their effort to act on issues important to themselves and their peers" (Campus Compact Indicators of Engagement n.d.). The Fitz Center's Leadership in Building Communities Seminar exemplifies the role of students in their learning. The seminar, which recently celebrated its tenth anniversary, uses a form of action research to engage students in participatory citizenship. The experience creates a rich learning environment for students and faculty, as well as deepens the relationship between campus and community by facilitating an exchange that directly benefits stakeholders in the community.

Students are engaged in classroom preparation on community building and strategies for working with communities in efforts to create vision and outcomes. In addition, they perform extensive field research in the neighborhoods, mapping assets and barriers in the neighborhoods and working with community members in a visioning process. The students, while coached in the classroom by the faculty, take on the responsibility of making decisions on their own that directly influence the direction of their learning experience. In addition to exercising their own voice and involvement in the research process and collection, the students work closely with community members, listening to the people whose communities are being served. As a result, they better understand the individual and organizational assets of the neighborhoods, and, together with the residents, structure actions that build on these assets.

Scholars have noted that few national efforts really focus on building relationships with community partners specifically on projects that increase the civic capacity of those community organizations and the individuals they serve (O’Meara and Kilmer 1999). In contrast, the Leadership in Building Community initiative directly increases the civic capacity of the community, extending the reach and power of their voice in the process and the outcome.

The fall 2004 Leadership in Building Communities Seminar revolved around working with three neighborhoods in Dayton to help them develop a shared vision. Over the course of the semester, students met with neighborhood residents and facilitated a visioning process. The Fitz Center approached the project with the intention of making the conditions right for good things to happen. The students lead the process, facilitating forums to encourage public dialogue. Through the forums, they helped the residents of the three neighborhoods develop a shared vision that included the following outcomes:

Outcome Relationships
Five Oaks, Grafton Hill, & Riverdale



A community-oriented public school was positioned in the center, making it pivotal to the success of the other outcomes, and also as a strategy to convince the local public school system to consider the possibility of building a community school that would serve the 1,200 elementary-school-aged children from the three neighborhoods. Remarkably, the work of the students and community members resulted in a school being slated for these neighborhoods by the Dayton Public Schools. After the students

presented the shared vision to the broader community, the president of a hospital in the neighborhood acknowledged the need for a school and volunteered to work with a group of neighborhood residents on approaching the school system. A few weeks later, Dayton Public Schools announced sites for neighborhood community schools that included a possible school to serve the three neighborhoods from the Leadership in Building Communities Seminar. The seminar provided an opportunity for student and community voices to emerge, and, consequently, the core outcome of the vision was realized.

The Leadership in Building Communities Seminar, like the majority of Fitz Center programs, exemplifies community-based teaching, research, and learning. The Fitz Center's success has been its ability to develop programs that create learning opportunities that produce positive changes that are accountable to the needs of community partners. Furthermore, their programs reflect a sustained commitment to helping improve society through dedicated leadership and service in community building.

Conclusion

Civic engagement is a leadership movement as much as a social, ideological, political, and professional movement, involving distinguished leaders. The leaders profess the transformation of society through education with a goal of creating a positive and long-lasting impact. In the case of the University of Dayton, the institution is a distinguished leader in the civic engagement movement, unique in its commitment to maintaining a campus that “reinvigorates the public purpose and civic mission of higher education” (Hollander and Saltmarsh 2000, 29). The university sustains this commitment through a purposeful allocation of resources, making it possible for the Fitz Center to effectively fulfill its mission to the numerous internal and external learning communities. The Fitz Center serves as the centralized, coordinating body, connected to the external community in a strategic manner to facilitate processes that result in building community and producing positive social change. The center creates conditions for change by utilizing its knowledge and expertise in community building, as well as leveraging its connections to civic leaders in the Dayton metropolitan area. More than a collection of committed faculty and administrators pursuing civic projects, the Fitz Center models an organization that is embedded in the overall operation of a university - an essential requirement for sustainability. When civic engagement becomes a purposeful core value exemplified by action, a university can have a meaningful and long-lasting impact on society. The University of Dayton reflects the qualities of an engaged university (Hollander and Saltmarsh 2000). It is not just located within a community—it is intimately connected to the public purposes and aspirations of a community.

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