

# A Service-Learning Partnership Between Cal State LA and the Los Angeles County Probation Department: Making the Case for Civic Professionalism

Akhila L. Ananth, Michael Willard, Denise C. Herz

## Abstract

This article provides an overview of the structure and implementation of the Probation Service Learning Program at Cal State LA. We use post-term evaluation reflections completed by students and probation directors to offer insight into the broader application of service-learning programs in criminal justice-related agencies. The findings presented demonstrate that the Probation Service Learning Program at Cal State LA was partially successful. Students showed evidence of connecting civic and personal outcomes as well as personal and academic outcomes; however, the connection was less substantial for academic and civic outcomes. This study underscores the importance of fostering partnerships between academic departments and professional practitioners to build strong curricula, facilitate student transitions into the workplace, and contribute to the broader public good. Additionally, it offers “lessons learned” and recommendations for improving the use of service-learning to achieve a fuller appreciation of civic professionalism for students as they choose their career paths.

*Keywords: service-learning, probation, criminal justice, student research, Los Angeles, civic professionalism*



The use of service-learning has steadily grown at American colleges and universities since the methodology emerged from the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s. More recently, service-learning has gained in popularity as a high impact practice (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005) that supports career development (Baetz, McEvoy, Adamson, & Loomis, 2012; Ellerton et al., 2014) and student success (Duggan, 2015; Furco, 2007; Kuh, Kinzie, Cruce, Shoup, & Gonyea, 2007; Lockeman & Pelco, 2013; Simonet, 2008; Zlotkowski, 2002). Employment rates in 2015 for young adults, though rising, remain lower than in 2008 or 2000 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015), indicating that the post-graduate employment market is more competitive than it has been in decades. In contrast to classroom-based curricula and

conventional internships, service-learning can ease students' transitions from university training to the professional workplace while enhancing civic-mindedness (Steinberg, Hatcher, & Bringle, 2011) and commitment to a profession's public impact (Boyte, 2013).

Scholars have long called for educators to incorporate civic learning in institutions of higher learning. In the social sciences, this has typically involved cultivating student competencies in participatory action research (Brammer et al., 2012), in which students gain skills in listening, critical thinking, negotiation, effective communication around difference (Flanagan & Levine, 2010; Jansen, Chioncel, & Dekkers, 2006; Morse, 1998), conducting research, and presentational and networking skills (Dudley, Robison, & Taylor, 1999; Flanagan

& Levine, 2010; Redlawsk & Rice 2009). However, professional experience alone without weekly reflections and faculty-led coursework, such as a traditional internship where students shadow a supervisor in the field and report to faculty only at the end of a term, can inadvertently encourage students to frame difference through stereotypes and generalize about complex social problems (Clayton & Ash, 2009). By contrast, in service-learning, classroom-based research skills are combined with reflection-based analysis and faculty guidance to produce more meaningful outcomes for the student, university, and community at large.

As part of a broader trend toward engaged student learning, the School of Criminal Justice & Criminalistics at California State University, Los Angeles (Cal State LA) partnered with the Los Angeles County Probation Department to create the Probation Service Learning Program in the academic year 2014–2015. The Probation Service Learning Program was developed to create a more direct pipeline for Cal State LA students to gain employment with the Los Angeles County Probation Department. Students were provided the opportunity to connect academic knowledge with direct experience in a criminal justice agency and to engage with the civic impact of the work. Likewise, the program offered the Los Angeles County Probation Department the opportunity to carry out small-scale, student-led evaluations of Probation Department programming and to “recruit” a skilled set of applicants to the department. Because this program appears to be the first of its kind with Probation, it also brings the broader Cal State LA campus increased publicity and access to professional networks. Thus, the program incorporated elements mutually beneficial to the School, participating students, the Probation Department, and the larger Los Angeles community.

In this article, we provide an overview of the structure and implementation of the Probation Service Learning Program at Cal State LA and summarize the results from postterm evaluation reflections completed by directors and students. Finally, we offer some insight into the broader application of service-learning programs in criminal justice-related agencies and organizations and discuss ways to further develop criminal justice service-learning instruction in order to achieve civic professionalism.

## Civic Professionalism and Service-Learning

Scholars in many fields have turned to the “civic meaning of professions” (Yusop & Correia, 2012) that disciplinary degrees prepare and train students for (Day, 2005; Dzur, 2004; Harrington & Beddoe, 2014; Kimball, 1996; Peters, 2004; Rinehart, 2010; Sullivan, 1995; Sullivan, 2004; Sullivan & Benner, 2005). Many professions contribute to the greater good of civil society, but as professionals are socialized within the day-to-day routine of the workplace, this larger contribution can be overlooked. Similarly, students often see their education and degrees solely in terms of preparing them for a profession. Service-learning projects that overtly demonstrate professionals’ contributions to society and the public good arguably help revive a more explicit civic understanding—and hence the “meaning” and value—of a criminal justice profession for students.

The experiences of students in the Probation Service Learning Program demonstrated the value and potential for the development of civic professionalism within a course curriculum. Civic professionalism aligns with the mission of a regional comprehensive university like Cal State LA, which has a strong emphasis on applied research across preprofessional degree programs, particularly in the area of health and human services. In particular, civic professionalism aligns with the mission of the Rongxiang Xu College of Health and Human Services, and it aligns with Cal State LA students’ desire for more hands-on learning opportunities, a common theme heard in focus groups held with students across the university.

The Cal State LA Probation Service Learning Program is an opportunity to adapt what scholars refer to as *civic professionalism* (Boyte 2013), defined as a conscious awareness of how one’s work or career directly benefits clients, stakeholders, and communities, often including reciprocal, participatory deliberation and work with community stakeholders. It is this sense of “work filled with public purpose” (Boyte, 2013) that we believe differentiates the students’ work in the Los Angeles County Probation Department from more conventional internships. As we met with Probation Department directors to discuss and identify the “service” and “work” that students would do, we needed new models that moved beyond observing or shadowing.

To meet the definition of service-learning, student projects emphasized the Probation Department as a workplace that interfaces with a wide cross section of the general public and as an institution of civil society.

The structure of the Probation Service Learning Program emerged from an engagement with the terms of service-learning as practiced at Cal State LA. In its application, service-learning in criminal justice can vary widely (Davis, 2015). Well-cited research in the field defines service-learning as

a course-based, credit bearing educational experience in which students (a) participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs, and (b) reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of personal values and civic responsibility. (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995, p. 112)

At Cal State LA, the formal definition of service-learning provides guiding principles for efforts across the campus:

Consistent with the special mission to provide educational experiences that recognize diversity while emphasizing the knowledge, experience, and ethical concerns common to all people, service learning:

- is a teaching and learning strategy that provides students with organized and meaningful learning experience outside the classroom designed to enhance their understanding of information, knowledge and theoretical principles shared in the classroom;
- is a pedagogical model that links course content with a community service component that is designed to address the needs identified by the community whether local or global; and
- has, as an integral component, the use of reflective activities intended to integrate course content and skills and knowledge with community involvement and to develop or strengthen students'

commitment to social responsibility and civic engagement. (*Cal State LA Faculty Handbook*, 2018, "Service Learning Definition")

Additionally, service-learning in the School of Criminal Justice and Criminalistics is required to meet three core standards established by a departmental committee. It should be

1. *Project-based.* Students are placed in an agency or organization to help develop and execute a project (e.g., carrying out research to find out important information or developing informational materials for organization).

2. *Faculty-led.* Faculty members oversee student projects, tracking their progress through weekly written reflections and regular check-ins (through e-mail or in person). In this way, the faculty member mediates the relationship between student work and the agency/organization.

3. *Community-oriented.* Student projects must benefit the organization/agency's work and connect to the betterment of the Los Angeles community at large.

In sum, service-learning in the School of Criminal Justice and Criminalistics equally emphasizes providing meaningful service and curriculum-relevant learning. Additionally, the focal projects in these courses are intended to mutually benefit the student and the partner agency.

### Overview of the Probation Service Learning Program

The Probation Service Learning Program was launched in fall quarter 2014 and continued into spring and fall of 2015, 2016, and 2017. Students were selected using a competitive process modeled after the County hiring process for Probation positions. To solicit interest, an informational session was held 4 to 6 months prior to the start of the quarter, with applications due within 2 weeks after the session. Applicants were primarily criminal justice majors; however, many criminal justice minors also applied. The applicants were required to complete

the Probation exam and background checks used by the County for potential volunteers. Beginning in spring 2015, students were additionally required to submit answers to two short-essay questions to ensure their commitment and writing skills.

In total, 11 students in fall 2014, 10 students in spring 2015, eight students in fall 2015, 12 students in spring 2016, and nine students in fall 2016 were ultimately accepted for participation in the Probation Service Learning Program. Once selected, each student was assigned by Probation to a director. Students attended Probation's general volunteer/intern orientation and toured Probation-run facilities, including Central Juvenile Hall and various juvenile camps. Additionally, Probation directors attended a 3- to 6-hour training with Cal State LA faculty, who reviewed the tenets of service-learning and the expectations for their participation in the program. Following the initial meeting with directors, both students and directors attended a training to meet one another and develop projects guided by feedback from the faculty instructor. Importantly, directors received continuing education credits for their participation in the trainings, allowing them to fulfil state requirements for probation officers while preparing for the program.

In their meetings, students and directors developed projects that foregrounded community need and provided students with the opportunity to explore "a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of personal values and civic responsibility" (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995, p. 112). In practical terms, projects were expected to apply the criminal justice concepts and theories the students learned in their coursework for the major, as well as generate evidence that could improve services for Probation Department clients. For example, one group of students conducted lobby surveys at a district office and learned that clients wanted a bulletin board, rather than a web page, for information about services and resources in the community. Focusing students' research on improving services could be understood within the typical institutional-bureaucratic procedures of program review, evaluation, and assessment. However, through one-on-one conversations, class discussions, and online conversations in the learning management platform (Moodle), faculty and directors

in the Probation Service Learning Program guided students to consider how research for quality improvement ultimately served the greater good for clients and their communities. In sum, students were engaged in a process of experiential learning that was intended to combine both career development and civic learning.

Participating students were required to spend a minimum of 8 hours each week in their placement, including a mandatory weekly meeting with their director to discuss the student assignments, experiences, observations, and course project progress. (This requirement was set at 10 hours in fall 2014, but was reduced in spring 2015 so students could complete all their required hours in 1 day.) Additionally, the supervising faculty member organized periodic course meetings throughout the term. The first meeting, about halfway through the term, was used as a midpoint check-in with directors and students. Students also attended additional course meetings with the overseeing faculty member, particularly to prepare for the final presentations and papers. At the end of the term, students and directors copresented their projects to all the students, directors, and faculty members at a day-long meeting. Beginning in spring 2016, students were also required to submit a summary of their research project and findings.

## Methods

A cornerstone of the Probation Service Learning Program has been the centrality of critical reflection activities. On a weekly basis, students and directors posted written reflections in forums on the course's webpage in response to questions about their experiences and observations. Directors were assigned Cal State LA handles and e-mail addresses, which enabled them to participate in online discussions. In spring 2015, reflections assignments included questions for the student to ask their director during weekly meetings; in this way, all the students in the course benefited from all the involved directors' perspectives in a virtual discussion space. Students were also required to respond to others' reflections, resulting in a productive online dialogue.

Based on Ash and Clayton's (2004) framework, we developed reflection activities that prompted students to analyze their service-

learning activities and experiences through academic, personal, and civic lenses:

When engaged in academic analysis, students examine their experiences in light of specific course concepts, exploring similarities and differences between theory and practice. In analysis from the personal perspective, students consider their feelings, assumptions, strengths, weaknesses, traits, skills, and sense of identity as they are surfaced and sometimes challenged by service-learning experiences. And when examining their service-learning related activities from the civic perspective, students explore decisions made and actions taken in light of consequences for the common good, consider alternative approaches and interpretations, identify elements of power and privilege, and analyze options for short-term versus long-term and sustainable change agency. (Ash and Clayton, 2004, pp. 140-42)

We wanted students to explore the connections between the academic, personal, and civic perspectives. Accordingly, student learning outcomes for this course were categorized into three overlapping themes: civic and personal outcomes, academic and civic outcomes, and personal and academic outcomes. In the following sections, we review student perceptions of progress in these three categories. With regard to civic learning outcomes, questions were designed to guide students to consider how their experiences working in the Probation Department related to greater knowledge about and commitment to the civic purpose of improving client outcomes. The intent was for students to make connections between their personal interest in a career in criminal justice (and their service-learning work in the Probation Department) and their expertise as criminal justice majors and to consider how each provides them with the commitment and skills to contribute to the public good.

## Findings

### Student Reflections

*Civic and personal outcomes.* The civic and personal outcomes identified for the

Probation Service Learning Program focused on the project's ability to (1) improve students' understanding of criminal justice practice and its mission of public safety and (2) impact students' personal understanding of what it means to work in Probation. To this end, students were asked to characterize the role of Probation in the criminal justice system and discuss whether their perception of this role had changed over the course of their participation.

Without exception, students' responses showed an increased awareness of what Probation does as an agency and the contribution Probation makes to the overall criminal justice system, and several students noted their inaccurate perception of Probation prior to the course. "[This experience] helped me understand what Probation is—I previously thought it was more limited but know its purpose is to rehabilitate and hold offenders accountable," noted one student. Another student wrote, "My thoughts on probation are different now that [I] worked with them. I saw that Probation is making an effort to help these kids out and not just lock them up." Whether from neutral or negative perceptions, these responses demonstrate changes in students' understandings of Probation's work. With regard to development of civic competencies, in the second comment the student's emphasis on "help[ing] these kids out" expresses an emergent awareness of having a personal ethic of care as part of one's professional practice. It also suggests the beginnings of a recognition of the importance of a Probation professional's interactions and communications with a client. As such it is instructive for faculty and Probation directors' future efforts to redesign the course.

For some students, their understanding of and affinity for a career in Probation was reinforced and/or grew during this experience. One student wrote, "The Probation Service Learning experience has helped me see the reason why I decided to choose this field. It reawakened my passion and desire to make a difference in at least one person's life." Another student wrote, "Probation Service Learning helped me realize probation work is interesting and challenging. . . . Having personal experience communicating and interacting with juveniles made me determined to apply to probation work." Those who still were unsure about applying to Probation expressed having a clearer vision of their

career trajectory after the course. “Before the Probation Service Learning Program,” a student wrote, “I had no idea how I would start my career upon completion of my bachelor’s degree. It has been one of the best decisions in my life.” Another student noted, “I gained valuable insight by shadowing multiple probation employees and have a better understanding of the different job functions each have.”

Throughout these examples students return to the importance of communication with clients. This underscores their recognition of the value and significance that the interpersonal dimensions of criminal justice professional practice can have for the Probation clients as they try to improve their lives. Such recognition of the importance of communication reflects personal growth with regard to their professional pathway and offers valuable evidence for faculty and directors to develop more explicit emphasis on these nascent elements of civic professionalism. We will return to the issues of care and communication as a part of the development of students’ sense of civic professionalism in the “Lessons Learned” section below.

**Academic and civic outcomes.** The Probation Service Learning Program also focused on the intersection of academic and civic outcomes, which required students to reflect on the relationship between academic knowledge and criminal justice practice, and, in turn, the impact of this intersection on public good for communities.

With regard to academic and civic outcomes, we have mixed findings about students’ connections between academic coursework, professional practice, and the public good after completing the Probation Service Learning course. Overall, student reflections focused more explicitly on the relationship between academic knowledge and professional practice and less on how academic knowledge and professional practice related to the public good. We note this in our discussion of representative examples from student reflections in this section, and we address it in “Lessons Learned” below. As with students’ civic and personal reflections, there was significant evidence of emergent civic sensibility in their reflections related to academic and civic outcomes.

Some students articulated sophisticated understandings of the connection between the classroom and workforce but were less

explicit about how and why that connection was important for ensuring that diverse members of the public are served equitably. For example, one student wrote,

Academic knowledge is truly the foundation for professional practice. . . . At one point I did not fully understand why courses on theories and criminal justice were necessary, however, once you have an opportunity to interact with clients from all different walks of life and backgrounds, it becomes evident.

The student seems to be moving toward the realization that academic theory prepares one for participation in the workforce in a role where one will encounter diversity and possibly where diversity competencies (e.g., the ability to listen to and acknowledge diverse points of view) and knowledge of inequalities and inequities are important for better serving all members of the public.

A similar recognition is illustrated in a student’s reference to evidence-based practices in the classroom. This student noted, “Practices that are based on empirical research are more likely to produce successful outcomes. . . . During my time at my assigned facility, I would . . . have conversations with staff about evidence based practices and its importance.” Clearly the student demonstrates a competent if not advanced explanation of why empirical research is important when applied in the workplace for quality improvement.

Another student found that academic study helped shape their experiences in the field, commenting,

My academic knowledge gives me a better perspective on the field and helped me understand a lot of what was going on around me. [. . .] During my internship I remember referring back to the things I learned in my research class and my stats class, as well as my child development classes.

These students were able to make direct connections between research and practice in criminal justice, as the course design intended.

What is unclear in these examples is whether or how fully students can explain the ways that improvement of professional

practice through theory and empirical research is successful in terms of the work of the Probation Department in the communities it serves. We believe it would likely be a short step for faculty and Probation directors to guide students to reflect about how quality improvement of services can result in tangible improvements for clients that also ripple out to their families, social networks, and communities.

Not all students, however, saw the linkage between the classroom and the practical application of theory and research. In some cases, students did not think the link was as strong as it should be, commenting that the degree program needed to focus more on probation issues in the classroom and generally provide more service-learning opportunities. One student described,

I think the classroom environment and the actual criminal justice field have little in common, because in the classroom you learn the way things are supposed to be, but in the field, you get to experience it. Sometimes what you learn in the classroom rarely applies, and sometimes the opposite is also true. I had some clue about probation, but nothing like I experienced during my internship.

Another wrote,

[O]nce a student graduates and pursues a career, a lot of what they learned in class becomes irrelevant, a lot of what we learn is forgotten a week after finals. I believe professionalism is taught by experiences outside of the classroom, and we should have more opportunities to practice professionalism in the classroom.

One student commented that the class would have been better if led by a practitioner rather than an academic. He stated, "What I learned in the classroom in no way prepared me for this experience. I think the relationship should be more hands on. I think a professor [*sic*] with a probation background would have been beneficial." Whether framed as a critique of the specific course or the current educational paradigm broadly, for many students the intersection between academic knowledge and criminal justice practice was not readily apparent.

These last few reflections demonstrate how some students conceive of academic knowledge; however, the ways in which these academic knowledge concepts were used and understood in the Probation Service Learning placements appears limited. Although these reflections provide some evidence that students made the connection between academic and civic outcomes through these experiences, these connections were less evident than connections the students made between civic and personal outcomes or personal and academic outcomes.

*Personal and academic outcomes.* A third critical intersection of student learning outcomes for the Probation Service Learning course involved the impact of experiences on personal and academic outcomes. From this perspective, students were asked to reflect on how the course, as part of the degree program in criminal justice, impacted their personal goals and career objectives. The majority of the students saw themselves moving into careers that focused on rehabilitating offenders and contributing to public safety. A subsection of students noted that the experience helped them formulate a way to give back to the communities they grew up in. "With the experience I have," one student wrote, "I will be able to obtain a job with probation and continue to give back to my community." Another said she now knows she wants to "be a mentor and role model for those who I can relate to and help guide them positively by sharing my experiences with them." Connecting her upbringing to the course, one student noted,

I currently work as a mentor for high-risk youth in the areas of Compton, Watts, and Inglewood. Many of my students have come up and told me I was a great influence in their lives. Therefore, I feel I would make some change in several youths' lives if I was to become a probation officer.

Students' personal connections to the communities they served helped bridge the academic and civic objectives of the course.

As the course instructors, the authors can attest to the personal transformations Probation Service Learning students experienced from the beginning of the term to the end. The majority of students seemed to emerge from the course with a palpable

new confidence in their experience, writing skills, and professional networks. Of the weekly reflections, one student wrote, “Moodle assignments help us better understand our journey.” Much of the credit for these transformations is owed to the relationships between students and their assigned directors. When asked what they would take away from the course, a student wrote, “I will keep the advice I received from my director, DPOs, and supervisors [and the] great experiences I had with the department. I will also keep the confidence that I could do a research project from scratch.” Another student wrote,

I was able to talk to [my director] about other things besides the project and those conversations helped me grow personally and professionally. . . . Building that bond and having a professional we can contact even after the project is over is an invaluable experience.

Of his assigned director, another student commented,

I loved that I was able to absorb every direction and advice that he provided for me. He truly is an inspiration and has encouraged me to push past my goals. Not only did I gain a professional insight to Probation, but he also taught me how to handle failure and how to bounce back from it.

The course provided students with opportunities to assess the connections between their curriculum, professional practice, community improvement, and their own personal growth.

Students made strong civic connections in terms of how their academic study related to a personal civic commitment to work in a field that allowed them to work in communities like the ones they came from. This strongly correlates with data on Cal State LA students from the Collaborative Institutional Research Project Survey (Higher Education Research Institute, 2016). In surveys administered to first-time, full-time freshmen, the students at Cal State LA rated the personal importance to them of “participating in a community action program,” “helping others who are in difficulty,” and “helping to promote racial understanding” higher than their counterparts at other,

comparable institutions (Higher Education Research Institute, 2016). Cal State LA student results for civic engagement in the CIRP Survey are remarkably consistent with the evidence of civic outcomes in Probation Service Learning students’ reflections, indicating that criminal justice students in the Probation Service Learning Program, which takes place near the end of their baccalaureate careers, had the same personal connections to civic issues that students bring with them to the university. This consistent correlation between Probation Service Learning students and the larger student population at the university underscores the merit of pursuing civic professionalism within their degree programs. It also provides strong evidence for the content focus in future revision to the course and instruction.

### Director Reflections

The directors were extremely positive about their experience in the Probation Service Learning Program, and many expressed an interest in participating in future sessions. Directors spoke highly of their students and of having enjoyed working with them. They often described their students in one or more of the following ways: intelligent, able to grasp things quickly, receptive to new experiences, motivated, and inquisitive. Directors received the additional benefit of fulfilling internal requirements for continuing education and community service.

Directors appreciated the freedom and flexibility offered in the Probation Service Learning Program to align student experiences with Probation operations and offer students a glimpse of Probation from a deputy probation officer’s point of view. The meetings were particularly appreciated; as one director commented, “The meetings provided a way to ‘surgically’ share experiences and mentor students toward a specific goal, making the experience more relevant to the student.”

Based on comments from the directors, the Probation Service Learning appeared to be mutually beneficial to both students and directors/Probation. Directors indicated that the students provided valuable feedback about the practice they were observing. One director wrote, “I feel this program has had an impact on my professional practice. I am more observant of my office and of other operations.” Another said that she gained a new perspective on her operation from her student’s insights shared during weekly



meetings. Some remarked that students re-vitalized their office, offering opportunities for deputy probation officers and other staff to explain their work and act as mentors to students. A director commented, “The fact that I had to be . . . thorough . . . to provide my student with good information and build a strong foundation for her, made me more aware of my role.” Tongue-in-cheek, one director wrote, “I realized it is hard work to mentor a new excited student.” Although civic professionalism was not discussed explicitly with directors, these comments suggest the possibility of consulting them about emphasizing it more when working with students.

Finally, directors were optimistic about the impact on Probation of identifying and recruiting well-matched candidates. One director said he enjoyed hearing how students viewed Probation before and after the class. Another wrote, “It gives me hope that there will be some good employees coming to us in the future.”

### Lessons Learned

As indicated above, both Probation directors and students spoke highly of their experiences and articulated ways in which the experience was positive from their respective positions. Student reflections on their experiences provided evidence that the course impacted students’ ability to think about the public good from the perspective of professional practice in Probation. Perhaps most important, the experiences offered students an opportunity to better understand the role Probation plays in community safety, how Probation operates within the criminal justice system, and the variety of potential career paths both within and outside Probation. Similarly, the directors enjoyed the experience, gaining a greater appreciation of their role as civic professionals and mentors to students interested in following their chosen career pathway.

Overall, findings showed that the Probation Service Learning Program at Cal State LA was successful. As with all experiments in higher education, however, particularly those that involve practitioners in the field, issues arise that require faculty to “return to the drawing board” for continuous course improvement. Below, we discuss ways in which the Probation Service Learning Program can better attain its goals, particu-

larly the goal of civic professionalism. The proposed revisions fall into three categories: (1) defining the purpose of the course, (2) revision of course curriculum, and (3) managing student projects.

### Defining the Purpose of the Course

In hindsight and based on evidence from students’ reflections about their experiences in the program, revising the course to more explicitly relate to a definition of civic professionalism may be beneficial. Peters (2004), for example, defines the “civic dimensions of *educational practice* [emphasis added]” as enabling scholars to “link the work of scholarship—teaching and research—to the public work of democracy—the articulation, deliberation, and negotiation of public interests, ideals, problems, and issues, and the development and exercise of knowledge and power in addressing them” (p. 48). Clearly articulating and explaining the identities of criminal justice professors and Probation directors as “civic professionals” may help students to more fully and explicitly realize the connection and develop civic competencies. In other words, focusing attention on how these professions, by definition, contribute to the betterment of communities and the public good will model and illustrate the pursuit of a civic professional career for students choosing a criminal justice profession. As Peters (2004) explains:

What makes professionalism more or less “civic” is not just the degree to which professionals’ intentions can be shown to be “public-regarding” but the degree to which their practice can be shown to be so as well. To practice one’s profession in a public-regarding way in a full and direct sense, professionals must view themselves as active participants in civic life. (p. 48)

### Revision of Course Curriculum

When moving from curriculum design to teaching the Probation Service Learning class, the assumption was that students would develop greater civic-mindedness by executing a research project related to the improvement of services within the Probation Department, which ultimately serves the public good. Although that was discussed explicitly, it seems that it was not fully learned experientially. Students’

reflections demonstrate that that assumption about improvement of services only made it as far as improvement of services *within* the Probation Department. It seems that the connection was too abstract—though some projects like lobby surveys or work on community information fairs were more client-centered or community-based. Emphasizing the connection to improvement of the public good *in, with, or for* communities can be reinforced in other ways. Connection to communities and society in terms of impact on public health or other measures related to families or cohesion within a community could be made an explicit part of class readings and discussions with Probation directors.

Perhaps a shift in emphasis from faculty and directors' end goal of "civic-mindedness" to a more explicit ongoing goal of "civic professionalism *in practice*" would help to accomplish this. Students' connections to civic outcomes were more explicitly connected to personal outcomes—such as their consistent emphasis on the importance of communication with probation clients—than when they were asked to reflect to connect them to academic outcomes. Student reflections consistently emphasized communication with Probation Department clients, which holds great potential for revision of the course. Bringle and Steinberg (2010) define communication and listening skills as fundamental to civic professionalism:

The civic-minded professional embarks on a career with a public-service orientation in mind, rather than a solely technical or economic/profit orientation to practice. . . . the civic-minded professional has a variety of skills in addition to professional knowledge and skills; among these skills is the ability to communicate well with others, and especially the ability to listen to divergent points of view. (p. 433)

Careers in the area of health and human services depend upon listening and communication skills, similar to the increased importance of patient-centered care in medicine (Epstein, Fiscella, Lesser, & Stange, 2010) and student-centered learning in higher education. Because Probation Service Learning students' reflections are also central to civic professionalism, it would be relatively straightforward to

revise course outcomes to more explicitly focus on civic professionalism. Guiding students by explaining how the very same client-centered skills are necessary for developing greater capacity for civically professional practice would both allow for greater connection between civic and personal outcomes and build a stronger foundation for students to make connections between academic and civic outcomes.

Another area for revision targets students' ability to explain relationships between academic theory and its application for evidence-based improvement of criminal justice practice within a professional setting like the Probation Department. The connection between these two was not clearly evident in their reflections. Students' reflections showed emergent recognition of the importance of diversity competencies and diversity knowledge about structured inequalities, but it was clear that students need more explicit opportunities to connect the use of data and information to assess the impact of various practices and approaches on Probation clients and the wider community—do they, for example, improve outcomes for clients and increase public safety within the community?

Civic professionalism conceived of as part of a criminal justice professional's role underscores the relationship between their actions and the advancement of institutional mission and outcomes for clients and the community. In turn, this civic professionalism framework could be used to determine whether students develop greater ability to explain criminal justice professional practice in general and a more specific ability to explain the civic dimensions of criminal justice professional practice. Olson and Dzur (2004, pp. 151–152) identify value in this approach for several reasons. First, it contributes to a greater sense of personal integrity on the part of professionals because the reward and meaning of work is more explicitly connected to furthering the public good. This would resonate with the civic commitments that Cal State LA students bring to the university (Higher Education Research Institute, 2016) and with the reflections of Probation Service Learning students. A second reason centers on the importance of trust as central to human services work with clients. Sullivan (1995), an influential and frequently cited scholar in the literature on civic professionalism, emphasizes that the legitimacy

of many professions is based on reciprocal trust between professionals and the public (as cited in Olson & Dzur, 2004, p. 151). Reflection on civic professionalism would encourage students—as future criminal justice practitioners—to consider how the status in criminal justice professions is granted to them by “civil society’s structure of legal procedures and reasonings” and that their “authority and autonomy . . . to solve key social problems are based on reciprocal trust” (Olson and Dzur, 2004, p. 151). Finally, Olson and Dzur assert that civic professionalism is valuable because it contributes to democracy itself when professionals find ways to foster engagement with the lay public (Olson & Dzur, 2004, p. 152).

### Managing Student Projects

After 4 years of offering the Probation Service Learning course, one concern we have is around students’ clarity (or perhaps lack thereof) regarding the difference between large-scale empirical assessments of criminal justice policy and the small-scale, less rigorous projects they undertake during their placement in Probation. For example, in May 2016, the County Board of Supervisors abolished the use of solitary confinement in juvenile detention facilities in Los Angeles County, citing empirical research highlighting the traumatizing impacts of solitary confinement. This change prompted several of the directors to assign student projects assessing the increase of assaults and physical violence inside detention facilities, presumably to make the case that the abolition of solitary confinement has hindered their ability to “control” detained minors, and in several terms, the students’ final presentations digressed into an open debate between directors and sometimes present faculty as well on the topic.

In light of this recurring conflict, one consideration for the future would be to spend some time in the classroom or through reflections clarifying for students the differences between large-scale empirical research—for example, the research that prompted the Board of Supervisors’ decision to end solitary confinement—and the relatively small-scale evaluations students undertake in the course of a single semester or quarter. One idea is to have students find a peer-reviewed program evaluation similar to the project they took on and

compare the population size, methods, and IRB requirements around the evaluation; their findings could be included as a part of their final presentation as acknowledged limitations of their work. Another way to connect students’ experiences in the field generally to the published academic work on the justice systems, implemented in a more recent term the course was administered, is to have students read personal testimonies of incarceration and probation supervision and connect them to either their experiences while in placement or empirical research on the same topics. In this exercise, students would connect qualitative work on the experiences of detained youth and adults to quantitative assessments of effective programs and policies in the same context, urging students to recognize how different types of research can serve and complement each other. A final suggestion may be to have students perform a mock IRB application, to better understand the rather grueling process by which academic researchers become qualified to speak for the communities they work with.

### Conclusion

The experiences and lessons learned from the Probation Service Learning Program reinforce the importance of fostering partnerships between academic departments and professional practice to connect students and their academic knowledge more directly to the agencies that shape the health and safety of our communities. Above all, this article demonstrates the importance of administering an assessment of service-learning courses each time they are offered.

In our assessment we determined the kinds of civic outcomes that students could demonstrate—personal commitment to make a difference, emergent awareness of diversity—and those that students could not: how improvement of professional practice within an institution can contribute to the public good in society at large. We think that greater focus on civic professionalism is a promising framework from which to support and grow students’ interest in serving the public through criminal justice or any human services profession.

Students of criminal justice at Cal State LA are often drawn to the field with the goal of improving community well-being in the ways it can be conceived. However, seldom do students have the opportunity to glimpse

what institutional and community change looks like from the perspective of those with the power to implement programs and policies that enable that change. A significant asset of the Probation Service Learning Program for Cal State LA students has been to expose them to the daily operation of a major criminal justice agency through the perspective of the director. This provided a unique opportunity for students to imagine their own future opportunities to improve the well-being of clients through effective communication, collaboration with key partners, and the implementation of best practices and evidence-based practices in criminal justice.



### About the Authors

**Akhila L. Ananth** is an assistant professor in the School of Criminal Justice & Criminalistics at California State University, Los Angeles. Her research examines constructions of race and gender in the design of juvenile courts and detention facilities. She received her Ph.D. in criminology, law, and society from the University of California, Irvine.

**Michael Willard** is professor and chair in the Department of Liberal Studies at California State University, Los Angeles. His research interests include youth, race, popular culture, and the arts in Los Angeles; service-learning and community engagement; transparent teaching; and faculty development and administration in higher education. He received his Ph.D. in American Studies from the University of Minnesota.

**Denise C. Herz** is professor in the School of Criminal Justice & Criminalistics at California State University, Los Angeles. Her research interests include improving juvenile probation services and building integrated systems for youth who touch both the child welfare and juvenile justice systems. She received her Ph.D. in criminology from the University of Maryland—College Park.

## References

- Ash, S. L., & Clayton, P. H. (2004). The articulated learning approach: An approach to guided reflection and assessment. *Innovative Higher Education*, 29(2), 137-154.
- Baetz, M., McEvoy, C., Adamson, K., & Loomis, C. (2012). Understanding the possible impact of a community service learning experience during university on career development. *Canadian Journal of Career Development*, 11(1), 29-37.
- Boyte, H. C. (2013). Reinventing citizenship as public work: Civic learning for the working world. *Higher Education Exchange*, 2013, 14-27.
- Brammer, L., Dumlaio, R., Falk, A., Hollander, E., Knutson, E., Poehnert, J., . . . Werner, V. (2012). *Core competencies in civic engagement* [Working paper]. Retrieved from [http://scholarworks.merrimack.edu/ced\\_pubs/1](http://scholarworks.merrimack.edu/ced_pubs/1)
- Bringle, R. G., & Hatcher, J. A. (1995). A service-learning curriculum for faculty. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, 2, 112-122.
- Bringle, R. G., & Steinberg, K. (2010). Educating for informed community involvement. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 46(3-4), 428-441.
- Cal State LA faculty handbook. (2018). Chapter IV. Curricular policies. Retrieved from <http://www.calstatela.edu/academicsenate/handbook/ch4a>
- Clayton, P. H., & Ash, S. L. (2009). Generating, deepening, and documenting learning: The power of critical reflection in applied learning. *Journal of Applied Learning in Higher Education*, 1(1), 24-48.
- Davis, J. (2015). Engaging criminal justice students through service learning. *Journal of Criminal Justice Education*, 26(3), 253-272.
- Day, L. (2005). Nursing practice and civic professionalism. *American Journal of Critical Care*, 14(5), 434-437.
- Duggan, J. (2015). *Exploring The Relation of Service-Learning Courses and Retention Rates at The University of Maine* (Honors Thesis). Retrieved from <http://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/honors/235>.
- Dudley, J., Robison, J., & Taylor, A. (1999). Educating for an Inclusive Democracy: Critical citizenship literacy. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 20(3), 427-441.
- Dzur, A. W. (2004). Democratic professionalism: Sharing authority in civic life. *The Good Society*, 13(1), 6-14.
- Ellerton, S., Di Meo, C., Kemmerer, A., Pantaleo, J., Bandziukas, M., Bradley, M., & Fichera, V. (2014). Service-learning as a pedagogical tool for career development and vocational training. In A. Traver & Z. Katz (Eds.), *Service-learning at the American community college* (pp. 211-224). New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan US.
- Epstein, R. M., Fiscella, K., Lesser, C. S., & Stange, K. C. (2010). Why the nation needs a policy push on patient-centered health care. *Health Affairs*, 29(8), 1489-1495.
- Flanagan, C., & Levine, P. (2010). Civic engagement and the transition to adulthood. *The Future of Children*, 20(1), 159-179.
- Furco, A. (2007). *Growing to Greatness 2007*. St. Paul, MN: National Youth Leadership Council.
- Harrington, P. R., & Beddoe, L. (2014). Civic practice: A new professional paradigm for social work. *Journal of Social Work*, 14(2), 147-164.
- Higher Education Research Institute. (2016). *2016 CIRP survey: CIRP construct reports California State University Los Angeles* [Excel file]. Los Angeles, CA: Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA.
- Kimball, B. A. (1996). *The true professional ideal in America: A history*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Jansen, T., Chioncel, N., & Dekkers, H. (2006). Social cohesion and integration: Learning active citizenship. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 27(2), 189-205.
- Kuh, G. D., Kinzie, J., Cruce, T., Shoup, R., & Gonyea, R. M. (2007). *Connecting the dots: Multi-faceted analyses of the relationship between student engagement results from*

- the NSSE, and institutional practices and conditions that foster student success* (Lumina Foundation for Education Grant # 2518). Bloomington, IN: Indiana University, Center for Postsecondary Research.
- Kuh, G. D., Kinzie, J., Schuh, J. H., & Whitt, E. J. (2005). *Student success in college: Creating conditions that matter*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Lockeman, K. S., & Pelco, L. E. (2013). The relationship between service-learning and degree completion. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning, 20*(1), 18–30.
- Morse, S. W. (1998). Developing the Skills for Citizenship. *About Campus, 3*(2), 29–30.
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2015). Fast facts: Employment rates of college graduates. National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=561>
- Olson, S. M., & Dzur, A. W. (2004). Revisiting informal justice: Restorative justice and democratic professionalism. *Law & Society Review, 38*(1), 139–176.
- Peters, S. (2004). Educating the civic professional: Reconfigurations and resistances. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning, 11*(1), 47–58.
- Redlawsk, D. P., & Rice, T. (2009). *Civic service: Service-learning with state and local government partners*. San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons/Jossey Bass.
- Rinehart, M. A. (2010). *Expanding the responsibility of architectural education: Civic professionalism in two schools of architecture* (Doctoral dissertation). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global: The Humanities and Social Sciences Collection. (DAI-A 71/06)
- Simonet, D. (2008). *Service-learning and academic success: The links to retention research*. [http://www.compact.org/wp-content/uploads/resources/downloads/MN-SL\\_and\\_academic\\_success.pdf](http://www.compact.org/wp-content/uploads/resources/downloads/MN-SL_and_academic_success.pdf)
- Steinberg, K. S., Hatcher, J. A., & Bringle, R. G. (2011). Civic-minded graduate: A north star. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning, 18*(1), 19–33.
- Sullivan, W. M. (1995). *Work and integrity: The crisis and promise of professionalism in America*. New York, NY: Harper Business.
- Sullivan, W. (2004). *Preparing professionals as moral agents: Carnegie perspectives*. Stanford, CA: Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.
- Sullivan, W., & Benner, P. (2005). Challenges to professionalism: Work integrity and the call to renew and strengthen the social contract of the professions. *American Journal of Critical Care, 14*(1), 78–84.
- Yusop, F. D., & Correia, A. P. (2012). The civic-minded instructional designers framework: An alternative approach to contemporary instructional designers' education in higher education. *British Journal of Educational Technology, 43*(2), 180–190.
- Zlotkowski, E. (Ed.). (2002). *Service-learning and the first-year experience: Preparing students for personal success and civic responsibility* (Monograph No. 34). Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina, National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition.