

“When I’m at School, I’m More Than Just a Student...the City Is My City”: Assessing College Student Outcomes in a Community Engagement Immersion Program

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Abstract

Community-engaged learning opportunities are increasingly prevalent in higher education. In addition to positive personal growth and learning outcomes, these opportunities allow students to learn about the community surrounding their campus and formulate their own understandings of social responsibility and citizenship. These connections can be especially powerful for students at colleges and universities located in or near urban areas. This study assesses the impact of REAL Dayton, a community engagement immersion program at a mid-sized Catholic and Marianist university, on students’ attitudes toward and perceptions of their city through pre/post surveys and interviews. The program encourages students to build their knowledge of the city and create sustained relationships with the broader community. This research enhances understandings of the effects and outcomes of community engagement programs for students. Findings demonstrate the impact of community engagement on student knowledge about their city and student perceptions of their own roles as community members.

Keywords: community engagement, community-engaged learning, higher education, program evaluation



Institutions of higher education are implementing various opportunities for students to participate in community engagement, civic engagement, and service-learning. These programs, broadly referred to as community-engaged learning (CEL), have become increasingly common in recent decades (Hellman et al., 2006; Warren, 2012). Community engagement has well-documented benefits for students, faculty, colleges and universities, and local communities (Bandy, 2021). This study focuses on outcomes at the student level, assessing how participation in a community engagement immersion program influenced college students’ attitudes toward and perceptions of the surrounding city. Findings demonstrate the benefits of a community engagement program in terms of how students

understand the broader community and how they view themselves within it, as well as their likelihood of participation in future community engagement.

Literature Review

Synergy between learning and service allows colleges and universities to respond to the needs of both students and the community; increased community engagement has become a widespread goal for universities, as it provides professional and personal development opportunities for students at the same time that it can lead to a mutually beneficial relationship between the university and the local community (Bierly et al., 2005). As CEL becomes increasingly institutionalized, some universities are moving toward becoming what Furco (2010) called

“engaged campuses.” These campuses are characterized by the authenticity and genuineness in which community engagement is applied to research, teaching, and the service mission of institutions. This authenticity is apparent in the reasons campuses create community engagement programs as well as the values and norms that underpin the operations behind a campus–community relationship (Furco, 2010). Because most campuses have specific goals and desired outcomes for community engagement programs, it is important to assess program outcomes in a variety of ways.

The promotion of sustained civic engagement is a primary goal of CEL programs. Musil (2009) defined 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. 59). This definition reflects the idea of active participation stemming from personal values and a civic responsibility to serve and improve society. Civic engagement and community involvement are distinct from one another in that civic engagement is a division of community involvement and is explained through location and process, meaning that it is not only *in* the community, but *with* it (Bringle et al., 2007). Based on this distinction, civic engagement creates mutually beneficial relationships that highlight participatory, collective, and democratic processes.

Institutions of higher education are making efforts to implement programs that will enable students to become more civically minded. Bringle and Steinberg (2010) defined civic-mindedness as “a person’s inclination or disposition to be knowledgeable of and involved in the community, and to have a commitment to act upon a sense of responsibility as a member of that community” (p. 429). Civic-mindedness is reflected through a person’s disposition toward the community and other people in the community. As students become civically minded, they develop a greater sense of responsibility to their community, and that leads to increased civic engagement. It is becoming more common for universities to emphasize civically minded and socially responsible objectives for their students (Barnhardt, 2015). For example, university

mission statements often include aspects that connect to “service” by illustrating the institution’s efforts to instill civic values in its students (Morphew & Hartley, 2006). Universities provide various opportunities for students to develop civic-mindedness through curricular and extracurricular activities, such as service-learning courses, internships, political participation, and serving as a volunteer (Bringle & Steinberg, 2010).

Community engagement enables students to understand how they can become civically minded and acknowledge their social responsibility to work on social justice issues. Educators can support students as agents of social change by encouraging them to think more critically about societal issues and can empower students to become problem solvers by helping them determine the most effective way to address social problems (Jacoby, 2017). Jacoby emphasized how crucial it is for educators to engage with “students as they seek to understand and change the systems and structures that perpetuate injustice and oppression, both on campus and in the broader society” (p. 6). For example, Clark-Taylor (2017) found that the incorporation of feminist thought into a community engagement program served as a catalyst in participants’ development of critical consciousness and social justice self-efficacy. Clark-Taylor detailed how feminism can increase people’s understanding of systemic issues and help people realize that they are autonomous and, through collective action, societal and institutional change is possible.

College students who engage in community service have the opportunity to create change in their communities. At the same time, these service experiences create change for students in terms of their vocational choices and life skills. In Fogle et al.’s 2017 study of undergraduate students’ experiences in community-engaged learning, many students reported that they could use the skills they had learned through service in the workplace in the future. Additionally, students in the study described the positive impact of breaking out of the “bubble” of campus life. By expanding their experiences and perspectives beyond the confines of their campuses, students developed new understandings of themselves and their communities.

Assessing the Outcomes of Community Engagement Programs

In addition to exploring the conceptual framework of community engagement, scholars have examined the outcomes of community engagement programs and their effects on college students. For students, the benefits of community engagement are especially evident in the areas of student development, civic engagement, and knowledge of the local community (Bandy, 2021). In terms of student development, Beatty et al. (2016) found that cocurricular service-learning programs can have a positive impact on student development by increasing personal growth and personal effectiveness. They measured “the extent to which participants perceive they have grown personally because of their volunteer experience in the last year” (personal growth) and “the extent to which participants perceived they had an impact through their volunteer community service” (personal effectiveness) by comparing surveys of undergraduate students who participated in an alternative spring break program to a control group (pp. 99–100). Service-learning participants reported significantly higher personal growth and personal effectiveness from the pre- to postsurvey, whereas there was no significant difference for the nonparticipants.

Opportunities to engage with community agencies through service-learning can lead to increased awareness of social justice, social identities, and the importance of dismantling stereotypes. Manning-Ouellette and Hemer (2019) measured changes in awareness among 95 students from an introductory service-learning leadership course by analyzing students’ work from reflection journals and papers and administering the Civic Attitudes and Skills Questionnaire (CASQ) to measure civic learning outcomes. Qualitative analysis showed that students were cultivating interpersonal skills, building leadership capacity, and developing social justice perspectives through participation in the course. Results from the CASQ survey showed a statistically significant difference in four scales from the pre and posttest survey used to measure student change: interpersonal problem-solving, political awareness, leadership skills, and diversity attitudes.

Beyond academic and personal development, researchers have also measured the effect of CEL on student civic engagement and civic-

mindfulness. Knapp et al. (2010) conducted a pretest–posttest quasi experiment with students from 52 service-learning courses to analyze the impact of service-learning on college students’ commitment to future civic engagement, self-efficacy, and social empowerment. They found a small but insignificant increase in civic engagement and no significant changes to students’ self-efficacy. However, they also found that students who felt empowered and volunteered for longer periods of time were more likely to engage in their communities after the program. These findings speak to the importance of students’ experiences and sense of agency and social empowerment within community engagement programs. Knowledge about the surrounding community is another important factor in students’ ongoing civic engagement. Li and Hanson (2016) found that students’ social relations and knowledge about the broader community surrounding their campus predicted increased feelings of place attachment, which then predicted higher levels of involvement in community service. Importantly, students’ involvement in the community service activity contributed to how much they knew about the school area and their social relations.

Increased civic-mindedness and diversity awareness are also relevant in the context of career development. Otto and Dunens (2021) compared community partners’ descriptions of CEL participants’ behaviors to preferred skills for hiring in positions for new college graduates. They found that “student learning outcomes from CEL are closely aligned with the soft skills that employers most desire,” most notably effective communication, critical thinking, ethical judgment, collaboration, leadership, and practical application of knowledge (p. 47). Meaningful participation in CEL can also influence students’ career pathways following graduation (Mitchell & Rost-Banik, 2019).

It is important to note that student development outcomes differ based on students’ social locations and identities. For example, Pelco et al. (2014) found that service-learning impacts student growth differently among first-generation and non-first-generation college students and that this growth was mediated by gender. Non-first-generation male students from minority and low-income backgrounds stated the least amount of growth from service-learning, whereas first-generation male students

from minority and low-income backgrounds stated the most growth. Female participants described notable levels of growth regardless of their generational, racial, or financial standing. CEL should be accessible, meaningful, and effective for students from a variety of backgrounds. Given that females are more likely to participate in community engagement (Schatteman, 2014) and this study found that females, in general, reported significant growth, it is important to consider how these programs can better serve male participants.

The majority of existing literature that focuses on the outcomes of college and university community engagement programs explores individual outcomes such as how these programs affect a student's personal growth and development. Aside from the personal impact of community engagement on students, it is equally important to understand how the experience of engaging with local communities shapes the students' attitudes toward and perceptions of those communities. Students at engaged campuses are more likely to be civically minded and more engaged, are knowledgeable of the surrounding community (including its challenges and assets), have a desire to continue to engage, and make efforts to establish stronger relations between the university and the local community.

REAL Dayton Case Study

The data for this study are drawn from surveys and interviews with participants in the 2019 cohort of REAL Dayton, a community engagement immersion program that takes place for 3 days each fall at the University of Dayton (UD). UD is a medium-sized, private, Catholic university in Dayton, Ohio. Rooted in the Marianist tradition, the university aims to educate the whole person by connecting learning and scholarship with leadership and service (University of Dayton, 2020b). The Catholic Volunteer Network named UD a 2020 Top School for Service, noting the University's Center for Social Concern (CSC), an office under Campus Ministry, as one of 25 top service-learning offices nationwide (University of Dayton News, 2020). The CSC focuses on justice education and service-learning and offers many opportunities for students to participate in reflective service, service-learning, and education and advocacy for justice (University of Dayton, 2020a). As UD prides itself on its strong sense of com-

munity on campus, it is also increasing its efforts to get students off campus and encourage them to explore the greater Dayton community by helping to bridge the gap between campus and the city.

Like many predominantly White universities, the demographics of UD differ significantly from the surrounding neighborhoods and city. The university heralded the student body of the 2021 incoming class as the "most diverse" in the institution's history (University of Dayton, 2021b): 71% of students were White, 6% were Black or African American, 6% were Latinx/Chicanx/Hispanic, and 11% were nonresident international students. Two percent were Asian, less than 1% American Indian or Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, 3% two or more races, 1% undisclosed race/ethnicity, and less than 1% international from outside the United States (University of Dayton, 2021a). The city of Dayton has an established history of racial and socioeconomic divisions. This racial and economic divide is visible through the split between the West and East sides of the city, which are divided by the Miami River. Data from American Community Survey 5-year estimates for 2016–2020 indicate that median household income near UD in the four surrounding U.S. Census blocks within the city of Dayton ranges from \$33,235 to \$49,118. Also notable is the proximity of the affluent city of Oakwood, for which the median household income was \$109,205 to \$161,230. In comparison, the median household income of the West Dayton Census block nearest to the university was \$26,845 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022). These socioeconomic disparities intersect with and exacerbate racial segregation in the city. The racial makeup near UD is predominantly White (ranging from 76.0% to 93.5% White between 2016 and 2020 depending on the neighborhood). Directly across the river in West Dayton, the vast majority of residents (around 90%) are African American or Black (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022). Although UD students frequent businesses and restaurants in the city blocks near campus, few venture beyond the bubble of campus life. In addition to working across racial and socioeconomic divides, CEL programs at the university must bridge gaps between the lived experiences of students and community members.

REAL Dayton (which stands for "Reach Out, Encounter Dayton, Act with Others, Lead

Together”) has been offered to undergraduate and graduate UD students each year since 2010 during the university’s fall break. The program is student led with the support of the Center for Social Concern; there are typically two or three student codirectors, about a dozen other student leaders, and between 30 and 50 student participants. During this 3-day immersive program, students form relationships with fellow students and community members; learn about the city’s challenges, assets, history, neighborhoods, local businesses, and organizations; serve at local nonprofits; and reflect on their roles as community leaders (University of Dayton Center for Social Concern, 2020). Each day, participants learn about and serve at numerous local organizations such as the YWCA, an urban farm, a food bank, a clothing and household goods charity, and a school mentoring program. The program also contains a schedule of events and learning opportunities, including visits with community members in different neighborhoods in the city; a panel of local leaders discussing their work in the community and its impact on the city; a tour of the city on a city bus to learn about local places and history; visits to city parks, restaurants, and small businesses; and shared meals in local community members’ homes. Each day of the program includes personal and group reflection activities that provide students the space to reflect on their experience and what it means to them. Overall, the program addresses humans’ desire for connectedness by promoting engagement between students and the broader community in order to build a stronger community between the two.

Methods

This study employs a multimethod approach, using both surveys and interviews to assess the impact of REAL Dayton on students and, in general, the effect of community engagement on students’ perceptions of the city of Dayton. Participants in the 2019 cohort completed a presurvey prior to the immersion and a postsurvey after the program was complete. Comparisons of the data from the pre- and postsurveys reveal the impact, or lack thereof, of the program on students. Additionally, interviews with participants in the months following the program provided a deeper level of insight into the goals of an engaged campus and the outcomes of community engagement programs: civic engagement/civic-mindedness,

students’ knowledge of the city, future engagement, and bridging the university–city gap.

The lead author was a codirector for REAL Dayton and present during the immersion experience, allowing distribution of surveys at the beginning and end of the program as well as ongoing communication with participants who indicated they were willing to participate in follow-up interviews. All survey and interview data were anonymized after collection, and we use pseudonyms when referring to or quoting participants. This research was reviewed by the University IRB and approved as exempt: 45 CFR 46.104(d)(2).

Survey Design and Sample

The survey was designed in stages. First, the lead author solicited input from the REAL Dayton leadership team to create appropriate questions for the surveys that would effectively measure the impact of the program. Additional questions, building on previous research on the outcomes of community engagement, were added in multiple areas: previous levels of community engagement and interaction with Daytonians, participants’ perceptions of the city, how participants understand connectivity between UD and the city of Dayton, their knowledge of the city, and their likelihood of future engagement. The pre- and postsurveys included identical sets of questions allowing for comparison of participant responses before and after the program. In addition, the presurvey included demographics questions and asked participants about previous community engagement. The postsurvey included additional questions asking participants to reflect on the most valuable aspect of the program and their likelihood of future engagement.

Initial surveys were distributed via Qualtrics (an online survey platform) to all participants in the 2019 cohort of REAL Dayton following a program orientation meeting. After learning about the study and completing an electronic consent, all 28 participants completed the presurvey before the immersion program began. Following the conclusion of the program, all participants received a link to the postsurvey via email. After several reminder emails, a total of 25 participants completed the postsurvey. After all surveys were collected, anonymized surveys were matched in a spreadsheet and analyzed using IBM’s SPSS software.

Table 1 shows the demographics of the 2019 REAL Dayton student cohort ($n = 28$). Nearly 40% of participants were sophomores, one quarter were seniors, and 14% were fifth-year students. Only 11% of participants were juniors, 7% were freshmen, and 3% graduate students. Although research has shown that females are more likely to participate in community engagement (Schatteman, 2014), there was fairly equal representation of female and male participants (54% and 46% respectively). In terms of race and ethnicity, more than three quarters of participants were White (79%), which reflects the university's student body being predominantly White (University of Dayton, 2021a).

In-Depth Postprogram Interviews

Follow-up interviews provide more in-depth, qualitative data to better understand what meaning students attached to their community engagement experience. Interviewing the participants after REAL

Dayton allowed for more detailed insights into how the program encompasses the goals of an engaged campus as well as the outcomes of community engagement programs: civic engagement/civic-mindedness, students' knowledge of the city, future engagement, and bridging the university-city gap. The interview questions asked participants to share their attitudes and feelings toward the program and the city of Dayton. Of the 11 participants who indicated that they were interested in being interviewed, a total of nine agreed to participate. Interviews were conducted over a 10-day period and were recorded digitally and transcribed.

Transcripts were analyzed using QDA Miner qualitative analysis software. The coding process began with an inductive approach to identify emergent themes. These codes were further refined in a second round of analysis. The interview data presented in this study provide an additional level of

Table 1. Survey Sample Demographics

	Frequency	Percent
Respondent Year at University		
Freshman	2	7.1
Sophomore	11	39.3
Junior	3	10.7
Senior	7	25.0
5th year	4	14.3
Other	1	3.6
<i>Total</i>	<i>28</i>	<i>100.0</i>
Respondent Gender		
Male	13	46.4
Female	15	53.6
<i>Total</i>	<i>28</i>	<i>100.0</i>
Respondent Race/Ethnicity		
Asian	2	7.1
Black/African American	2	7.1
White	22	78.6
Multiple Races/Ethnicities	2	7.2
<i>Total</i>	<i>28</i>	<i>100.0</i>

Note. $N = 28$.

detail about the effectiveness and outcomes of the REAL Dayton program, using quotes from participants as examples. All quotes are reported as originally stated by participants (with minor editing to remove repeated words or filler words such as “um” and “like”). All names are pseudonyms to protect participants’ anonymity.

Survey Results

The goal of this study was to examine how community engagement within the city of Dayton shapes students’ attitudes toward and perceptions of the city. Surveys included questions about program participants’ demographics, their prior community engagement, and their likelihood of future engagement. Additionally, participants answered identical questions to test for changes in their responses from pre- to postsurvey regarding their perceptions of Dayton, how they characterize the connection between UD and Dayton, their knowledge of Dayton, and their comfort interacting with community members.

Prior Community Engagement and Program Information

It is important to measure students’ previ-

ous community engagement, as their attitudes toward and perceptions of the city could vary depending on how much time they have spent interacting with the city and its people. Most of the students had never participated in REAL Dayton before (89%). Three participants (11%) had taken part in the program at least once in a previous year (see Table 2). When asked about their prior community engagement in the city beyond the REAL Dayton program, 39% of respondents reported that they had been involved in one to three community engagement projects/programs in Dayton before, which reflected the greatest number of participants. Following this, 29% of participants had never been involved in a community engagement project/program, 21% had participated in four to seven community engagement projects/programs, and 11% had participated in seven or more. About 70% of students had participated in some form of prior community engagement, a number consistent with the findings of previous research (Fogle et al., 2017; Schatteman, 2014). In terms of interaction with community members in Dayton, 14% reported that they had never interacted with community members in Dayton, half of respondents said they had interacted with

Table 2. Prior Community Engagement and Program Information

	Frequency	Percent
Prior Participation in REAL Dayton Program		
Yes	3	10.7
No	25	89.3
<i>Total</i>	28	100.0
Prior Community Engagement in Dayton		
0 Events	8	28.6
1–3 Events	11	39.3
4–7 Events	6	21.4
7+ Events	3	10.7
<i>Total</i>	28	100.0
Prior Interaction with Dayton Community		
0 Interactions	4	14.3
1–3 Interactions	14	50.0
4–7 Interactions	4	14.3
7+ Interactions	6	21.4
<i>Total</i>	28	100.0

people outside their campus community one to three times, and the remaining quarter reported at least four interactions. Table 2 illustrates students' previous participation in the program and their prior community engagement and interactions with the Dayton community.

Program Outcomes

This study uses paired sample *t*-tests, also known as dependent tests, to test whether the means of two paired measurements, in this case pretest and posttest scores from the REAL Dayton program, are significantly different. These tests measure whether the program created meaningful changes in participants' perceptions of Dayton's safety, Dayton's livability, whether community members are actively working to address the city's challenges, the connectivity between UD and Dayton, knowledge of Dayton, and comfort interacting with the community.

Results show that REAL Dayton created meaningful changes in three of the five measures of perception of the city: general livability ($p < .05$), addressing challenges ($p < .01$), and willingness to live in Dayton in the future ($p < .01$). Table 3 provides an overview of these results. There was a significant increase in the number of respondents who agreed with the statement "I feel like Dayton is a good place to live" after the program ($M = 4.32$, $SD = .476$) compared to before the program ($M = 4.00$, $SD = .577$), $t(24) = -2.138$, $p = 0.043$. The results from the pretest ($M = 4.12$, $SD = .666$) and posttest ($M = 4.64$, $SD = .860$) for "I feel like there are people in the Dayton community actively working to address the city's challenges" reveal a significant increase, $t(24) = -3.161$, $p = .004$. In regard to the statement "In the future, I would live in the city of Dayton," a

paired sample *t*-test showed a statistically significant increase in participants stating that they would live in the city of Dayton from pretest ($M = 3.12$, $SD = .833$) to posttest ($M = 3.64$, $SD = .907$), $t(24) = -3.161$, $p = .004$. However, participant responses for measures of perceived safety and university service opportunities did not show statistical significance.

Pre- and postsurveys also measured student perceptions of the connectedness between the university and the city of Dayton. Table 4 shows the results of paired sample *t*-tests for these questions. Results showed that there was no significant difference in participants' responses from pretest to posttest for either measure (connection between the university and city and ideal level of connection).

The last two paired questions tested differences in participants' perceptions of their knowledge about the city of Dayton and their comfort interacting with the Dayton community. Table 5 presents the results from these questions. Contrary to the expectation that participation in the immersion program would lead to an increase in students' perceptions of their own knowledge about the city, we found the opposite. Responses to "How much do you think you know about the city of Dayton?" showed an overall decrease in the number of participants who felt they knew "a good amount" or "quite a lot" after the program ($M = 1.96$, $SD = .539$) compared to before the program ($M = 2.76$, $SD = .831$), $t(25) = 6.928$, $p = .000$. This result suggests that students were more reflexive about their knowledge of the city after participating in the program and that they had a better sense of how much they did not know. This topic is explored more fully in the interview results below.

Table 3. Perceptions of City

	Difference in Means	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	Sig (2-tailed)
Pair 1. Dayton safety	-.200	-1.309	24	.203
Pair 2. Dayton livability general	-.320	-2.138	24	.043
Pair 3. UD service opportunities in Dayton	.080	.440	24	.664
Pair 4. Dayton community addresses challenges	-.520	-2.161	24	.004
Pair 5. Dayton livability personal	-.520	-3.161	24	.004

Table 4. Connectivity Between University and City

	Difference in Means	t	df	Sig (2-tailed)
Pair 1. Perceived UD/Dayton connectivity current	-.080	-.359	24	.723
Pair 2. Perceived UD/Dayton connectivity ideal	-.120	-.721	24	.478

Table 5. City Knowledge and Community Interactions

	Difference in Means	t	df	Sig (2-tailed)
Pair 1. Knowledge of Dayton	.800	6.928	24	.000
Pair 2. Comfort interacting with Dayton community	-.240	-1.445	24	.161

There was not a significant difference in the means of participants’ responses about how comfortable they felt interacting with members of the Dayton community from pretest ($MD = 4.60, SD = .816$) to posttest ($MD = 4.84, SD = .624, p = .161$).

dent who participated in REAL Dayton felt that they were likely to engage in the city of Dayton again. The percentage of participants who said they would engage in cities where they lived in the future was the same. Table 6 displays these frequencies.

Likelihood of Future Engagement

Following completion of the program, participants were asked about the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with the statement “In the future, I am likely to engage in the city of Dayton.” More than half of the respondents (60%) stated that they strongly agreed with the statement, implying that their likelihood of future engagement in Dayton is very high. The other 40% of respondents said they agreed with the statement. In other words, every stu-

Interview Results

Following the completion of REAL Dayton in fall 2019, nine participants completed follow-up interviews. These interviews enabled students to share more about their experiences on REAL Dayton and provide a deeper understanding of how community engagement shapes their perceptions of Dayton. Furthermore, the interviews offer insight into how students make sense of their community engagement experiences

Table 6. Future Engagement

	Frequency	Percent
Likelihood of future engagement in Dayton		
Agree	10	40.0
Strongly agree	15	60.0
<i>Total</i>	25	100.0
Likelihood of engagement in future city		
Agree	10	40.0
Strongly agree	15	60.0
<i>Total</i>	25	100.0

and what meaning they attribute to them moving forward. The sections that follow are based on the goals of an engaged campus and general outcomes that typically have been assessed in previous research measuring the effectiveness of community engagement programs for college students: civic engagement and civic-mindedness, knowledge of the surrounding community, continued/future engagement, and bridging the gap between the city and university.

Civic Engagement and Civic-Mindedness

When asked about what it means to be an active citizen in their community, interview participants discussed six central themes: awareness, involvement, civic engagement, making a difference, supporting local businesses, and making connections within the community. Almost all the students who participated in an interview articulated that involvement within the community is a major component of being an active citizen. Rachel, a senior and first-time participant of REAL Dayton, detailed her understanding of active citizenship:

Being aware of the issues that are going on in your community and knowing what those are and knowing what kind of people those are affecting and maybe what role you can take to help or at least even just being an active listener and understanding the problems.

This student's response encompassed the importance of awareness, involvement, and making connections in one's community in order to be an active citizen. A few other smaller themes that emerged were civic engagement in the form of political participation and "voting with your dollar," making a difference in the community by helping others, and supporting local businesses.

Another theme that came up was being aware of what is going on in one's community, particularly knowing what challenges the community is facing. Rachel talked about the value of getting to know the people in one's community: "Taking the time to know the people around you and understanding that your neighborhood extends just outside of the people you live next to. That is your whole entire city, your area." Rachel's response shows the power in taking pride and ownership of one's city and forming connections with those in it. Chloe, a sophomore and second-time par-

ticipant, talked about the importance of developing a deeper, unbiased understanding of the surrounding community in terms of her own role as an active citizen:

I think becoming a citizen of where you are living at that point in time, no matter how long it's going to be, even if it's not permanent [is important] . . . also, not listening to stereotypes . . . because the things that are said about Dayton could honestly be said about so many cities and they're really polarized because of the city and the reputation that it has had in the past . . . it's important to keep that in mind and no matter where you are, going in with an unbiased perspective.

Chloe's reflection demonstrates the importance of students exploring the city of Dayton while they attend UD. Furthermore, Chloe explained how REAL Dayton and her community engagement in the city of Dayton throughout college have given her a better understanding of how she can be an active citizen in whatever communities she lives in:

It showed me that social engagement is more than just volunteering because it's easy to think of it as just that. It showed me how well-rounded civic engagement actually is and how it means literally being an active member of your community. It showed me all the opportunities that are available . . . it gave me the tools and then I can take those tools wherever I end up.

Knowledge of City's Challenges and Assets

As detailed above, one outcome of community engagement programs that is often assessed is students' knowledge of the local community, which is related to their desire to be civically minded (Bringle & Steinberg, 2010). Additionally, becoming more familiar with a city, particularly increased awareness and understanding of the city's challenges and assets, allows students to think more deeply about social justice (Jacoby, 2017). Survey results from this study showed that REAL Dayton participants reported overall lower perceived knowledge after the program, reflecting a better sense of how much they had to learn about their city. This is not to say that students did not learn about

their city during the immersion experience, but rather that the community engagement program encouraged students to be more reflexive about what they thought they knew and what they did not know. To explore this topic, interview participants were asked to share their thoughts on the biggest challenge they saw facing the city of Dayton.

More than half of the participants talked about Dayton being a food desert or food insecurity; other challenges that students mentioned were a lack of quality jobs, drug addiction, poverty, and social disparity; all these were challenges mentioned in the surveys. Rachel touched on Dayton's challenges with food access, but noted that the city faces other interconnected challenges:

I definitely think the food desert is a big one, but I think the even bigger issue is red lining and that there is a lot of poverty in Dayton. And I think a lot of struggles stem from that and you can definitely see the different divides of the suburbs of Dayton. And then as you get closer to the city center or just even in the communities or even from community to community, there's definitely a lot of disparity.

Interview participants were also asked if they thought people in the community were addressing the challenges they spoke about. Almost all the participants felt that the community is trying to address the challenges. Two students who felt that community members are making efforts to address these challenges also pointed out that these issues are systemic, particularly when talking about the food insecurity in Dayton. Chloe discussed the transportation issues that people encounter when trying to get to a grocery store and how many people on the West side of Dayton do not have grocery stores near them, saying, "People are addressing it, but it's really hard to address a problem that's facing an entire city." Hannah, a sophomore and first-time participant, said, "I think it is being addressed. I just think it's such a systematic [sic] problem that it's going to take a lot to address it." Although both these students recognized that the community is working to address challenges that the city is facing, they realized that there are deep-rooted social justice issues underlying these challenges that also need to be confronted.

When asked about the assets of the city, interviewees talked about the people in the city as being Dayton's greatest asset, and more than half talked about the strength and resiliency of the community members. For example, Grace, a senior and first-time participant, talked about the resiliency of the city and its people following multiple tragedies during the summer of 2019 (including destructive tornados and a mass shooting at a downtown bar):

I've always really admired Dayton's resiliency and I think this past summer has really shown that. . . . One of my professors actually brought up the Dayton shooting and was talking about how most big cities or medium size, when they experience something detrimental or harmful, they tend to turn on each other . . . but the quickness to do the Dayton Strong [campaign] and the idea behind . . . [and] how quick everybody was there for each other . . . it didn't matter what side of whatever event you fell on, everybody was there for each other.

Grace's reflection emphasizes that the people are what make the city of Dayton what it is, and because of the people, Dayton has been able to bounce back from the tragedies and become even stronger as a community. Other assets mentioned by participants were its size, geographic location of the city, its recent growth, and its history of innovation.

Students' experiences of engagement with the city also helped them to counteract negative perceptions and stereotypes about the city and develop an understanding of the importance of learning through experience. Caleb, a senior and first-time participant, said that through REAL Dayton he gained a "sense of empathy knowing how people perceive things, you have to go and see it for yourself in order to know if their perception was correct. The way people stereotyped the city of Dayton was in no way correct." Hannah shared how she has developed a greater admiration for Dayton now that she has spent more time in the city by saying, "I learned that there's more than just what is at the surface. There's a deeper history and I feel like the misconception of Dayton is that it's just kind of trashy, but there's so much more than that." Because these students were able to see the city for them-

selves and spend time in it, they broke down preconceived notions and stereotypes of the city; these students started to think critically about how stereotypes are perpetuated and what impact their perpetuation has on a city's image. Gaining this understanding is crucial for students as they develop their own sense of their roles in breaking stereotypes and working for social justice.

Continued and Future Engagement

Another outcome of community engagement examined in previous research is its impact on college students' commitment to future engagement. To explore this outcome for REAL Dayton participants, interviewees were asked about their understanding of their own roles in the city of Dayton as UD students. Participants mentioned the importance of getting off campus, doing service in the city, breaking out of the "UD bubble," cultivating responsibility for taking care of the city, and seeing themselves as Daytonians rather than just college students.

Almost all interviewees said that getting off campus was one way they can take part in the city as a UD student, especially in terms of participating in service opportunities in the city. Moreover, the majority of interview participants said that they want to take part in more service opportunities as a way of contributing to the city of Dayton, especially through the organizations they learned about during the program. Other common themes among participants were encouraging other students to get off campus more, using positive language when talking about Dayton, and the idea that Dayton is a small enough city that there is room for impact and growth. Chloe explained that she could make an impact on the city and its relationship with the university by

spreading the word about different things and having positive talk about the city and just walking the walk, if I'm going to talk the talk. I'm going to say, "Hey, let's get downtown, let's actually go." . . . When people do talk about [Dayton] in a negative way . . . you have to shut that kind of stuff down. I feel like one person or a few people standing up for the city can have an impact.

Chloe demonstrated how she can play a role in getting students off campus and helping

break down the negative stereotypes about Dayton.

When asked to reflect on how what they learned during REAL Dayton is applicable to future engagement and where they live in the future, every student talked about how they want to get involved and invest in whatever community they end up in. Hannah shared how she wants to apply what she learned on REAL Dayton to the communities where she lives in the future: "Taking the time to go out and explore the city and get to learn about it and become more invested in it. Not just live in a place but learn about a place and put my roots down more. Maybe not be afraid to put myself out there in the community." Caleb was struck by the sense of community in a specific Dayton neighborhood:

I'm definitely going to be a lot more involved in my community that I live in in the future just because seeing all the people in St. Anne's Hill and how they all help one another, how they are all just so close as if they're one big family. That was really nice and makes me want to live in a community that's going to be just like that.

REAL Dayton gave Caleb the opportunity to become familiar with the Dayton neighborhoods and the people living in them, and now he has an idea of what kind of neighborhood he wants to live in in the future. Caleb can take what he saw in St. Anne's Hill and bring that same sense of community wherever he lives.

Bridging the University–City Gap

Another positive outcome of community engagement can be improved university–community relations. While discussing the connections between the University of Dayton and the city of Dayton, many students talked about the opportunities the university provides to get off campus, especially the free bus service between campus and downtown. Several students described the relationship between UD and Dayton as a mutual partnership. Hannah explained: "I see them connected as they both kind of help each other. The city of Dayton has a lot to offer to the University as well as the University has a lot to offer to Dayton." Hannah's understanding of the connectivity between the two depicts both the university and the city as being an asset to each other

and for each other. At the same time, a few students spoke about the “UD bubble,” or the sense that campus is distinct and separate from the city. Ella, a senior and first-time participant, explained:

Unfortunately I feel like campus is a little bit of a bubble. So, the University of Dayton exists within the city of Dayton. . . . But I see them connected and since the University’s part of the city of Dayton, you have to realize that the people that you live with in college are part of your community but then the people who live in Dayton as a whole are also a part of your community.

Ella’s response shows how community is really emphasized at UD, but often that community remains on campus; however, through her participation in REAL Dayton she came to recognize that community expands beyond campus into the city.

Although interviewees acknowledged that the university provides opportunities for students to get off campus, many also felt that the university could do more. Some students articulated that the Center for Social Concern and some academic departments do a better job than others at providing opportunities and would like to see the university expand these opportunities so that more students are aware of them. Hannah said: “I feel like a lot of people don’t understand how much Dayton has to offer. So, the University could make that more broadly known. I think that would improve a lot of the disconnect.”

Interview participants were also asked about who they think is responsible for improving the connection between the university and the city of Dayton. Most students explained how it is the university’s responsibility to inform students of opportunities in the city, especially first-year students who come in knowing very little about Dayton. At the same time, they emphasized the importance of students taking initiative and their willingness to accept these opportunities. Grace reflected on this idea of a collaborative effort between the University and students:

Personally as a student, I feel like I have a lot of responsibility in bridging that because somebody can feed me all the information or give me all the accessibility but if

I don’t choose to take it up, then I’m not going to go anywhere. So, I think as a student body we have a very big responsibility. I also think the University has a responsibility to give us access and the ability to cross that barrier . . . I think it’s a joint effort . . . I think we need to work together to do it.

Through her response, Grace shared that it is important for the university to give students opportunities and the means to get off campus, but as a student, she has a responsibility to bridge the gap between UD and Dayton by being open to these engagement opportunities. A senior and first-time participant, Anthony, shared similar thoughts on how students and faculty both have a responsibility in improving the connection between UD and Dayton:

I think it’s more the students and the faculty, faculty providing the opportunities and letting first year students know about what opportunities there are. Also, that goes for students to students who have been in the city for a while and kind of know what it’s all about. They can provide information to younger students who aren’t really familiar with the city too much and kind of build that bridge. So, I think the responsibility lies more on the students, and the faculty getting students off campus to go out and explore.

Anthony recognized that students who have engaged in the city can have a positive impact on other students by encouraging them to do the same and sharing their experiences in the city. Both Grace’s and Anthony’s responses demonstrate the need for the university community as a whole to work together to improve their connection with the city.

Discussion and Conclusion

At many colleges and universities, there is a strong sense of community on campus while a gap remains between the institution and the surrounding city. Many students remain on campus in their own bubble and do not engage with the city and its people. It is important for students to get off campus and get to know the surrounding city so that they see themselves as

members of and contributors to the greater community, not just students on campus. Institutions of higher education are increasingly focused on creating opportunities for their students to participate in community engagement (Hellman et al., 2006; Warren, 2012). Community engagement opportunities like the immersion program that is the focus of this study help students to form connections with the Dayton community to bridge this gap by learning about and building connections with the broader community and its people.

The purpose of this study was to assess the outcomes of REAL Dayton, an immersive community engagement program at the University of Dayton, from the perspective of student participants using a multimethod approach of pre- and postprogram surveys and in-depth interviews. Existing literature on the effects and outcomes of community engagement programs on students examines how these programs affect a student's personal growth and development (Beatty et al., 2016; Pelco et al., 2014). This study fills a gap in this research by exploring how community engagement within the city where a student's university is located shapes students' attitudes toward and perceptions of the city. Results of analysis of pre- and postsurvey data show a significant increase in agreement with three measures of positive perceptions of the city of Dayton: program participants indicated higher levels of agreement regarding Dayton being a good place to live, personal interest in living in the city of Dayton in the future, and perceptions of the Dayton community actively working to address the city's challenges. There was not a significant difference in students' responses from pre- to postprogram surveys in regard to whether they felt that Dayton is a safe place or that UD gives students opportunities to get involved with service in Dayton. Moreover, there was no significant difference in participants' responses regarding the connectivity between UD and Dayton (both current and ideal) or their comfort interacting with the Dayton community after completing the program. During the interviews, participants described generally positive experiences on REAL Dayton as they emphasized the knowledge they gained about Dayton, their admiration for the city, and the applicability of their experiences to future engagement.

Following the program there was a significant increase in participant agreement

with the statement "I feel like there are people in the Dayton community actively working to address the city's challenges." This result reflects one of the program goals, which is "act with others by serving at several non-profits working to address the challenges in our city" (University of Dayton Center for Social Concern, 2020). There was also a statistically significant change in how knowledgeable students felt about Dayton from pre- to postsurvey, but not in the expected direction: Rather than reporting increased knowledge when asked how much they knew about the city (as predicted by previous research, such as Li and Hanson's 2016 study), students indicated that they felt less knowledgeable (rather than more) after participating in the program. We propose that this result reflects an increase in students' awareness of how much they *did not know* about the city and a more reflexive understanding of their need to learn more. When students want to gain more knowledge of the city, they may feel more comfortable exploring it. Whether this knowledge is about the city's neighborhoods, local organizations and businesses, community challenges and assets, or other aspects of the city, this knowledge enables students to act as more informed members of their communities (Jacoby, 2017).

Previous research indicates that students who felt empowered from civic engagement and volunteered for longer periods of time were more likely to continue future engagement (Knapp et al., 2010). Students who participated in REAL Dayton (a 3-day immersion program) reported that they were likely to continue to engage in the city of Dayton and other communities in the future. Specifically, research that has examined the likelihood of current and future engagement among college students has found that students' social relations and their knowledge about the location of their school predicted increased feelings of place attachment; attachment to place predicted more involvement in community service (Li & Hanson, 2016). The findings presented here contribute to this literature, showing that participants' perceptions of livability (both general and personal) increased after the program. These perceptions could be due to the participants' interactions with the Dayton community and their learning experiences during the program. The amount students participate in community service has an impact on their knowledge of the school area and their social relations

(Li & Hanson, 2016). Although this study did not test for a relationship between place attachment and likelihood of future engagement, the study showed significant increases in participants' feelings about Dayton being a good place to live as well as a likelihood of future engagement.

When asked about how they think their gifts and talents can make a positive impact on the city of Dayton, interview participants described how their personal characteristics and interest in participating in service at local organizations and nonprofits can make an impact on the city. These reflections demonstrate the ways that students developed soft skills that will carry over to future community engagement and career pathways through their participation in the program (Otto & Dunens, 2021). REAL Dayton allowed participants to see where their gifts and passions fit into the city. Similar to the students in Fogle et al.'s (2017) study, participants from REAL Dayton expressed the importance of getting off campus and engaging in the city, actively working to close the city-campus gap. Throughout the interviews, students shared that they have a responsibility to encourage their fellow students to get off campus and a desire to keep breaking the "UD bubble" and strengthen campus-community connections.

Survey and interview participants also demonstrated how they became more aware of the challenges that the city of Dayton is facing. Participants were able to see how community members are working to address these challenges through their leadership and involvement in various initiatives and organizations. These findings align with Jacoby's (2017) claim that educators can support students as agents of social change. She detailed the importance of encouraging students to think critically about societal issues and empowering them to take their awareness of problems a step further by becoming problem solvers. In the interviews, some participants noted how the challenges that Dayton is facing are challenges that other cities are encountering and that many of these issues are systemic and interconnected. In line with Manning-Ouellette and Hemer's (2019) findings that CEL participation increases students' social justice perspectives and political and diversity awareness, it is evident that REAL Dayton helps students think more critically about the issues of the greater Dayton community and introduces them

to ways that the community is addressing them and what role these students can play. This awareness reflects the development of a holistic view of civic engagement that is embedded within and in collaboration with the local community (Bringle et al., 2007).

It is important to note that this study was only an assessment of one community engagement program, so it is not generalizable to community-engaged learning at UD or beyond. In regard to the demographics of participants, the gender of participants showed almost equal representation (males 46% and females 54%), which is significant because previous research has found that females are more likely to participate in community engagement (Schatteman, 2014). The racial demographics of the sample are representative of a predominantly White institution, limiting the generalizability of the results: of the participants, 78% were White, which aligns with the general student body at UD. The other 22% of participants were slightly more racially representative than the student body. An additional limitation of this study is that REAL Dayton is an intensive 3-day community engagement program rather than a long-term community engagement program. The effects may vary based on the length of time and frequency that students participate in community engagement. There were 28 participants on REAL Dayton 2019, so the sample size was relatively small. Future studies including a larger sample size of students participating in a community engagement program could be more generalizable.

To understand fully the outcomes of this program, it would be necessary to conduct a longitudinal study to follow intentions for future engagement and how those intentions are realized after students graduate. One important component that the program tries to help participants understand is that what they learn during REAL Dayton about community engagement is applicable to anywhere they go. The program empowers students to take what they have learned about active citizenship and being a good neighbor with them beyond UD in whatever communities they live in. Building on this current study and exploring REAL Dayton's long-term impact on participants after they graduate would contribute to the literature on how community engagement affects the likelihood of future engagement and what such engagement looks like. Additionally, conducting a study with a leadership team

of REAL Dayton could be another way to build on this current study. REAL Dayton is a student-led program, and the leadership team participates in a 10-week minicourse about servant leadership as they prepare to lead their peers through the program. This type of study would allow for a better understanding of the implementation and facilitation of community engagement programs at the university level.

Future research on the outcomes of CEL should include perceptions of community members and organizations in addition to students. Given that CEL is conceptualized as creating a mutually beneficial relationship between university campuses and cities, it is important to ask community members how they feel the university can and does engage with the community. Taking into consideration the gaps between UD and the broader Dayton community, including socioeconomic and racial differences, a community-driven perspective could provide insight into how the community views student engagement and whether it is actually beneficial to the community. Furthermore, obtaining such a perspective would give community members an opportunity to share recommendations on how to improve student community engagement and civic education. As Brisbin and Hunter (2003) suggested, studying the perceptions of community members and organizations would give the university a better idea of

how they can bridge the gap between the university and the city and provide engagement opportunities to students in a way that will be mutually beneficial to the community as well.

Higher education sets a foundation for civic action, and the extent to which institutions value and encourage community engagement for their students plays a critical role. Such support must go beyond the inclusion of civically minded objectives in institutions' mission statements (Furco, 2010). In order to help students become civically minded—or driven to be knowledgeable, active, and responsible within their communities (Bringle & Steinberg, 2010)—community engagement opportunities need to be offered and publicized to students. Following participation in REAL Dayton, all interviewees expressed that active citizenship has to do with being aware of what is going on in their community, getting involved, and forming connections with others. Furthermore, many interviewees talked about taking pride and ownership in where they live. These findings show the benefits of students becoming civically minded while in college so that when they enter the world beyond their campuses, they not only carry with them an understanding of what it means to be an active citizen, but an enduring desire to act and engage in their communities.



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