Shaped by Campus Culture: Intersections Between Transformative Learning, Civic Engagement, and Institutional Mission

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Abstract

This ethnographic case study describes how civically engaged students understand their commitment to social change. Literature on civic engagement and service-learning abounds, yet gaps remain in understanding how students understand and act on campus mission and culture with respect to civic engagement. Using the frameworks of transformative learning, emerging adulthood, and civic engagement, this study attempted to understand a subculture of 24 undergraduate students at a Jesuit university. Ethnographic case study methodology was used in order to understand broader context and culture within which this subculture existed. Findings help to further understand how students interact with campus mission and culture relative to civic engagement. Emic and etic themes were distilled into 10 overarching umbrella themes. Implications for future research focus on the intersection of culture, context, and civic engagement at both faith-based and secular institutions.

Keywords: culture, Jesuit, civic, engagement, activism

Introduction

Historically, college and university campuses have been a springboard for civic engagement and activism *(Boren, 2001; Vellela, 1988)*. Particularly during the 20th century, students have made their voices heard about both largescale political and ideological concerns and smaller, more large-scale issues *(Rhoads, 1998)*. Although these movements and high-profile student leaders have helped shape the notion of the socially and politically engaged campus, the causes have varied over the years—from financial aid concerns to civil rights and free speech to divestment movements to human rights causes. Through it all, the context of the university campus has remained a constant *(White, 2016)*. Levels of support from institutional leaders have fluctuated, but university students have consistently led these civic engagement and activist efforts on campuses across the country *(Earl, Maher, & Elliott, 2017)*.

Simultaneously, competing criticisms of the passivity of students and the apathetic, indifferent campus are also present *(Dreier, 1998)*. Other criticisms have questioned the seemingly heroic

depictions of students by each successive generation, particularly when reflecting back on the so-called high watermark of American student activism in the 1960s *(Levine & Carnegie Council, 1980)*. As early as 1970, the American College Personnel Association asserted that, for the sake of dialogue and understanding, "stereotypes of the activist must be avoided, and the distorted pictures created with the mass media should be viewed with skepticism" *(Ellsworth & Burns, 1970, p. 6)*. These conflicting messages—seemingly true and misleading at the same time—highlight the challenges scholars have faced in dealing with student activism as a recurring phenomenon. Authors consistently acknowledge the complexity of the history of student activism and its present-day legacy *(Boren, 2001; Earl et al., 2017; Rhoads, 1998)*.

Interestingly, levels of student activism on college and university campuses have been relatively consistent since the late 1960s *(Levine & Cureton, 1998; White, 2016)*. Data show that students are engaged in working for social and political change and have been for quite some time, both for internal causes that affect a particular campus and for external causes that involve neighborhood and local community concerns, as well as more globally focused social justice concerns *(Quaye, 2004; Rhoads, 1998)*.

More recently, scholars suggest that sustained civic engagement is an appropriate and useful umbrella category and concept that includes traditional understandings of student activism as well as community service, political participation, and advocacy *(Lawry, Laurison, & VanAntwerpen, 2006)*. Civic engagement connotes a range of activities and can be broadly defined as "acting on a heightened sense of responsibility to one's communities" *(Coalition for Civic Engagement & Leadership, 2010, p. 2)*. Civic engagement work focuses chiefly on creating conditions to engage students in "positive social change for a more democratic world" *(p. 3)*. With the emergence of the concept of civic engagement, lines have become blurred between traditional notions of activism and community engagement. Activism has been viewed as resistance to established systems and authority structures *(Boren, 2001)*. Community engagement has been described as working within the system to bring about change *(Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont, & Stephens, 2003)*. The Carnegie Foundation *(2012)* defines community engagement as "collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity" *("How Is 'Community Engagement' Defined?", para. 1)*. Both activities come together under the broad

heading of civic engagement that emphasizes the educational value of "active democratic participation" *(Ropers-Huilman, Carwile, & Barnett, 2005, p. 296).*

This study emerged from this milieu of contrasting and conflicting critiques, images, history, and stereotypes regarding students involved in civic engagement, community engagement, and activism. In particular, this study examined the experiences of students involved in civic engagement at a Jesuit university. These institutions are led by the Roman Catholic order of priests known as the Society of Jesus and founded on the principles of Ignatius of Loyola. Known for promoting social change in an educational context, Jesuit institutions are centered on the key principles of service, accompaniment, community outreach, and social justice. Although each institution puts these principles into practice in its own unique way, the essential principles guide the overarching vision of Jesuit educational practice in higher education. Other essential hallmarks of this brand of pedagogy and practice include focusing on the total formation of each individual within the human community, engaging in value-oriented formation of students, creating a spirit of community, encouraging lifelong openness to growth, and showing care and concern for each individual person. Many Jesuit institutions rely on the concept of "the magis"—an aspirational and inspirational notion that roughly translates from Latin to English as "the more universal good"—to describe the spirit of their educational mission *(Geger, 2012).*

Conceptual Framework

The framework used in this study included several elements: what happens (transformative learning), when it happens (emerging adulthood), how it happens (civic engagement), and why it happens (Jesuit educational pedagogy and practice). These theories shed light on the role of culture as related to campus mission. The theories overlapped and highlighted the interrelationships between the process of student learning, the individual and developmental context of student learning, and the types of learning activities in which students engage. These three concepts and theories are built on the ground of Jesuit educational pedagogy and practice. The culture in which students found themselves was a critically important component to this study, for it forms the foundation on which students grow, develop, and engage in transformative experiences.

Methodology, Data Collection, and Discussion

Undergraduate student participants were selected by purposeful sampling and invited to participate in ethnographic interviews. The transcripts from these 24 interviews were compiled and coded, with both preset and emergent codes utilized *(Gibbs, 2007)*. Several recurring themes emerged. The majority of these themes were emic, pulled directly from the student stories and voiced by the students themselves. Common terms and phrases emerged that reflected the students' common experiences on campus. The collection of themes was compiled into a broad grouping. Both emic and etic themes were reduced to one-word summary categories in order to capture the students' sentiments. These one-word summaries were then grouped into even broader categories. Global themes such as religion, passion, privilege, questioning, justice, and perspective emerged. The one-word themes were tallied, and the top 10 categories were used to identify the most salient and recurring sentiments shared by the students (see Table 1).

Table 1. Most Frequent One-Word Summaries

One-Word Themes	Number of Occurrences
Perspective/Exposure	11
Insight	6
Church/Spirituality	5
Passion	5
Peers/Community	5
Reflection/Depth	4
Authenticity	4
Presence	3
Mentorship	3
Growth	3

A composite profile of a civically engaged student on campus emerged from this process. In addition to essentially serving as a heuristic construct, the profile brought together the most common themes voiced by the collection of students in this study. The individual narratives preserved the uniqueness of each student's story, and the composite profile served as an attempt to piece together the commonly shared elements of student experiences. In a sense, the profile attempted to highlight the essence and ethos of the culture according to the most commonly expressed sentiments. The profile streamlined the student experiences and pinpointed the most

salient parts of the campus culture. It was both a compilation of pieces of the student narratives and a new narrative altogether, a type of ethnographic or speculative fiction to help further describe the context. Numerous key themes emerged from the student narratives, including a strong commitment to specific Jesuit values like solidarity with marginalized communities (which, for some students, seemed to qualify and modify traditionally taught Roman Catholic values), a strong awareness of unearned racial and economic privilege, the value of asking critical questions of authority figures and systems, and the importance of articulating one's deeply held values in order to maintain consistency and authenticity.

Significance for Theory, Research, and Practice

A wide range of literature on civic engagement exists, in which engagement is described as anything from a valuable learning tool to a source of campus unrest *(Boren, 2001; Vellela, 1988)*. Relatively few studies have examined the interplay between students and overall campus culture. The perspectives and lived experiences of actual students who were civically engaged in a sustained way helped advance understanding of this as a cultural phenomenon. Descriptions of culture are always limited when offered by external observers. This study gave voice to campus culture through the eyes of students and their privileged perspectives as insiders. And, as the key themes underscore, these students played two roles—as agents within the culture helping to shape the experiences of other students, and as individuals who were shaped by the cultural environment. Through their narratives, the students articulated some powerful—and rather mature—personal learning and overall transformations. Further, this study offered contributions to existing theory on service-learning and experiential learning *(Kolb, Boyatzis, & Mainemelis, 2001; Miettinen, 2000; Moon, 2004)* by broadening the conversation to include student self-understandings, the role of campus mission, the influence of student subcultures, and the language of transformative learning theory and perspective transformation. The uniqueness of an ethnographic case study provided an opportunity to focus on the nuances in the life of an institutional subculture. The subtleties of the student narratives also helped put these larger institutional values into perspective, showing how they "came to life" in the daily realities of engaged students. The findings and discussion from this type of examination could be transferable to other mission-based institutions, including religiously affiliated institutions and institutions with community engagement missions.

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Methodological Addendum

This dissertation utilized an ethnographic case study as its methodology. Since the study examined questions about culture on a university campus, an ethnographic approach was deemed to be the best way to understand context, interactions, and overall meanings ascribed to these activities. With limited time and resources to complete the dissertation, using the ethnographic case study model served the study well. I was able to incorporate ethnographic means of data collection (participant observation, contextual interviews, document analysis) and analysis (domain analysis, emic and etic themes and codes, composite sketches) and apply them to a specific, time-limited case. This methodology, however, still required a significant investment of time, particularly when analyzing the data. Overall, these research tools were incredibly useful in my effort to reliably represent a specific culture.

About the Author

Dennis McCunney serves as director of the Center for Leadership and Civic Engagement and teaching assistant professor of leadership studies at East Carolina University. His professional and research interests include leadership development, faculty culture, critical service-learning, campus–community partnerships, and democratic engagement. He received his Ph.D. from Morgan State University's School of Education and Urban Studies.