

Faculty-Driven Student Engagement in Community-Engaged Projects: An Undergraduate Perspective

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Increasing student involvement in community-engaged initiatives begins with cultivating an environment in which students feel safe to take intellectual risks and where their interests and assets are valued. Drawing parallels between what students are learning in the classroom and problems within real communities allows them to develop a greater sense of responsibility in addressing community needs. Furthermore, creating spaces where students can talk about what they know and what interests them offers faculty opportunities to assess what types of projects might be of interest to students. It is essential for faculty to listen to their students actively and intentionally to identify what they know, how they think, and where their interests lie when creating community-engaged projects. This article seeks to present two areas for faculty to consider when motivating students to participate in community-engaged projects and the support needed to ensure lasting community and student impact.

Recruiting Students for Community-Engaged Projects

The Social Impact Fellowships at Lehigh University are marketed to students as an experiential learning, research, and entrepreneurial engagement opportunity to address real-world challenges through sustainable, impact-focused projects. The fellowships are not only chances to develop professionally and academically, but they are also opportunities for personal growth. The team members are intentionally composed of a diverse selection of majors, requiring students to learn to play to each other's strengths to achieve a common goal. Students greatly benefit from the interdisciplinary work of the projects because students have to venture into the Lehigh Valley community and establish partnerships with stakeholders of different perspectives and cultural backgrounds. Through this process, students learn how to develop projects that are grounded in stakeholder feedback and are accurate to the needs

of the community. Ultimately, undergraduates who partake in the Social Impact Fellowships gain practical skills that can only be attained through experience.

From a recruitment perspective, promoting a community-engaged space creates opportunities for students to develop the skills and mindsets to address complex societal challenges. Many students choose not to engage in community-based initiatives or projects because they feel that they do not have the skillset or academic background to be a valuable asset to their team. They might feel this way because, in their minds, a researcher may be limited to a tenured faculty member with years of field experience. Therefore, emphasizing that community-engaged initiatives do not necessarily require extensive prior experience is critical. It is equally important during the transitional stages of a project that new team members receive the appropriate guidance and training to develop a clear vision and cohesive team. For example, guidance could look like an onboarding process for new members, so they can access and understand the work that previous team members have contributed. This would allow new members to familiarize themselves with project expectations and deadlines. Understanding and addressing the concerns of new team members through such a process ensures that students feel supported during their community-engaged experience and prevents burnout.

Highlighting diverse student experiences at events like student panels is a great way to ensure that applicants truly understand what participating in different types of community-engaged spaces might look like and how the students involved in impact-based projects were able to utilize their strengths to effectively contribute towards bringing their projects to fruition. Once the connection between prospective students and research-active students has been established, the dissemination of knowledge can begin. Introducing new cohorts of students to long-running projects allow for new

ideas to be introduced and potential deliverables to be completed, which, under the right guidance, means an opportunity to attend and present at academic conferences.

Encouraging Students to Attend Conferences

Conferences are spaces where students can showcase their research and expertise in professional settings. Being in a formal academic setting allows students to build self-confidence and agency in their projects, providing them with the skillset to share and explain their ideas. In addition to giving students confidence in their field of study, conferences provide opportunities to network with fellow scholars and professionals. Participation in Lehigh University's Social Impact Fellowship program granted an opportunity for students to apply for and attend the 2022 Engagement Scholarship Consortium (ESC) Conference. This allowed students to network with professionals in a formal setting and present their projects to experienced researchers. When presenting research outside of their university, it is easy for students to become intimidated or nervous. Therefore, faculty must provide appropriate guidance for students on what to expect and how to conduct themselves at conferences.

Faculty can help students optimize their conference experience by initiating conversations between students and others the faculty member may know or by encouraging students to network on their own. The program director of Lehigh University's Social Impact Fellowship programs, Khanjan Mehta, challenged students to make at least 10 meaningful connections by the end of the 2022 ESC Conference. This goal could be accomplished by attending research talks, speaking to presenters during poster sessions, and speaking to representatives from organizations in their field of interest. Establishing a clear, achievable goal for students to strive for at conferences tasks the students to leave their comfort zone. Networking with others who have shared interests in research and community engagement at conferences may also introduce students to opportunities that further their careers.

Conferences are spaces where students can showcase their research and expertise in professional settings, and a formal setting allows students to build self-confidence and agency in their projects, which provides them with the skillset to disseminate their ideas. Students also have the added benefit of networking with fellow scholars and professionals. For these reasons, faculty should motivate and support students to participate in community-engaged projects that could lead them to conferences.

Conclusion

This article emphasized the role of faculty in encouraging students to join high-impact projects and provided onboarding strategies for new team members wanting to participate in community-engaged projects. These strategies highlight the role faculty play in catalyzing the professional development of their students, especially through supporting students' attendance at academic conferences. Faculty have a critical role in opening the door for students to become more involved with community-engaged projects that can positively impact their communities and create mutually beneficial educational opportunities.

About the Authors

At the time of this writing, Sofia Espinoza Hernández and Paulina González Orozco were undergraduate students in the Department of Population Health at Lehigh University, and Nandini Yellamelli was an undergraduate student in the College of Arts and Sciences at Lehigh University.