

## **Local Political Involvement and Service Learning**

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At the University of Iowa, 2005-06 is the “Year of Public Engagement” where “[d]uring this year, the University community will be encouraged to intensify its efforts and sharpen its focus on engagement with the public and public issues at the local, state, national, and international levels” (University of Iowa, 2006). Putting aside the question of whether one year is enough to do “engagement” justice, Iowa’s move is just the latest in a series of efforts by colleges and universities to do something to better connect students, faculty, and staff to the community at large. The idea of engagement has spawned a mini industry of late as institutions of all types struggle with the question of what it means to be “engaged.” While this is in fact a very big question, our paper focuses on a small, but critical, portion. We are interested in how political science can use “civic” engagement options to enhance coursework and to reinforce not just involvement in a community, but involvement in the *politics* of a community. While not negating the importance of working in soup kitchens, or cleaning up polluted streams, we suggest that these activities do not, by themselves, connect students to the *civic* – that is, the *political* – in their communities.

A political science concern for civic engagement is not really new, though perhaps the use of the language of “service learning” and “civic engagement” is. Political science, after all, is often the home of various internship programs, semesters in Washington and state capitals, and other “hands-on” projects such as campaign internships. If any department has been historically “engaged” it is political science. Having said this, however, it is not clear at all that political scientists have in general given a lot of thought to how concepts from service learning can directly inform the way we teach our courses. It is one thing to simply send students out to volunteer with campaigns; it is another to fully integrate the experience of campaign work with

the material actually taught in class.

This paper describes one such effort at the University of Iowa. The course, Local Politics, has been taught since 1999 by the first author. Typically this course includes units on the function and structure of local government and the role of citizens and interest groups, along with a local elections unit. The capstone of the course has been a local government simulation called Camelot, which takes up the last three or four weeks of the course.<sup>1</sup> In the past students were also assigned to “observe” the Iowa City City Council election (the course is normally taught during the fall city elections) and to write an in-depth paper on one candidate’s campaign. More recently, following participation by the first author in a faculty “Service Learning Institute” at Iowa in summer 2005, the course was revised to incorporate a comprehensive civic engagement/service learning section, which was implemented in fall semester 2005. The challenges and successes in implementing service learning in this political science course form the basis for most of the rest of this paper. We begin by considering some key elements of service learning, then describe the design of the service-learning requirement, following which we examine the outcome of the experience from both a student and faculty perspective. We close by drawing some broad conclusions about the value of such an exercise in a political science course.

### **What is Service Learning in Political Science?**

For quite some time now, many high schools have required a community service component for graduation. This component usually consists of pure “volunteering,” that is, students must find a community organization and volunteer their time “helping” the organization. Thus more and more of our students come to college level classes with some

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<sup>1</sup> Camelot is a published simulation, quite comprehensive in nature, and can be played by up to 75 players. For information see Woodworth, James R., R. Robert Gump, and James R. Forrester. (2006). *Camelot: A Role Playing Simulation for Political Decision Making* (5<sup>th</sup> Ed.) Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

experience in “coerced volunteering”, but rarely does the work they do in the community connect back to any specific curricular goals at their high school. Nonetheless, something seems to be happening. As Putnam (2000) points out, the youngest adult generation is clearly more volunteer oriented than their elders. While young people may not attend meetings with regularity, and may show serious declines in the type of social capital with which Putnam is concerned, they can readily be mobilized to “do good” in a community, even without the coercion of required volunteerism.

At the collegiate level many colleges and universities have developed “service-learning” initiatives, sometimes driven from the top down (Iowa’s Year of Public Engagement declaration by the University President was part of the impetus for the faculty Service Learning Institute) and other times from the students up. The APPLES program at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill represents one such approach. As noted on its website, the program is both a unit of the Provost’s office and a registered student organization (APPLES, 2006.) What one finds in examining many of these programs is that while the idea of service learning is rapidly gaining acceptance, it is not always clear what exactly is service learning. APPLES perhaps puts it most succinctly in describing service learning as “focus[ing] on the connection made between service in the community and what one learns in an academic setting. Through reflection, students’ service experiences are also used as a tool for learning.” This is placed in opposition to “community service” which is described as “a basic conducting of service within the community, which has no structured ties to any academic curriculum” (APPLES, 2006.)

In reflecting ourselves on what service learning might mean in a political science course, we considered this: is civic engagement the same thing as service learning? Local Politics students might be developing civic engagement skills through the traditional assignment of

examining a local election campaign as it happened, but it was quite clear that the assignment was generally done in isolation from the rest of the course content. It was much like any other paper assignment that undergraduates might receive. “Here’s the assignment, go do it, turn it in when it is done” has been a typical approach and reflects almost exactly how the existing assignment worked in Local Politics. The instructor would help by providing campaign contact information, and would set the expectations for the form of the resulting paper, but except by accident the local campaign assignment was never directly discussed in class and certainly never reflected upon as part of the assignment itself or class discussion. Clearly if guided reflection is a critical part of service learning, as it seems to be (Bringle and Hatcher, 1999) then what was happening in Iowa Local Politics was not service learning, though it might be community service, or even civic engagement.

After some wasted time deciding whether or not “service” in a political campaign would be “community service” – given the ephemeral nature of such campaigns and perhaps the uncertainty of whether campaigns “do good” in a community – we decided to move on. Initially we thought the question of whether we were going to be “doing service learning” to be an interesting one; on reflection we decided it was not. Whatever we call it, the key difference between what came before and what was planned for the course revision was that the typical elements of service learning – working in the community, reflecting on the work, and connecting the work to the course content – would be added to what was already deemed a pretty successful course by students who had taken it in the past.<sup>2</sup> Given the course’s success, and the not

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<sup>2</sup> Students taking Local Politics regularly call it the best class they had at Iowa. The authors (the first of whom teaches the class and the second of whom took a version of it in an intense three week summer session) suspect that it is the Camelot simulation that generates this response. Much of the class is the “typical” lecture and discussion format, with a few visiting local politicians and interest groups leaders thrown in. But the simulation is high powered, intense, and extremely involving of students, and provides what many say is a real hands-on way of understanding just what the lectures and discussions were all about.

inconsequential amount of time necessary to incorporate a service-learning component into the class, why do it? Notwithstanding that the first author committed to making this modification as part of his participation in the faculty service-learning institute in summer 2005, the primary driver was the idea that in adding service learning, key pedagogical and engagement goals could be realized.

### **Goals for Service Learning**

There appear to be, in essence, three main goals in service learning from the perspective of course providers. One is to partner with the community to determine and fulfill a need of the community or community organization. A second is to engage the student in the community immediately and increase potential for future engagement. Finally, to be truly valuable, service-learning assignments must connect with and enhance theories students are learning in the classroom at the same time they are completing projects in the community. While we found a version of these goals explicitly stated at UNC Chapel Hill, similar sentiments are found throughout the service-learning literature. Thus the goals of service learning are both to accomplish something of value in the community and to directly tie the community experience to the content of the course. While this is done by placing students in community organization settings, it seems necessary that these students produce something of value for their organizations, while working to connect their experience back to the classroom. This latter activity is usually done via some sort of guided reflection exercise, where students consider the nature of their work and the connections it makes through the maintenance of a journal and through in class discussions.

It is hard to argue with the idea that service-learning projects should meet some need in the community. Even a brief look at programs in place throughout the country show placements

such as animal shelters, soup kitchens, homeless shelters, environmental organizations, and the like. Certainly these agencies, and many others, are chronically understaffed and find serving their clients to be challenging. Adding some student workers might be just the ticket that they need, as long as it does not take more effort on the organization's part to get the students up to speed than they get work in return from the students. Some research reflects the positive nature of students' involvement in community organizations. A survey of "Learn and Serve America, Higher Education" reported that 94% of the organizations interviewed would like to have students participate again in the future (Gray et al, 2000). Nonetheless, there were challenges reported. The variations and time constraints naturally incorporated in students' lives was viewed as the largest obstacle. Some organizations also suggested that training became more cumbersome because the students were only involved for a short period of time. However, there was still overwhelming support for their involvement with more than 70% reporting "that the benefits of working with student volunteers far outweighed the problems and costs" (Gray et al, 2000).

But from the perspective of a political science class, where student projects may include working in a campaign, it is not quite so clear what the community "need" might be that is to be served. Campaigns come and go, and while winning candidates may run again someday (as do some losing candidates) it is rare the politician at the local level who maintains an ongoing campaign organization. The campaign organization itself exists primary to serve the candidate's needs (winning an election) which may or may not be the same as a community's needs. So perhaps we must content ourselves with the idea that local political campaigns serve an inherent, often unstated, community need – to provide the necessary information so that voters in the community can make an informed decision about the options available to them and the potential

policy consequences of their vote choice. Many in the community might disagree on the value of campaigns, or of politics in general, while few would disagree that traditional social service agencies serve a community need.<sup>3</sup>

One option, of course, would be to place even local politics students into community service agencies, and work to connect their experiences with the local political environment. Then there would be little doubt that the first goal of service learning would be fulfilled. For various reasons, including the traditional assignment in this class, students in our Local Politics class primarily served in campaigns, though two groups of students did not. More on this later in the paper.

The general idea of the second goal is that engaging students with various community organizations now will promote their civic engagement in the future. We all know the dire claims of Putnam's (2000) *Bowling Alone*: the great "civic generation" weaned on World War II is passing away and leaving in its wake a generation or two of disconnected, uninvolved, social capital lacking Americans. Meeting attendance is declining; gathering in informal groups is declining; engagement in our communities in all manner large and small just does not happen the way it once did in the good old days. There is some evidence that young are also less engaged than they might be. While volunteerism might be up, there is good evidence that today's students are not connected to the political/public environment (Keeter, et al, 2002). Without actually entering this debate, or even commenting directly on its merits, we suggest that whether or not social capital matters, and whether or not it is (or was) declining, civic engagement is, as

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<sup>3</sup> That politics is an anathema to many people should come as no surprise. The student of local politics learns quite quickly that much of America's local political environment has developed as a response to ongoing "reforms" which typically had as a stated goal to get "politics" out of local government. The widely quoted aphorism is that there is "no Republican or Democratic way to plow the streets or pick up the trash." Thus, while we celebrate separation of powers at the national level, and support partisan elections for Congress, most local governments have no separation between executive and legislative, and partisan local elections are becoming quite rare in many states.



Martha Stewart might put it, “a good thing.” It seems particularly appropriate that political scientists be concerned with students developing the necessary skills, knowledge, and understandings to allow them to become productively engaged in their communities.

Reports suggest that students may in fact become more engaged citizens after participating in a service-learning program. A study of alumni from a Catholic liberal arts college showed that students who participated in either community service or service-learning during their undergraduate were much more likely to be involved in their community two to nine years after graduation than those who did not (Fenzel & Peyrot, 2005). In another study, a survey sent to students during their first year of college, four years after and finally nine years after they started college, was used to track the effects of undergraduate volunteerism. The benefit of the students’ early involvement in the community seems clear.

...spending six or more hours per week in volunteer work during the last year of college, as compared to not participating in volunteer work, nearly doubles the student’s chances of being engaged in volunteer work in the years after college, and more than doubles his or her chances of spending either one, three, or six plus hours per week in post college volunteer/community service work (Astin, Sax and Avalos, 1999).

This study also found that the earlier someone becomes involved the more likely they are to volunteer in the future. Further, being a “frequent” volunteer in high school doubled the chances that someone would report volunteer work on the nine year survey. In another study, Astin and colleagues (2000) found that participation in service learning had a stronger effect on future “commitment to activism” than did simple community service activities not tied to coursework. This suggests that it is when community service is taken a step further and paired with faculty oversight and guided reflection activities – that is when it becomes service learning, this second goal may be achieved. It may be that, as Birney (2005) suggests in a different context, service-learning activities help increase political efficacy on the part of students

involved in these programs. Longo and colleagues (2005) find that students in “engaged” projects learn too that they are not in it alone, that others are similarly situated, and that the work they do has impact on the community. Both realizations might also enhance the likelihood that students will continue to be engaged long after leaving their service-learning courses behind.

Finally we turn to the third goal, that of enhancing student learning by connecting the theory of the classroom with the practice of the “real world.” While many speculate that this combination should allow students to comprehend material in a new, improved manner, the evidence is a bit slim on this point. We found one study which claims a positive correlation between course grades and service learning (Markus, Howard & King, 1993.) In this case students were enrolled in a “Contemporary Political Issues” course that included two lectures and a discussion section each week. Two discussion sections were designated as service-learning sections requiring 20 hours of time dedicated to a community organization. At the end of the semester the service-learning students had an average grade of a B+ to an A-. The non service-learning students averaged between a B and a B+ on the same exams. In this case it appears as though service learning positively impacted course grades. However, it is also possible that we are simply seeing the effects of a selection bias – those students likely to do better were perhaps also more likely to take a service-learning section.

Other studies have looked at the effects of service on academics more broadly, but with little agreement. In addition to their positive findings on future engagement, Astin and colleagues (2000) found service learning to have a positive effect on academics. Focusing on both grade point average and writing skills, they found that these service-learning effects were greater than the effects from general community service. But a different study reached the opposite conclusion. Surveys administered to 1,300 students supplemented by personal interviewing not

only failed to support the hypothesis that “service-learning promotes improved academic skills,” but also found that in some instances students who chose not to participate in a course-based service component had greater improvement in their academic skills than those that did (Gray et al, 2000). While it may be difficult to draw a firm conclusion about whether service-learning courses do in fact meet this third goal of academic improvement, there are certain variables can affect the outcomes of the experience. The structure of a class, type of service and goals of the class play an important role in what a student takes away from the course.

When it comes to the academic theories and ideas taught in the classroom it can be difficult to reinforce these through a service-learning project. This problem may be highly dependent on the class subject. It can be frustrating for both the teacher and students to make connections between political theory and working at a soup kitchen (see Zivi, 1997, for this example.) In some instances the teacher will feel torn between focusing on the themes developed through the community project and those that the students learn in the classroom for testing. Thus, it becomes important to be sure that the service-learning project fits with the subject material if the goal of reinforcement is to be realized. A class on local politics, for example, can easily incorporate its themes with the work students do on local campaigns. Students working in such an environment may be essentially seeing the reading “in action” making it much more exciting and understandable.<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps the best way to connect the service experience with the classroom work is through reflection exercises. Students might keep a personal journal throughout their experience.

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<sup>4</sup> Having said this, it is also possible to use a little creativity and connect students in ways they might not expect. A colleague at Iowa in English, Teresa Mangum taught a fall semester 2005 course entitled Literature and Society: Capturing Animals, in which she partnered with the local animal shelter to provide a service learning component for students so that instead of simply reading and discussing the role of animals in our culture, students experienced first hand the stories and insights animals could provide while doing useful work on behalf of the shelter. Information on her course can be found at: <http://www.english.uiowa.edu/courses/mangum/animal05/index.htm>.

Ideally they would make a journal entry each time they were involved at the site. At various times during the semester the instructor might also pose specific questions, offering the student a more structured way to make connections to class material. Such questions should directly correlate with the material being covered in class at that time. For example if the class is covering the role of the media in campaigning the students could reflect on how media effects in their own campaigns. The student may then be able to better understand the concept in light of a first hand experience, giving a more complete picture.

Our purpose in perhaps belaboring these goals here and now is to set the stage for the effort we made to incorporate service learning (or perhaps civic engagement) into a political science class. Students were intrigued, though perhaps nervous, when told about the plan. The professor (the first author), a great believer in “getting students out there” and “hands-on work” was perhaps nervous about the extra work this project might create for him. And the undergraduate TA (the second author) simply wondered what her role would be in all of this. In any case we all entered this with a shared sense that something valuable might come out of it, perhaps even a project that would achieve some, if not all, of the service-learning goals we have just discussed.

### **Service Learning and Local Politics at Iowa**

In order to help the reader understand what we were doing, we will first detail the way in which the class was structured, and then talk about what actually happened during the semester. Because of concerns that the workload on the instructor would be significant, the first step was to involve an assistant in the project. Fortunately, a version of the Local Politics course had been offered in the May 2005 three-week session at Iowa, and one of the students in that class

developed a particular interest in learning more about service learning. As someone who experienced the class without a local campaign assignment of any type, this student (who is the second author on this paper) was particularly interested in how the service-learning project would work. We were able to structure an independent research tutorial that provided credit to the student in exchange for 1) developing a bibliography of work on service learning, and 2) acting as the administrative support for the service-learning project portion of the class. Without this second function, the course could not have been carried out effectively. The student assistant did most of the work of maintaining contact with organizations, monitoring student work, and providing initial assessments of journals. The instructor maintained all grading authority and oversaw the work of the student assistant.

### **The basic structure of the class**

Local Politics is an upper level elective course at Iowa, designed to give students a basic understanding of the forms and functions of local government. It is specifically not a “state and local politics” course, not is it an “urban politics” course. As noted earlier, the course has several elements, designed to teach students how local government works, who gets involved in local politics and why, and some nuts and bolts about local election campaigns. This latter is a particular interest of the instructor who has himself run for (both winning and losing) local office in the past. The course seems to attract a substantial number of non-political science majors, especially journalism students, as well as a smattering of sociology and business students. The majority of the typical 42 student enrollment is majoring in political science, however.<sup>5</sup>

As noted earlier, the service-learning project implemented in fall 2005, replaced a previous assignment to write a paper about a city council candidate’s campaign for office. This

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<sup>5</sup> More details on the course, including the most recent syllabus, can be found on the first author’s website at <http://www.uiowa.edu/~c030111/localpolitics/munipol.html>.

new service-learning project accounted for 25% of the student's grade. Assessment of the service-learning work was to be based on 1) actual completion of at least 35 hours of service during the course of the semester, and 2) the quality of a written reflection journal to be kept by students documenting their work hours, their thoughts about their work, and responding to four specific guided reflection assignments spaced over the course of the project.

The projects available largely focused on the city council elections then ongoing in Iowa City. There were six candidates running for two open at-large seats (five of whom participated with the class) and one candidate running unopposed for a districted seat (who also participated). City Council elections are held in two stages in Iowa City, with a primary election in October to reduce the number of candidates to no more than two for each available seat, and a general election in November where voters pick from the remaining candidates. All candidates run on a non-partisan ballot, and the local political parties do not actively involve themselves in the campaigns.

Given that there were to be 49 students in the class, we were concerned that the local city council campaigns might be overwhelmed if every student chose to work on a campaign.<sup>6</sup> Such campaigns are usually small affairs in Iowa City; it remains unusual for a candidate to raise and spend even \$10,000 on the race. Consequently before the semester started we determined that other placements would be necessary. Fortunately, two more campaigns were readily available. A group of local residents had successfully petitioned to place the question of "public power" on the November ballot. Voters were to be asked whether to potentially form a municipal electrical utility, thus removing the franchise from the private company that held it. The company,

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<sup>6</sup> As it turned out, this class has far more "drops" than it usually does. Before the semester began the course was full, and several students wanted to be added. Despite adding a few, the final tally in the course was 43. It is clear that the service learning assignment appeared to be more work than many students wanted to commit to in one semester. This suggests that caution is in fact needed in assessing the effects of service learning, since some percentage of students may be dissuaded from taking such classes, resulting in a selection bias effect.

MidAmerican Energy campaigned extensively against the measure, while the group, Citizens for Public Power, worked in favor of passage. Both sides agreed to take on any students who might be interested.

Finally, two other opportunities appeared. The president of the Iowa student government (UISG) planned a Get Out the Vote (GOTV) project which was to focus on improving the abysmal voting rate of Iowa students in local elections. Second, a local public interest group had formed to petition the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to open up hearings on the renewal of a local television license, asserting that the station was failing to operate in the public interest. Both groups became involved in the project, but while UISG was also election focused, the Iowans for Better Local TV (IBLTV) was the only placement opportunity that did not involve the local elections. In any case, the service-learning project was to end on Election Day in November. This was done to allow time to do the final local government simulation, Camelot, which continued to be the capstone of the course. To complete the required 35 hours by the ending date students found it necessary to work in their organization about five hours a week.<sup>7</sup>

### **Getting Started**

Before the semester started in late August, a short meeting was arranged with the candidates and/or the leaders of the organizations. This July meeting was to explain the project and ask if they would like to participate. It also gave them a chance to ask any questions they had about the project. During this meeting, contact information was exchanged and the best way for students to get in touch with each group was determined. Shortly after these meetings, approximately three weeks before the beginning of the semester, we decided to hold a job fair on

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<sup>7</sup> While a number of students complained that the assignment seemed to be excessive, the argument was presented that since this assignment was in place of a research paper, students would be expected to put the same amount of effort into this that the instructor would expect for a paper, which is about 1/3 of all the time devoted to the class.

the second day of class.<sup>8</sup> To coordinate this, the candidates and leaders were either called or emailed an invitation. Each of the candidates and all other groups indicated they would attend. We arranged for everyone to have a table and allowed them to bring literature if they liked. Due to the size of the room and the large class size, we divided the class into two groups by alphabet. Each group of students was instructed to come at a different time, allotting about 45 minutes for each group to meet the representatives of the campaigns and organizations.

The job fair gave the students some assistance in deciding on their service-learning project for the semester. They had the chance to meet the candidates and leaders personally to determine what kind of work they would do for them. To ensure that they actually did meet everyone, students were required to sign their name at each table, which most students actually did. While the job fair was a bit of a last minute thing, it seemed quite successful; both students and campaigns/organizations were pleased to have the contact. In the end one candidate did not show despite confirming: it is perhaps no surprise that no one initially signed up to work on his campaign. At the other extreme, one of the candidates brought a bowl of candy and treated the opportunity as a chance to meet potential voters, as well as volunteers. Her table was quite popular.

Students had been given placement forms that were to be filled out by the campaign or organization with which they were going to work.<sup>9</sup> At the last minute, we decided to allow students to have their placement sheets signed at the fair itself, which turned out to cause some confusion when some candidates did not get the word that they could sign people up right then and there. The idea of the form was to create a formal way to guarantee that the organization and

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<sup>8</sup> While in retrospect this “job fair” turned out to be an excellent idea, the idea itself was driven by necessity, when the first author thought he would have to be absent for the second day of class, and was looking for some way to not cancel.

<sup>9</sup> The form can be found on the course website at <http://www.uiowa.edu/~c030111/localpolitics/munipol.html>.



student had discussed their role and had the opportunity to exchange contact information. To avoid overwhelming any organization, we only allowed six available slots on each project. Once the placement sheets were turned in, the first six students were placed on a project. In the end approximately 10% of the class had to make a second choice when their first preference was full.

As students were placed with the organizations, we sent a confirmation email to them. This included the group they would be working with and the contact information. A confirmation email and/or call were also made to the organization so that they had a list of students who would be working with them.

### **Journaling and Guided Reflections**

Students were required to keep a reflection journal on their work. This served multiple purposes. First, it was their time log for their work. Second, it was a place to think about what they were doing. Third, it was the final “output” or “result” of the work students did and as such its content was a major input into the grade they received. The journal was required to be handwritten to avoid situations where students might be tempted to create a journal out of whole cloth the night before it was due to be turned in. While online course sites can provide time stamped journaling possibilities, given all the other changes being made in the course, it did not seem an optimal time for the instructor to learn something new. In retrospect though, after trying to read 43 handwritten journals, online journaling may be encouraged in the future!

In addition to writing entries in their journals each time they did service, there were four guided reflections for the students to respond to in their journals. Before students did anything for their organization we asked them to write about their current knowledge of local government. The other guided reflections were directly related to the service-learning project as it was in process and are included at the end of this paper. As much as possible, the reflections focused on

an aspect of local politics that had been covered recently in course readings or lectures. In the final analysis, we required them to reflect on why their candidate or referendum had won or lost. Students were also asked to provide an overall evaluation of the service-learning project as the last writing in their journal.

We also scheduled two in-class reflection days during the project. The discussions were to revolve around the guided reflections to which the students had responded. But there was a real problem with this idea – after all students were mostly working for campaigns that were competing with each other. Thus there was a risk that confidential campaign information might be accidentally discussed in public. So to maintain campaign confidentiality the class was divided into discussion groups consisting of students who were working on the same project. The student government, referendum and interest group members were split apart though, and filtered in with candidates that had similar philosophies to vary the discussion. After the primary, we incorporated an all-class discussion about the results. This was done on a regularly scheduled reflection day. The small group discussion time was shortened to allow for approximately twenty minutes of class discussion.

### **Working with Campaigns and Organizations**

Political campaigns are odd beasts, especially local campaigns. In some cases the primary contact was the candidate him or herself. In others, there was a campaign manager with whom the students worked. In all cases, the campaigns were not large organizations, and the students made up a substantial portion of the workforce available to the campaign.

At random times during the course of the project we checked in with the campaigns and organizations. This was initially done within two weeks after assignment to be sure that the students had been in contact with the organizations. If there was a problem in communication an

email was sent to the student to be certain that they had received the phone call and/or email from their organizations. After that, other check-ins were carried out approximately once a month. Our goal was to be sure that any problems that crept up could be quickly eliminated, but at the same time we did not want to be bothersome to the organization. Each of these check-ins simply involved a phone call or email to each organization. Finally, at the end of the project we contacted all the campaigns and organizations once more asking them for feedback on both the project itself and on the role the students played in their organization.

### **What Happened?**

An initial assessment of the service-learning project suggests that it was successful, at least in a general way. While not all students had a well structured experience, and not all organizations made effective use of the students available to them (as we detail below), even those students that found their projects particularly frustrating appeared in their journaling and in class discussions to be able to make connections between the classroom material and their “real world” experience. Many students expressed either a written or verbal desire to participate in a local project again. We asked students at the end to give us a general evaluation of the project and the extent to which it allowed them to better understand their classroom work. Some representative responses include:

- This project was very useful in that it took classroom lessons and gave them a face. Things we have been learning throughout our political science education about elections and campaigns were finally there in front of us to use and explore.
- I got to take part in a local campaign and learn about local politics first-hand. It definitely made the topics of this class easier to understand and made it a lot more interesting. This experience was probably one of the best school-based experiences that I have had in my four years at the University of Iowa.
- I really feel this project helped me grasp some of the principles of the class. I know that without this project that I would not understand local campaigns as well.

- Overall in regards to this project I think my overall experience far surpassed that of my expectations. I came into this expecting this to be a large waste of time, but looking back on it I really see this as being beneficial. I know that by the time it was over I was left wishing I could do this for another couple of weeks.

What is especially compelling about these and other similar comments is how students such as the first one above drew larger lessons than just those dealing with the content of this specific Local Politics course. There is also a hint that at least some students might be motivated beyond just this one experience, and it is really gratifying to see students who assumed the project would be a waste of time deciding that in the end it was not.

### **Three Goals of Service Learning**

Earlier we discussed three broad goals of service learning and now it is time to consider whether this project did indeed move us closer to any of the goals. If we believe that these goals are worth striving for – and we do – then we need to get some sense of how well we did. As a reminder, the first goal was to fulfill a need of the community or community organization. The second was to engage students now and increase their potential for future community engagement. Finally, we expressed a goal of enhancing the theories the students learn in the classroom through completing their projects in the community.

### **Fulfilling Community Needs**

In our follow up discussions with the political candidates and other organizations where students were placed there was general agreement that the involvement of the students was helpful to the organizations. Not only did the students add an element of excitement and an additional labor force, but several of the organizations found that these students also offered innovative ideas. All the feedback that we received was positive during this follow-up, even as we asked specifically about problems or challenges. The organizations and candidates expressed

that if they were again in a similar situation (running for office, supporting an issue) they would wish to have student involvement again. This is not to say that the process was without problems. There were obstacles that surfaced during the experience – many of which we will detail in the last section of this paper – but from the standpoint of the organizations the obvious result was that their needs were met.

As we noted earlier, though, there is another question at hand. There is no debate that having students work at a soup kitchen helps the community as a whole as well as the particular agency’s clients, but what about political campaign work? We think it is clear that this work too is valuable to the community because of the impact that local government can have on its residents. The decisions that a city council makes directly affect everyone whether they realize it or not and whether they like politicians or wish they would all go away. City councilors are often relied on by community members to help them when they are unable to get something they need. One of the local candidates who was already a City Council member pointed out how his constituent work directly benefited members of the community, using as an example intervention in getting needed special services bus service for a disable member of the community. Thus, while it may be in an indirect manner, the students’ work in campaigns clearly has potential to be meaningful to the community.

### **Current and Future Engagement**

While it is certainly too early to know whether or not students participating in this class will remain “engaged” in either Iowa City community or wherever they land, we did get some sense from reflection responses that for some this experience was an eye-opener that might lead them to continue. Students wrote in ways that made clear most realized their actions would have a direct effect on the results of the election regardless of the manner in which they participated.

Even students not working on a campaign – the UISG get-out-the-vote project and the IBLTV better television project – felt they had direct influence on events. It appears that the work done by the UISG to raise awareness of the election and get students out to vote had some success, as student turnout was up significantly over the election two years before. And while the IBLTV project was not directly connected to the elections, students worked on a major public event that included attendance by two FCC Commissioners and which drew a crowd of about 500 people to discuss the state of local television news coverage.

The after-effect for many students of seeing their work turn into results created at least an expressed interest in future involvement. This was especially the case for one student who worked on the UISG project. By seeing the results of her work in numbers, how many students were newly registered and how many students actually voted, she expressed that she was now encouraged to work in the campaigning process again. Students also became aware that they were not in it alone. One student's final reflection commented on a meeting with her group where she was able to learn about the personal lives of the community members involved in the project. She found herself making a connection with them because she saw the sacrifice that they were making in their lives to be a part of the group. Part of the reason she wanted to continue with the group was because of the people she met in the process. Then there were the students who decided to continue with their project even after completing the 35 required hours. Finally, even students who were already active in their communities recognized the value in the project, writing that:

I think this project would be a great idea in the future because it is very good at promoting community interaction while at the same time reinforcing our education. I think that other students should do this project because I think that it could be beneficial for those students who rarely get involved with things.

## Connecting with the Academic

Whether adding the service-learning component to this class enhanced students' understanding of the material is difficult to assess. What we would like, of course, is some kind of controlled experiment, where one randomly selected group of students gets a version of the class with service learning and another without. That is not available here or in very many other similar situations.<sup>10</sup> However, while it is difficult to say whether grades were better in this class over a class without service learning, it became obvious to the instructor that the projects helped the students bridge their work with class material that highlighted campaigning styles, the role of media in local politics, the structure of local government and more. Thus, the students were able to see the reading in action. This was reflected by students in final assessments of the project:

- I noticed a lot of the things we talked about in class were happening while I was working on the campaign. It was much easier to relate to the material, which can be a little abstract in many political science classes. We got to live the material we learned in class.”
- I think the experience of working for a campaign was an awesome opportunity. I think that it really took what would normally just be learned in class to a completely different level and allowed me to experience first hand the actual strategies and events that were the focus of actually getting someone elected. I think without this type of experience to reinforce the readings, it is impossible to imagine what actually goes on in a campaign - instead of just theory.”

So while we do not have the kind of evidence social scientists would like to say yes, definitely the service-learning component enhanced student learning of the class material, we are quite comfortable that for many students it did exactly that.

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<sup>10</sup> It should be obvious that it would be difficult to make these assessments. As part of the faculty service learning institute at Iowa, a business school colleague developed a survey instrument to be administered at the beginning and end of the semester by those of us who were running “service learning” designated courses. In addition, the first author administered the survey in his course on Voting Behavior and Elections, which had no service learning component. At the time of this writing, these data are not yet available, and in any case they will not represent the kind of controlled experiment that would be most useful. Nonetheless, there are good efforts to make assessments of service learning courses; see for example, Longo, Drury, and Battistoni (2005.) Markus, Howard & King (1993) made an early attempt to assess the effects of service learning in a controlled way.

## **Now What about the Problems?**

This is not to say that the project was without problems or that each goal was equally met for every student. While the project as a whole ran fairly smoothly, there are changes that we would probably make the next time. Most of the major changes would be in initial selection of the groups combined with smaller changes in the facilitation of the job fair, communication with the organizations, in-class reflections and feedback on the project.

### **Problems with Some Organization Placements**

The two major problems that were encountered were primarily caused by our decision to allow students to work on an unopposed incumbent's campaign and with the university student government (UISG) on their get out the vote project. While the incumbent had promised that she would be developing materials for her constituents, including guides to local issues, in the end all she did was participate in a few local candidate forums. Most of the students on this assignment expressed frustration and concern because of the lack of things to do. They were perhaps more concerned that there was not 35 hours of work to be had than actually bored, but in any case the experience was not what it should have been. In retrospect, given the focus on *campaigns*, it was just wrong to assign students to a candidate without a campaign. In our defense, at the beginning of the semester it was not yet clear the candidate would have no opposition, since the filing deadline was a couple weeks after classes had begun. Regardless of their promises to keep the students busy, however, it is unlikely that they will have very much to do in an uncontested campaign. One student on this campaign actually decided half way through the project to assist another candidate's efforts.

The UISG project had problems because of its structure. The project was student run without any faculty or staff person overseeing the operation. The student in charge of the project



had never run a campus-wide voter registration and get out the vote campaign and was not even clear on the deadlines inherent in such a process, such as the need to GOTV for the primary. He did not have a clear plan on how this was going to be done as campaigns normally would. There were no timelines, deadlines or specific goals for the students. Initially the UISG leader intended to create mini-projects and place each student from the Local Politics class in charge of one of these projects. However, not all the students were prepared to lead; some would have preferred to be given small tasks to complete than design a plan of action on their own. There was also a major communication problem between the UISG leader and half of the students in the group, though it appears much of this problem came from the Local Politics students and not UISG. We suspect that a number of students who chose this project did so thinking because it was student-run that it would be easy to do, and thus less motivated students self-selected for this project. In any case, this small group of students failed to return emails and/or calls and did not show up for events to which they had committed. Contrasting this effort with a candidate campaign, it seems in the end that the level of attachment to the project was much lower for UISG than it would be for any candidate seriously running for office. A candidate has a direct interest in involving the students because failing to do so could result in losing the election, but the student-run project did not offer the same motivation. If this project or a similar endeavor was repeated in the future, it would be advisable to receive a detailed proposal from the student group before agreeing to include it. The proposal should include a specific timeline of events and the tasks that the students should complete. It may also be necessary to provide some oversight if there is no faculty or staff overseeing the operation.

### **Feeling Like Things Were Not Quite Right**

This experience was new for many students, so they did not have much of a base of

knowledge to draw on in considering whether they were doing useful or effective work at times. Often, the journals expressed some frustration about how the campaigns and organizations were run, even in the most effective of them. Campaigns, particularly, seemed quite disorganized to our students with many things done at the last minute. Disorganization seemed to be higher in these campaigns than in partisan, higher stakes elections. It was necessary to assure students that this was normal, which we did repeatedly, even though some did not seem to always believe us.

### **The Job Fair**

The job fair was a major success overall, although there were isolated difficulties. Some students did not feel that had enough time to become well informed about who they were choosing. In one case, a student signed up to work with IBLTV, which was challenging the license of a local TV stations. She thought the IBLTV group seemed interesting while not quite understanding what they were doing. After her first meeting with the group, she came to the instructor and begged to be allowed to change organizations. It turned out she was a journalism major, had recently interned for the TV station that was the target of the group, and felt that she could not in good conscience advocate against them. She was, of course, allowed to switch. The condensed time period for choosing their candidate or group likely had more to do with this than the fair itself.

Given that the idea of the job fair was a bit last minute, there was not much time available for planning. This left some confusion about the sign-up process for both organizations and students. At the fair itself the two authors went back and forth between themselves on when and how to collect the forms that would confirm a student placement. Since only six slots were available for students with each organization this was more important than if an unlimited number of students could sign up to work with any given group. Because the class was broken

down into two groups coming at different times, our initial thought to use first come, first served did not work well.

Some campaigns and organizations present at the fair did not realize that they could sign students up on the spot. The result was that one of the organizations – working on the public power issue campaign – signed up only one student. Others expressed interest, but the organization representative told them they had to wait to sign up later; most then went to another organization. Interestingly, the campaign representing the other side of the issue ended up with only two students, so, this may have not actually created a problem.<sup>11</sup> We learned that it is imperative to be sure that the protocol is communicated clearly to everyone involved to avoid this confusion in the future. The decision to allow students to turn in their sign up forms was made at the fair so simply deciding this in advance would allow time to explain the structure.

### **Resources and Other Communication Problems**

Besides the problem of communication about the sign up process there were a few problems that surfaced during the project that could have been easily solved with clearer communication. Many candidates had students driving to put out yard signs and creating brochures for them. While common tasks for volunteers on a campaign it may not be appropriate for students performing the task for a class. The written journals from the students reflected this concern. A number of students complained about using their own resources for gas, printing or copying. There were also complaints from one group of students that they were not involved into the decision-making processes of the campaign. Instead they were treated as any other volunteer doing primarily phoning and canvassing.

Mentioning potential issues like this to the campaigns, organizations and students before

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<sup>11</sup> This was not so much because students did not find the issue itself interesting. Rather, students thought that candidate campaigns were where all the action is, and could not really imagine what they would do in an issue campaign. Since the class had only begun, no teaching about issues in local politics had been done at this point.

the projects began would have been helpful in eliminating the problems. It is probably necessary for the professor or TA to do this as the students themselves would more than likely be uncomfortable saying anything to either the organization or the professor (we didn't hear about these problems until the end). Students might think that complaining about these issues might adversely affect their grade for the project. Had we known, we might have suggested to that campaigns using student labor this way either offer to reimburse expenses or perhaps pair a student up with another volunteer who would drive while the student placed the signs. Letting groups/candidates know that expecting students to use their own monetary resources is not appropriate appears to be any easily overlooked but necessary communication. It is also important to fully describe their role to the students before beginning their projects.

We also found that reiterating to the organizations that confidentiality would be protected was important. We wanted the students to be involved in the "behind the scenes" work of the campaign. Doing this would necessarily expose students to the insides of campaign strategy, something no campaign wants out in the open!

### **Scheduling Difficulties (on Everybody's Part!)**

One of our most significant problems turned out to be scheduling. Students have a variety of commitments that can all fall at very different times. It was challenging to get everyone working for any given organization together in the same place at the same time. Often at least one student would miss a weekly meeting for a group or would be absent from an event the campaign thought was important, but the student thought was less critical than something on her personal schedule. There were two things that made this communication gap smaller. First, the organizations that used email had a much easier time informing the students about activities that were happening each week. But given that these were local campaigns, several of the candidates

were not email users, and thus had a very hard time connecting with students who seem to be glued to their email and nothing else. Second, those couple of campaigns and organizations that actually had a volunteer coordinator on staff had far fewer problems connecting with students than those that did not. In spite of the obstacles the experiences were overwhelmingly positive.

### **Feedback from the Organizations**

We learned that there should be an opportunity for the organizations to provide more feedback than we solicited, perhaps even anonymously. When dealing with politicians, especially, there is the risk that they will give you a “political answer” when asked how the project went. The two candidates running for re-election had no negative remarks at all about the students. This could indicate that they simply did not give us the information because of their own role in the community. Every other organization or campaign included at least one constructive suggestion for the service component in the future. There was no requirement for the organization to comment on each student directly. At least four organizations expressed the desire to have a follow up meeting after the project directly with students to give them feedback, though time did not permit this. There were also suggestions to allow the organizations to sign a time log as students did their work and comment positively or negatively about how they performed. Perhaps providing an anonymous survey and/or comment section for the organization could create a comfortable atmosphere to provide feedback without fear of political backlash.

### **Knowing about the Project Beforehand**

Many students expressed the desire to have known about the service-learning requirement beforehand by listing it in the course description. Because course descriptions at Iowa are set a year in advance, and because the instructor did not decide to “ramp up” to a full service-learning experience until two months before the start of the course, this was not possible

this time, but should be done in the future. Even so, the vast majority of students reflected a positive experience that they would repeat. We might not want to exclude students from this experience who, had they known ahead of time, would not have chosen to take the course. So it is a bit of a challenge to decide how much information to provide up front at registration. It may be useful, however, to include an example project in the description. Courses at Iowa fill up quickly and changing schedules after registration can be difficult. In addition the journals reflected that most students felt 35 hours was too large a requirement for the project. On the other hand, devoting a large amount of time to the work is necessary for someone to really understand what they are doing and why. Reducing the number of hours by very much would not give a student enough time to make the project worthwhile.

### **Reflecting on the Experience**

While in many ways this paper, lengthy as it is, represents the authors' after the fact reflections on the project, students were required to reflect as they went along. This reflection process is key to the service-learning concept, enhancing the chances that the students themselves will take something valuable away from the project. Overall, we found that the required written journals were an excellent way for students to reflect on their experiences. In general, we were very happy with the amount that they wrote and the thoughtfulness of the content. The journals were an excellent resource to consider improvements that could be made in the future, as well as how things were going throughout the project.<sup>12</sup>

One the other hand, the comments students wrote in their journals indicated that the in-class reflection exercises could be improved. Generally, there was a lot of communication with other group members outside of the class. This made the group discussions in class – which

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<sup>12</sup> Having said this, the first author finds himself quite disappointed that as of this writing, in a class of 43 students, only two students have appeared at his office to retrieve their journals. Perhaps naively, he thought that students would want to keep the journals, which really were generally well done, as a sort of record of what they did.

involved small group discussion organized around the existing groups – redundant. Usually students ran out of things to say to each other well before the allotted time was used up. Because so many of the students were working in campaigns that were directly competing with one another, it was difficult to structure these discussions because of need to ensure confidentiality. This problem was very obvious in the first in class discussion period. For the second we intermixed the non-candidate groups – public power, UISG, and IBLTV – into the candidate groups and this helped, but it still was too limiting.

One possible solution could be to always include groups like this so that there is always a mix of experiences to talk about. Another would be to hold off all in class discussion until the election was over. (This was not an option here because of the necessity to move into the Camelot simulation immediately after Election Day.) Another idea would be to present students with a set of questions when they begin the in class reflection to be turned in at the end of the class. Doing this could extend their discussions beyond their initial written reactions.

The journals were collected for evaluation once during the semester and again at the end. After the first collection the journals were read by both the student assistant and the professor. In addition to tallying the number of hours the student had completed thus far, detailed feedback was given on their entries. The feedback may have instructed them to consider their experiences in more depth, asked pointed questions about their insights or given them reassurance that things were going smoothly. For example:

Sounds like the experience is going pretty well, with some of the usual challenges of any campaigns. (I hope he signs the book too!) Overall I think you're doing a good job of documenting your experience and commenting on it, which is what I am looking for in these journals. You've apparently put in about 7.5 hours so far, according to the journal – you'll need to do a lot more soon, unless the journal isn't covering everything you've done (it should be).

You should be keeping a specific list of hours that you worked – the dates

worked, and the hours (like 9/20, 4-6pm, 2 Hours). I know you're listing the total hours, but I'd like the dates and times as well. Also, you should have included notes from your group's discussion about reflection #2 in the material you handed in. Good start though.

Would we do this again? From the instructor's point of view this process was exhilarating and exhausting. Forty-three students is a lot to manage, and the whole project could not have been done without the support of the student assistant. But it is clear that in this Local Politics class at least, having the students do real work on local city council campaigns, referendum issues and issue groups made it relatively easy to connect class material that highlighted campaigning styles, the role of media in local politics, the structure of local government and more, with the actual experiences students were getting on the ground in politics. The students were able to see the reading in action. As two students noted in their final assessments of the project:

- I noticed a lot of the things we talked about in class were happening while I was working on the campaign. It was much easier to relate to the material, which can be a little abstract in many political science classes. We got to live the material we learned in class.
- I think the experience of working for a campaign was an awesome opportunity. I think that it really took what would normally just be learned in class to a completely different level and allowed me to experience first hand the actual strategies and events that were the focus of actually getting someone elected. I think without this type of experience to reinforce the readings, it is impossible to imagine what actually goes on in a campaign - instead of just theory.

Some service-learning purists may not agree that what we did was actually service learning, and others may not agree that what the students did benefited the community in the ways that working at social service agencies might. But it would be hard to argue with the kind of statements these students and others made. We may not be able to prove it scientifically, but we do believe that these students learned more about local politics



than any other class the first author has taught. And what more could any instructor ask?

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**Local Politics  
Service Learning Reflections**

**Reflection #1**  
**(Due before any work began)**

Answer the following in your journal. You may write more, of course, but at a minimum please write at least two paragraphs in response to each question.

- What do you already know about the local political environment? Do you know who the key actors (people and organizations) are? If so, briefly describe them and explain what makes them important players. If not, imagine who they might be and why they would be important to the local political environment?
- At this point, what kind of campaign or organization would you like to join? Once you do sign on to work in a campaign or organization, what kind of work do you expect to be doing? What kind of work would you like to be doing and why?

**Reflection #2**  
**(Due about three weeks into the service learning project)**

Answer the following in your journal. You may write more, of course, but at a minimum please write at least two paragraphs in response to each question.

- Is your time being used wisely? Why or why not?
- Why do you think that your work is or is not valuable to the organization?
- In what ways is your organization or campaign well organized and in what ways is it disorganized?

**Reflection #3**  
**(Due the week after the Iowa City Primary Election, October 11)**

Answer the following in your journal. You may write more, of course, but at a minimum please write at least two paragraphs in response to each question.

- What happened in the Iowa City primary election? Why did the winners win, and the losers lose. And why was turnout extremely low?
- To what extent do the activities of your campaign or organization reflect the ideas in Strachan's book on local campaigns? Are you using new style techniques? Old Style? A mix of both? What are some of the approaches being used in your organizations?
- Have your original expectations changed based on your experiences thus far?

**Reflection #4**  
**(Due following the ending of the Service Learning project)**

Answer the following in your journal. You may write more, of course, but at a minimum please write at least three substantive paragraphs in response to each question.

- How did your expectations and actual experiences relate to each other? What went the way you thought it would? What did not? Why do you suppose your expectations and reality were different, if in fact they were?
- In what ways did your experience connect to our readings and class discussions? Did you find campaigning to match the kinds of things we talked and read about? For those not in a campaign, was the process of organizing/activating an interest group or voting project what you would have expected from what we learned in class about the way local government works?
- Why did your organization win or lose? (for campaigns)
- What factors led to either the success or failure of the organization with which you worked (non-campaigns)?
- How did your “real world” experience compare to what happened during our Camelot simulation?