EDUCATING FOR CIVIC PROFESSIONALISM

A NACU & Kettering Foundation Research Project
Final Report: Fall 2020

NACU partnered with the Kettering Foundation on their initiative Educating for Civic Professionalism. The collaboration included researching what NACU chief academic officers understand about civic professionalism and how their campuses are developing civic professionals through curriculum and other methods of engagement.

Founded in 1995, the New American Colleges and Universities (NACU) formed in response to Ernest Boyer's challenge to American higher education to contribute to finding solutions to pressing economic, social, and cultural challenges. This collaborative network of colleges and universities is bound by their similar missions and approach to teaching and learning. The campuses differentiate themselves from traditional liberal arts colleges and larger research universities in how they purposefully integrate the liberal arts, professional programs, and civic engagement. They've created an education model that embraces career development and civic engagement and are committed to developing citizenship skills and values in their students. They have successfully formed mutually beneficial partnerships with their local communities. Also, they've dedicated resources to faculty that integrate civic engagement into teaching and learning. _Perhaps, these NACU campuses are more important now than ever before as they prepare graduates to be successful in their careers and also productive and responsibly engaged citizens of the world._

Because of their commitment to improving society through an integrated learning model, NACU campuses are a valuable test case for finding out what academic leaders, specifically provosts, understand about the concept, scholarship, and practice of _civic professionalism_. From the onset, we hypothesized that the academic leadership at NACU campuses would be familiar with _civic professionalism_ and see it as the definitive outcome for educating students. In other words, we thought their curriculum and pedagogies would result in graduating civic professionals.

NACU is grateful to the Kettering Foundation for launching this investigation into civic professionalism and for its support of our research project to work with provosts. In consultation with Kettering, we designed the project around the following research questions:

What do provosts understand of civic professionalism?

What opportunities do they see in their own work in advancing the concept or researching its effects on student learning?

What is currently going on at their campuses in terms of civic professionalism that differentiates from general civic engagement?

These questions guided each segment of engagement with NACU provosts during group discussions (in-person and videoconference), survey, and one-on-one interviews. Each method for collecting input helped us understand their perspectives on civic professionalism, as well as their leadership position to advance academic concepts and priorities on their campuses.

Since NACU had a previously established provost learning community, we were able to take on the project without extensive or laborious coordination.

We officially launched the project at the NACU provosts' retreat held at the annual meeting of the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U). We continued the dialogue during a videoconference as a follow-up from the retreat. Also, as part of the data collection, we developed a survey tool to solicit additional input based on what we had heard during the first two conversations. Lastly, in an effort to dig deeper into our findings, we conducted one-on-one interviews with select provosts. These interviews provided an opportunity to discuss in detail additional ways in which NACU and its campuses could advance the discussion of civic professionalism with faculty on their campuses. Overall, the mixed methods provided the ample input we needed for this project to make it a valuable learning experience for participants.

Understanding of civic professionalism

Before our first engagement on the subject at AAC&U, we spoke with a few provosts who were not familiar with the formal concept, scholarship, or practice of *civic professionalism*. This initial insight challenged our belief that NACU provosts would already be aware of the scholarship as it fit perfectly within their framework for educating students. Hence, we wanted to prime the discussion with a common definition and general knowledge, so we sent reading material prior to the meeting. The material included: *Citizen Professional Idea* from the University of Minnesota; *Democracy Inside* by Albert Dzur; and *Educating for Civic-Mindedness* by Carolin Kreber.

At the provosts' retreat, the majority of provosts acknowledged they lacked deeper knowledge with the terminology and/or scholarship prior to the articles. Just under half of our provosts were *vaguely* familiar. No one in the group discussions or in the survey said they were *very* familiar with the scholarship of civic professionalism, nor had they used the term on their campuses. One person provided a counterpoint that civic professionalism was simply a nuanced version of civic engagement and a different term for explaining the civic work that has been underway in higher education for several decades. This observation accurately described a concern we had for this research project. Honestly, we wondered if the provosts would immediately say they've been educating for civic professionalism through their current civic engagement activities on their campuses without calling it *civic professionalism*. Plus, this comment spurred discussion around the specifics on civic professionalism and how it is part of the civic engagement continuum, yet differentiated through an intentional focus on *faculty teaching students how to use their professions for the greater good.*

More so, the unfamiliarity with the name did not affect their understanding of the concept. Several provosts thought the name perfectly described what their campuses were trying to accomplish through their integrated education model. The scholarship on civic professionalism gave clearer definition to a NACU

education. Civic professionalism aligned with their goals to develop the character of their students with civic attributes, preparing students to make a positive contribution to society.

The key to understanding the concept is the differentiated focus on the *professions* and helping professionals think about how they leverage their expertise and skills for a civic purpose. Even though the provosts could provide many examples of civic engagement embedded in professional learning, professional programs still lacked an intentional grounding in the scholarship of civic professionalism. In other words, their professional programs had not been developed by reflecting on the fundamental question: *What is the public impact of your specific discipline?*

Further, there was not clear evidence that professional programs deliberately reflected how to work with people outside their professions in a cooperative way to achieve mutually desirable outcomes. For example, are health care students trained to view their patients as citizens and co-creators of healthy solutions? This recognition creates new opportunities for academic leaders, faculty, and students to wrestle with ways to invite the public into their professions and to, ultimately, develop an ethos of educating for civic professionalism. As campuses take on this understanding, their students may become wiser in knowing they are in a privileged position to use their professional knowledge and skills to, in the words of Ernest Boyer, "…improve the human condition."

Lastly, when asked about their level of interest in learning more about civic professionalism, whether this means through distribution of literature, webinars, or professional development, the provosts indicated moderate to strong interest in the idea of additional learning, showing a recognition of the importance of the concept. In particular, they wanted to discuss in more detail with colleagues:

How does civic professionalism fit into curriculum, pedagogy, or co-curriculars?

How could their teaching and learning centers provide faculty development?

How would civic professionalism both inform and be used to assess their current civic practices in the professional programs?

Their continued interest to learn more is certainly a motivator for NACU to keep this subject as a priority in its ongoing research and programming.

Role in advancing civic professionalism

In holding conversations with the provosts about their "understanding of civic professionalism," it became clear that civic engagement permeated teaching and learning at their campuses. The civic development of students was embedded in the learning goals and outcomes. Likewise, centers on campus that program faculty development, among a range of topics, included sessions on pedagogy around civic engagement for faculty. Service and volunteerism is part of the DNA of NACU campuses and regularly appears in the mission language. The journey begins with the first interactions students have with the campuses all the way through graduation. Service to the local community, in particular, is integrated into the undergraduate and graduate experience through community-based co-curricular requirements. Often, general education includes hands-on, real world projects. Many of these projects connect students to non-profit and other civic organizations through partnership agreements.

The provosts and academic leadership oversaw the regular assessment of learning outcomes to assure students are indeed achieving learning objectives as well as civic outcomes. Additionally, they made sure civic outcomes are part of the process for developing new programs, courses, and pedagogies.

Having demonstrated that civic engagement is part of the mission, curriculum, learning outcomes, pedagogy, and co-curriculars at their campuses, this begged the question about the opportunities that provosts have in their role as the senior academic leader to advance civic professionalism. The provost

position is unique to higher education and holds tremendous responsibility for the successful operations of a campus. This includes supervision and oversight of curriculum, instruction, and research affairs. Depending on the institution and reporting structure, this also includes oversight of budgetary affairs, athletics, and student affairs. Ultimately, the provost sets the academic priorities of the campus and allocates funds to these priorities to ensure their effective implementation and assessment.

Successful provosts are savvy in advancing academic change through diplomatic leadership. For instance, they know making civic professionalism an academic priority depends on faculty support. It requires developing a culture or ethos for civic professionalism among faculty who are on the frontline with students. In essence, if you want to implement major change, you have to work with the faculty.

Based on our conversations, we learned several key strategies for leading change with faculty that include providing *guidance and direction, internal communications, and incentives and resources*. In terms of *guidance and direction*, this includes helping the academic senior team and faculty understand the civic professional framework and how it fits within the academic mission. Also, it is critical to showcase its relevance and the ongoing priority of working with community partners to address local issues, especially connecting professionals and their skillsets to making real change for marginalized populations. Working with their deans, provosts can direct them to assess how current professional programs are directly working together with citizens to identify and enact positive change. Where it is strong, this becomes a shining example within the university as well as a benchmark for other programs. Where it is weak, this becomes an area for improvement and new investment.

Further, provosts are in a position to convene and host conversations with faculty and faculty leadership to advance the concept and understanding of civic professionalism. This creates the opportunity for making the case for how civic professionalism is connected to the mission and academic priorities of the campus. Provosts also have the convening authority to organize topical brown bag lunches and town hall meetings with faculty to discuss and answer questions. While they may not explicitly direct faculty to shift to civic professionalism, they can guide the conversation and pose the challenging questions that require faculty to reflect on the earlier question: *What is the public impact of your specific discipline?*

Additionally, as part of their regular *internal communications*, there are frequent opportunities for provosts to incorporate the language of civic professionalism in their remarks. This will begin to familiarize the campus with terminology and the concept as they showcase pockets of civic professionalism mobilized in the professions. It is a case of telling the stories and, in doing so, beginning to shift the language and paradigm.

Provosts also are in a position to advance academic change through *incentives and resources* for learning about civic professionalism. Such resources could include creating space for faculty to connect with other faculty colleagues to think through redesigning courses in professional programs. Incentives that are tied directly to promotion and tenure can be motivators for faculty, as well. Provosts could also allocate funds to faculty development that gives both the high-level understanding and, more importantly, the concrete examples in curriculum and pedagogy. This is a valuable opportunity to connect faculty with faculty from the same discipline that have made progress with redesigning courses within a civic professionalism framework. *Business faculty connect with business faculty, nursing with nursing, music with music, architecture with architecture, and so forth*. Faculty need concrete examples and it is particularly important they connect with colleagues from their profession who understand program constraints and requirements.

Also, if it wasn't already happening on their campuses, provosts are in a position to challenge the professional schools to work together by bundling expertise and services with the goal of having a collective impact. This means creating inter-disciplinary teams across professional schools as an effort to work

more holistically with citizens. For instance, many NACU campuses have established clinics to serve the local communities with regard to health and wellness. These clinics focus mostly on connecting nurse practitioners with citizens. There is an opportunity to integrate other professions such as therapy and accounting or challenge the arts and sciences faculty and students to reflect on how they can be part of working with citizens through university-established community clinics. Another example would be trying to weave together sociology and political science in an effort to promote equity and inclusion. This inter-disciplinary setting benefits the health of the citizens beyond isolated diagnosis and treatment, as well as challenges professionals to think about collective impact with citizens. (The next section of this report describes several examples of this work at NACU campuses.)

Because NACU campuses embed civic outcomes in their learning goals, these few suggested strategies reflect ways provosts may redefine civic engagement in the context of civic professionalism. However, even while reflecting on advancing civic professionalism, the question repeatedly came up whether the redefinition of *civic engagement* into *civic professionalism* was necessary since the goal itself–creating professionals that are committed to social improvement–is part of their integrated model.

Civic professionalism on campus

Throughout the project, the provosts shared countless stories of how civic engagement is part of their integrated education model. The commitment to civic work is in their *history, mission*, *student learning outcomes*, *curriculum*, *course learning goals*, *faculty research*, and *co-curriculars*. You can find examples of civic work that forge faculty-student collaborations as a strategy to address local issues through public scholarship. Further, more common approaches to civic engagement are prevalent in their co-curriculars, including extensive service-learning requirements as well as the community work performed at centers for civic engagement. For several of the campuses, students are required to complete a course on civic

engagement as part of their general education, which is a way to broadly educate students on its importance.

Also, another commonality that emerged is a requirement to include defined civic outcomes as part of the process for developing new programs, certificates, and courses. This ensures that civic engagement remains an academic priority in future offerings on campus. Lastly, while the terminology differed from civic engagement, the campuses focused on *character building* in which faculty worked with students to reflect on ethics and values and the drive toward personal civic responsibility.

When discussing if their undergraduate pre-professional programs help students understand the importance of working with communities, ***almost 70 percent of provosts said community engagement was directly incorporated into the learning while the remaining said it was loosely incorporated***. Similar to demonstrating civic engagement in general education and co-curriculars, there were several strategies shared for accomplishing engagement in the professions. One simple approach included making community service a requirement for pre-professional programs. Another approach required students to participate in a co-curricular opportunity connected to their disciplines. These co-curriculars were offered through centers on campus that serve as the front door to the campus for external partners.

Those NACU campuses that operated health clinics in their communities for the uninsured had developed, over time, an interdisciplinary approach for serving patients that served as an effective model of educating for civic professionalism. This included housing occupational therapy, physical therapy, speech therapy, counseling, and other health professions together in the clinics. The integrated approach created collaboration among professions with the stated goal by academic leadership to treat citizens holistically and as partners in health and wellness.

Another example of an inter-disciplinary approach included a partnership with a local food pantry. Beyond providing groceries to citizens, the university focused on developing dignity in people with

socioeconomic inequalities. To achieve this, they integrated wrap-around services (i.e. counseling, accounting, legal, mentoring, career exploration) into the food pantry. In doing so, they educated students on the difference between volunteerism for charity and working with local citizens to understand their situation. In both these cases, health clinics and food pantry, the experiential setting provided opportunities for students to apply learning in a way that benefit citizens.

One provost commented that she thought colleges of education are a good model for developing civic professionals. Social mobility is part of the ethos of the faculty in education and also present in the students who want to become educators. In other words, faculty and students who enter education want to do more than simply teach in their content areas. Often teachers become deeply connected to their students and parents and understand their roles in the community as helping to address equity issues through education.

Lastly, one campus launched social entrepreneurship as a major in light of initial resistance from traditional business faculty. As an outgrowth of their academic prioritization of student civic development, they invested in new major to broaden the understanding of *entrepreneurship* for business students. They recognized entrepreneurship as more than an economic activity, but as a way for finding world-changing solutions for society at a time in which they are most needed.

Similarly, colleges of architecture challenged students to think of themselves as possessing a set of skills to help different populations in society. For example, they are asked to design for people with disabilities. Like the business school example, this reflects a shift in mindset away from traditional approaches in the professions to applied approaches that benefit citizens through their skills and expertise.

These examples of engagement between professional schools and their communities are a few ways of the most common ways in which curriculum and pedagogy are intentionally designed to develop civic professionals. They demonstrate authentic and educational connections between student professionals and local residents. The never-ending question becomes, do these engagements change the identity of professionals? As proposed by one of the earliest definitions on what it means to be a civic professional, the University of Minnesota defined it as*: seeing oneself first as a citizen with special expertise working alongside other citizens with their own special expertise in order to solve community problems that require everyone's effort.*

Conclusion

NACU campuses understand higher education is critical to local communities, providing a home for knowledge, research, and resources. These campuses are rooted in a social justice mission and have risen to Ernest Boyer's call for a scholarship of engagement and for an American higher education that addresses pressing economic, social, and cultural issues. They understand the role of the university in addressing community problems by being good stewards of place and working *with* communities and citizens instead of *on* them.

While they are dedicated to a civic education, there is always room to learn more and improve upon current practices. Perceptions of community members about what is important and effective engagement between professionals and citizens is essential to effective relationship building. Civic professionalism is an effective way for colleges and universities that participate regularly in civic engagement activity to improve their practices. The dialogue with citizens helps build a shared understanding of what constitutes a quality profession-citizen engagement. In other words, civic professionalism enables students to develop a heightened sense of community perspectives during their interactions. The community perspective becomes tacit knowledge for the students through the participatory process and can also translate into organizing principles used to co-create solutions to local problems. The fact that the *residents of such communities bring forward wisdom and experience that are not otherwise learned in the traditional classroom settings strengthens the case to educate for civic professionalism*. Further, in defense of civic

professionalism, it counters what scholars acknowledged early on in the service-learning movement that too many colleges and universities participating in service partnerships viewed their communities as laboratories for experimentation or passive recipients of expertise. It is most likely the lack of mutual engagement previously that has contributed to increasing distrust between citizens and public institutions such as higher education.

Since NACU campuses readily identify with educating for civic professionalism, there is opportunity to continue this work with the provosts and advance the scholarship and practice of civic professionalism even further. A valuable next step would include working more closely in helping provosts connect with their faculty on the subject. This could include working with one or more campuses to act on key strategies identified in this paper for making civic professionalism an academic priority.

NACU envisions a collaborative project that poses fundamental questions to academic leadership and faculty along the lines of:

What is the public impact of your discipline?

How can professionals in your discipline work together with lay citizens as partners (with independent agency and capacities) rather than clients (to be acted upon)?

How can professional or preprofessional education in higher education prepare future professionals for this kind of work?

Activities could include a conference or a series addressing these specific questions, or some variation, for their respective professions. NACU's role would be to organize the series and capture the data in a manner that could be easily distributed to a larger audience interested in learning about the topic.

Finally, we are grateful to the Kettering Foundation for its commitment to this project and for its support of our efforts to work with provosts. Equally, the provosts are sincerely thankful for this project and the opportunity to learn about civic professionalism. It enabled them to dedicate time to thinking about the scholarship and practice of civic professionalism within their academic own framework and priorities. Also, it challenged provosts to reflect on the effectiveness of our current civic work while, at the same time, remembering the importance of engaging with local citizens to find ways to improve existing relationships between campuses and their communities.