Making the case for Community-Based Learning

Why choose an engaged approach?

High impact practice (HIPs; see Kuh or whatever basic source; maybe the AAC&U itself?)
Community-based learning (CBL) consistently produces some of the highest learning outcomes of the high impact practices (HIPs).
Check out these tables to see how CBL increases deep learning (Kuh & O'Donnell, 2013).

Table 1

Relationships between Selected High-Impact Activities, Deep Learning, and Self-Reported Gains

	Deep Learning	Gains: General	Gains: Personal	Gains: Practical
First-Year				
Learning Communities	+++	++	++	++
Service Learning	+++	++	+++	+++
Senior				
Study Abroad	++	+	+	++
Student–Faculty Research	+++	++	++	++
Internships	++	++	++	++
Service Learning	+++	++	+++	+++
Senior Culminating Experience	+++	++	++	++

+ p<0.001, ++ p<0.001 & Unstd B > 0.10, +++ p<0.001 & Unstd B > 0.30

Table 2

Relationships between Selected High-Impact Activities and Clusters of Effective Educational Practices

	Level of Academic Challenge	Active and Collaborative Learning	Student–Faculty Interaction	Supportive Campus Environment
First-Year				
Learning Communities	+++	+++	+++	++
Service Learning	+++	+++	+++	+++
Senior				
Study Abroad	++	++	++	++
Student–Faculty Research	+++	+++	+++	++
Internships	++	+++	+++	++
Service Learning	+++	+++	+++	+++
Senior Culminating Experience	++	+++	+++	++

+ p<0.001, ++ p<0.001 & Unstd B > 0.10, +++ p<0.001 & Unstd B > 0.30

Source: Ensuring Quality & taking High-Impact Practices to Scale by George D. Kuh and Ken O'Donnell, with Case Studies by Sally Reed. (Washington, DC: AAC&U, 2013). For information and more resources and research from LEAP, see www. aacu. org/leap

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Benefits to underrepresented students

Several studies show that CBL is linked to positive outcomes specifically for students with underrepresented identities (e.g. students of color, first-generation college students). York (2016) found that low-income and first-generation student GPAs increased when they took CBL classes, while also supporting their critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Lockeman and Pelco (2013) found that community-based learning enrollment raises graduation rate for all students, but particularly underrepresentedln students and students with low socio-economic status. Yeh (2010) found that low-income, first-gen students who participate in service learning experience growth in areas that are linked to retention (like developing resilience and building skills and knowledge).

Student retention

CBL also has a positive impact on overall student retention (Gallini & Moely, 2003; Reed, Rosenberg, Statham, & Rosing, 2015; Yob, 2014). This may be due to several reasons, including typically increased student interactions with faculty, increased engagement and challenge, and increased resilience.

Instructor/university benefits

Positive course evaluations

CBL courses are consistently ranked more highly than traditional university courses. Students enjoy the courses when they are well-planned and executed, and feel the work is more relevant and meaningful than many traditional lecture courses, leading to positive evaluations for instructors (Eyler, Giles, Stenson, & Gray, 2001).

In support of service

At many institutions of higher education, one's service is an important piece of the job description. Teaching a CBL course is a way to teach an influential course while also focusing on public service.

Instructor recognition

At UW-Madison, there is a new category in the Chancellor's Distinguished Teaching Awards, for Excellence in Community-Based Learning. This award is open only to instructors of community-based learning courses and includes a base pay raise.

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Positive feelings towards the university

Students involved in CBL courses consistently report that the course helped them to develop more positive evaluations of their universities (Astin, Sax, & Avalos, 1999). Students believe that universities are committed to public service and believe that CBL courses increased their positive feelings toward the university.

Improved town-gown relations

CBL partnerships can increase positive feelings from the community toward the university and vice-versa (Driscoll, Holland, Gelmon, & Kerrigan, 1996). This can promote better resource sharing and allow each entity to utilize the energy of the other.

Student benefits

Increased content learning

Students in CBL courses consistently report that they are learning more than they do in traditional academic courses, and this often bears out in the students' grades, which are elevated compared to traditional courses. Research shows that students typically have increased understanding of course material and learn more skills when taking CBL courses (Eyler, Giles, Stenson, & Gray, 2001; Novak, Markey, & Allen, 2007).

Problem-solving skills

When students are working on real-world problems as opposed to textbook examples, they are typically motivated to work harder. In addition, the nature of real-world problems means that students can have a better understanding of complex problems, accept uncertainty, understand issues more deeply, and develop the ability to use course material in new ways (Eyler, Giles, Stenson, & Gray, 2001).

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Insufficient

Personal development

Students typically report that CBL classes cause them to think about life in new ways (Conway, Amel, & Gerwien, 2009; Hampson, 2007; Yorio & Ye, 2012). This is usually because the course has allowed them to meet new and different people who are often from very different backgrounds. These situations give students the chance to understand the world from different perspectives, think about social justice issues, and grow as a whole person.

These situations also allow students the opportunity to reflect on their own set of values and standards, changing them to meet their new understanding of the world. They can examine their own privileges and adjust their behavior to reflect their new understandings. It is not uncommon to hear that a CBL course changed the entire trajectory of a student's life.

These experiences also allow students to develop more self-esteem, self-efficacy, and self-confidence by asking them to test their knowledge and skills in new situations. Research has also shown that CBL experiences can increase students' determination and persistence in academic and other areas.

Career development

This academic and personal development often leads to career shifts for CBL students. Students may get a chance to "try out" a career, as education students do when they tutor others. This can lead to students developing clearer career paths (Eyler, Giles, Stenson, & Gray, 2001; Hampson, 2007).

CBL volunteer placement sites also allow students to build relationships with professional connections. Some students will go on to work in the nonprofit sector, and their CBL connections may lead directly or indirectly to a position.

Finally, some students may ramp up their career goals due to a CBL course. For example, a significant number of students working in advocacy positions as part of a Psychology undergraduate course were so moved by their experiences that they decided to pursue graduate and professional degrees so they could continue to work and have a voice in the advocacy field (Gemignani, 2013).

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Cultural humility

Research has shown that CBL courses can help students develop intercultural sensitivity in several ways (Hampson, 2007; Keen & Hall, 2009; Wehling, 2008).

CBL courses can help students overcome stereotypes and reduce their own racism. Because these courses often require students to interact with members of different communities and groups, students have a chance to overcome their own biases. After taking CBL classes, students often report they are more respectful to people who are different from them, as well as more interested in knowing and working those who are different from them.

Civic commitment

One of the more obvious benefits of CBL courses is that they offer students a chance to become more civically engaged (Hampson, 2007; Parker-Gwin & Mabry, 1998). Students in CBL courses are directly involved in their own communities. This allows them to better understand social problems and believe that social problems truly do affect communities, not just individuals. Some research shows that students who've taken CBL courses are more likely to continue to do service or volunteering after their course ends, as well as believe that volunteering is an important action for everyone to do.

Course enjoyment

In addition to students' learning and academic gains, they often like CBL courses more than traditional courses! They report being more excited about the course and simply understanding the material better.

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Resources needed to do excellent community-based learning

Instructor time

CBL courses often do take a bit more time than "traditional" courses, at least initially as instructors are developing relationships with community partners and developing their course so it is in alignment with CBL principles. In fact, instructors often fear that their departments and institutions will not recognize the additional time CBL takes, and this acts as a deterrent to adopting this teaching approach (Abes, Jackson, & Jones, 2002). It is important for advisors, departments, and institutions as a whole to support instructors so they have enough time to develop and implement their course appropriately, and UW-Madison is working on this priority through its Civic Action Plan (Schelbe, Petracchi, & Weaver, 2014; Underwood, Welsh, Gauvain, & Duffy, 2000).

Funding

Sometimes, CBL instructors might have additional funding needs, such as honoraria for guest speakers from the community or for supplies for community projects. The Morgridge Center for Public Service has some emergency funds that instructors can apply to use. Additionally, MCPS has annual funding for new CBL courses through its Course Development Grant program. Departments should also be mindful of this funding need. It is especially important to compensate community partners appropriately when they share their time and expertise with students through guest speaking opportunities, as this is one small way UW-Madison can support good community partner relationships.

TA/intern support

To best support this high impact learning, it can be helpful for instructors to have the support of a teaching assistant or a CBL intern, who is a trained undergraduate student paid by the MCPS who can support all the community-engaged work of a course. Providing adequate instructor support can ensure that instructors can best support student learning and community benefit (Underwood, Welsh, Gauvain, & Duffy, 2000).

Manageable class sizes

CBL classes can take some logistical planning, especially when organizing students' community-engaged experiences and setting them up at their sites. It is helpful if the class size is appropriately matched for this logistical piece, as well as to support student learning in class through reflections.

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Characteristics of good CBL courses and partnerships

Equitable, mutually beneficial relationships

Ideally, CBL courses are planned in partnership with community partners and are driven by the priorities of the community partners, along with the course topics (Stoecker & Tryon, 2009). When there is alignment on these priorities, power over the direction of the course and efforts of the students is shared and relationships with community partners can be mutually beneficial, based on trust, and more equitable, as well (Bringle & Hatcher, 2002; Strand, Marullo, Cutforth, Stoecker, & Donohue, 2003; White-Cooper, Dawkins, Kamin, & Anderson, 2009). The relationship should allow for shared decision making about class priorities and student time. Often, community partners prefer to come into classrooms to work with students, and should be invited to do so.

Adequate time for reflection

Reflection is a foundational part of CBL classes (Bringle & Hatcher, 1999). Reflection can take place in a variety of ways, such as discussions, writing assignments, and art projects, but the time this work takes should be accounted for in the course planning and built into the syllabus. Reflection should be meaningful and based on thoughtful prompts that tie together the course content, community experiences, and student's perspectives to promote deeper learning, understanding, and growth (Hatcher & Bringle, 1997; Eyler, 2002).

Compensation for community time/expertise

For many community partners, working with CBL students may take extra time that is not part of their job descriptions (Blouin & Perry, 2009). They may come into classrooms or spend time working with students on their own time and dime. It is important to recognize the value of the knowledge and expertise community partners share with the academy and provide appropriate and desired compensation whenever possible (Israel et al, 2005). For example, it may be possible to offer parking passes when community partners come to campus, as well as an honorarium for their time.

Meaningful, realistic work and/or project outcomes

Classes are typically offered on a semester timeline, and those 15 or 16 weeks go fast! When doing course planning, be mindful of the scope of work that is reasonable to expect from students during this time. For example, that is likely not enough time to research, plan, implement, and evaluate a health project in a community, but may be enough time to complete one piece of a project or work in a team on a larger effort. This also speaks to the importance of longer-term commitments when possible and appropriate. When instructors maintain long-term relationships with their community partners, they may have students plug into different parts of the same project or push a project forward over time. This offers continuity for the community partner, as well as meaningful work for the students.

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