

The Shopfront Community Program: A Blueprint for Work-Integrated Learning and Engaged Scholarship in Higher Education

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Abstract:- It has been widely accepted that higher education can and must play a role in developing civic-minded professionals who can respond to complex societal challenges (Dey et al., 2009). This suggests that educational institutions should not only focus on the intellectual development of their students, but play a much more critical role in providing the necessary skills and experiences to develop “civic-minded graduates” (Dey et al. 2009; Steinberg & Bringle 2011).

In line with this, the University of Technology Sydney (UTS), Australia, launched the Shopfront community program which has been in operation for 25 years. Housed within the Centre for Social Justice and Inclusion, the program is the longest-standing curriculum-based community engaged learning initiative, that acts as a gateway between faculties and small- to medium not-for-profit organizations.

Quantitative and qualitative data collected since its inception, as well as case studies from 2020 and 2021, provide the evidence-base for the ongoing use of Shopfront as a blueprint for successful work-integrated learning in higher education globally. The findings indicate that by matching suitable community projects with undergraduate and postgraduate coursework programs, faculties are able to enhance their level of engaged scholarship and support the work of non-profit organizations whilst developing civic-minded students.

Further, the findings provide an indication of the vital ingredients necessary to develop a long-standing reciprocal relationship between students, faculties and community organizations. The case studies presented provide evidence that students benefit from community-engaged learning, academics receive support in establishing networks to embed work-integrated learning, and community partners receive resources they would normally not have access to.

Keywords: *work-integrated learning; engaged scholarship; civic-mindedness; higher education; social impact; community engagement.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) has been identified as an effective pedagogical strategy to develop skills and employability among students while encouraging industry partners to contribute to this type of professional learning (Doolan et al, 2019). Universities in particular are increasingly implementing WIL as a way to develop more work-ready graduates (Brown, 2010).

As argued by Holzman et al (2017), in addition to acquiring practical knowledge related to their academic discipline, it is equally important for graduates to possess soft skills including communication and teamwork skills, ethical reasoning and critical thinking. This can be achieved through community-engaged-learning, which establishes reciprocal relationships between community and coursework, responding to community challenges and simultaneously acting as a “pedagogical intervention that can promote the civic growth of students,” (Steinberg & Bringle, 2011, p. 428).

Holzman et al (2017) provide ample evidence that students participating in such community-oriented activities have improved “cultural knowledge, awareness, and competence as well as increased ability to address social justice issues related to equality, race, and empathy,” (p.3).

Indeed, it has been argued that universities must make an effort in developing civic-minded professionals who can respond to complex societal challenges (Dey et al., 2009). This suggests that educational institutions should not only focus on the intellectual development of their students but play a much more critical role in providing the necessary skills and experiences to develop “civic-minded graduates” (CMG) (Dey et al, 2009; Steinberg & Bringle, 2011).

Shopfront is a community engagement program at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) that aims to do just that. Its goals are to create robust, collaborative partnerships between university and community to provide capacity development to community-based organizations, produce community-engaged scholarship and facilitate students in developing their skills to become civic-minded leaders.

It is a program that provides services free of charge to the community. The program is funded by the university and has been partnering with community-based organizations since 1996, and to date has completed over 1000 community projects and worked with over 15,000 students, 60 staff and 15 subjects across five faculties. It aims to build strong and

sustainable communities through practice-based learning and by doing so, encourages students to become agents of change within their communities.

The case studies presented in this paper provide evidence that this type of WIL program has successfully established a mutually beneficial relationship between students, community organizations and academics. Both quantitative as well as qualitative data presented provides fresh evidence that WIL enhances civic-mindedness among graduates, builds capacity for not-for-profit organizations, and supports engaged scholarship efforts, leading to social impact.

At the beginning of the program cycle, UTS Shopfront receives proposals for academically rigorous projects initiated by the community. These projects are then assessed against curriculum requirements and if suitable, connected to relevant faculties within the university. The work for the project is undertaken by students through coursework subjects supervised by academics. Projects can range from large, multi-disciplinary undertakings involving several subjects over a number of semesters, to small projects and internship-style placements that might involve one or two students.

The duration of the project cycle is typically one semester (12 weeks) and UTS Shopfront staff facilitate communication between organizations, students and academic partners before, during and after the project period. Depending on the subject, students have multiple opportunities to engage with the organization directly, make suggestions and get feedback. Their work is guided and graded by experienced academic staff in the relevant field. At the end of the cycle, the organizations receive high-quality deliverable and maintain ongoing relationships with UTS Shopfront.

A key component to its long-standing success is the program's ability to build and enhance mutually beneficial partnerships for its three stakeholders – students, academics and community organizations. The intentional creation of reciprocal relationships, in which both community partners and universities identify mutually beneficial outcomes, must be a key component of community engaged programs (Holzman et al, 2017). Shopfront delivers this through beginning with deep listening appreciative methods which are sensitive and inclusive of diverse cultural and social

assets and needs, and connecting with other pathways or programs, where necessary, to deliver the best outcomes.

To ensure the program stays true to its vision, the outcomes of UTS Shopfront are continuously weighed against its Theory of Change, a methodology for the planning and evaluation to promote social change. The Theory of Change defines long-term goals for all three stakeholders of the program, and then works backwards to identify and execute the necessary preconditions. One crucial aspect of the UTS Shopfront Theory of Change is increased civic-mindedness among graduates, which will enable them to have increased agency to enact personal and social responsibility. The following sections will focus on this particular aspect.

II. CIVIC-MINDED GRADUATES

The concept “civic mindedness” refers to an individual's awareness of community issues combined with a strong commitment to addressing them through one's own skills and capacities (Steinberg,2011).

It is suggested that curricular and co-curricular activities which involve community-engaged learning, service-learning programs, internships, fieldwork, voluntary service and political involvement can help develop civic-mindedness among students (Bringle & Steinberg, 2010). By engaging in such programs, graduates do not only leave university with academic qualifications and work experience, but also a sense of how they can contribute to and support the communities they are involved in (Bringle & Steinberg, 2010).

In their CMG model, Steinberg (2011) argues that the attributes of a civic-minded graduate develop at the intersection of three dimensions – identity, educational experience and civic experience (p. 20). Specifically, the intersection takes into consideration the graduate's personal values and self-knowledge (identity), their academic knowledge (educational experience) as well as participation in community (civic experience). It is at the heart of these three dimensions that student achieve their highest potential as civic-minded graduates. The combination of these elements is particularly powerful because the student gains motivation in the fact that their skills and knowledge can make a difference in society.

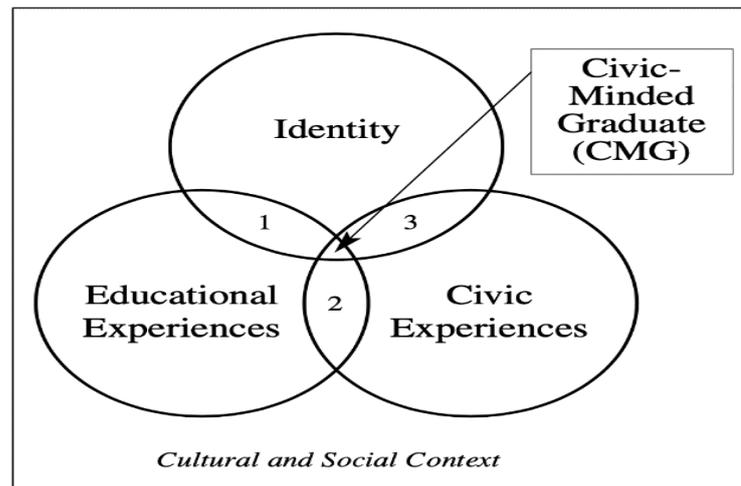


Fig. 1: IUPUI Civic-Minded Graduate Model

While universities are well-equipped to provide curricular programs in pursuit of academic knowledge, the civic experience in particular can be difficult to achieve in a higher education setting as it requires students to engage with community in various ways and academics do not necessarily have the capacity to build and maintain a network of community partners. It is thus part of the responsibilities of UTS Shopfront staff to enable academics to tap into these networks and collaborate in such a way that outcomes are mutually beneficial while also speaking to a robust Theory of Change.

Scholarly work suggests a number of core elements that encompass civic-minded graduates characteristics. UTS Shopfront is based on the conceptual framework for the construct of civic-minded graduates developed by Steinberg and Bringle (2011) which identifies seven elements as central components to be manifested in a civic-minded graduate, and which can be fostered through higher education that includes WIL and specifically, community-engaged learning. The seven elements are:

- Academic knowledge and technical skills
- Knowledge of volunteer opportunities and non-profit organizations
- Knowledge of contemporary social issues
- Listening and communication skills
- Diversity skills
- Self-efficacy
- Behavioral intentions ->civic behavior

The authors further suggest that all these attributes can be fostered during curricular and co-curricular activities. UTS Shopfront operates in the curricular domain and addresses the seven elements in the following ways.

A. Academic knowledge and technical skills

Students who participate in a UTS Shopfront project must familiarize themselves with a particular community problem posed by the organization they are matched with, understand the causes and collaborate to develop solutions and strategies for change. Depending on their chosen discipline, they must find ways to do so within the context

of their expertise (e.g.business consulting, media, visual communication etc.). Research provides evidence that students who engaged in WIL combined with community service as part of their coursework performed better in examinations and achieved higher overall course grades than those students who were not offered community engagement opportunities (Steinberg & Bringle, 2011).

B. Knowledge of volunteer opportunities and non-profit organizations

By being offered a WIL opportunity with a community organization, UTS Shopfront students gain exposure to the important work of not-for-profit organizations, including their operations, the beneficiaries of their services and some of the ways in which social problems are addressed. As explained by Steinberg and Bringle (2011), a key attribute of a civic-minded graduate, regardless of their chosen career path, is awareness of such opportunities, especially on how graduates can use their skills and knowledge for community service and in support of the not-for-profit sector.

Shopfront in itself offers students a volunteering opportunity while valuing their contributions thought course credit. Students are also provided ongoing volunteering opportunities outside their curriculum through its extra-curricular sister program, *SOUL Award*, where students are encouraged to continue their learning journey and skill up through volunteer placements in community organizations.

C. Knowledge of contemporary social issues

As put aptly by Steinberg & Bringle (2011, p.433), “one of the key dimensions of citizenship is knowledge of what one should do and why”, as well as the ability to make informed decisions on what needs to be done to address social issues.

Embedding community engagement in higher education pedagogy helps students gain a greater understanding of the problems faced by the community, nation and world. This is further supported by UTS Shopfront’s regular evaluations which will be elaborated on in more detail in the next section; important here is the finding that of the 152 students surveyed in 2021, 84 per cent indicated increased knowledge of community

organizations and volunteer opportunities as a result of working on the community-engaged coursework project. Additionally, 78 per cent agreed that they have increased awareness of a number of community issues as a result of this engagement.

D. Listening and communication skills

The framework suggests that civic-minded professionals must possess the ability to communicate well with others, respond with empathy and listen to divergent points of view.

Because most UTS Shopfront projects require students to work in teams to find solutions and conduct themselves professionally when working on projects concerning vulnerable groups, the program has been very successful in enhancing their ability to empathize and communicate effectively. The student survey found that 86 per cent consider themselves better listeners after completing the project, even when people's opinions differed from their own. Similarly, 78 per cent indicated they were better able to respond to others with empathy after being involved in the project.

E. Diversity skills

Community-Engaged Learning, as a form of WIL, has been found to increase students' ability to work with diverse groups, reduce the application of stereotypes, and overall increase their sensitivity to diverse people and cultures (Steinberg & Bringle, 2011).

To ensure students are adequately exposed to diverse groups and a complexity of issues, UTS Shopfront projects are selected in such a way that they offer students exposure to communities and environments in which they interact with persons who are different from themselves. For example, in 2021, students participated in projects where they were able to learn about diversity in mental and physical health, different cultural groups (domestically and internationally), gender and LGBTQ+ issues, socio-economic disadvantage and homelessness, as well as environmental issues and the impacts of climate change.

F. Self-efficacy

The term self-efficacy captures the individual's tendency "to be inclined to take action, to expect that the action will produce the desired result and learning from actions by self and other" (Steinberg & Bringle, 2011, p. 435). Specifically, UTS Shopfront aims to increase the student's confidence in their own ability to have an impact in the community through service.

After completing a UTS Shopfront project, 74 per cent of students indicated that they would like to dedicate their career to improving society, while 63 per cent reported feeling motivated to participate in advocacy and political action groups as a result of their WIL experience.

G. Behavioral intentions → civic behavior

This part of the framework aims to understand the relationship between behavioral intentions and actual behaviors, i.e. whether the students' intentions of serving the

community (as indicated in the surveys) actually translate into actions after graduation.

While follow-up evaluation efforts have been in place for many years to measure ongoing impact among participating community organizations, recent student post-graduation evaluations have been impeded by COVID-19 lockdowns and stay-at-home orders which caused a disconnect after graduation. Evaluation will resume in 2022 and UTS Shopfront will check in with students six months after completion of their degree to analyze the rate at which students' intentions translated into civic behavior.

III. EVALUATION AT UTS SHOPFRONT: CIVIC-MINDEDNESS AND CAPACITY BUILDING IN COMMUNITY

UTS Shopfront employs a number of evaluation strategies and tools borrowed from the conceptual framework outlined by Steinberg et al (2011) for the CMG. To measure the impacts of the program, Steinberg recommends three measurement procedures: the CMG Scale, the CMG Narrative Prompt and the CMG Interview Protocol.

The CMG scale is a useful tool, especially in the form of pre- and post-activity surveys to determine the students' growth as a result of the activity. It is a self-report measure with a 6-point response format (strongly agree to strongly disagree), yielding a quantitative set of data. Shopfront employs this measure by asking enrolled students to fill in a pre-semester survey before commencing the project, and a post-semester survey after its completion. The data is used to evaluate the impact of the project on various graduate attributes, including civic-mindedness.

The CMG Narrative Prompt is a tool which can be used as an alternative approach to self-report measures (Steinberg et al, 2011) and asks students to read a statement, rate the extent to which they agree with the statement, and then write a response to elaborate on it. Such CMG Narrative Prompts are also embedded in the UTS Shopfront student surveys.

The CMG Interview Protocol complements these two tools to "collect in-depth information from students about their involvement in community activities, what motivated their involvement, and how they perceived their college education in terms of preparing them for active citizenship." (Steinberg et al, 2011, p. 25). These interviews provide further assistance in interpreting the CMG scale answers. UTS Shopfront reaches out to students throughout the year, but especially at the end of each project cycle, to conduct qualitative interviews which are used for reflection, analysis and review of the program.

The same set of tools is used to measure capacity building among the industry partners who work with the students, and to measure engaged scholarship among the academics who embed the program into their curriculum. This is to provide a more holistic view of the social impact not only for the students, but also more broadly for the communities and academics involved. The evaluation efforts seek to provide an evidence base that demonstrates the

wide-ranging and diverse positive impacts of developing a more civic-minded, socially responsive student cohort.

The following sections present predominantly the qualitative data gained from the interviews to demonstrate the benefits of increased civic-mindedness through WIL and the effects this has on communities as well as the students' own development as agents for social change.

A. Case Study 1: *Becoming a Socially Responsive Designer*

The Grove is a community of practice which strives for a more regenerative economy and culture by welcoming people through dojos, annual retreats and consulting services. In 2021, The Grove approached UTS Shopfront in need of a clearly communicated brand and website design. They were paired with students at the Faculty of Design, Architecture and Building who worked on a re-brand and design solution that clearly represents The Grove's journey, messages and values.

One person working on the project was final year Bachelor of Design student, Jenny Lee. Using the CMG Interview Protocol, Jenny was interviewed post-semester to reflect on what it was like to learn new design skills by working with a not-for-profit client. As expected from successful WIL experiences, Jenny mentioned the fact that working with a real-world client required everyone in the team to conduct themselves professionally, improve communication skills to explain design briefs to a non-expert audience and improve teamwork skills in pursuit of delivering the outputs on time.

In her interview, Jenny also eloquently spoke about her own realization that she could use her skills in a way that benefits others.

"It is very rewarding, especially because it was for the not-for-profit sector. They are driven by passion for doing good for the world. It allowed us to be really passionate about it as well and put our passion into the design making."

Her impressions gained from working with a community organization speak volumes about the program's ability to help students develop a sense of social responsibility and realize their own agency and responsibilities as emerging professionals.

"We kind of realized, wow, these people are willing to volunteer and give up their time to put good and positive change into the world. I think that made a really good impact on us. To think about that as designers, we kind of are the future so we can use our skills to do good for the world like they did as well."

In addition to this interview, UTS Shopfront used narrative prompts to survey 31 students in Jenny's cohort, who were also final year students enrolled in the subject *Socially Responsive Design* offered by the Faculty of Design, Architecture and Building, and engaged in WIL with not-for-profit organizations.

The survey data mirrored Jenny's sense of increased civic-mindedness, which 83.87 per cent of students either agreeing or strongly agreeing that working on the project has increased their awareness of a number of community issues.

The exact same proportion of students agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that they now have a desire to be of service to others, and 87.09 per cent of surveyed design students agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "I would like to dedicate my career to improving society".

In line with the CMG Narrative Prompts, students were given the opportunity to elaborate on their responses by typing an answer. The following statements demonstrate that students have gained a good understanding of their own agency to use the skills and knowledge learned at university to make a positive difference in their communities.

One student explained that the highlight of the project was

"The chance to learn about a cause I was so unaware of and act on this using my skills".

Another student was able to verbalize the feeling of accomplishment gained from being of service to others:

"The client was so lovely and a joy to work with. She was so passionate about her job and it made me feel accomplished being able to help out."

A similar sentiment was expressed by another student who has evidently gained a greater sense of empathy. In commenting about what made the project meaningful, they commented:

"Hearing the personal stories of the people that worked at the organization - understanding their motivation and dedication to their work and being able to find design solutions that convey the heart of what they do with the general public"

This provides direct evidence that the program was able to influence the student's personal values and self-knowledge (identity), enhance their academic knowledge by offering a practical application (educational experience) and enable them to meaningfully contribute to the community (civic experience). As laid out by Steinberg et al (2011), this is precisely the intersection needed to increase civic-mindedness.

B. Case Study 2: *Building Capacity in Sunset Strip Village*

Increased civic-mindedness among graduates is not only important for the students' individual development, but it is also a vital aspect to achieve positive social impact in communities of the future. This is exemplified in the case of the Sunset Strip Progress Association Inc. (SSPAI), a locally run, not-for-profit group of volunteers in the region of Menindee Lakes, NSW, who have tackled drought-related challenges in the community since 2012. In 2020, UTS Shopfront partnered with SSPAI after being contacted by the association secretary who has been involved with the Sunset

Strip Village for 28 years. He reported that the village has experienced severe drought cycles for close to a decade, turning the area into a brown, desolate and depressing landscape due to insufficient water supply for the Community Centre Precinct lawns as well as Land care Nursery and land restoration sites.

The impacts have not only been environmental, but also psychological and economic. The long-lasting drought has led to painful shortfalls for the community with at least 28 families in the agricultural industry abandoning the area, and weekend tourism declining sharply. The demoralized community soon saw a third of the houses in the area going up for sale.

UTS Shopfront reached out to its long-standing partners in the UTS Business School as well as the Faculty of Design, Architecture and Building to assist Sunset Strip Village while turning it into a WIL opportunity for final-year undergraduate students.

The project was first embedded in the *Tourism Management* subject, where final-year undergraduate students were given the opportunity to immerse themselves in the community and work with Barry to better understand the situation on the ground. Working closely with SSPAI, the tourism management students researched the area and developed recommendations for strategic tourism. SSAI have used the strategic tourism plan to apply for funding from Destination NSW in the hopes of implementing the recommendations. The organization believes that implementation will have ongoing positive effects for the area and re-activate the community, develop infrastructure, increase volunteers, and offer more entertainment options.

While the business students developed these tourism strategies, UTS Shopfront once again partnered with the subject *Socially Responsive Design* to develop communication collateral that would support the tourism strategy. In this subject, students designed steel-cut signs and posters to attract visitors to the village, as well as a village information booklet for tourists.

During the evaluation process, UTS Shopfront conducted a one-on-one interview to get feedback from the SSAI secretary.

In speaking of the students, he particularly valued the connections that were established for the community:

“The students got us to think about things in a different way. There was a lot of new technology that the students introduced to us to change our thinking. They got us connected with influencers and other media contacts which we would have never thought of. Really, the students gave us a different perspective of how to attract people to the community and lift the residents’ spirits.”

The element of civic-mindedness also emerged during the interview, in which he drew attention to the fact that urban young people at a prestigious university in the heart of Sydney were dedicating themselves to a small, remote community over 1000km away.

“We all crowded around the computer and talked to the students, and we were instantly positive about this community. It lifted our spirits to see that the students cared about us, and we really enjoyed sharing our experience, stories, and history with them. The real key is the prestige of UTS and how they were interested in a small village – that has really stayed with us. For someone to be interested in us and help us, I think that is really significant to our community and lifted everyone’s spirits.”

The significance of educating a more civic-minded generation of professionals cannot be overstated, especially if they have a willingness to be of service and an increased capacity to empathize with individuals and communities who have different experiences to them.

Further evidence of this is provided through follow-ups UTS Shopfront conducts with students and organizations. Fowler was contacted in December 2021 (18 months after commencing the project) and asked to provide an update on how the students’ work had been implemented, and the impact it has had.

He reported that the tourism strategy was in full swing. The 2km walking trail which the students suggested is commencing construction soon and will feature the ‘welcome to village’ sign as well as the steel cut outs which were designed by the students and have already been manufactured and delivered to Sunset Strip Village.

The walking trail will also feature ten local public art installations (films) and the actors of these films will get bronze stars along the Village’s boulevard to mimic the Hollywood Boulevard – another suggestion laid out in the tourism strategy. Fowler reported that these bronze stars have already been delivered and were contracted to be installed. The opening stone of the walking trail features an acknowledgement of the contributions made by the UTS students.

The village information booklet designed by the students is now being used by real estate agents to show to prospective buyers, issued to new residents via email, and sent to partners for funding submissions.

Other aspects of the tourism plan have also been submitted for government funding through Destination NSW in collaboration with the local Council and Menindee Tourism.

The secretary summarized these developments with the statement:

“This is such a large impact – the students don’t realize how much they’ve helped our community for years to come.”

IV. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, quantitative and qualitative data collected since its inception, as well as case studies from 2020 and 2021, provide the evidence-base for the ongoing use of Shopfront as a blueprint for successful WIL in higher education globally

The findings indicate that by matching suitable community projects with undergraduate and postgraduate coursework programs, faculties enhance their level of engaged scholarship and support the work of non-profit organizations whilst developing civic-minded students. The findings also stress the importance of a Theory of Change to develop clear goals and long-standing reciprocal relationships between students, faculties and community organizations.

The case studies presented provide evidence that students benefit from community-engaged learning, academics receive support in establishing networks to embed WIL, and community partners receive resources they would normally not have access to.

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