Community Engagement in a Former Steel Town: The Role of a Living-Learning Community

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Prior research indicates that Living-Learning Communities (LLC's) can help promote college students' community engagement. This applied research, a mixed-methods program evaluation, investigated the extent to which an LLC situated in a mid-Atlantic former steel town enhanced college students' community engagement and feelings of attachment to the community. The evaluation involved interviewing and surveying current and past students from the LLC as well as community neighbors living near the LLC. Results indicated that students increased their feelings of connectedness to the community and neighbors expressed a desire for long-term engagement with City House. The program evaluation suggested multiple contributors to student-community engagement; specifically, the role of a) proximity in maximizing student interactions with diverse others, b) shared vision between students and community members, c) academic preparedness for students' civic engagement, d) informal community interactions. While student time management can be a concern, the program evaluation supported the role of LLCs in reducing students' disengagement within communities.

Living-learning communities (LLCs) are increasingly integral parts of many colleges and universities in the United States as institutions seek to strengthen and improve undergraduate experiences for students. The Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP) initiative indicates that living-learning communities, or living-learning programs, are high-impact practices whose effectiveness is supported by research (Brower & Inkelas, 2010). The National Study of Living-Learning Programs (NSLLP) surveyed 24,000 college students participating in living-learning programs and identified several key successful outcomes: critical thinking, higher commitment to civic engagement, and smoother transitions to college (Brower & Inkelas, 2010). Other studies utilizing NSLLP data supported similar findings for civic engagement (Rowan-Kenyon, Soldner, & Inkelas, 2007). Results supporting the efficacy of living-learning communities for civic and community engagement (also known as regional engagement) are consistent with data from the larger body of service-learning research (Battistoni, 2013; Weiler Haddock, Zimmerman, Krafchick, Henry, & Rudisill, 2013).

LLCs are varied in their design, methods, course content, and size. What LLCs typically have in common, however, are one or more of the following goals: to promote student growth, student retention, or student satisfaction at the institution. LLCs are broadly defined as an intentional restructuring of an educational curriculum by combining courses and facilitating a cohort of students (Rocconi, 2011). Additionally, a common and unifying objective of many

LLC programs is to bridge the gap between in-class academic work and out-of-class experiences for students (Daffron & Holland, 2009; Eck, Edge, & Stephenson, 2007; Inkelas, Vogt, Longerbeam, Owen, & Johnson, 2006). LLCs typically do this by providing a residential experience for students in which academic life and everyday life are integrated. The hope is that students will become more engaged and active in the learning process due to a more seamless educational experience (Inkelas, et al., 2006; Gassbarre, 2011).

While many LLCs aim to connect students to their respective college communities, other LLCs focus beyond educational institutions and aim to connect students with their local communities. Kanter and Schneider (2013) argue that civic learning and engagement is "anemic" among citizens in the United States, based on the National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement study in 2012. They found abysmal levels of civic knowledge as well as low assent among college students that college education should contribute to increased civic engagement. While Kanter and Schneider fault the U.S. educational system for a "civic recession," Boulianne & Brailey (2014), discussing similar concerns in Canada, indicate that a lack of community attachment may be to blame. Putman's (2001) pivotal book, *Bowling Alone*, supports this premise, citing declining adult engagement with civic and neighborhood groups. While increased volunteerism among students may counter some of these trends (Longo, 2004), many argue that more substantial examples of community connectedness are nonetheless lacking. More recently, some argue that the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign and election showcases that "schools are failing at what the nation's founders saw as education's most basic purpose: preparing young people to be reflective citizens who would value liberty and democracy and resist the appeals of demagogues" (Kahlenberg & Janney, 2016, para. 4). Some have additionally pointed to Putman's conceptualization of social capital, and the lack thereof, as the *key* distinguishing factor in who did and did not support Trump (Barone, 2016).

A variety of terms are used in the research literature to get at this idea of community connectedness. Boulianne and Brailey (2014) define community attachment as emotional and personal bonds that tie individuals with a community group; this, therefore, includes one's sense of community, feelings of belonging to the community and being integrated into the community. Boulianne and Brailey surveyed a stratified random sample of 381 college students and found that community attachment predicted greater civic engagement.

The present study is a program evaluation of a living-learning community in an urban location, and it focuses primarily on these two themes: enhanced community attachment and increased community engagement. The development of "place attachment" is a key goal in the LLC described in this project; place attachment is defined as "a positive affective bond or association between individuals and their residential environment" (Shumaker & Taylor, 1983, p. 233). Researchers (e.g., Bailey et al., 2012) argue that place attachment tends to be lower in economically deprived neighborhoods, and it is expected that place attachment will continue to suffer as economic inequalities continue and increase (Dorling & Rees, 2003). Finally, "community engagement" will also be used to refer to the long-term partnerships among groups in the present study. Community engagement is defined by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (1997) as groups with geographic proximity working collaboratively to bring about changes to promote healthy communities. While community physical health is the focus of the CDC, other aspects of public good, such as social or economic, can also be addressed via community engagement.

The key mechanism by which LLCs can foster civic engagement is via relationships with one another and within the community. The cohort experience typified by LLCs promotes

networking, small group interactions, and academic and social integration (Inkelas, Soldner, Longerbeam, & Leonard, 2008). For engagement beyond the cohort into the community, however, a certain level of knowledge of that community may be necessary. Saltmarsh (2005) advocates for civic learning prior to civic engagement. According to Saltmarsh, what specifically needs to be learned are structures of government and citizenship; the values of justice, inclusion, and participation; and the development of skills such as communication, collaboration, and problem-solving in civic contexts. Fostering relationships in the community can then occur. Since LLCs pair academic learning with engagement, they are uniquely suited to support Saltmarsh's model of civic engagement.

The present study is a program evaluation of a living-learning community located in Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania. City House is designed to nurture college students' understanding of and commitment to this city and serves as an opportunity for students to live in a community with one another as a household while engaging the life of their neighborhood. Ten students from a private Christian college live at the City House each year, and City House is located one and a half miles from their campus.

Overview of City House and Beaver Falls

Beaver Falls has been an industrial city since its establishment in the mid-1800s. For most of the 20th Century, the economy of Beaver Falls was rooted in the American steel industry, and the city became a hub for restaurants, theaters, and department stores. The early 1980s, however, brought a collapse in the steel industry followed by significant population and economic decline. Today, Beaver Falls is marked by dilapidated buildings, vacant homes, a rampant drug trade, and a culture of poverty. Businesses struggle to stay open, and homes sell for $58,000, on average. Soup kitchens, clothes closets, social service agencies, and after-school programs are a normal part of the social fabric.

City House resides in a corner home in a traditional residential, downtown neighborhood. Surrounding the house, in each direction, are two-story homes built during the first decade of the 20th century. While some of these homes have been sub-divided and are rented as apartments, others remain intact, with consistent ownership over many decades. Of the seventeen nearby homes, twelve remain intact and are owned by families or singles; four are used as rental properties, and one is vacant. Among these same households, four are African-American, and thirteen are White. The LLC's neighborhood also tends to be one of diverse age groups. Five of the seventeen households are over 65 in age; three of these are residents are in their later 80s or 90's. Two are middle-aged couples without children, four are middle-aged singles without children, four are two-parent families with children, and one is a single-parent family with children.

Like the city of Beaver Falls as a whole, residents of this neighborhood come from various lines of work, both blue and white-collar. The seventeen households represent the following occupations or job statuses: retired college librarian, retired federal grant officer, mechanic, medical receptionist, retired railroad operator, retired nurse, restaurant dishwasher, handyman, college professor, bartender, bank teller, commercial appraiser, construction worker and retired sales clerk. Of the same households, at least three individuals do not work and receive unemployment or disability benefits.

In 2006, two college personnel purchased the large three-story home that would become City House. Two students initially asked for an opportunity to move into a traditional Beaver Falls neighborhood to build relationships with those in their community. Since the college was

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opposed, but campus policies allowed students to live with faculty and staff, a former resident director and current professor purchased the home, met (and won over) neighbors, and invited students into the neighborhood. While college administrators were not initially convinced, they eventually recognized the value of the program and now show increasing support.

This hesitation on the part of the college reflects the awkward town/gown relationship in Beaver Falls in recent decades. In 1880, the then-thriving city of Beaver Falls approached the college, requesting that it relocate from Ohio to Pennsylvania because it was believed that a college would provide Beaver Falls with educated workers of high integrity. Upon moving, the college received land on the top of a hill overlooking the city. This set them apart geographically, but there were social and ideological differences as well. For many decades, the college contributed to the welfare of the city. However, in the 1980's, at the collapse of the steel economy, the college was of little help to the city, which widened the social gap between the two. Current students are often cautioned of the dangers of the city while Beaver Falls' residents (as confirmed in the present study) view the college as being uninterested, separate, or even "snobbish."

Aware of these tensions, City House emerged as a possibility for healing, reconciliation, and relationship. The primary goal of City House is to invite students to see and experience a traditional urban neighborhood – to meet folks in the community, acknowledge them as friends and neighbors, to work alongside them in projects or initiatives, and value their helpfulness, stories, ideas, and friendship. The directors believe that providing a context for a relationship can produce greater awareness, understanding, and compassion among students and possible encouragement to members of the neighborhood. It is hoped that inviting students to live in the neighborhood will be a small step towards healing the town/gown divide.

Students living at the City House are between ages 19 and 22 and are typically white, Protestant, and middle-class. While most students are from small towns and suburbs with 200 miles of Beaver Falls, others have been from as far away as Maine, New Hampshire, Colorado, Texas, California, and Haiti. Students living at City House take two 3-credit courses, which are designed to help them gain a deeper understanding of community and neighborhood. The courses, "Civic Engagement: Beaver Falls" and "Restoring the City," are designed to utilize faculty from a variety of disciplines along with guest speakers from the community, field trips, retreats, and projects to help students better understand how their faith can inform where and how they live as community members, consumers, neighbors, and citizens. The courses cover topics like Christian community, food (what they eat, where it comes from, and why this matters), local economies, the history, environmental issues, needs, community development, and the social environment of Beaver Falls. Students in City House also are required to volunteer at a Beaver Falls organization or ministry of their choice, such as nearby soup kitchens.

Finally, students are required to share household duties, such as food preparation, grocery shopping, and household chores. It is typical for City House students to study and travel to campus together. They also become involved in one another's lives. These habits of "place-making" complement the instructional activities of City House in order to help students form an understanding of and commitment to place. As an underlying theme in City House, these habits and instructional activities help the students to understand the history and stories of the place in which they reside, and to develop a deep knowledge of its ecology. They also learn about the ways in which Beaver Falls residents identify themselves as a collective (i.e., "townies"). All of this points to "membership" or attachment to both a physical location as well as its social context.

A major focus for the students at City House is the relationships formed with neighbors. Since the beginning, neighbors have warmly welcomed students into the neighborhood. Each year, the new group of students hosts a block party in late August where nearly one hundred people come out for burgers, wings, and s'mores. Over the years, neighbors have taken on more and more of the planning and food preparation for the block party, making it a community effort. The students also coordinate an urban garden, which was planted in a vacant lot near the house. Typically, nine or ten households contribute money, plants, or labor in exchange for a portion of the vegetables that are grown. Students also learn to interact with neighbors informally. It is common for students to play basketball or soccer on the front street with kids on the block or invite the kids to help in the garden when there's weeding or picking to be done. Students will also babysit for these families when asked. Additionally, students get to know neighbors by stopping by while they sit on their porches or to borrow a baking ingredient or specific tool needed for a minor repair in the house. Periodically, students invite neighbors to dinner, although it requires more planning and confidence than most students have in the kitchen. During the winter, it's not uncommon to see neighbors helping students shovel out their cars or working together to clear a sidewalk. One neighbor has routinely asked for help with computer or printer problems and will often buy pizza for the house or bring cookies. With just a few feet between houses, ongoing interaction is impossible to avoid.

City House personnel requested an outcomes-based program evaluation of the extent to which City House meets its goals and objectives. The program evaluation embarked on six areas of assessment: 1) students' community and civic engagement, 2) student experiences in City House, 3) the impact of specific activities and educational experiences as part of the living-learning community, 4) Beaver Falls neighbors' perceptions of City House and the students, 5) student recruitment efforts, 6) community within City House. For the purposes of this paper, which focuses on how LLCs can help promote college students' community engagement, two outcomes will be examined: community engagement and impact of activities and educational experiences, specifically as they pertain to community engagement.

Method

Participants

Three groups of participants contributed to the program evaluation: former City House students (eleven students), current City House students (eight students), and Beaver Falls neighbors (seven neighbors). Male and female participants comprise each group. Among the former City House students, eleven students (four male, seven female) permitted their journals to be analyzed; of these, four students (3 female, one male) consented to be interviewed. These students had graduated college between 2011 and 2015. Current City House students were likewise comprised of four male and seven female students. Eight of these students completed the survey and seven consented to be interviewed. We conducted neighbor interviews in-person and student interviews via Skype, based on the preferences for each group.

The City House director contacted past and current students to inform them about the study. Current students all consented to participate in the survey, and all students who consented to be interviewed were interviewed. Interviews of current students took place at the end of the academic year, to enable current students to comment on City House freely. All former students who consented to be interviewed were put in touch with the principle investigator. Researchers approached the six houses residing on the same block as City House as well as one household on the corner lot adjacent to the house to request that the adult residents be interviewed for the

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study. All seven neighbors consented to be interviewed. Included in the seven neighbors is the pastor of the church that is on the same street, opposite City House. Triangulation of sources (i.e., using multiple interview formats across different respondent constituents) is a recommended way of addressing consistency of content in qualitative research (Patton, 1999).

Materials and Procedure

The project utilized three means of data collection: student academic journals, surveys, and interviews.

Student Journals. Academic journals from the two sociology courses taught by the City House director were analyzed. Student journals comprise 25% of student grades for each semester. During the fall term, students receive a journal prompt once a week and are required to submit a journal reflection for 10 out of the 15 prompts. Journal submissions are at least two-pages long and are required to connect to readings for the course. During the spring term, an identical process continues, although students are given an option to instead submit comparable reflective work in a different format (rather than a weekly journal) if they prefer.

In contacting former City House students, the City House director asked whether former students would consent to have their journals analyzed. All entries of each journal were included in the analysis. Current student journals were not analyzed for this project, due to logistical and privacy issues while students were still enrolled in the sociology courses. Although journal prompts changed from year to year, investigators found common themes that describe students' experience.

Journals were analyzed by a team of research assistants. Two readers read each journal and independently coded each "text unit," or complete thought, using a phenomenological approach to qualitative analysis. The research assistants had completed a college course on phenomenological qualitative approaches prior to participating in the journal analysis. The assistants then came to consensus on the coding for each journal entry.

Surveys. The baseline City House survey was administered to current City House students during their first full-month of the academic year. This 25-item survey included 22 closed-ended and three-open ended questions. Five items on the survey (the Civic Indicators questions) originate from the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement's (CIRCLE) Civic Engagement Quiz, which is available for public use. These questions assessed students' baseline civic engagement prior to participation in City House. Additional questions were written specifically for the purposes of this study. Questions focus on students' baseline behaviors and beliefs in engaging with diverse others, understanding and appreciating their community, frequency of community interactions, and a connection between students' faith and community engagement. Open-ended questions asked students to provide written comments about the integration of their faith and community engagement, beliefs about the importance of engagement as communities such as City House, and hopes and expectations for their participation in City House.

The follow-up survey was administered during the final month of students' academic year. Surveys were anonymous, and the City House director assigned a number code to link baseline and follow-up surveys. The director did not have any access to student survey information itself. The follow-up survey was identical to the baseline survey except that the last open-ended question was changed and an additional question given. Rather than asking about

students' expectations for living in City House, students on the follow-up survey were asked to summarize what they learned by participating in City House. In addition, students were asked to report on how they changed as a result of their participation. Surveys were analyzed using descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations). Due to an observed ceiling effect, null hypothesis significance testing was not used.

Interviews. Students, as well as neighbors, were interviewed. Former and current students received the same semi-structured interview questions. Interviews with former students occurred over the phone across the academic year, while interviews with current students occurred via Skype during finals week. Skype was selected for this student group to maximize engagement during the interview, compared to phone interviews with college students. In addition, students indicated that Skype would be preferable given their end-of-term schedules. Interviews were each approximately 45-minutes, depending on student responses. The principal investigator conducted all interviews and took notes. The interviewer read back comments to the participant when comments seemed to be important for future inclusion as quotes. All interviewees consented to be quoted. The semi-structured student interviews consisted of 21 possible questions, which asked students to report on their favorite and least favorite aspects of City House, activities and events that had the greatest impact, their evaluation of how much they learned during the year, specific successes and challenges regarding engaging with City House neighbors, current views of the importance of civic engagement, evaluations of what they learned about living in community, the integration of their faith and civic engagement as well as community living, and City House's contribution to greater spiritual and emotional maturity.

Semi-structured interviews with City House neighbors also took approximately 45-minutes each, and were comprised of eleven questions. Neighbor interviews were face-to-face and recorded, with the exception of the interview with a pastor, which occurred over the phone. The principal investigator and two research assistants took notes during the interviews. Neighbors reported on the frequency of their interactions with City House students, the quality of students' civic engagement, the integration of new City House students, whether they enjoy having City House in the neighborhood, and recommendations or critiques.

Interview data was qualitatively analyzed by the principle investigator, using a mix of pre-determined themes to be investigated based on the purposes of the program evaluation as well as open-ended thematic analysis. Predetermined themes were based on what the City House directors were hoping to learn as part of the program evaluation; these were previously described as the six areas of assessment for the program evaluation. Additional themes emerged from the transcripts and notes; these included the frequency and quality of student-neighbor interactions, the extent to which students help neighbors and vice versa, neighborhood children's positive interactions with the college students, and students' openness and nonjudgmental attitudes toward neighbors.

Results

Changed Perceptions of Beaver Falls

A key intent of City House, and a catalyst for increasing students' community engagement, is to change student views about Beaver Falls, PA. Students who feel removed from the city and repulsed by the city's appearance exhibit the antithesis of attachment to the city. The intent is instead for students to love and enjoy this city and the people in it. The program evaluation indicated that student views of Beaver Falls changed overall. Interviews with City

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House students indicated that students with initially negative or neutral views of the city changed their opinions during their time in City House. For example, students stated:

> Student 1: Originally thought, "This is an ugly city." Always hearing about the danger…Since living in the house, more focus on what can I do to help, but more of an "us" rather than "them."
>
> Student 2: Didn't think much of Beaver Falls—any other place, really…Have come to love Beaver Falls and appreciate it more.
>
> Student 3: I had never really gone down into the downtown area, and I hadn't heard much about it. And what I heard was negative…But then moving down there was fine. Not everyone down there was a drug addict! Up at [school], that seems to be the feeling. But these people are just like us.

Some students who came to City House in the fall term were already familiar with the city and on-board with being part of it. For these students, their time in City House enriched their perspective and helped them to identify more with this community. For example, one student stated, "[It] makes a difference living somewhere. I used to come to Beaver Falls a lot in the past to shop, etc. I see more of the brokenness [now] but come to love it and identify with it more." Given that all interviewed students indicated positively changed perspectives regarding Beaver Falls, this was a successful outcome.

Frequency of Engagement

Neighbors and City House students unanimously agreed that, perhaps like many neighborhoods in the northeast United States, the frequency of interaction is higher in the early fall and late spring and lower during colder weather. During warmer weather, neighbors and students interacted approximately every-other-day, while during colder months they typically interacted once a month. Students who interacted more frequently with neighbors indicated that they had found a point of connection with the neighbor. For example, having a common interest in a sport or hobby fostered neighborly engagement.

As indicated in neighbor and student interviews, the three areas of greatest success in terms of engagement were the block party, shared meals, and connections with neighborhood children. The block party has grown over the years and now encompasses streets well beyond the small street on which City House is located. Neighbors look forward to it each year as a time to connect with the new City House students and a time to connect with one another. Shared meals, such as having neighbors over to City House and vice versa, do not occur as frequently as both neighbors and students would like. The primary barrier to increasing frequency for this activity is students' busyness. Balancing schoolwork, extracurricular activities, City House activities, and the domestic duties at City House are arguably the greatest challenges that the students face. Finding time for the lengthy socialization (and cooking) required for a dinner party often proves to be difficult for the students. However, both students and neighbors agree that when meals do happen together, these are important times of building connections and friendships. Even short interactions centering around cooking and communicating with neighbors were valued by both parties, as stated by this student:

> One time [students] were cooking, and they needed cinnamon, and we didn't have any. I decided to offer to walk over to someone's house, and I walked over to [a neighbor's] house. He was sitting on his porch, and I was like, "Hey [neighbor's name], can I have some cinnamon please?" and he was like "Sure! What's your name again?" and I was like

"[name given]!" than he was like, "Come on in, you can meet my wife!", and I was like "Okay, yay!"

Finally, connecting with neighborhood children is something that comes more naturally to City House students than inviting adult neighbors over for a meal. City House students often feel comfortable playing basketball with kids in the street or talking with neighborhood children. On their part, the neighborhood children largely embrace City House students and enjoy having the feel of older brothers and sisters in the neighborhood. For example, one neighbor stated:

> They're involved with young people and children on our street. I think that really has a good impact on the neighborhood. Sets up for a really safe environment. They're on the porch on a regular basis, coming and going. I think their presence has helped.

Neighbors feel that the City House students are a good influence on the children and they also help to provide activities for the kids.

Students' Challenges with Community Engagement

The greatest challenges that students indicated that they faced regarding community engagement were: engaging with neighbors was harder than they expected, time management, and questions about how to implement what they learned from City House post-graduation. The challenge with engaging neighbors appears to be one-sided; neighbors expressed interest in seeing and talking with the students more. Some neighbors indicated that they had some problems getting a few of the students to converse with them; they attributed this reticence to shyness on the students' part. On the student side, a common refrain during the interviews was that they realized that they didn't engage with neighbors as often as they felt they should have. This seemed to be one of the primary student regrets by the end of their year in City House. The primary barrier to engagement coincides with the second challenge: time management. Students struggled to balance all of their academic and extracurricular activities with City House activities, and sometimes informal interactions with neighbors lost out in the balance.

Finally, former City House students who were interviewed years after graduation indicated that City House had affected them in profound ways. However, a common theme was persisting challenges in applying what they learned from City House to their current setting. For example, one former student now lives in a rural community; she wonders how she can engage her community given the distance between houses.

Survey Results

Since many students elected to join City House due to already high interest in civic and community engagement, a ceiling effect was observed on student answers on the baseline survey. The ceiling effect makes it difficult to assess student change from baseline to the end of the school year, and answers to most questions tended to be static. However, students' beliefs about civic engagement increased relating to questions such as the importance of living in a diverse neighborhood (baseline M = 4.13, SD = 1.13, follow-up M = 4.62, SD = 0.52), interacting with people of different beliefs (baseline M = 4.50, SD = 0.76, follow-up M = 5.00, SD = 0.00), and interacting with people from different social backgrounds (baseline M = 4.63, SD = 0.52, follow-up M = 5.00, SD = 0.00). Students slightly decreased in their answers on the importance of building relationships with neighbors (baseline M= 4.88, SD= 0.35, follow-up M= 4.50, SD= 0.53) and the importance of understanding the history, demographics, assets, and challenges of a community (baseline M= 4.88, SD= 0.35, follow-up M= 4.50, SD= 0.53).

When factoring in student comments on these topics, it is likely that the slightly decreased emphasis on the importance of building relationships is due to students' unrealistically high expectations at the start of the term (evidenced by their baseline score on a scale of 1 to 5). Since interviewed students focused on regrets at not building relationships, it is likely that this decrease reflects their more realistic thoughts on this topic. The slightly decreased emphasis on learning about the community is likely the result of the continuous emphasis on this topic. This is certainly a topic that is reiterated in multiple ways (academically, experientially) throughout the City House experience. Students verbally expressed experiencing some fatigue on this topic, despite its importance. Regarding the increased emphasis on the importance of living in a diverse neighborhood, interacting with those of different beliefs, and interacting with those of different backgrounds, it is encouraging to see the decreased variation on student answers. That is, not only did average responses go up on these questions, but standard deviation reduced (to zero on the latter two questions), indicating that students answered unanimously on these questions.

Long-term Engagement

While former City House students struggled somewhat in applying what they learned about civic engagement to their current situations, City House was instrumental in helping students to consider the importance of long-term community engagement. The first step in scaffolding this for students was to change their perceptions of Beaver Falls and encourage them to identify with the city in its struggles and successes. As one student wrote, "I was walking to school—get this—in the rain and passed a backhoe tearing down not one but two houses. I cried."

While living on campus, this student may have been oblivious or indifferent to any sort of demolition project. It is evident that spending two semesters learning and experiencing the history and stories of the city, along with building relationships with neighbors who feel an attachment to the place, the student wept out of compassion for those who feel the weight of this loss.

Next, students were required to engage in volunteer activities; most volunteered at a local soup kitchen. Students indicated that these volunteer activities, while time-consuming, were nonetheless beneficial in connecting them with ways to contribute to their community. Other high-impact activities promoting civic engagement, according to the students, were the urban garden and informal interactions with neighbors. Neighbors, in turn, loved having the neighborhood urban garden; they loved receiving fresh vegetables and having City House students mentor their children in caring for it, and they felt pride in the beauty of the garden.

Neighbors insightfully noted that the "strong community feeling," as stated by one neighbor, that City House inspires suggests ways to offer systemic change throughout Beaver Falls. As another neighbor said:

> Beaver Falls is at a crisis point; opportunities are slipping away. Some things have to be done; it doesn't have to be big...We need a lifting of our vision so we can see Beaver Falls in a better place. In its own small way, City House has provided a bit of vision to say, "It can be better."

This neighbor also explained that City House students' and staff's openness and friendliness is imitable, and it is through these qualities that he felt community-building can occur. A few neighbors spoke strongly of wanting to see City House succeed and then expand beyond the neighborhood to multiple City Houses throughout Beaver Falls. They indicated that they would like to see the City House project replicated in another neighborhood in order to revitalize

Beaver Falls. One neighbor said, "[The City House director] mobilized community resources. [Now the community is] bettering its own lot. If we can do that next level, city-wide is our objective."

While logistics prevent City House from adding a new location to the existing one, at least at the present time, the sentiment of college students and urban neighbors collaborating together to better their communities is clearly exhibited here. City House offers a model and hope that such community engagement efforts can build, in Beaver Falls and elsewhere.

Discussion

The program evaluation of City House indicated that student community engagement improved as a result of City House in terms of changed perceptions of Beaver Falls, changed perceptions on the importance of interacting with those who are different from them, and successful neighborhood interactions—particularly with more structured activities such as the block party and urban garden. These changed perceptions and commitment to community seem to persist post-graduation, at least according to the graduates who consented to participate in the study. This program evaluation, therefore, supports studies finding increased student civic and community engagement as a result of an LLC (e.g. Brower & Inkelas, 2010; Rowan-Kenyon et al., 2007).

The foundation of this improvement was students' changed perceptions of Beaver Falls, and the LLCs location and proximity to neighbors most likely served as the primary catalyst for this improvement. Residential campus LLCs exhibit similar gains by providing a cohort experience for students that results in the cohort being somewhat removed from other students while engaging in heightened interactions within the cohort. This type of socialization may facilitate student learning of the LLC theme (Inkelas et al., 2008). City House, however, illustrates this type of student socialization with the additional goal of increased interactions between students and urban community. City House, by design, places students in a very particular location that shapes their everyday interactions, observations, and experiences. In other words, context is a key factor in civic engagement. City House students could have learned *academically* about interacting with individuals who are different from them (in terms of socioeconomic status, race, age, religion, etc.) while on campus but living next to Beaver Falls neighbors helped them to learn *experientially*. Students articulated this distinction, indicating that despite visiting downtown Beaver Falls on occasion and being willing and open to interact with others, "loving" and "identifying with" the city did not occur until the students resided there.

In addition to proximity, shared vision between students, City House personnel, and neighbors also contributed to greater civic engagement; specifically, community attachment. All three groups articulated why the types of interactions promoted by City House and the neighbors are important, and why others should also participate in these interactions. Informal interactions with one another as well as intentional collaboration both can serve as important factors for civic engagement. As Boulianne and Brailey (2014) explained, community attachment—which involves feelings of connectedness as well as being integrated within the community—can predict civic engagement. While the Beaver Falls neighbors understandably expressed greater community attachment, their acceptance of City House students and view of the students as part of their community bodes well for the continued success of this program as well as future community engagement among academic institutions and the city. The neighbors also emphasized that city-wide change requires expanding these types of collaborations beyond a

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single location. They viewed this model, with its emphasis on proximity and shared a vision, as one that should be imitated across the city.

While Putnam (2001) describes the decline of civic engagement in America, programs such as City House illustrate the interest in and commitment to community, connectedness, and sense of belonging that many college students have and can successfully contribute to. The move from on-campus housing to a diverse neighborhood in an economically distressed community seems to expose commonly accepted, but often harmful, perceptions of "the good life." Students' widely held assumptions about space, privacy, safety, materialism, and convenience are challenged when they experience the rich diversity, interactions, connectedness, and enjoyment of their new urban context. The ways in which these previous perceptions are challenged by everyday encounters and observations seem to suggest new practices and habits that are hopefully formative for the years after college. Arguably, there is a great need today to promote young adults' interactions with diverse others, particularly when, as would be the case for the City House students, the typical school experience would otherwise be very monochromatic. These divisions cause "the democratic message of equal political rights and heritage [to be] severely undermined" (Kahlenberg & Janney, 2016, para. 18). While it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the perspectives of the Beaver Falls residents interviewed for this study, they emphatically saw two-fold benefits to interacting with the primarily white, middle-class college students: 1) increased community engagement on their street due to the activities of City House and 2) opportunity to impart their wisdom and experience to these students. A few of the residents enthusiastically spoke of a hope of multiple City Houses being established across Beaver Falls. While time, money, and opportunity may limit this happening in the near future, their comments reflect a hope that higher education plays a role in bringing real change to a community and to mentor a new generation in seeing more interconnectedness with diverse others.

The experience of students at the City House indicates that students' community engagement is additionally rooted in two integrated factors. First, students need a knowledge base that broadens students' understanding and equips them to see connections and develop meaning. City House, therefore, builds upon Saltmarsh's (2005) recommendation that civic engagement is prefaced with obtaining knowledge about the community and community structures. Secondly, this knowledge base becomes solidified and embodied through everyday interactions, observations, and relationships. The finding that students who found shared interests with neighbors engaged most successfully in informal interactions is consistent with West, Magee, Gordon, and Gullet's (2014) work on peripheral and self-revealing similarities and sustaining inter-racial relationships. Essentially, they found that perceptions of similarity in cross-race dyads reduced anxiety about the cross-race partner as well as contributed to intents to sustain the relationship. Their results indicated that it was crucial for the similarities to be in areas peripheral to the purposes of the interaction in order to have this effect. City House's emphasis on informal, off-the-cuff interactions between college students and Beaver Falls neighbors (who typically differ from one another across a number of dimensions, including age and race) is consistent with West et al.'s recommendations. Thus, improving students' academic knowledge of communities and emphasizing informal interactions between the students and community members are features grounded in research; these are promising for other LLCs and programs seeking to promote community interactions.

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Challenges

Time management appears to be one of the greatest challenges for the City House students, and this goes hand-in-hand with finding ways to balance schoolwork and community engagement. These challenges reflect an interesting counterpoint to literature indicating that LLCs can help bridge the gap between coursework and out-of-class experiences (e.g., Daffron & Holland, 2009; Eck et al., 2007). While this is indeed the hope of a successful LLC, a risk is that the academic and experiential components will overwhelm students with too many activities. Reasserting boundaries between academics and experiences and determining where they lie is something that off-campus LLC students and instructors may need to negotiate. For example, the program evaluation for City House recommended that instructors consider removing some academic readings and increase student interactions with neighbors, given the findings that certain academic topics may be overemphasized while informal interactions with neighbors may need to be increased in order to promote program goals. An additional recommendation was that City House instructors openly discuss the academic/balance issue with students at the beginning of the academic year and throughout the term to negotiate and renegotiate these boundaries as best fit the needs of each cohort.

Limitations

Limitations to the program evaluation of City House include the composition of the participant sample. Former City House students who consented to be interviewed and maintained current contact information with the City House director likely gave more positive answers than those who did not consent would have. However, this may be mitigated by interviews and surveys from the current group of City House students who were perhaps less positive compared to other cohorts; neighbor comments indicated comparisons across years of students that suggested this conclusion.

Utilization of Skype and in-person interviews across each participant type, with complete recordings of each interview would facilitate more rigorous qualitative analyses. A multi-year study comparing baseline and final student responses would better address student experiences across cohorts rather than idiosyncratic experiences within a single cohort. Small sample sizes in the present study also limited analyses as well as generalizability. While study results may inform other programs of specific qualities that contribute to student-community engagement, generalizability cannot be assumed, given the sample size and specific context of the present study.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were made to the City House directors following the program evaluation; these recommendations may be useful to those intending to implement a comparable program. First, regarding students' perceptions that time management was a significant barrier to achieving City House goals, the students themselves recommended that they have more of a voice in choosing which activities to emphasize and how to balance the various aspects of the City House experience. While the City House directors may always require minimum requisite volunteer hours, household tasks, academic experiences, and neighborhood engagement, collaborative meetings between directors and students at the start of the year could be used to collectively decide on what particular areas should be emphasized that particular year. This might result in better time management and successful buy-in from the students. City House has already begun to implement these recommendations.

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A second recommendation addresses City House alumni's challenges in applying what they learned about civic engagement in an urban setting to a different one. More concerted instructional debriefing sessions at the close of each academic year could help students to reflect on where they might be living in the coming year and how they can live out what they learned in that new setting.

A third recommendation addresses students' likelihood of having a commitment to place as well as greater civic engagement, and the recommendation arose from the Beaver Falls residents themselves. If at all possible, students should be encouraged to live in City House for at least two years, with increased opportunities for alumni to still be involved in City House (such as in the capacity of a house mentor) when possible. The time it takes to develop a deep commitment to place and the need to overcome initial feelings of resistance when students realize that they have never devoted this much time to engaging with and interacting with others means that students may not realize the full benefits of participating in City House until the end of the year. It was clear that alumni who had participated for multiple years could clearly articulate what they learned from the experience and how it changed them. Furthermore, second-year students are much more likely to be comfortable interacting with neighbors and may have learned to better balance academics and civic engagement. According to the neighbors, while they didn't at all mind learning new names and faces each year, they saw how students who participated across multiple years were more participatory and better aligned with City House goals and objectives (of which the neighbors were well-aware, based on their interactions with the directors over the years).

Conclusion

In conclusion, promoting community attachment among inherently transient college students is unlikely to strongly connect individual students long-term to the specific communities in which they engage during their college years (although, it is possible). Based on Boulianne and Brailey's (2014) research finds that while community attachment predicts volunteerism, college students' intent to stay in a community did not. Students' commitment to a *particular place* during their college years may be a less important goal than their learning of the principle *commitment to place* overall. Interviews with City House graduates indicated that these former students do currently strive to implement this principle. A deep sense of commitment to place is arguably necessary for the health of local communities and may also contribute to individual's well-being (see Flanagan & Bundick, 2011). The hope is that while City House students engage their community of Beaver Falls, they will recognize the significance of this, or any, particular place and learn the value of investing in and caring for the places they will live. Furthermore, this program can serve as a model for others seeking to counteract civic *dis*engagement.

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