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# Building Bridges with Big Brothers Big Sisters: Service-learning Links Between Professional and Civic Engagement Education at a Predominantly Black Institution

Susan McFarlane-Alvarez and Shandra McDonald

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## Abstract

During spring and fall semesters of 2017, Clayton State University students in corporate communication minor courses collaborated with film production majors to raise awareness for Big Brothers Big Sisters of Metropolitan Atlanta. Through this three-way collaboration, students helped to build tactical communication with the objective of increasing interest among potential volunteers for the organization's mentoring program. The deliverables included three videos that Big Brothers Big Sisters used in its drive to increase the number of volunteer mentors in the communities for both the organization and Clayton State. This paper examines the importance of community-engaged service-learning for a student population at a minority-serving predominantly Black institution in Morrow, Georgia, part of the Atlanta metropolitan area. As part of Clayton State's broader community engagement initiative, this collaboration is being evaluated using a case study design. Consequently, we examine the interdisciplinary roots of the initiative while positioning professional and civic education as simultaneously achievable. Ultimately the research positions Clayton State as a centrifuge for collaborative experience, which serves this dual purpose.

## Theoretical Backdrop

While the earlier body of research that focused on service-learning does not take Black institutions significantly into consideration, these colleges and universities have a long and important history of civic engagement. Gasman, Spencer, and Orphan (2015) provide a detailed review of civic engagement initiatives among mostly private Black colleges. Service-learning is recognized as leading to greater civic engagement among students, providing a philosophical justification for both civic education and service-learning by "reclaiming the historic civic purpose of higher education" (p. 347). Further, two possible reasons are provided for why HBCUs had not been included in earlier conversations about civic education and service-learning. Firstly, the claim is made that HBCUs have not themselves become active participants in the conversations about service-learning. Secondly, these institutions have been overlooked in the scholarly literature in this area. The point of these observations is that service-learning and civic engagement exist to significant degrees at HBCUs but remain unrecognized and unaccounted. Lomax (2006), on the other hand, notes, "For historically Black colleges and universities, engagement is not an enhancement of their curriculum, but part of their birthright" (p. 5).

With greater focus on the issue of race as it intersects with civic engagement, in *African Americans and Community Engagement in Higher Education*, the authors call for scholars and practitioners to consider issues of race when researching and implementing service-learning initiatives (Evans, Taylor, Dunlap, & Miller, 2009). The issue of race is further examined by Stevens (2003), who sets out to highlight unrecognized service-learning embedded in African American social thought and action. In particular, recognition is given to the early work of "Negro" institutions like the church, Black colleges, and other civic-minded organizations. An example of such early precedents is the role of Ida B. Wells-Barnett in promoting service-learning and civic engagement through the Negro Scholarship League. Through her stewardship, Wells-Barnett mobilized a Sunday School-originated group to help incoming Black migrants to the Chicago area by offering community action programs (see <https://blackmail4u.com/2019/02/09/4781/>). In activities of this kind, Stevens (2003) cites the unrecognized roots of social action and education within the African American community.

While the philosophies of W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington are often pitted against each other, in the realm of education and civic

engagement, Du Bois and Washington are in fact more alike than different in their approaches. Stevens (2003) considers Du Bois, who “also used a facsimile of the service-learning philosophy during his early teaching experiences” (p. 30). Similarly, Washington believed that a traditional university education could be enhanced by ensuring that students were actively engaged in labor and acquiring knowledge of practical trades. The essential role of engaged learning at Black universities and colleges is effectively summarized by Gasman et al. (2015), in the statement that, “Historically Black institutions, however, always had, as the right ventricle, a fourth purpose—the pursuit of social justice, which is the core of civic engagement, and the strengthening of democracy” (p. 374). Through a consideration of Washington and Du Bois, Gasman et al. (2015) posit that pitting the two perspectives of academia—professional versus civic—against each other is a false dichotomy. While Washington saw the necessity for Black students (and the wider African American society) to get to work in whatever way feasible within the segregated society, Du Bois saw good reason to educate an elite few, and let them fight for change by bringing together the talented tenth with the larger community of African Americans and creating a sense of collaboration. More pointedly, the article notes that HBCUs have always shown that higher education can serve both civic and professional functions and that the mission of higher education is strengthened by this dual pursuit. Here, as defined by Ehrlich (2000), the term civic engagement can be understood as work that makes “a difference in the civic life of the communities and develop a combination of knowledge, skills, values, and motivation to make that difference” (p. vi).

While Clayton State University is neither an HBCU nor a private institution, as are those mentioned in the study by Gasman et al. (2015), the institution confronts similar social issues to its HBCU counterparts. In particular, according to the Dream Makers Scholarship Initiative (Clayton State’s Office of Giving (2018), 78% of Clayton State students demonstrate need with approximately 85% of them receiving financial assistance in the form of scholarships, grants, and loans. As Gasman et al. (2015) assert, HBCUs play a critical role in the “social, political, economic, personal and educational development of the Black communities” (p. 350). In this writing, we assert that Clayton State and other predominantly Black institutions can be similarly integral to the

development of their surrounding communities.

Clayton State’s efforts in community engagement serve as an example of what can happen when students of a public, predominantly Black institution are encouraged to put their professional learning, liberal arts education, and commitment to civic engagement to work, simultaneously and strategically. As an example of community-engaged learning within what Gasman et al. (2015) refer to as the category of community organization collaborations, the Clayton State project with Big Brothers Big Sisters serves to illustrate the reality of higher education serving both civic and professional functions, building the students’ industrial capability and social employability while serving to strengthen the contextual community on multiple levels, including mutual achievement of strategic missions and goals between the university and its community partner.

In the case of the Big Brothers Big Sisters project, Clayton State students helped the organization advance its mission to improve the lives of youth, while Clayton State was able to further build its brand through community engagement and program development. In effect, examination of Clayton State’s collaboration with Big Brothers Big Sisters reveals several specific gains for the university, its students, the community, and the community partner, providing an example of a primarily Black institution fulfilling both its civic and professional function through community engagement.

### **The Community-Engaged Learning Project**

In fall 2016, Big Brothers Big Sisters of Metro Atlanta (see <https://www.bbbsatl.org/>) contacted Clayton State to request student involvement in raising awareness in the community surrounding the university. The nonprofit sought to recruit new volunteers, particularly Big Brothers, as they had increasing numbers of Little Brothers who had been unmatched. Big Brothers Big Sisters of America (2019) is the largest mentoring network operating through donor and volunteer support in the United States. The nonprofit seeks to make monitored matches between adults and children who are often facing adversity with strong and enduring professionally supported one-to-one relationships that change their lives for the better. In its Annual Impact Report (Mitchell, 2019), the organization noted that through the mentoring program, children build higher aspirations, greater confidence, and better relationships. The mentoring is also reported to decrease the likelihood that the children will engage in risky behaviors, while

increasing their chances of educational success (Mitchell, 2019).

The community-engaged collaboration between Clayton State and Big Brothers Big Sisters of Metro Atlanta fulfilled the professional learning outcomes, while also advancing the university's civic engagement projects. Indeed, the mentoring within Big Brothers Big Sisters has long been associated with strengthening the community. In fact, according to a 1995 *Public/Private Ventures* study (see <https://www.bigslittles.org/publicprivate-ventures-study/>) that looked at over 950 boys and girls from eight Big Brothers Big Sisters agencies across the country, 46% were less likely to begin using illegal drugs; 27% were less likely to begin using alcohol; 52% were less likely to skip school, while "Littles" skipped half as many days of school as did their peers, though the direct relation revealed in this and similar studies may not prove causality.

Added to the role of Big Brothers Big Sisters in the wider metro community, it is also important to note Clayton State's geographical and socio-economic context. While there has been some overall economic improvement in Clayton County since the time of this study, the situation at the time was not markedly different from today.

Clayton County is located to the south of the Atlanta Metro Area, and includes the seven cities of College Park, Forest Park, Jonesboro, Lake City, Lovejoy, Morrow, and Riverdale. With a 2019 population of 292,256, the county's population is 69% Black, 9% white, 13% Hispanic, and 5% Asian, with 3% reporting two or more races. The county's median household income in 2019 was \$51,093, with a per capita income of \$21,251, with 15.4% of the county's population living in poverty (see Census Reporter, <https://censusreporter.org/profiles/05000US13063-clayton-county-ga/>).

Against this socioeconomic backdrop, Big Brothers Big Sisters of Metro Atlanta reached out to Clayton State, expressing the need to reach and recruit potential mentors, or "Bigs," in and around the Metro area, but especially in the Clayton County area. Through Clayton State's PACE (Partnering Academics and Community Engagement) initiative, the connection was made between Big Brothers Big Sisters of Metro Atlanta, and the Introduction to Advertising class, within the Department of Visual and Performing Arts.

In a formal briefing session, the client explained to students enrolled in the class that the reason for this need was that in the communities within Clayton County, the number of "Littles"

far exceeded the number of "Bigs" (or mentors). Students received the information brief from the client during an in-person meeting in which the client also explained the communication objectives, including the desire to increase awareness of the need for mentors, and to increase understanding that the mentoring commitment is rewarding, not onerous. In the days following the briefing session, students brainstormed possible tactical approaches to achieving these communication objectives and presented the client with the recommendation of a series of videos featuring "matches," or pairs of "Bigs" and "Littles," each providing testimony about the rewarding nature of their mentoring relationship.

Students in the Introduction to Advertising course worked with the client to conceptualize the video series, while simultaneously learning about the processes of pre-production, production, and post-production, including scripting and producing videos that would fulfill the communication objectives. The advertising students came up with a creative approach to the project, and pitched that approach to the client, while learning about and using a video treatment, (brief descriptive paragraphs) and storyboards. After the client approved the creative direction for the video series, students were asked to assess their internal video expertise, training, and capability, and realized that they didn't possess the skills necessary for completing the technical aspects of the video production, in order to achieve the level of professionalism that the client would likely be seeking. Another aspect of student learning included assessment of human resources, and the decision to outsource production to an external service provider. In this instance, the external service provider included students enrolled in the class, Modes of Video Production.

Ultimately, through collaboration with students of video production, students of advertising wrote audiovisual scripts, learned about the importance of clear communication with clients, and practiced the arts of scriptwriting, pre-production planning, and outsourcing. At the same time, production students learned about receiving and distilling a brief, working with an agency production team, and producing video material that would adhere to the client's brief. Students worked together, collaborating across disciplines, also learning professional decorum, location production protocol, and the importance of community-engaged learning for both students and community partners.

## Outcomes

Ultimately, students produced four videos: “Workshop Fun,” “Monster Trucks and Being a Big Brother,” “Just Dive In,” and “Kyle.” Students presented all four videos to the client, but the video titled “Kyle,” which featured the marketing manager of Big Brothers Big Sisters, quickly became obsolete because of the departure of the main person featured in the video. The remaining three videos are hosted on the YouTube Channel for Big Brothers Big Sisters of Metro Atlanta (see <https://www.youtube.com/user/BBBSMA2012/videos/>). Through this collaborative community engagement project, the community partner gained outreach to its target audiences. In fact, in fall semester 2017, this project work continued as students in Introduction to Public Relations also developed a publicity plan around deployment of the videos in social media, which included building awareness of Big Brothers Big Sisters more deeply into the community. Given the demographics of the surrounding Clayton County area, the project served to build connections among community members at the levels of individual, organizational and institutional relationships. Added to this, students gained professional experience in the areas of scriptwriting, project management, and public relations, including writing news releases, social media strategy, and feature story pitching.

Through this collaboration, Clayton State strengthened its recognition as a community-engaged institution, preparing students both professionally and as civic-minded leaders. The story of this community partnership between Clayton State and Big Brothers Big Sisters of Metro Atlanta, and the intent to raise awareness about the need for volunteer mentors, was further disseminated through Clayton State’s print and online magazine, *Laker Connection*, in spring 2018 (see <https://www.clayton.edu/laker-connection/Volume13/Issue1/Spring2018/Brotherly-Love>).

## Conclusion

The benefits of an engaged learning project like the described collaboration between Clayton State and Big Brothers Big Sisters of Metro Atlanta are easy to identify. On graduating, public relations, advertising, and video production students at Clayton State typically enter a competitive job market in which they are considered alongside applicants from larger, more widely recognized institutions like Georgia State University and the University of Georgia. For these students, the

ability to present portfolio items that demonstrate real-world application of their learning is valuable. Similarly, students’ ability to describe their experiences using industry terms help potential employers to see that they are workforce-ready.

Perhaps even more important than helping the students become workforce-ready is what might be termed disinterested learning, which takes place during engaged learning experiences like the one described here. In her article, “The University Has No Purpose: And That’s a Good Thing,” Elizabeth Corey describes disinterested learning as learning that takes place without consideration of the activity’s consequences (see <https://www.chronicle.com/article/The-University-Has-No-Purpose/243185>). In the advertising, public relations, and production courses in which the students were enrolled during the semesters in which they participated in this engaged learning project, the course outcomes predicted that the students would learn best practices in these disciplines. Far more difficult to predict were the outcomes that were related to the human contexts of sympathy, humility, and charity.

For students of a predominantly Black institution like Clayton State, learning increasingly focuses on increasing the student’s income-earning potential upon graduation. Students typically enroll in higher education to achieve the specific and tangible benefits that university education offers. As a result, the less quantifiable benefits of disinterested learning are often overlooked and deemed to be the realm of privileged students, who do not have the sole concern of employability upon graduation (see <https://www.chronicle.com/article/The-University-Has-No-Purpose/243185>). However, it is the human context of this learning that will help students become more active participants in their own communities and ultimately make them more likely to foster leadership qualities.

By highlighting both the industrial importance as key to career success, as Booker T. Washington asserted, and the importance of the less outcome-focused education, as Du Bois argued, students benefit from broad learning that serves to strengthen their outlook as both employable graduates who are workforce-ready, and as future leaders in the community.

Set against a broader environment in which learning for the sake of learning is increasingly questioned, the success of university courses is often measured based on applicability of coursework to students’ vocational intentions.

Increasingly, instruction is required to take on some measure of applicability to the attainment of professional expertise. Meanwhile, learning that solely fulfills theoretical, epistemological, or civic outcomes may be seen as increasingly difficult to rationalize. The nature of Clayton State's collaboration with Big Brothers Big Sisters of Metro Atlanta (2017) serves as an example of the potential of tying professional learning outcomes to civic engagement opportunities, ensuring multifaceted success among the several contextual stakeholders.

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