

CIVIC EDUCATION IN UKRAINE: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

(on the example of Kyiv National Linguistic University)

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The formation of informed, socially responsible professionals and citizens is the prime goal of education in Ukraine. To that end, the Law on Education of Ukraine obliges the state to create conditions for civic engagement of students. While quantitative studies on the subject put a compelling argument about the benefits of civic engagement for promoting participatory democracy and enhancing students' analytical and communication skills, there is scant knowledge of how students actually understand and experience it. The article makes an attempt to address this issue. Drawing on the qualitative methodology and a development triad motivation-activity-outcome, it studies civic engagement experiences of students of Kyiv National Linguistic University. The majority of respondents associate civic engagement with volunteering, political activity and the notion of active citizenship. Students who participated in civic-related activities in the hope of a better grade (extrinsic motivation) reported learning next to nothing from their participation. Conversely, students who took part in such activities for personal reasons (intrinsic motivation) reported improvement of their communication and teamwork skills. Participants struggled to describe the wider impact of their civic engagement due to the lack of reflection. Based on the results of the study, we propose a tertiary model for structuring civic engagement opportunities in a university setting to enhance students' experience.

Keywords: civic education; civic engagement; extrinsic and intrinsic motivation; structured reflection; learning outcomes.

Introduction

Participation of citizens in all aspects of society is central to the advancement of democratic institutions and an important precursor for promoting social justice and human rights (Arnot, 2008). Higher education plays a pivotal role in strengthening civic vitality by offering individuals the opportunity and knowledge to influence the nature and direction of society. Additionally, it equips them with skills and competencies to contribute positively to their professions and to function successfully in a globalised community (Sieriakova & Valigura, 2016).

In pursuit of Ukraine's pro-European agenda, the recently adopted Law of Ukraine on Education (2017) declares that the prime purpose of education in the country lies in the upbringing of informed and socially responsible citizens (p. 8). Citizens' rights and responsibilities to the society are premised upon individuals having access to and "obtaining civic education aimed at forming competences related to exercising rights and duties by a person as a member of the society, awareness about values of the civil (free democratic) society, the rule of law, human and civil rights and freedoms" (the Law of Ukraine on Education, p. 9).

Given this mandate to advance the civic mission of education, a lot of universities started to embrace more thoroughly the concept of civic engagement and actively seek ways to enhance students' out-of-classroom experiences. For example, eight Ukrainian universities in partnership with the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) have launched a semester-long civic education course "Democracy: from Theory to Practice" which acquaints students with fundamental human rights, principles of social justice and challenges them to design a project to benefit their communities.

In this research, we **aim** to analyse students' experiences of civic engagement, to evaluate it through a qualitative study and to offer a comprehensive model for structuring students' civic engagement within a university setting.

Literature review

Taking action for the benefit of a community is the basic tenet of civic engagement (Pancer, 2015). It is broadly defined as individual's activities alone or as part of a group that focus on addressing community problems (i.e. volunteering, fund-raising, petitioning, disseminating relevant information) and participating constructively in the political and social life of the community (i.e. rallying, voting, campaigning) (Manning & Edwards, 2014). A large body of empirical research (Astin et al., 2000; Hoffman, 2015; Jacoby et al.,

2009; Knapp et al., 2010; Millican & Bourner, 2011; Lorenzini, 2013; Prentice, 2011; Zepke, 2015) suggests that the above-mentioned activities can yield important learning outcomes and inculcate in students' a sense of civic responsibility. Civic engagement was found to have a positive impact on students' grades and classroom participation (Knapp et al., 2010; Millican & Bourner, 2011) as well as to enhance their communication and critical thinking skills (Astin et al., 2000). Students who participated in civic-related activities reported developing a better understanding of themselves and their citizenry role in a community (Flores et al., 2019; Prentice, 2011) as well as demonstrated more openness to divergent points of view (Zepke, 2015).

At the same time, researchers (Jacoby et al., 2009; Flanagan & Levine, 2010) argue that the concept of civic engagement in higher education transcends that of volunteering. The emphasis in the latter is solely on benefiting the recipient (i.e. collecting toys for orphanages, fund-raising) and while it may give a sense of personal satisfaction to students, it does not require them to critically examine the existing structures or their own position within the larger social landscape (Jacoby et al., 2009). The role of educational institutions lies in structuring students' civic engagement endeavours in such a way as to encourage critical reflection and assisting them to derive meaning from their experiences. In other words, for civic engagement to bear the desired outcome (enhanced civic responsibility, critical thinking and communication skills) universities should turn students' out-of-classroom activities into significant learning experiences. Fink (2003) theorises that significant learning experiences are predicated on active observation (not mere registration of a problem, but an exploration of ways to address it) and reflection on one's personal agency.

The above-mentioned empirical research privileges the use of civic engagement for the upbringing of informed and socially responsible citizens as well as emphasises its benefits for student retention and development. However, the majority of studies on civic engagement in higher education are based on statistical data which do not give a clear idea as to how students actually experience civic engagement, what motivates them to get civically engaged in the first place and what they learn as a result of their civic participation (Kokoza, 2013). As civic engagement takes a more prominent place in both institutional missions and pedagogical scholarship in Ukraine, we believe it is important to incorporate students' voices into the current narrative of civic education.

Methods

The purpose of this study is to explore students' experiences of civic engagement. Rather than having participants respond to the preconceived notions of what civic engagement is, we wanted them to define it in order to uncover a deeper, richer understanding of the phenomenon. This focus on understanding the experience rather than uncovering the absolute truth in line with qualitative methodology, namely the phenomenological approach which favours the use of small and purposefully selected samples to study the essence of a phenomenon in great detail (Shram, 2006). Therefore, we recruited 24 participants from the cohorts of 2nd and 3rd year students at Kyiv National Linguistic University (KNLU) who had taken part in civic-related local and international activities and expressed an interest to participate in the study. In line with the ethical considerations for qualitative research (Traianou, 2014) the students were informed about the objectives of the study and of their right to withdraw from it at any time, as well as how their identities would be protected through the research process (the inclusion of first names and year of study when cited; personal information was not shared with the third parties).

The data collection included the use of a questionnaire and a follow-up focus group discussion. We sent to the participants the questionnaire of five open-ended questions in English. To encourage maximum reflection, we employed Price's (2002) ladder question technique in structuring our questionnaire: we started with general, less intrusive questions by asking the participants to describe their civic engagement activities, including the parts they liked and disliked, and eventually delved deeper into their experiences by prompting the participants to identify learning outcomes and to define civic engagement. The initial data analysis involved the methods of open and focus coding (Blair, 2015) which enabled us to identify emerging themes in the students' narratives. To explore them further we conducted a follow-up focus group discussion, during which we explored further the themes identified in the initial analysis. On the basis of students' answers and our notes from the focus group discussion, we delineated the key themes of the participants' experiences of civic engagement. In line with the qualitative research standards (Shram, 2006) and to ensure the trustworthiness of the study, excerpts from the participants' narratives are sprinkled throughout the results section of the paper.

Results

All the participants defined themselves as civically engaged but offered different interpretations of the civic engagement itself. The recurring themes in the students' definitions of civic engagement include "help", "politics" and "values". Let us consider them in greater detail.

Civic engagement as help. The participants described civic engagement as various forms of help provided on a voluntary basis. It is noteworthy that beneficiaries of this help were different to different students. For Liliia (2nd year student), it meant help to those less fortunate than herself, such as the orphaned, the disabled and the retired, while for Vadym (3rd year student) being civically engaged meant helping Ukrainian Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO) soldiers past and present *"you can make donations or encourage others to donate, prepare and send food to ATO soldiers [...] there are a lot of other ways in which you can help people who are making things better for our country"*. Alexandra's (2nd year student) idea of help extended to all members of society who may or may not be of immediate need for assistance, because *"it [civic engagement] is also about mentoring, giving advice and encouraging others to be kinder"*, she says. Several students defined civic engagement as assistance to the university community that takes the form of taking part in competitions, organising charity events and students' concerts. *"...it [civic engagement] starts with assisting your local community, such as your university. You cannot improve things on a global level if you do not assist to improve things locally"*, says Olena (3rd year student).

Other students, who also associated civic engagement with voluntary help, believed that the sole beneficiary of such help should be the country. Kristina (2nd year student) defined civic engagement as help to the country that comes in the form of *"representing Ukraine abroad in the best possible light"*. Dariia (2nd year student) echoed this sentiment when she mentioned that as citizens we sometimes do injustice to our country, therefore civic engagement for her is a help to the country in the form of dispelling prejudices and promoting Ukraine's finer points. Several other participants defined civic engagement as help to society but could elaborate further on the subject.

Civic engagement as politics. Another theme which loomed large in the participants' narratives of civic engagement was politics. This category of students associated civic engagement exclusively with political activity, primarily with taking part in elections. Thus, Anna (3rd year student) equated being civically engaged with casting a ballot at elections while Valeriia (2nd year student) believed that civic engagement is akin *"to be involved in elections"* by which she means not only voting but *"following current political debates and staying informed"*. Victoria goes further and claims that civic engagement is not only about voting at elections but encouraging others to do so as well *"a lot of my friends do not vote and I think it is wrong. I see it as my civic duty to explain to them the importance of elections for our country and inspire them to vote"*. The students, who defined civic engagement under the thematic strand "politics", included in their respective narratives such behaviours as attending a rally of a political party and disseminating political information via social media.

Civic engagement as values. Unlike the previous two categories of participants, the students who described civic engagement under the thematic strand "values" defined it not as a particular behaviour or action, but rather as a set of values associated with the notion of active citizenship, such as freedom of speech and freedom of choice, respect for diversity and multiculturalism, viewing oneself as a global citizen rather than a citizen of one specific country. Thus, for Alina (2nd year student) civic engagement is *"a possibility to speak one's mind and to have a frank and open discussion without fear"*, while for Vladyslav (2nd year student) it is *"essentially a freedom of speech and knowledge that your opinion matters"*. Two other participants draw parallels between civic engagement and being a citizen. For Neliia (2nd year student) being civically engaged was the same as being *"a sensible and decent citizen, always following current affairs, analysing what is happening in the country and the world"*, while Vadym (2nd year student) took this notion one step further and defined civic engagement as global citizenship *"we live in a globalised and interconnected world, hence civic engagement is the acceptance of diverse opinions and different cultures, by accepting and respecting this divergence of views you become a global citizen"*.

As students offered different interpretations of civic engagement, respective activities in which they participated differed widely. Additionally, the participants' experience of civic engagement emerged as a complex process that involved incentive (motivation) for participation, actual activities and results (outcome) of taking part in such activities.

Motivation. Civic participation, like any other activity, requires an incentive sufficient enough to influence behaviour. For the students in the study, such incentive came in the form of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Participants, who were intrinsically motivated, wanted to take part in civic engagement activities because they believed it was an important for their personal and professional growth and that through their

civic participation they would benefit the wider community. In another words, motivation for civic engagement came from "within" the participants (Table 1).

Table 1. Thematic strands in students' definitions of civic engagement

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT		
HELP	POLITICS	VALUES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – voluntary assistance to vulnerable members of society – help to ATO soldiers – mentoring – assistance to the university community – improving the country's image – showcasing the finer points of national culture 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – voting / encouraging others to vote – staying informed about the political affairs – attending rallies – disseminating political information 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – freedom of speech – freedom of choice – respect for different points of view – global citizenship values – multiculturalism

Thus, Mariia (2nd year student), who participated in several service-learning projects during her study exchange programme said that she did so to "*broaden my horizons and learn to communicate with people who are culturally and socially different from me*". Anastasiia (2nd year student), who volunteered to interpret at different university and community events, admitted that she did so to improve her communication skills and to challenge herself "*I am a shy person and talking to people I don't know, let alone in a foreign tongue, does not come naturally for me, so I do it [get civically engaged] to challenge and improve myself*". Olena (3rd year student), who was a regular participant of different out-classroom-activities at the university, said that it helped to forge a connection with the university community and as result, she became more motivated to pursue her studies and earned better grades. Improving foreign language skills and representing Ukrainian culture abroad was another reason that figured in the students' narratives of civic engagement, especially those who participated in study abroad programmes or sought to exercise their civic endeavour through volunteering at recent international musical and sports events that were held in Ukraine. Like Neliia (2nd year student), who captured the sentiment by saying "*I participated in that activity because I wanted to try myself in an interpreter's role...It was good for me to communicate with native speakers, to listen to them and follow [trying to acquire] their perfect British accent*".

Other participants, however, reported that their personal aspirations had little to do with their civic participation and motivation for civic engagement came from the "outside" in the form of peer pressure and study abroad requirements. These students were *extrinsically* motivated. They participated in civic-related activities to fulfil the requirements of a scholarship, get a better grade and make their CV look more compelling. Therefore, those students were more interested in the external reward rather than the process of civic engagement. Thus, Alexandra (3rd year student) openly admitted that her participation in civic-related activities was driven by pragmatic considerations "*job market is tough and competitive, so I thought it was a good idea to do civic engagement and then put it on CV so that it stands out*". Anna (3rd year student) who associated civic engagement with voting in an election and re-posting pleas for help and other socially significant information on Facebook and Twitter, said that it was peer pressure "*if people around you become civically engaged in one way or the other, you feel pressured to do so as well*". Fulfilling the requirements of a study abroad programme was another incentive behind students' civic involvement. Apart from the academic component, study abroad programmes include a cultural aspect that usually comes in various forms of community service in which programmes' participants are expected to take part. Therefore, some study participants mentioned that taking part in these activities was not even optional, or as Romana (2nd year student) put it "*I simply had to do it because it was part of my exchange programme, otherwise I would not have earned the completion grade*".

Activity. The study participants, driven either by intrinsic or extrinsic motivation, participated in a raft of out-of-classroom activities. In the interest of the reader's time, we present a concise summary of our findings in this area. The activities in which students took part largely fall into categories: activities revolving around the university and activities encompassing the wider community. These two categories are not mutually exclusive and a lot of our participants took part in both. The activities associated the university, in which our research participants took part, included programmes of academic and cultural exchange, student concerts (e.g. Freshman/woman debut), taking part in academic and sports' competitions, contributing to the university newspaper, providing administrative and language assistance during visits of

foreign delegations and mentoring international students. The activities that encompassed a wider community included volunteering at various charity endeavours and sports competitions, fund-raising and collecting goods to notable causes, using social media platform to distribute information and highlight certain social blights. Thus, a group of participants came up with the idea to collect toys and sweets to help children in foster care celebrate St. Nicola's Day *"we prepared a mini-concert programme because we wanted to make it fun for the children and not just to bring toys [...] we also played and communicated with them. Overall, it was rewarding, although challenging experience, because it involved a lot of organisational preparations"*, said Lilya (2nd year student). Several students mentioned that while they had some good ideas of their own on how to improve the local community, they found it rather hard to see their initiative through a tortuous path from the conception to completion and found it easier to join the existing initiatives under the auspices of AIESEC and USAID Engage. Victoria (2nd year student), for example, assisted with the English Language classes for ATO soldiers, while Anna (2nd year student) helped to put together a dance performance at a rehabilitation centre. Some participants of study abroad programmes prepared presentations about Ukrainian history and culture for local communities *"during the Feast of the Nations event at my host university I prepared a short presentation on three most important Ukrainian landmarks and the history events associated with them as well as explained the meaning of some of the Ukrainian symbols"*. Most of our research participants admitted to being active users of Facebook and Twitter, which enables them to highlight the causes their care about. For example, Nataliia (3rd student) is a member of several Facebook groups that help homeless animals and on a regular basis re-posts information about abandoned animals looking for a new home. Re-posting information about people seeking help is another popular method of online network-type civic engagement.

Outcome. The majority of the study participants believed that their civic engagement endeavours had a positive impact on their personal growth and career skills. In particular, students mentioned enhanced communication skills, growing self-reliance and independence, developing tolerance to multiculturalism and divergence of opinions, appreciation of team work, better awareness of themselves as citizens of Ukraine, as well as improved command of foreign languages. As civic engagement activities invariably involve various forms of collaboration, a lot of the research participants reported honing their communication skills and developing tolerance towards different points of view. For example, Kristina (2nd year student) said that she learnt to communicate more effectively with people by acknowledging the divergence of opinions *"I've learnt that we are all different and that it is not a bad thing, it is what makes us stronger, I mean, different minds and different ideas brought together to enrich the world. I've realised that you can still remain on good terms with a person with whom you different opinions about a topic"*. A similar sentiment was expressed by Alexandra (2nd year student) who mentioned that she came to appreciate the value of communication in resolving disputes and that *"if you do not like something, instead of getting upset, I learnt, that it is better to talk about it"*. Students, who assisted with the organisation of some of the university events involving group work, said that their participation made them appreciate the teamwork more. In particular, Alina (2nd year student), who took part in devising a mini-play performance for a student concert, described how she started with thinking that her idea was the best and eventually came to realise that *"it is when you discuss your idea with others, listen to their suggestions and incorporate some of them, that you get the best results [...] After all, we all had the same goal, we were one team"*.

The students, who participated in civic-related activities involving representatives of other nations (i.e. study abroad programmes, the Champions League) reported growing more confident and self-reliant as well as developing a better awareness of themselves as citizens of Ukraine. For instance, Anastasiia (2nd year student), who by her own admission was rather shy, reported becoming more confident in her language ability and communication skills. Exposure to another country and different cultural environment propelled some of the students, who took part in an academic exchange programme, to reflect on their country of origin and national identity. For example, Dariia (2nd year student) said that she had never thought much of what it meant to be a Ukrainian, until she was asked to speak about her country at an event at her host university *"it [citizenship] is more than just the name of the country where you were born, but a set of values that we hold dear, such as openness, hospitality, honesty. It is also our cultural and historic heritage, so when you say that you are from Ukraine, you represent [embody] all that. [...] I also learnt to take pride in my country"*. Several other participants shared this point of view. In particular, Victoriia (2nd year student), who mentioned that while volunteering for the Champions League she met a lot of foreigners who spoke in glowing terms about Ukrainian hospitality and beauty of the country's capital. It made her appreciate the finer points of her native country more.

While the participants described at length the outcomes associated with their personal growth, they were noticeably reticent when we asked them to talk about a wider impact of their civic engagement activities.

The majority of respondents admitted that they never thought of how the initiatives in which they participated impact a community or beneficiaries of such endeavours. In a similar vein, they struggled to see themselves in a larger social context. Therefore, their responses to the respective questions were monosyllabic and did not reveal much, apart from the students' belief that it was somehow "good" for their community.

Additionally, while the prevailing majority of the participants reported that they learnt from their civic engagement experiences, there was a small group of students who admitted that they learnt next to nothing from their participation. Thus, Alexandra (3rd year student), who participated in collecting toys and sweets for the orphans, said that "*I think we brought some joy for the children, but it was a simple activity and I didn't have to do much. There was nothing for me to learn*". Anna (3rd year student), who re-posted online pleas for help on Facebook, was equally dismissal of the outcomes of her civic engagement. It is noteworthy, that students in this group mentioned their lack of involvement in the activities they were pursuing as well as viewed civic engagement as an obligatory part of the programme, as Romana (2nd year student) summarised it "*we did not have a choice but participate*". Remarkably, the students who reported no outcomes of their civic engagement experiences were the ones who participated in the related activities in return for an external award, that it, were extrinsically motivated.

Discussion

The purpose of the study was to explore the students' experiences of civic engagement. Specifically, we looked into how they understood the term "civic engagement", reasons behind their civic participation, activities in which they took part and what they learnt as a result of their civic endeavours. The participants associated civic engagement with various forms of voluntary assistance provided to community members (vulnerable groups, ATO soldiers) and to the community itself (university, the country at large) as well as with taking part in the political life of the community (voting, following political affairs). In other words, they associated civic engagement with a certain type of action connected with the community, which dovetails with a wider action-based approach to civic engagement (Manning & Edwards, 2014; Pancer, 2015). However, other participants defined it not as an action but as a set of values that the community and its members should aspire to attain, which is in line with the view (Arnot, 2008) that civic engagement is both a means to achieving participatory democracy and its most salient characteristic. Given different facets of the civic engagement phenomenon and its varied interpretation by the students, the activities in which they participated differed widely and ranged from giving free English lessons for ATO soldiers to re-posting pleas for help on Facebook. It should be noted, that civic engagement has emerged as a more complex process than simply taking part in an activity. It involved motivation, actual activity and learning outcomes.

We found that students who were intrinsically motivated (pursued civic engagement for personal development goals), reported enhanced communication and teamwork skills, improved command of a foreign language and more tolerance towards different ideas, as a result of their civic participation. Conversely, the students who were extrinsically motivated (took part in exchange for an external reward), could not see much meaning in what they did as their involvement was only perfunctory, and as a result, reported learning next to nothing. Such discrepancy in learning outcomes between the intrinsically and extrinsically motivated students could be explained with the help of Student Involvement Theory (Astin, 1984), which posits that the more physical and psychological energy students invest in their academic and social activities, the more they learn and the more involved they become. Thus, the intrinsically motivated students tended to choose the activities which reflected their personal interests, exerted more efforts and became more involved in the activities they pursued, and as a result learnt more.

Nevertheless, both the intrinsically and extrinsically motivated students were unable to position themselves within a larger social context, to see that their actions are making a difference, however small, to the life of the community. The aim of the civic engagement pedagogy is not only to encourage learning through the service to the community but to empower students as well (Jacoby et al., 2009). The latter is impossible without structured reflection because, as John Dewey, a US philosopher and champion of experiential education stated: "We do not learn from experience, we learn from reflecting on experience" (quoted in Garrison et al., 2012, p. 51). As of most of the students' civic engagement pursuits directly or indirectly revolved around the university, the preeminent role of encouraging such reflection lies with the university. The purpose of the structured reflection is for students to see how their actions impact others, how they make a difference to their community, how their preconceived ideas of community issues changed as a result of civic related activities. Thus, at the end of an activity or a project student instructors could hold focus group discussions with students and prompt them to reflect on the abovementioned questions. Analysis of inputs (students' thoughts/expectations/biases before an activity) is an integral part of structured

reflection. Therefore, students' instructors are advised to ask students to reflect on their initial expectations and thoughts prior to the commencement of a project.

Table 2. Tertiary model for structuring students' civic engagement within a university setting

INPUT	ACTIVITIES	OUTCOMES
<p><u>Preparation:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – identifying students' interests and community partners – exploring students' initial expectations and thoughts prior to a project – setting clear goals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – open-ended questions survey & engaging with potential community partners – focus group discussions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – better awareness on the part of students – more opportunities to forging a connection and become involved – clarified expectations and putting everyone on the same footing
<p><u>Implementation:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – monitoring student progress – mentoring 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – maintaining contact with students and community partner 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – possibility to troubleshoot any potential setbacks
<p><u>Debriefing (structured reflection):</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – identifying challenges students encountered – exploring how their perceptions shifted – probing into their personal agency in addressing an issue 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – developing a semi-structured interview guide questions – focus group discussions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – nuanced understanding of their role in a community – better perceptions of the outcomes achieved – enhanced social and personal skills

Taking into consideration the foregoing, we suggest a tertiary model of structuring a civic engagement in a university setting (Table 2). It is built around three core components of civic engagement: input (preparation stage), activity (implementation stage) and output (learning stage). Incorporating our findings with the Student Involvement Theory (Astin, 1984), we elaborate a set of actions for university instructors to undertake at each stage to make students more involved in the process.

Conclusions

As civic engagement pedagogy broaches Ukrainian educational terrain, we explored the civic engagement experiences of 24 KNLU students. Drawing on the qualitative methodology we established that the participants associated civic engagement with various form of voluntary assistance, political participation and a set of active citizenship values. The students took part in a raft of out-of-classroom activities but their learning outcomes differed widely due to the type of motivation. The students who were intrinsically motivated the reported improvement of their communication and foreign language skills and better awareness of their national identity. The extrinsically motivated students, on the contrary, reported learning very little from their civic endeavours. The tertiary model for structuring students' civic engagement experiences rests on three core components of civic engagement (input, activity, outcome) and privileges the role of structured reflection for the upbringing of informed citizens.

Driven by the motivation to better civic education in Ukraine, our further research can be focused on the contextual factors influencing students' civic engagement as meaningful and mutually beneficial to the public good.

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