

One undergraduate's transformational story of self-discovery and personal development frames this discussion of the importance of undergraduate involvement in social justice research.

By Penny A. Pasque and Hailey Neubauer

# Beyond Discourse to Emancipatory Action: Lessons From an Undergraduate

## HAILEY NEUBAUER'S JOURNEY

WHEN I ARRIVED AT COLLEGE, I HAD THE misconception that I was pursuing higher education for the same reasons that today's typical high school senior would list; I wanted to get training for a skilled, long-term job with a high salary. My ticket to this life-long gravy train was going to be a degree in industrial engineering, which seemed to combine my love of calculus with my desire to make a lot of money. I was going to get all of my gen-ed courses out of the way early, so I could have the rest of my college years to study only what I wanted to study and then get out in the real world and achieve my inevitably immense financial success. Perhaps if I had amended this plan to put off taking my gen-eds to the very end of my academic career, my life would still be following this same track; however, despite my intentions, the engineering hopeful from a year ago has been replaced by a sociology major with a social conscience. I am

actively engaged in research and undergraduate student organizations, and have an ever-developing sense of civic duty. As I write this, I am halfway through my sophomore year.

This transformation may seem drastic because it is. It ultimately boils down to a conflict between using my intellectual talents to build my excessive personal financial security using math (a subject I find fun in the same trivial sense that I find puzzles fun) and using these same talents to work toward the betterment of society through teaching and research, areas in which I find both passion and fulfillment. While both sides have always been a part of me, it took exposure to a special kind of teaching with Dr. Pasque through the Honor College Undergraduate Research Opportunity Program (UROP), engagement with the university's Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) program, and a diverse, welcoming campus climate to promote the growth of interest in the latter over the former. I share a bit of my journey to provide

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some context regarding my life as I was introduced to research that focused on community-university engagement toward social justice through in- and out-of-the-classroom action.

When arriving on the University of Oklahoma's (OU's) campus my sophomore year, I not only saw more diversity (although admittedly, it's possible that this could be attributed to my increased appreciation for diversity at this time in my life), but I also saw this diversity being welcomed, celebrated, and appreciated. Most impressive was the inclusion of LGBT-empowered programs, a welcome surprise both because such programs were blatantly absent at the land-grant school I attended my first year and because I often saw the LGBT community being ignored and ostracized in the society in which I grew up, conveying the extent to which OU works to celebrate diversity.

Without ever having participated in any form of previous campus involvement at either university, I made the decision to apply to serve on the LGBTQ Advisory Board, a group that plans events to increase awareness of LGBT issues as well as promote understanding and acceptance of the community. I was

selected and, after only one semester, it has already been an incredible experience. Serving on this board has not only proven to me how much more meaningful the college experience becomes with campus involvement, but has also demonstrated the full extent to which the smallest actions can impact a person's life, positively or negatively. On one hand, I have developed an increased awareness of the types of abuse that ignorance has cast upon LGBT individuals; on the other, I have had the honor of heading the foundation of a probable annual event that will draw high school students from Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) Clubs throughout Oklahoma to our campus for an afternoon to demonstrate the ways in which OU is a welcoming campus that offers a number of resources for the LGBT community. Though the planning is in its very early stages, it has been incredible receiving responses from GSA sponsors expressing the excitement of their students over an event I have actually helped create for incoming students.

While involvement with this board has given me an idea of how plausible it is to make a difference in society, it took engagement in a research project with Dr. Pasque to finally discover how to most effectively combine all of my passions into my professional life. It has opened my eyes to the many social problems in our society from which I had previously been sheltered. Naively, the most surprising of these issues was the quality of our education system as a whole and the underlying interplay between various types of stratification and access to education. Through our research project, I started to realize the implications of this issue: education provides access to a higher quality of life, so to stratify access to it (often by current status/quality of life) is to perpetuate a vicious cycle of a status quo. This seemed like an incredible injustice, and I began to question the ways that it would be possible for me to simultaneously be a practicing engineer and work to improve our country's education system.

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have been involved in it, I have come to fully grasp the social good research serves. I now see research as the ideal tool for trying to identify and fix the problems underlying our higher education system. I am fortunate enough to attend a research university that understands the importance of undergraduate research experience, since if I did not become a research assistant on this project, I am certain I would still be a very confused engineering major, rather than the enthusiastic and empowered sociology major I am proud to be today.

When I started the project, I first read Dr. Pasque's research findings from her book, *American Higher Education, Leadership, and Policy: Critical Issues and the Public Good*. I also engaged in national conference calls with people who are interested in strengthening university-community partnerships for social justice, including a university president, the director of the National Forum on Higher Education for the Public Good, faculty from Imagine America, a Kettering Foundation officer, administrators, and other faculty from around the country. It was quite interesting to hear how people from across the United States talked about what I was experiencing in my second year at college—but from a very different perspective. I was encouraged and impressed by how welcoming and accepting they were of me, particularly as inexperienced as I felt relative to these accomplished individuals.

In sum, I worked with Elizabeth Hudson and Penny Pasque to create an annotated bibliography of all the national organizations, websites, and blogs that are doing work related to civic engagement in higher education and universities making changes in society. I also listened to over 50 hours of audiotape on which over 250 higher education leaders *talk* about the public good and provide examples of how their institutions *act* as engaged local and global citizens. This research focuses on the ways in which universities may make needed change in society, and we hope it is useful as undergraduates and administrators—or the “real people within universities”—work

together *with* community members on community-university engagement initiatives. I was able to present this initial information at the International Congress for Qualitative Inquiry in the spring of 2012. I have learned from this research and now I hope that you, and White House administrators, can learn from Dr. Pasque and me.

As this research touches the White House, it makes me realize how their policies directly impact the lives of people on a local level—my level and your level. Such programs and research opportunities are invaluable to students like me, and the goal for this article is to describe one way in which this undergraduate learning opportunity changed lives in the hopes that it is useful to undergraduates, administrators, and scholars around the country, as well as to administrators in the White House. In this article, first we share a bit about the national landscape regarding community-university engagement initiatives. We also share research findings that are instructive to higher education and student affairs professionals engaged in regular dialogues and programs that work to make change on campus and in local communities. Finally, we offer a call to action to the White House to tangibly follow up on some verbal initiatives they have mentioned in a way that might help foster campus engagement initiatives in a sustainable manner. We hope this information is useful to administrators and undergraduates as we work to move beyond discourse to emancipatory social action as local community members and as a larger nation.

## THE NATIONAL LANDSCAPE

THERE ARE NUMEROUS CRITICAL ISSUES facing the world today, including educational and economic inequities, incarceration rates, drug and human trafficking, the environment, safe drinking water, and other issues of social justice. While the fact that there are critical issues facing the world is not debatable, we argue that universities are positioned to play

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an instrumental role in researching and addressing such inequities. Further, student affairs professionals work directly with undergraduates, and some of us engage regularly in community–university partnerships. As such, student affairs professionals and undergraduates are in unique positions to engage in “grassroots” types of social change while they/we simultaneously have support from “grasstops” leaders at the university and national levels.

Grassroots initiatives on campuses may be found across higher education in service–learning courses, volunteer programs, alternative spring break programs, and living learning communities, to name a few. There are a number of books and articles about these topics, including *Educating Citizens: Preparing America’s Undergraduates for Lives of Moral and Civic Responsibility* by Anne Colby, Thomas Ehrlich, Elizabeth Beaumont, and Jason Stephens; a chapter on “Students Co-Creating an Engaged Academy” by Eric J. Fretz and Nicholas V. Longo in the well-conceived *Handbook of Engaged Scholarship* two-volume series; *Engaging the Whole of Service-Learning, Diversity, and Learning Communities* by Joseph A. Galura, Penny A. Pasque, David Schoem, and Jeffrey Howard; and many books and articles by Barbara Jacoby. In addition to campus-based initiatives, there are a number of national associations and institutions that address community engagement and social change, including Campus Compact, Imagining America, the American Democracy Project, the American Association of Colleges and Universities, and the American Commonwealth Partnership (ACP), which is a collaboration between various colleges, universities, schools, and organizations dedicated to actively promoting higher education’s civic mission, among others.

In January 2012, the White House joined the movement to promote higher education as a primary agent of civic engagement and the public good when it hosted the gathering entitled “For Democracy’s Future: Education Reclaims Our Civic Mission.” This national gathering of government, community, and education leaders was designed to address the current crisis in civic education, culminating in what Secretary of Education Arne Duncan presented as an inability of the United States to adequately address pressing

global challenges faced both here and abroad without “dramatically improving the quality and breadth of civic learning and democratic engagement” (para 13). Through the unveiling of the ACP, along with the publication of *A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy’s Future* by the National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement and the Association of American Colleges and Universities and *Advancing Civic Learning and Engagement in Democracy: A Road Map and Call to Action* by the US Department of Education, Office of the Under Secretary, and Office of Postsecondary Education, the White House and the Department of Education presented civic education and engagement as a national priority, challenging institutions of higher education to act at the forefront in revitalizing America’s democracy. In October 2012, they asked the Association for the Study of Higher Education community for feedback on steps 4–9 of the *Road Map* through e-mail (civiclearning@ed.gov) and blog posts (<http://www.ed.gov/blog/2012/10/the-education-department-wants-to-hear-from-you/>), which as of December 7, 2012, only had 11 responses.

To be sure, we appreciate this initiative and that the Department of Education has made this topic a priority. We hope this priority continues and moves toward action. We also question the ways in which challenges are issued to higher education institutions—as an ambiguous entity—with little reward or support for tangible action on grassroots levels. Importantly, Michael W. Apple and others have found that campaigns, standards movements, investments, and accountability plans are often reductive and support political ideologies rather than emancipatory approaches that deeply address inequities. As such, we ask, “What is behind this national discourse?” and “What are the ways in which talk turns to action?” such as in Neubauer’s own story.

In order to explore these questions in more detail and consider the ways in which it might be useful for student affairs, we worked together to (1) review the current research about the role of higher education in critically addressing higher education for the public good; (2) review the national discourse and discussion about universities as actors and agents of social change

on blogs, reports, and social media; and (3) focus on one national dialogue in order to explore the ways in which institutions—and actors within institutions—move from dialogue to emancipatory action, if at all.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

IN PASQUE'S BOOK MENTIONED EARLIER, she explored higher education leaders' perspectives of higher education's relationships to society as found through (1) a macro-analysis of the current literature (about 90 different books and articles) and (2) a micro-analysis of face-to-face language during a national conference series. In this case, "leaders" included community partners, university presidents, legislators, student affairs professionals, faculty, foundation officers, graduate students, and undergraduates who may not consider themselves to be leaders but who had published or articulated their thoughts in various national and campus contexts.

Through examination of the linguistic complexities of this national written and verbal discourse, Pasque found one aspect that was problematically commonplace and another quite original one. The finding that was not new was that some women, people of color, graduate students, and community partners were silenced and/or their perspectives were reframed or discounted in the national dialogue on engagement. This is not okay.

The unique finding was that the perspectives of people with *advocacy* perspectives about higher education's relationships with society were marginalized in the national discourse. *Stated another way, people with advocacy voices for social change were marginalized in conversations about community-university partnerships.* Specifically, these advocacy perspectives (presented by people with either agent and/or target social identities—i.e., white male full professors, African American male community partners, and Latina graduate students) that questioned the dominant perspectives were silenced, reframed, or disregarded. In each case, the dilemmas presented by these advocates were not captured in

recrafted models or in revised visions for change that hope to strengthen the relationships between higher education and society. Specifically, the dilemmas raised by advocates were initially ignored by claims of "broad, if not universal, agreement" in final reporting mechanisms, but we have since learned from these findings and hope for change in the future—including at gatherings sponsored by the White House.

It is important to elaborate on the content of the advocacy perspectives, which have two similarities. First, people with advocacy perspectives claimed mutual interdependence between the public and private good of higher education; where one ends and the other begins is blurred. Specifically, the private good argument is the belief that educating the private individual through higher education will contribute to the public good through an increase in economic growth, thereby defining the public good as local, state, and national economic vitality. This was Neubauer's perspective when she entered college. The argument for the public good is the belief that educating students to participate in a diverse society will contribute to the public good in terms of items such as increased civic engagement and appreciation of diversity. For example, Neubauer's original desire to get a degree and make money is not mutually exclusive from her desire to make social change—the two can coexist. We need money, commitment, drive, and many additional resources (both public and private) as we work for social change.

Second, each person who spoke from an advocacy perspective passionately described a crisis in higher education where action from leaders is needed to shift the focus of higher education from a capitalistic, market-driven emphasis to one that better serves the public good. This is mirrored in the literature such as *Take Back Higher Education: Race, Youth, and the Crisis of Democracy in the Post-Civil Rights Era* by Henry A. Giroux and Susan Searls Giroux, *Universities in the Marketplace: The Commercialization of Higher Education* by Derek Bok, and *Academic Capitalism and the New Economy: Markets, State and Higher Education* by Sheila Slaughter and Gary Rhoades. Moreover, higher

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education's role in a democracy needs to acknowledge the public and private realms as well as privilege the *interconnections* between them. These interconnections are the crux of a crisis in the academy where change in leaders' perspectives about, and behaviors regarding, the academy is needed. Political capital and social change are necessary to actualize a true and inclusive democracy. Further, this perspective believes that it is particularly important for leaders within colleges and universities to initiate this change. We argue that undergraduates also have agency, can work to initiate this change, and have done so on college campuses and in communities in the United States and around the world.

Most scholars with the advocacy perspective identify people with an economic neo-liberal view—who support the marketization of the larger economy and of higher education—as problematic and believe there is a lack of leadership and governance within the academy. There is also a fear that if there is not a change in how stakeholders inside and outside the academy perceive and act upon higher education's relationship with society, then higher education will be increasingly perceived as a private good or commodity. This will, in turn, reduce the collaborative connections between communities and universities that focus on social change and equity. Solutions offered included increased access to education, multicultural education, civic engagement for a diverse democracy, university engagement and outreach regarding myriad topics, and a change in leadership dialogue and processes.

It is these advocacy perspectives that have been found to be marginalized in the discourse and in national policy conversations. In these instances, silencing is not necessarily connected to volubility as discussed by Deborah Tannen; for example, omitting comments from final reporting documents, rejecting critical approaches in national journals, crafting committees where recommendations are “filed” (as opposed to “considered” and/or “acted upon”), and creating university committees where all handpicked members come from a majority perspective may all be methods of silencing perspectives.

Marginalizing the perspectives from community partners, people of color, graduate students, and women, along with ignoring advocacy perspectives from anyone, limits our available strategies for community and social change. The perpetuation of the

current trajectory and the continued marginalization of advocacy frames for social change are detrimental to working toward social justice and equity. To be sure, these findings are important for the White House to consider as they move forward with this Advancing Learning and Engagement in Democracy initiative and strategically ask for input.

To further our input for the White House, we asked, Was there anything beneficial that came from past national conversations on these important issues? We went back to the discourse and intentionally looked for the ways in which leaders talked about action and social change—much in the way that Secretary Arne Duncan says that he wants to prioritize. So we ask: What are some examples of leaders in national conversations (university presidents, legislators, student affairs professionals, undergraduates, etc.) moving from talk to action with a voice of social and emancipatory change?

### OUR NEWEST FINDINGS

**HAILEY NEUBAUER WENT BACK AND LISTENED** to 50 hours of dialogue from these national discussions similar to the ones that Secretary Duncan says he wants the Department of Education to prioritize. The focus of the 50 hours of dialogue was higher education for the public good—how higher education institutions can and should work for the “public good.” Any discussion that directly addressed concepts of moving beyond discourse toward emancipatory action—the goal for this project—was transcribed in a word-for-word transcript.

Notably—or should we say “sadly,” or perhaps “alarmingly”—only 12 pages of transcript from 50 hours of conversation focused on tangibly moving beyond discourse to action. A few participants shared examples of their action on their home campuses. Others spoke about the impact of this action on people in their local communities, staff, and students. For example, one person spoke about the action on her own campus at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). She stated:

I'm going to take advantage of this opportunity as I always do to hand out a little documentation about what we're doing since I think very much

a part of social movements is spreading the word. But this, the brochure that I'm handing out, is about a new institute that we have at UCLA called IDEA and it's cross-disciplinary, it's housed in the Ed School but it really is across schools and departments and the IDEA stands for the Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access. And we worked over the last two years with some support of the chancellor to try to carve out a space where—UCLA is very much a means of research [production]—we use advocacy and we use a network strategy to try to solve a particular problem and that's the disparities in college preparation, college access, college retention of students of color in the city of Los Angeles. We chose this problem partly because it's a real problem in itself, but also because, for us college access is, across the communities in Los Angeles, so intimately connected with the larger political economy of our city and our state. It allows [us] to dig deeply into a range of important problems with this very concrete indicator of both the extent of the problem and the degree to which we're making progress. So it's from this bias, I mean it's really—I sat here for the last two days just very impressed with the quality of thinking, I know some of your work; this is not my community. I feel very much like a practitioner sitting here but I'm a scholar and an activist trying to do this work in the context of a university, rather than being someone who runs one or someone who studies about one.

In an interesting way, this woman distances herself from the “quality of thinking” in the room to define herself as a scholar, activist, *and* practitioner. She is “doing” this work on college preparation and retention of students of color in Los Angeles rather than studying about the topic. She describes her handing out documentation as an important part of social movements and sharing information on this institute working to make concerted change in a local community.

In another example, action made an impact on salary at one institution. People who were awarded a community service and engagement award by the Board of Regents received a \$2,000 permanent salary increase. The speaker made the point that the promotion from associate to full professor at the University of Minnesota includes a \$2,500 permanent salary increase, and this award is almost the same amount. Importantly, he noted:

We had to negotiate that with the civil service bargaining unit and a whole bunch of other groups to make sure it was okay, but we did, and I think that's something you need to think about.

This is important because the group made sure the financial aspect of the award was not just for faculty or high-level administrators but worked with the bargaining unit to make sure that everyone at the university could benefit as a recipient of this award for doing social justice work in their community.

Our final example is from Bates College in Lewiston, Maine, which is very connected to its local community. The person described:

[The initiative] started its work by having an open community forum where people in the cities of Lewiston and Auburn came and through a structured democratic, conclusive process set *their* priorities, and I found that personally very, very exciting. And now, Bates, of course, has the challenge of organizing their civic engagement work around community-defined priorities.

Through these face-to-face conversations, university administrators and students came to understand *the priorities of community members* and did not make assumptions about their priorities. In this way, the direct dialogue helped to identify and crystalize priorities for the community-university partnership that valued both the community and the university in an equitable relationship.

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**We must launch efforts on “grassroots” and “grasstops” levels and put into place infrastructures of support (including and beyond financial support) that are sustainable—beyond dialogues with selected individuals and input via blogs that may not be widely known.**

## MOVING TOWARD ACTION

THESE NARRATIVES ARE A FEW STRONG examples of individuals within an institution starting an award and individuals within institutions starting an institute and a community forum. There are many more best practices throughout our institutions, albeit 12 single-spaced pages of transcript from 50 hours of dialogue is concerning as this is a similar process to the one the White House describes that they are using as they move forward with their engagement initiatives, though without the “lessons learned” from this research. We argue that holding educational dialogues for dialogue’s sake *cannot* be defined as emancipatory action that will address sociopolitical and historical inequities in the United States and across the globe. Please don’t get us wrong—talk is important because often times we are not on the same page and need to understand the complexities of the issues. However, as the discourse from the participants reflects, actions and processes that intentionally work toward social change take individual initiative, equitable collaboration, time, energy, funding, and resources. As such, we must launch efforts on “grassroots” and “grasstops” levels and put into place infrastructures of support (including and beyond financial support) that are sustainable—beyond dialogues with selected individuals and input via blogs that may not be widely known.

Importantly, intentional and sustainable collaborations between undergraduates, student affairs administrators, and community members must recognize historical inequities, address current and future inequities, and be established on a foundation of trust and respect, as Pasque talked about in “Collaborative Approaches to Community Change.” Such intentional initiatives are idiosyncratic; they operate on many different levels at the same time—pushing on the boundaries of inequities and injustice in myriad locations. Again, Neubauer is a good model for this idiosyncratic model; she challenges herself to make difficult change in her co-curricular, curricular, personal, and professional social justice endeavors. She has worked on talking about social justice *and* serving as a social justice actor.

As mentioned, such initiatives that intentionally connect discourse and action take time, inclusion of many people with various perspectives, energy, and money. We appreciate that the Department of Education wants to challenge higher education institutions to address pressing global challenges faced both here and abroad through civic learning and democratic engagement. We support this challenge and see it as a challenge that interconnects both the private and public goods/ideals of higher education. However, these are the same institutions that have seen a dramatic decrease in federal and state appropriations during difficult economic times and are already pushed to new limits. These are the same institutions that often look toward academic capitalism in order to survive the current neo-liberal context that supports a market-driven economy.

If such community-university programs and teaching pedagogies are to be initiated in higher education, then they need to be ones that intentionally connect both the private and public goods of higher education, not challenges that request more in terms of the public good initiatives with a reduction in private resources. Certainly, Neubauer has contributed (and will continue to contribute) to the public good of the institution and the local community through her actions; however, she would not have been able to engage without tangible funding for higher education, a McNair Scholarship, the UROP program, and institutional funds to present an earlier version of this manuscript at an international conference. For Neubauer, the public and private are also interconnected.

In sum, we need both talk *and* action from the White House, in much the same way that the White House is asking for both talk and action from higher education institutions. We cannot stop with a rhetorical call for action without tangible incentives and plans for sustainability through individual, community, institutional, and systemic support that work toward emancipatory action for educational equity and social justice. We cannot continue to reify the status quo through discourse alone—albeit in fancy and highly publicized settings—but encourage universities—and the



# We cannot continue to reify the status quo through discourse alone—albeit in fancy and highly publicized settings—but encourage universities—and the White House—to embody the layered responsibilities of local and global actors as we move toward emancipatory action.

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In this way, the White House initiatives, national inter-organization initiatives, and community-university engagement initiatives have potential to move from discourse to action, in much the same way that Neubauer has moved from discourse to action in her undergraduate career. Neubauer has learned from the White House initiative, her co-curricular opportunities, and her research opportunities; now is the time for the White House and community-university initiatives to learn from an undergraduate as we move toward emancipatory action.

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