

The following essay was written by a student in the School for New Learning, in support of an Independent Learning Pursuit (ILP). The student has agreed to share this with SNL Writing. Identifying details have been removed. November 2013.

# Civic Engagement

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Competency L-3

## ***Civic Engagement***

Competence L-3:

***Can assess the social and personal value of civic engagement for achieving change.***

- 1. Critically analyzes national or local civic issues from a systemic perspective.*
- 2. Explains the impact an engaged citizen can make to improve the effectiveness of a society.*
- 3. Articulates a strategy for personal civic engagement.*
- 4. Engages in an activity that positively contributes to the civic life of a community.*

### ***Introduction-Interpreting the Competence***

It is through my life-long experiences of interacting with people, acquiring knowledge through college-level coursework and research, and working within the community, that I can demonstrate proficiency for competence L-3: *Can assess the social and personal value of civic engagement for achieving change.*

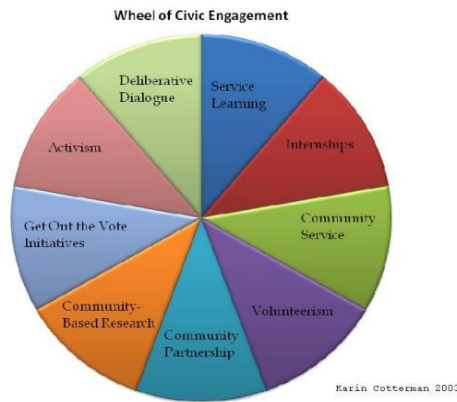
From this Independent Learning Pursuit document (ILP), the reader will understand how I have analyzed a national or local civic issue, will understand how an engaged citizen can improve the effectiveness of a society, and understand how I personally created a strategy and have engaged in activities that have contributed positively to the civic life in my community.

### ***Defining Civic Engagement***

In an article edited by Thomas Ehrlich (2000) titled, *Civic Responsibility and Higher Education*, civic engagement is considered to be an umbrella term which describes the activities which “promote the bridging of communities with socially conscious thought and action.” Ehrlich went on to explain that someone who engages in his or her community is “working to

make a difference in the civic life of our communities and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values and motivation to make that difference” (Ehrlich, 2000). It means promoting the quality of life in a community, through both political and non-political processes.

As I researched civic engagement, it was quite interesting to gain an understanding of the work of Karin Cotterman. In her latest article, *What is Civic Engagement*, she uses this wheel to show the different types of civic engagement (Cotterman, 2012).



<b>Community Based Research</b>	<i>Faculty/Student/Community Research inquiry into societal disservices for example nutrition and food desert in urban settings</i>	<b>Internships</b>	<i>Similar to a practicum; practical application of theory learned in the classroom in a controlled setting</i>
<b>Service Learning or Experiential Learning</b>	<i>Enhances what a student learns; it connects academic discussion to real-world experiences the service given to a community results in the development of soft transferable skills and increase networking and marketability for future employers for students and reinforces learned academic material</i>	<b>Activism</b>	<i>Through advocacy, for example, increasing others awareness through Get out the Vote drives, Reducing Gang Violence walks, or various disaster relief fund: earthquake relief, tsunami relief</i>
<b>Deliberate dialogue</b>	<i>Workshops, seminars, town hall meetings</i>	<b>Community Service or Volunteerism</b>	<i>May be one-time or on-going service to a community in need</i>

(Cotterman, 2012)

In addition to the work of Ehrlich and Cotterman, another expert in the field, Malka R. Kopell recently included his ideas of the importance of civic engagement in the *Journal of American Pediatrics*. Kopell (2010) stated, “Civic engagement is a way that decision-makers can interact productively with people who really matter—those who have a stake in solving the problems in question.” He believes that civic engagement is the best way to solve some of the complex life and health issues facing young children today such as the obesity epidemic. In his work, he explains that it is through the act of being an engaged citizen and all of us working together, as a society, “we are bringing a whole new group of “experts” into public problem-solving which can generate more creative and better solutions” (Kopell, 2010).

### *Engaging in the Community*

It is my belief that engaging in the community starts at a very young age. My sister and I started volunteering when we were in first or second grade. First, we would accompany my parents as they worked at charity events in our town. We helped at family volunteer events such as passing out tickets at the Naperville Rotary Club’s Father’s Day Fair, decorating the tent walls with streamers and banners at Naper Settlement’s Oktoberfest, and clearing tables at Naper Nights, a concert series. While these activities were not overly impactful in changing lives, it was a great place to start helping in our local community. According to Cotterman’s wheel, these experiences would be considered volunteerism or community service.

By the time I was in junior high school, I was ready to engage in my own civic activities. In the article, *Civic Education vs. Civic Engagement*, “Examples of civic engagement would include such activities as participating in the political process, performing public service, and working with various voluntary and community groups” (Downs, 2012). Our city has a

“volunteer fair” for teens, and I took this as a prime opportunity to find out which non-profit organizations were looking for help. I attended the fair and gained knowledge of local businesses and non-profits that needed assistance. In addition, local leaders discussed the keys to being a good volunteer such as showing up on time, dressing appropriately, and making good decisions while “on the job.” The volunteer fair concept would be well-liked by Constance Flanagan and Peter Levine who have researched the benefits of civic engagement among U.S. adolescents and young adults, and have discovered that becoming civically involved is a key part of transitioning from childhood to adulthood (Flanagan and Levine, 2010). According to the Corporation for National Community Services, 68% of middle and high school students have the opportunity to participate in civic events (Settersen, 2010). Personally, I left the volunteer fair with two volunteer opportunities that I looked forward to. I appreciated the fact that my community offered this type of experience, and I felt that the opportunities that I had in junior high helped educate me and let me build necessary skills for my high school civic engagement experiences.

During my high school years, I became recognized in the school community as well as “around town” as a dedicated volunteer. At Naperville North High School I joined the student government board and helped plan the junior/senior prom and organized senior year social activities. In addition, I headed up the Hoops for Heart fundraising basketball event at our school. Over the course of a few months, I conducted meetings with fellow student volunteers, planned and organized the sign-up process for the basketball teams, and I solicited and collected donations from local businesses for raffle prizes. The event was very successful in raising funds for the American Heart Association.

As a high school senior, during my physical education period each day, I served as a “leader” in class. Although I was not working in the larger community, this was a leadership role within the 3000-person community of my high school. This leadership role gave me the opportunity to plan physical education lessons and then “teach” these lessons to the rest of the students. In addition, I took the attendance each day and handled all clerical work such as documenting fitness levels and goals for fellow students. In essence, being a “leader” was almost like being a student teacher in a volunteer capacity. Considering I was working under the direction of the director of athletics at the high school, I consider this opportunity as experiential learning on Cotterman’s wheel.

### ***Civic Engagement-College Coursework***

As part of my college coursework at Bradley University, I took a class called Intellectual and Cultural Events. During the semester-long course, we attended class to learn about civic engagement and then we attended several cultural events that were held on campus or in the local area within the community. According to the research of Alison Hutton, “Building supportive environments deals with the inextricable links between people and their environments. These environments may be physical, social and economic. Supportive environments are important as they ensure that the place where everyone lives is safe and enjoyable” (Hutton, 2012). Offering so many different activities for students to attend gave students and community members a place to form a common bond within their environment. We had the opportunity to attend programs with political speakers, historians who spoke of travels abroad; and we attended theatre, musical, and band/chorus events including fine arts. Although this course did not match up with the De Paul competency requirements, I felt as if this class offered me the opportunity to learn about many types of “civic events” and opportunities to learn about people and their passions within

the college community and community at large. Furthermore, I believe that attending events within the community help us realize the skills that fellow community members have obtained and they help us understand the diversity around us. According to Donald Downs, “A vibrant university should be engaged with the real world around it, but it must do so on its own distinctive terms, maintaining its core identity, which is as an institution dedicated to the intellectual virtues. These virtues include freedom of inquiry, diversity of viewpoints, and the highest intellectual standards in the pursuit of knowledge” (Downs, 2012). I certainly felt as if Bradley University understood this view and gave the students every opportunity to experience it.

### *Applying Civic Engagement Skills in College*

According to Flanagan and Levine, “Colleges have become an important place for adolescents to learn how to get involved. This is important to “the health and performance of democracy.” In college, I applied this concept as I became involved with numerous civic engagement activities. I was the house manager and treasurer for Theta Chi fraternity, and I was one of a team of organizers for Shack-a-Thon, an activity that supported Habitat for Humanity. In addition, I supported a Bradley University Dance-a-Thon that raised funds for cancer research, and I participated in St. Baldrick’s by shaving my head. In addition, I participated in Relay for Life, Cure Search Walk for pediatric cancer, and Make-A-Wish events. I believe these events would be considered activism on Cotterman’s wheel. While each event by itself may not be considered enough to “encourage change” as the L-3 competence states, I believe that by participating in so many civic activities, I was setting a good example for other college students

showing how they can certainly do their part to raise awareness of civic activities and that change can be encouraged if many work together.

But, the group I most recognized with was a non-profit foundation, Shining Stars Foundation, a charity that provides outdoor experiences for children with cancer and life-threatening diseases. I volunteered in March of 2010 to accompany eight children from the Chicago area to Aspen, Colorado for a week-long ski and snowboard trip. At the time, I was an avid skier and ski instructor and I wanted to donate my skills to assist children battling cancer. The week-long event started when I met all of the children at O'Hare airport. I traveled west on a ski trip with a nurse from Children's Memorial Hospital and eight children. Once we arrived in Aspen, I met up with several adults from the charity. We openly discussed the activities for the week as well as the health issues that many of the children faced. We had networking meetings each morning to review how things were going for the children and for the adult volunteers. This experience of ongoing networking meetings helped me approach the weekly activities from a systematic approach as described in the L-3 competence. My task was to teach skiing and snowboarding to one specific child for the week, but I also helped with daily operations of serving meals, entertaining the children, and working with other adults in managerial tasks. Assisting children with arts and crafts, lifeguarding around the pool and keeping the rooms cleaned up were a few of the additional tasks I took upon myself. Although I was there to teach skiing, I gained so much more from my week with Shining Stars. I quickly realized how this experience contributed greatly to the attitude of the children battling cancer. I instantly became a supporter of the charity!

At a local community level during the summers, I helped with planning and executing fundraisers for Shining Stars Foundation such as golf outings and dinner events to help raise



funding to send more young cancer patients to the spring ski trip. I worked with several other adults in a committee setting to plan the events, one step at a time, from setting the event date to organizing menus, executing step-by-step operations for effective outings, and I helped collect raffle and silent auction donations. Again, this was an experience in using a systematic approach to achieving change in my community. I worked tirelessly to raise funds for the Shining Stars Foundation to support children with cancer. In essence this activity of working with others provided me the strategy and a systematic approach to future change as described in the competence for L-3.

### *Cancer-A National & Civic Issue*

According to Nancy Paris, President and CEO of Georgia Center for Oncology Research and Education, “In the twenty-first century there will be an estimated 33,400 newly diagnosed cases of cancer and about 13,900 deaths from cancer annually. Cancer is a disease that affects adults and children of all races, cultures, and educational backgrounds” (Paris, 2013). Cancer is caused by an uncontrolled growth and spread of abnormal cells in blood, tissue, or organs. There are over 100 different types of cancer. *Cancer burden* is a term that may be used to describe the magnitude of the impact of cancer on a geographic area (a county or state) or a population group (by sex, race, or economic status) (Paris, 2013). When someone is diagnosed with cancer, it can impact not only the person that is diagnosed but it also impacts their family, their friends, and the community.

Little did I know at the time how helpful my civic engagement with the cancer organization would be for me? I now understand this firsthand as I was diagnosed with a brain tumor in January 2011. Once I was diagnosed, I quickly went into research mode. I tried to

learn everything that I could about the disease, treatments, and outcomes. I spoke with other cancer patients to try to determine the best treatment option that I could find. My treatment involved a biopsy, Proton radiation therapy, and two types of chemotherapy drugs.

Unfortunately, in June 2011, I suffered a pulmonary embolism (blood clot) over my heart and lungs. This led to open heart surgery. Due to this setback, my treatment needed to be adjusted. After careful research and discussion with my medical teams, I started on a trial chemotherapy drug. Although they had expected the tumor to shrink about 15%, over time, the tumor actually shrank about 85%. I was one of only 18 people across the country on this particular drug, and I was a success story for this trial drug. After the initial shock of the disease and once I was in active treatment, I used what I had learned about cancer to become a proponent of educating others about cancer, trial drugs, and the importance of battling cancer with a positive attitude...I became a public advocate for cancer research and charities that support cancer patients.

### ***Public Speaking-An Avenue for Educating Others***

My first speaking engagement was at a local fundraiser in Aurora, Illinois. The Kevin Meyer Foundation asked me to speak on behalf of the Shining Stars Foundation. In addition to explaining what types of activities go on as well as the great benefits that children receive from the foundation, I shared my personal cancer story. I spoke in front of 125 people at their annual golf outing/dinner event. The event raised approximately \$16,000 for pediatric cancer research. Most of my speech was centered on the effects that cancer has on a family as well as the importance of supporting local charities that support children and families battling cancer.

The medical team from Northwestern Hospital asked if I would be willing to share my cancer journey with other patients. Over time, I became a “spokesperson” for Northwestern

Memorial Hospital. I not only spoke with fellow cancer patients who had been recently diagnosed, I was asked to speak at several fundraisers on behalf of the Northwestern Brain Tumor Institute under the direction of Dr. Jeffrey Raizer. My first engagement was speaking at the Lou Malnati's 42<sup>nd</sup> Annual Cancer Fundraiser in October 2012. Over 500 doctors, nurses, and supporters were at the event. My speech focused on my cancer journey as well as the fact that I was the first patient who started treatment at Lurie Children's Hospital and through a new partnership, then was treated at Northwestern Hospital. My treatment centered on the use of a new trial drug called ABT-888. I explained the importance of using trial drugs and the importance of educating the public about cancer and how people need to become self-advocates if they are diagnosed with cancer. The Lou Malnati Foundation awarded the doctors from both hospitals over \$300,000 in research funding. My speaking at this event helped educate supporters about trial drugs and the importance of keeping a positive attitude.

Most recently, I was interviewed for a major fundraiser that was held recently on October 4th. Northwestern Brain Tumor Institute had approximately 1000 people at an event called "Minds Matter." The dinner event raised funds for research to support clinical trials for brain tumor patients. While patients were not speaking at this event, my photo and my cancer story played on large teleprompters during the event. In addition, I was recently interviewed by our local newspaper, The Naperville Sun, and a story about my treatment and the work of the Northwestern Brain Tumor Institute appeared in the paper September 18th. This article will help educate people in my own community about cancer, trial drugs, and the importance of keeping a positive attitude.

***In Conclusion***

All of these speaking engagements have provided me the opportunity to share my story with others and to help raise awareness about cancer and trial drugs. I took what I have learned to become a proponent of educating others about cancer, trial drugs, and the importance of battling cancer with a positive attitude...I became a public advocate for cancer and research charities that support cancer patients. It is through my life-long experiences of interacting with people, acquiring knowledge through college-level coursework and research, and working within the community, that I believe I have demonstrated proficiency for competence L-3: *Can assess the social and personal value of civic engagement for achieving change*. I will continue to use the skills I have learned, and apply them on a daily basis in life-long learning situations!

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\*Denotes that source is peer-reviewed and academic according to DePaul University library site.