

Praxis

Building Bridges, Not Walls: Mobilizing Community Engagement to Promote Democracy, Diversity, and Equity

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Cite as: Everson, D.W., Jacobus, M.V., Baskett, R., & Sage, K. (2025). Building Bridges, Not Walls: Mobilizing Community Engagement to Promote Democracy, Diversity, and Equity. *Metropolitan Universities*, 36(3), 80-103. DOI: 10.18060/28812

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Editor: Patrick M. Green, Ed.D.

Abstract

This paper outlines a novel model of community-engaged learning: *Building Bridges, Not Walls: The Democracy and Diversity Project*. Inspired by the pedagogical horizontality of Paulo Freire and the applied disciplinary approach of “service sociology,” Building Bridges pursues sustainable university-community partnerships with the goals of expanding democracy, diversity, and equity both in our community and among our undergraduate students. The model foregrounds the embedding of community engagement across our sociological curriculum in an iterative and flexible manner. We provide an overview of the model by describing its four constitutive stages: design, implementation, evaluation, and reflective revision. These stages are concretized through application to our public university and community in Portland, Maine.

Keywords: community engagement, democracy, equity, diversity

Introduction

‘How can we be civically engaged every day?’ This query, posed by the Portland Immigrant Welcome Center’s late Executive Director, stewards the aspirations of our community-engaged learning (CEL) model: *Building Bridges, Not Walls: The Democracy and Diversity Project* (‘Building Bridges’). Building Bridges was undertaken by sociology faculty and students at the University of Southern Maine (USM) in collaboration with a wide range of community partners (see Appendix A). Building Bridges facilitates student, university, and community capacities in democracy, diversity, and equity by applying a tiered approach of increasing intensity to CEL practices across our undergraduate sociology curriculum.

The Building Bridges initiative is motivated by the following questions:
How can institutions of higher education...

- Solidify community networks to build durable coalitions and democratic infrastructure?
- Integrate the inherent expertise of our diverse communities in a continual cycle of mutual learning?
- Synthesize community-engaged learning approaches across a range of undergraduate sociology courses in ways that model and promote democracy, diversity, and equity?

Based on these guiding questions, this paper describes Building Bridges as a novel CEL model of reflective practice (Kolb, 1984) for promoting democracy, diversity, and equity in our local communities and provides guidance for sustainably integrating these relationships into university courses.

The Building Bridges model is consonant with a definition of “community engagement” as an approach to university-community partnerships that promotes expansive network-building to pursue durable solutions to social problems. The concept of “community” thereby reflects “a broad term used to define groups of people, be they stakeholders or interest groups, defined by a geographical location or affiliation to identity” (New England Higher Education, n.d.). Thus, we use the term to refer to collaborative action taken between classes, faculty, staff, or students at a university and a community group or organization (“community partner”) aimed toward mutually beneficial outcomes. As described by Schramm and Nye (1999), this “empowerment or capacity building model” encourages the establishment of collaborative partnerships “in a reciprocal learning process at each stage in the research and planning process” (Reardon, 2006, p. 97). By contrast with the term “service learning,” which often emphasizes a unidirectional approach whereby academic institutions “solve” community problems (Vázquez Jacobus et al., 2011), we use the term community engagement to describe a more horizontal and collaborative practice where *both* universities and community partners mobilize distinctive resources to address unique needs (Scobey, 2007).

Our model is also grounded in the core assumption that higher educational institutions can promote the conditions necessary for the revitalization of democratic practices and principles (Boyte et al., 2025; Saltmarsh et al., 2009). Through community engagement, our students cultivate democratic capacities that may not otherwise be valued in an academic setting, such as network-building, conflict mediation, and complex problem-solving: capacities intended to benefit student participants before and after graduation (Cox et al., 2014; Vázquez Jacobus & Baskett, 2010).

The Building Bridges model unfolds in four stages, which we identify and describe through our efforts at implementing it within the sociology curriculum at USM. Prior to this discussion, we review the pedagogical motivations inspiring the framework, emphasizing both the liberatory philosophy of Paulo Freire and the role of “service sociology” (Treviño & McCormack, 2016; White, 2014) in promoting a structural understanding of our communities’ inequities. We then delineate how these foundations inform the central goals and integral practices of our Building Bridges model.

The Pedagogical Foundations of Building Bridges

Guided by Paulo Freire’s (1970) pedagogical approach, Building Bridges emphasizes horizontal collaboration, reciprocal learning, and the liberatory potentialities of connecting communities across various power matrices. Congruent with the increasing body of scholarship on community-engaged learning as a form of university-community collaboration, Building Bridges is grounded in the co-creation of mutually beneficial knowledge and practices that serve the needs of both community partners and undergraduate students. Critical to this approach is a continual awareness of power asymmetries and an adaptive reflexivity to decrease these disparities on projects with multiple stakeholders (Bhatt & Singh, 2023; Osinski, 2021; Post & Ruelle, 2021). As such, rather than following a more traditional research model where the university engages with the community in order to study a research question of academic interest, we rely heavily on our community partners to frame problems, and potential solutions, that we can mutually learn from and collaboratively address.

Building Bridges is also fortified by our disciplinary literature on “service sociology” (Treviño & McCormack, 2016; White, 2014). Service sociology emphasizes the capacity of community engagement to transform student worldviews by stimulating their “sociological imagination” (Mills, 1959; Wickersham et al., 2015), a conceptual toolkit which encourages individuals to identify the structural and historical foundations of contemporary social issues. Service sociology’s connection of theory to practice, and centering of marginalized voices (Snyder & Karlen, 2014), deepens student understanding of the structural forces underlying social inequities (Karraker, 2019) and emphasizes the necessity of community building for their remediation.

Democracy, Diversity, and Equity

The pedagogical and theoretical pillars of Building Bridges assist in scaffolding the three interrelated goals of our CEL model: democracy, diversity, and equity. In regard to *democracy*, we are motivated by studies documenting a correlation between CEL and the expansion of values consonant with a democratic society. Researchers, for instance, have linked community engagement to the cultivation of civic values like reciprocity (Einfeld & Collins, 2008), accountability (Lau et al., 2021), and empathy (Opatrny & Statham, 2014). By targeting social problems (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Holsapple, 2012), community-engaged learning also promotes increased civic-mindedness (Battistoni et al., 2009) and a sense of efficacy toward achieving positive social change (Karraker, 2019). Building Bridges strives to generate and deepen democratic capacities among all collaborators, including faculty, students, and institutional partners. We thus aim to create “citizen professionals” (Boyte et al., 2025) not just among university faculty and staff, but our undergraduate students as well.

An expansion of democratic capacities, of course, is possible only through the mobilization of institutions, social networks, and students that reflect the vast *diversity* of our communities. Studies have documented how community pedagogies cultivate an appreciation of diversity through the reduction of negative stereotypes (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Holsapple, 2012) and heightened awareness of racial issues (Conner & Erickson, 2017). In addition, by nurturing interpersonal empathy and respect (Einfeld & Collins, 2008), CEL intertwines student theoretical and applied understandings of the structural sources of prejudice and discrimination (Hochschild et al., 2014). Often directly benefiting underrepresented communities, community engagement also invites the contributions of historically marginalized students whose life experiences reciprocally deepen the impact of the engagement (see, e.g., Vázquez Jacobus et al., 2011). In recognizing the benefits of community work for academic success, especially for marginalized student populations (Song et al., 2017), Building Bridges attempts to minimize the barriers to student participation in community projects, thereby promoting collaborative teams that reflect the increasing diversity of our communities.

Finally, Building Bridges’ pursuit of *equity* extends both within and beyond campus. Regarding the latter, we mobilize university resources to collaborate with a diverse range of community partners addressing social inequities in southern Maine [see Appendix A]. Conversely, the pursuit of equity within our higher education institution is driven by the make-up of our undergraduate student body, which is comprised of a substantial percentage of historically underrepresented students who often leave USM prior to graduation. As such, our focus on equity is rooted, primarily, in a deep commitment to promote more equitable outcomes for our diverse undergraduate student body. This can be uniquely accomplished through CEL opportunities that both promote career preparation and contribute to student perseverance through the networks, practical skill building, and broader sense of purpose they afford.

Historically Underrepresented Students and Retention

A major avenue for promoting student equity is in devising mechanisms to reduce graduation barriers. As a regionally based public institution, USM's undergraduate student body is comprised of a sizable percentage of first-generation college (43%) and immigrant-origin students (6.2%) (USM 2024). Perhaps unsurprisingly, USM perpetually grapples with relatively low rates of student retention and graduation. Thus, in encouraging our students to participate in engaged learning, we are informed by studies that reveal a positive correlation between community engagement and student retention.

Scholars have documented a strong correlation between community engagement and student retention (Gallini & Moely, 2003). Much of the literature, however, focuses on the impact of engagement on traditional-aged college students, who attend school full-time and are often campus residents. Horn and Carroll (1996) describe "traditional" students as young, entering college full-time soon after completing secondary school, and having few familial or occupational demands. USM students, by contrast, have greater range in age and commuting distances, often carrying family care responsibilities and part or full-time non-academic employment. It is precisely this institutional context that directs us to involve students in applied projects that build necessary career skills and relationships, enhance their sense of efficacy and agency, and root them more deeply in both our institution and community.

In nurturing student connections to both campus and the Portland community, we are informed by studies showing the myriad benefits of such links, even for historically underrepresented students. Teranishi's (2007) study of Latinx college students revealed that experiential learning cultivated student identities, relationships, awareness of structural inequalities, and community connectedness. Regarding the latter, student perceptions of community connection are related to positive academic performance, including higher course grades (Wilson, 2018) and grade point average (Kim & Sax, 2009). Participation in community engagement has also been linked to positive post-graduation employment outcomes, such as higher starting salaries and shorter time to an initial raise (Matthews et al., 2015). Similarly, Lau et al. (2021) note how engaged work can be an avenue for community partners to witness student strengths, leading to direct recruitment for post-graduation employment.

Dosage and Flexibility in CEL

To pursue such benefits, we were cognizant that our model's design must be sensitive to the social realities of our students described above. As such, Building Bridges promotes an approach to community-engaged learning that foregrounds both a 'dosage effect' of engagement and a flexible structure for student participation.

Building off Gallini and Moely (2003), Nigro et al. (2011) sought to understand more about the impacts of “service-learning” on retention by studying the “dosage effect” of different intensity levels of engagement, and by including students from diverse backgrounds across a range of undergraduate courses. Based on their sample of 770 undergraduates from 17 New England public and private universities, Nigro et al. (2011) found that a higher dosage of service learning was correlated with increased levels of student retention.

In line with these findings, Building Bridges consciously integrates increasing levels of CEL across our curriculum, as documented in stage II of our model below. This dosage effect is designed to deepen community engagement in an iterative fashion as our majors simultaneously deepen their theoretical understanding of social inequities across our sociology courses. The strengthening of social relationships in the classroom and the community is designed to be an additive mechanism promoting student retention at USM despite the numerous obstacles delineated above.

Beyond community dosage, the persistent obstacles confronting underrepresented student populations such as our own require a model of *flexible* CEL. Nigro et al. (2011) suggest that community engagement is more complicated for students whose financial, family, and community responsibilities put greater obligations on their time and resources. Not surprisingly, financial strain for students and their families has been linked to lower levels of retention (Braunstein et al., 2008; Breier, 2010). Further research is needed into how differentially resourced students experience and are impacted by CEL, with studies noting a lack of clarity on the topic (Clever & Miller, 2019; Ludwig 2016). Brownell and Swaner (2012) suggest, however, that community engagement may have more impact on students who have the capacity to commit themselves to the time and energy required by such experiences. As such, Building Bridges adopts a flexible model sensitive to students with limited time and resources. We encourage, for instance, student participation at night, on weekends, during class time, or with their families. Furthermore, projects encouraging students to integrate their engagement directly in their communities or jobs, such as volunteering at their children’s school, completing an applied project at the local park, or “getting out the vote” in their own neighborhoods, can mobilize students as stakeholders to draw multiple purposes from their applied work (Vázquez Jacobus & Baskett, 2010).

In centering both a dosage effect and flexibility, we are motivated by Burawoy’s (2005) assertion that undergraduates are integral figures in the mission to promote justice and equality through publicly engaged sociology. Despite the many obstacles that historically underrepresented students confront, we want them to have a seat at the pedagogical table. Thus, Building Bridges is designed to mobilize diverse student populations into a variety of additive and flexible community engagement projects across our curriculum.

Below, we outline our CEL model and discuss its potential impacts on furthering democracy, diversity, and equity.

The Building Bridges Model of Community Engagement

To pursue the broader objectives of Building Bridges, we integrate both cross-curricular and campus-community collaborations in an iterative dosage effect and flexible CEL model. Collaborative engagement is particularly valuable from the perspective of higher education because it accesses diverse learning styles (Kolb, 1984), utilizes multiple competencies, and maximizes creative approaches. Freire’s (1970) concept of “conscientización”, and Mills’ (1959) “sociological imagination” framework, theoretically scaffold our targeted form of collaborative learning, where social problems are set within their broader community, cultural, and historical context. Only then, with an intersectional analysis and recognition of the interaction of power and social systems, can social problems be properly conceptualized and potentially mitigated (d’Arlach et al., 2009).

As noted above, Building Bridges integrates CEL additively and flexibly, across multiple levels of course offerings. The four-stage process mirrors a cycle of engagement and reflective practice akin to Kolb’s (1984) Learning Cycle (Figure 1), but applied to the University of Southern Maine’s academic schedules, our courses, and our community connections (Figure 2):

- Stage I: Relationship Development, Coalition Building, and Planning
- Stage II: Implementation and Curricular Integration
- Stage III: Reflection and Evaluation
- Stage IV: Revision and Reintegration



FIGURE 1. Building bridges and the cycle of engagement.

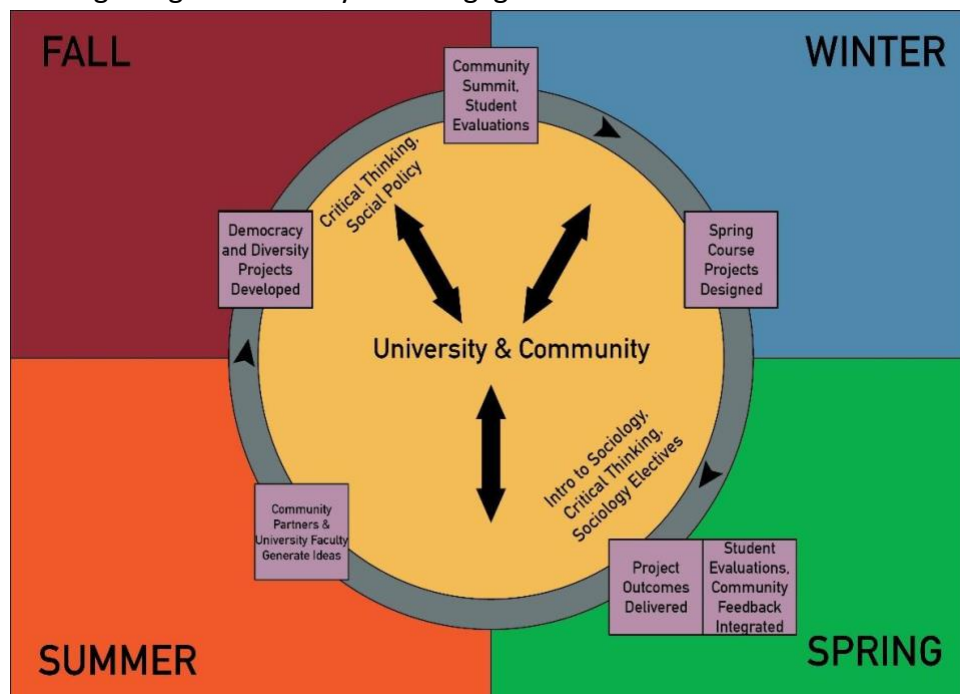


FIGURE 2. The cycle of engagement and the academic year.

Stage 1: Relationship Development and Planning

Effective community-university partnerships are grounded in mutual trust, creativity, resourcefulness, relevance, and timeliness (Vázquez Jacobus et al., 2011). Building Bridges began through a casual interaction over lunch at a Campus Compact conference. This interaction between a community partner and USM faculty member was, in fact, the culmination of years of

relationship and trust-building between these two colleagues and their respective institutions. Galvanized by this re-connection, the Building Bridges team invited a number of Portland community partners and USM faculty and students to consider how we might collaborate around a common goal. Considering the calendar year, and particularly charged political environment, we initially gathered around the goal of promoting voter engagement during election cycles.

Our initial meeting included representatives from the Portland Immigrant Welcome Center, The League of Women Voters of Maine, The Portland Office of Economic Opportunity, The Portland Housing Authority, Maine Immigrants’ Rights Coalition and Portland Empowered (described in Appendix A). The community organizations described their mission statements as well as their respective assets and perceived challenges that would potentially impact collaborations. Correspondingly, USM faculty reviewed how student engagement projects could be tied to course learning objectives across our curriculum. All the collaborators affirmed that temporal continuity was crucial to our collective goal. Although many universities operate in 16-week sessions, community challenges do not stop in May and December. Thus, we aspired to establish sustainable collaborative infrastructures that continued beyond the election cycle as well as the semester’s end.

Prior to implementing the Building Bridges model, sociology faculty had individually and more sporadically integrated engaged learning into the curriculum. In instituting Building Bridges, we collaboratively designed and designated projects that would fit particular courses at different dosages of engagement intensity. After consultation with a cohort of interested community partners in the summer prior to initiating the model, we identified a few different projects that would suit courses at varying levels of our curriculum. In the inaugural semester of the model, we developed an inventory of projects that would include an increasing level of engagement across our introductory, intermediate (‘Critical Thinking’) and upper-level (‘Applied Social Policy’) courses (see Tables 1, 2 and 3 for a list of suggested projects). These inventories detailed potential community placements and an overview of the experiential activities. Students were presented with the engagement options during the first class meeting of the semester and were encouraged to choose a placement compatible with both their interests and schedule. Although the Building Bridges activities ideally follow a student through their college trajectory, they do not require a CEL class as a pre-requisite nor are they limited to sociology majors. The classes and projects are connected, but more synergistic than co-dependent.

TABLE 1. Sample community engagement project inventory for introduction to sociology

Community Partner	Student Work (10 hours/semester)
Catholic Charities	Staff orientation sessions, assist with set-up, answer questions, monitor children.

Portland Immigrant Welcome Center	Assist with language labs, work with practitioners to set up offices, staff community gathering.
Portland Office of Economic Opportunity	Work with middle school students improving computer simulation guiding new residents through social services in Portland.
STEM Sisters	Assist with science workshops at high schools.
Goodwill Industries: CASH	Review tax clients' paperwork and refer to community resources.

Stage 2: Implementation and Curricular Integration

Guided by our community partners, and a design of increasing intensity of CEL, we implemented engagement at varying developmental levels across our introductory, intermediate, and upper-level sociology curriculum. We sequenced first the relatively light community exposure of introductory courses and followed these experiences with more intensive engagement as students advanced through their coursework. In doing so, we deliberately integrated students and projects across our curriculum, providing cross-course student collaboration. This collaboration is designed to build relationships and solidarities among our sociology students with the intent to foster retention for our majors and minors, while serving as a vehicle for non-major recruitment in our introductory courses. Our design anticipates that students who take a SOC 100 class with Building Bridges proceed to take a SOC 200 class with a higher level of engagement that peaks in upper-level courses. In such a manner, students build on their prior experiences, while serving as mentors for students at earlier stages.

Introductory-level student exposure establishes an orientation to the practices of applied learning and community awareness, ideally setting a precedent for students to remain engaged throughout their undergraduate experiences. Offering such opportunities earlier in student trajectories builds critical social anchors, particularly important for our historically underrepresented undergraduates, and conveys the importance and urgency of sociological thinking both within and beyond the university's institutional structures. In this model, introductory-level students complete a 'light exposure' engagement project, devoting a minimum of 10 hours to a community organization. While students are encouraged to choose from the inventory of partnerships that we have negotiated, they may propose alternatives based on their own interests and connections with local organizations.

Both individualized writing assignments and group discussions are utilized to connect student community experiences to assigned sociological readings. The central learning objective of these reflections is for students to identify and comprehend the complex structural forces at the root of social inequities. In one example, students who worked in community food pantries were

confronted with Maine’s stark levels of food insecurity. Linking this community reality to sociological readings and course discussions of the housing crisis, low-wage labor, and the absence of affordable childcare enabled students to see food insecurity as a societal ‘issue’ with structural derivations (Mills, 1959). Students in a different introductory sociology course were tasked with identifying the social structural barriers to immigrant and refugee integration in Portland. Readings and class discussion on the topic contextualized the students’ engagement project. In this case, the community partner tasked them with providing recommendations on a web-based simulation deployed by the Portland Office of Economic Opportunity as a means of introducing users to the barriers and resources awaiting immigrants, refugees, and asylum-seekers.

Building from our introductory course, where student projects are performed individually and with a lighter time commitment, our intermediate-level course (‘Critical Thinking about Social Issues’) more intensively embeds group-based CEL experiences. At this level, engagement projects are an integral curricular anchor, proceeding for the duration of the semester and culminating in a deliverable resource for a community partner (e.g., election education pamphlet, workshop presentation on housing access). An inventory of project options related to election engagement for a previous Critical Thinking course is replicated in Table 2 below. Different semesters of the course have focused on additional themes related to democracy and equity, including public education and the mass media.

TABLE 2. Critical thinking project options

Project Example	Project Description
Table Setup for Voter Information	Collect resources for handouts. Work with Community Engagement Coordinator and Dean of Students to set up information table in highly trafficked area.
Design Community-Specific Voter Information Flyers	Research and create flyers including information on voting statistics, local resources, and contact information for voting in Maine.
Research Voter Information for LWV	Research student voter engagement or absentee voting and create a fact sheet. Fact sheet will be used by local advocacy groups.

Research Voting Holidays (apply to U.S.)	Research international voting holidays and prepare information concerning potential advantages and disadvantages of Voting Holidays in the United States.
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Sequentially building on the introductory and intermediate experiences, our upper-level sociology electives integrate the most intensive community engagement. Upper-level courses require students to collaborate with community partners as their capstone project. Students in Applied Social Policy, for instance, engage with the community across two dimensions. First, as a class, they organize a community social gathering such as a conference, town council meeting, or non-profit fair. Organizing these community events allows students to appreciate social problems and systems at a macro level, from the perspectives of diverse community voices. Second, students complete a small group ‘community applied project’ (CAP) in consultation and collaboration with a community partner. These specific partnerships and mutual coordination on a concrete project narrow and focus the sociological lens as students attend to the needs and assets of a particular community partner and its clientele. From their projects’ inception through its culmination, students work mutually with community partners to design, implement, and evaluate their work. While the nature of student-organization collaboration varies, each group must produce a deliverable resource that benefits the partner. The CAP assignments typically require two to five hours per week, or a minimum of 35 semester hours, of engagement with the community partner. During this time, students and their organizational partners develop goals, discuss resource needs, and exchange feedback on the final deliverable. The latter have included organizing a referendum on tax deduction of college loans in Maine, organizing a middle school community conversation about political ideology in the classroom, and designing and implementing a grant-funded after-school arts program. To provide a more thorough example of a culminating capstone project, we briefly describe our “Democracy and Diversity Summit” below.

The Democracy and Diversity Summit

In the first iteration of Building Bridges described here, students in an Applied Social Policy course, most of whom had been exposed to election mobilization in earlier courses, organized a community summit to discuss and collaboratively design civic engagement projects. The goals of the Summit were to: (1) bring together USM faculty, staff, students, and local community leaders to share ideas about civic engagement; (2) celebrate the work of our communities in empowering historically underrepresented groups; and (3) build on the momentum generated during an election cycle to promote ongoing civic engagement. A full description of the Summit is found in Appendix B.

At the conclusion of the fall semester, the Democracy and Diversity Summit brought together 68 community partners, 16 USM faculty and staff, and 28 USM students. The Summit began with a panel in which representatives from the community collectively shared their needs and vision of civic engagement prior to dividing up into smaller working groups that designed projects for future semesters. Thus, as we had in the summer prior to the fall semester, with this summit, we collaboratively designed projects to be implemented in classes the following spring semester. In some cases, these projects built on projects initiated in the fall semester; in others the projects were novel, benefitting from previous feedback and lessons learned. Table 3 provides a sample inventory of projects generated from the Summit.

TABLE 3. Sample partner list with corresponding engagement project opportunities and engagement intensity: (A) short-term (B) semester-long (C) long-term or ongoing

Partner	Project Description	# Students needed/Intensity Level
Sandcastle Clinical & Educational Services	Event planning, interactive playgroup assistance, childcare, clerical duties, group fitness assistance, literature-based activities	1 or more: A, B, C
American Red Cross, Androscoggin County	Blood-drive assistance, clerical, shadowing, disaster response	1 or more: A, B, C
Androscoggin Home Care & Hospice	Provide home visits for companionship, transportation for high-risk patients.	Individual, small group, class, A, B
The Artvan	Qualitative research study about the impact of the Artvan in local communities. Make art with kids.	Individual, small group, class, A, B, C
Auburn Public Library	Surveying, fundraising, workshops, reading programs	Individual or full class A, B, C
Big Brothers, Big Sisters	Mentor opportunity	1 or more, B & C

Stage 3: Reflection and Evaluation

Building Bridges culminates every semester by soliciting feedback and evaluation from community partners and students. At the semester’s conclusion, we seek to directly assess the partners’ and the students’ evaluation of their experience through group reflections as well as individual written assessments. With partners, we are interested in what worked and what could be improved regarding student interaction, the project’s utility, the level of student preparation,

and what the partners would like to modify in future collaborative work. With the students, our focus is on probing their satisfaction with the community engagement process, their learning of course material, and their sense of belonging, agency, and purpose. As there is less scholarship on this question, we are particularly interested in exploring the impact of CEL on the students' intent to persevere in college and to the unique impacts that these applied experiences have on historically underrepresented students.

Through reflection on our student and community partner feedback, some suggestive patterns have emerged. One, the dosage-effect approach to community engagement shows promise as a mechanism for connecting our students more deeply to both campus and the broader community. Through repeat interactions with other students, the faculty teaching these classes, and community partners, students have routinely expressed appreciation for the network-building aspect of the model. Some have even utilized community connections to secure post-graduation employment opportunities. Second, students have also expressed gratitude for the flexible approach to community projects, particularly when CEL is reserved for the assigned course time and when time outside of class is recognized and valued as integral class material, similar to a graded paper. As noted in the next section, embedding community projects directly into regularly scheduled class meetings and replacing outside class time that might be spent on more traditional assignments with applied community work has become an increasingly utilized strategy as the Building Bridges model has evolved.

Challenges unique to applied learning also persevere. Balancing commitments to coursework and extra-academic responsibilities remains a significant impediment to many students. While most students engaged in community work have appreciated the network-building opportunities and applied problem-solving, some have noted the cumulative stress of additional time commitments outside the classroom. Some have also commented on the emotional and social stressors that can be raised by these applied projects. In some cases, this may be especially prominent for public university students like ours, since students often conduct community service in the very schools and agencies utilized by family members. Anecdotes from students in our study corroborate this possibility. One student applied his learning from a social policy class to successfully appeal for funding for the after-school program where he was employed, allowing him not only to keep his job but also inspiring him to recognize the relevance and importance of his college education. Another student, working at a local food bank, felt burdened and disturbed by being “in service of” her friends and neighbors. She was so overwrought by the desperation of her community that she came to question the value of continuing college “when [her] community is suffering.” The intensity and connectedness of these interactions may be part of the explanation for the differential impact of community engagement on retention among non-traditional students and students of color (Myers-Lipton, 2002; Tinto, 1975).

In contrast to students' concerns about workload, community partners often emphasize the need for greater consistency and predictability in collaborative projects, encouraging *increased* student interaction throughout the semester. Many of the organizations we work with are understaffed and under-resourced: taking the time to train and orient students who may only be working with them for 12 weeks is a burdensome resource expenditure. Partners often foreground the importance of durable collaborative projects that transcend the timelines of academic semesters. This feedback from both students and institutional partners has been an invaluable guide for modifying the Building Bridges model (Stage IV).

Stage 4: Revision and Reintegration

Based on the feedback and ideas generated at the conclusion of the semester, the fourth stage of our project involves recalibrating our model for future semesters. Ideally, this stage facilitates the feedback loop linking back to Stage I, and the cycle begins anew. We review the engagement practices of the previous semester; we reflect on the data and feedback provided by our community partners and students; and we consider suggestions raised through our community convocation opportunities. Recruiting and integrating critical feedback from all stakeholders in the process ensures a reciprocal process that enables us to better serve both our community partners and our students. We integrate, revise, refine, and start again.

Perhaps the biggest challenge we continue to confront is balancing the needs of our community partners with the increasing strain confronting university students in the United States. The exorbitant costs of pursuing an undergraduate education, along with the rising costs of living and housing crises that roil cities like our own, have made the procurement of a college degree unattainable for many, particularly historically underrepresented students. We have witnessed firsthand the increasing extra-academic labor and family care responsibilities that beset many of our students. Not surprisingly, as these obligations mount, coursework becomes less of a priority, and CEL projects have the potential to further overschedule students. However, we have also witnessed how such engagement opportunities can be the tether that connects struggling students to the relevance of their education by contributing to their sense of purpose and agency when they might otherwise feel detached.

In light of these realities, we continually reassess and modify the Building Bridges model to better balance student and community needs. While retaining the dosage approach, the most significant alteration we have made is to *enhance* the flexibility built into the model. For one, overburdened students have been provided with more remote opportunities to engage with community partners that do not require on-site visits. Engaging via Zoom, for instance, has reduced travel and time commitments, particularly important considering USM's sizable percentage of commuter students who do not reside in Portland. Second, and perhaps most importantly, we have made every effort to embed the labor associated with community projects

directly into regularly scheduled class meetings. Devoting more class time to applied projects often means a reduction in traditional assessment and curricular activities. We believe the trade-off is worth it and encourage greater sensitivity to students' time commitments among those enacting community-engaged learning.

Conclusion

As our communities confront deepening social inequalities and unprecedented threats to our democratic institutions, we contend that community engagement is higher education's keenest armament. In formulating the Building Bridges model, we set out to contemplate how our higher education institution can assist in the building of durable and diverse community networks that bolster democratic capacities while reducing the glaring and expanding social inequities of the contemporary United States.

Theoretically motivated by the horizontality of Paulo Freire and the social structural perspective of C. Wright Mills, we outlined our Building Bridges model of community-based pedagogy as practiced in the sociology program at USM. Inspired by how service sociology can cultivate positive outcomes for both communities and undergraduate students, particularly those from underrepresented groups, our model leverages an iterative dosage effect of community engagement throughout our curriculum. Our model also emphasizes maximal flexibility for community-based projects to remain accessible to the often-overburdened undergraduate students that we serve.

The need for deep civic engagement, particularly among youth, looms large as America's democratic institutions confront unparalleled challenges and legitimation crises. Recent social crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, exposed deeply entrenched social and racial inequalities that are vulnerable to political exploitation and manipulation. Many institutions of higher education, including our own, have responded by intensifying efforts to build durable coalitions to protect and strengthen local democratic infrastructures. Across a range of institutions, organizations, and creative individuals, community-based engagement continues to offer hope for attenuating US society's durable inequities and tech-driven social atomism. As we collaborate in a reciprocal process of learning, engagement, and action, we foster the resilient communities tasked with protecting democracy, diversity, and equity in the United States.

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Appendix A

Building Bridges Community Partners

- The Campus Election Engagement Project (CEEP) is a non-partisan organization providing education, resources, and consultation to promote election engagement on college campuses. CEEP provided funding, guidance, and education for students to organize voter registration tables and *Get out the Vote* activities, as well as delivering workshops educating students about voting trends and their application to social policy in Maine. Maine Campus Compact. Campus Election Engagement Program. Maine Compact. [Maine CEEP](#)
- Catholic Charities Refugee and Immigrant Services has been the primary organization facilitating the relocation of migrants to Maine. Students worked with Catholic Charities to staff workshops and provide daycare and citizenship education. Catholic Charities. [Maine Catholic Charities](#)
- The Portland Office of Economic Opportunity’s mission is “to help integrate into our economy immigrants and residents who need access to opportunities” (Portland, 2022). Students in SOC 100 piloted an interactive website designed to educate new Mainers to the resources available. Office of Economic Opportunity. Portland, Maine. [Portland Office of Economic Opportunity](#)
- The Portland Immigrant Welcome Center (PIWC) strengthens the immigrant community “through language acquisition, economic integration and civic engagement” (PIWC, 2022). PIWC’s first Executive Director was a leading partner in designing the Building Bridges project. Projects were designed for students to assist in language labs and with grant writing for future PIWC projects. Portland Immigrant Welcome Center (2022). *Vision & Mission*. [Portland Immigrant Welcome Center](#)
- The League of Women Voters of Maine is a non-profit organization that “encourages informed and active participation in government” (League of Women Voters, n.d.). LWV staff educated students about the electoral process, groups underrepresented in voting, and the connections and differences between citizen engagement and voting. USM students participated with LWV’s Neighbor-to-Neighbor program, going door to door in underserved neighborhoods to educate residents about upcoming elections. League of Women Voters. (n.d.). About the League. [LWV of Maine](#)
- Maine Immigrants’ Rights Coalition (MIRC) was organized to convene Maine’s over 85 immigrant and refugee advocacy groups to facilitate advocacy and organize community. The MIRC played a key role in organizing the Summit and in encouraging attendance by diverse community and immigrant leaders. Maine Immigrants’ Rights Coalition. (2022). *Our Story*. [Maine Immigrants’ Rights Coalition](#)
- Portland Empowered supports the families of immigrants and refugees in their interactions with the public schools. USM students served as peer advisors and educators. *About Portland Empowered*. Portland Empowered: Championing Voice in Education. [Portland Empowered](#)

The Portland Housing Authority (PHA) coordinates public housing and tenant services for Portland's public housing communities. The PHA runs study centers for school-age children in four housing communities in the Portland area, where resident children receive afterschool homework help and engage in activities. USM students assist with outreach and education to PHA residents and serve as mentors in the study centers. Portland Housing Authority (n.d) The Portland Housing Authority Study Centers. [Portland Housing Authority](#)

Appendix B

The Democracy and Diversity Summit

Organized by Applied Social Policy students as their culminating capstone project, the Democracy and Diversity Summit brought together 68 community partners, 16 faculty and staff, and 28 students. As the Summit was designed for informal conversation and networking, participants were assigned to one of four thematic areas based on their pre-survey responses regarding interests, assets, and challenges: Educational Engagement (preK-12 schools), Cultivating Culture (arts, culture, food), Political and Civic Engagement, and Multicultural Coalition Building.

Students in the course organized the Summit in four stages:

1. *Celebration of Community* – A welcome from Portland’s mayor and the USM President of accompanied by a slide show of the year’s projects, and an overview of the goals of the Summit.
2. *Panel on Democracy and Diversity* -- Four community leaders spoke about their organization’s work, overviewed their constituents’ assets and challenges, and suggested collaborative work. The panelists shared their assessments of successful projects and lessons learned where projects had been less successful.
3. *Working-Group Action Planning* -- Inspired by the panelists, the Summit then turned to a workshop. Each thematic area was organized into a working group, facilitated by a Social Policy student and a USM faculty member. Participants were encouraged to share lessons gleaned from prior collaborations and to highlight successes. The Social Policy students led the group in identifying and outlining future projects. At the conclusion of the Summit, project ideas were shared and student facilitators collected follow-up information from their table’s participants.
4. *Follow-Up and Project Development* -- Perhaps the most substantial work of the Summit was what happened after it concluded: Social Policy students compiled all the suggested projects into a comprehensive list of proposed projects and followed up with each participant asking for additional input. This list was pared down into feasible projects for different course levels (see Table 1 for class-specific projects and Table 3 for a sample list used for courses with the designated engagement level) and shared with interested faculty. After follow-up meetings with community partners, these projects and relationships served as the basis for the Building Bridges engagement projects the following spring and academic year.