“I don’t like the pat-you-on-the-back kind of community service,” asserts Auburn University student Marian Royston. “I want to learn how to work with others to create change we can all live with.” Royston has participated in a recent series of research exchanges at the Kettering Foundation that is exploring how to affect college students’ sense of civic agency through experiences in community. Students like Royston want to do more than good deeds; they want to make a difference in the very fabric of communities. But, what differentiates community experiences that affect students’ sense of civic agency from the traditional community-service experience Royston describes? Kettering’s research exchanges in higher education are bringing together faculty, practitioners, and students from various colleges and universities who share an interest in moving institutions of higher education beyond service and service learning.

Living Democracy: From Service Learning to Political Engagement

Alexandra Robinson
Service learning, which arose in part as a response to criticism that community service lacks academic rigor, is broadly understood as a combination of community service and active learning. In the last decade, practitioners have made great strides in incorporating deep reflection and serious academic content into service experiences, and the academic literature is starting to show positive student outcomes connected to service learning.

However, if one of the goals of higher education in a democratic political system is to help students realize their roles as active citizens, service learning may not go far enough. Historically, community service has not been thought of as political. Indeed, federal agencies that fund service learning explicitly discourage recipients from engaging students in politics. Although service learning engages students in a community, this engagement may not be structured to build the knowledge or skills associated with democratic participation or citizenship. Perhaps most worrisome, students sometimes see service as an alternative to politics—a way of performing good works without the hard work of negotiating across differences or bureaucratic institutions, which suggests that service experience could actually undermine students’ sense of civic agency.

Perhaps in response to these challenges, students like Marian Royston are starting to demand richer experiences. She is part of a growing movement of students, faculty, and administrators who want to move higher education’s community outreach strategy beyond the conventional community-service approach. This shift is evident in the number of colleges and universities that have renamed their service-learning offices and programming as “civic engagement.” Indeed, even proponents of service learning are anxious to show that it goes beyond the soup kitchen stereotype and makes lasting social change in communities. In recent years, there has been an explosion in the number of organizations and associations dedicated to promoting civic engagement in higher education. While the terminology is clearly starting to shift, a critical question Kettering’s research is asking is whether civic engagement is simply a new label for traditional community outreach strategy beyond the conventional community-service approach.
As Mark Wilson observed, democratic civic engagement is about engaging people as active creators of stories. What happens next is an open question, a point in the journey to discover, as Marian Royston put it, “how to work with others to create change we can all live with.”

Living Democracy

This raises an important question: what is the relationship between service learning and political forms of engagement? Can they be complementary, or are they in tension? In a study for the Kettering Foundation titled *The Civic Spectrum*, Bernie Ronan suggests that service is part of a continuum leading naturally into politics. In his article “The Necessity of Politics,” Harry Boyte goes further arguing that the framework of service undermines agency and fundamentally opposes democratic politics. He points out that service often denotes altruism and selflessness, which effectively masks the self-interest of the service provider and at the same time obscures the capacities and contributions of those being served. The result of this apolitical stance, Boyte contends, “is moral passion, but little political savvy.” In essence, if service learning helps students to understand the what and why of change, it is missing the how of change.

Whatever the relationship between service learning and political forms of engagement, most agree there is indeed a distinction. Wilson suggests that the two can be distinguished in the following ways. First, service learning is typically organized for students in predetermined projects, while democratic politics calls for organizing; that is, democratic politics involves students as active participants in a process that they help to create. Second, service learning requires students to give time (usually a specific number of hours for which they receive credit), while democratic politics requires an ongoing commitment, an ethical attitude in which students have responsibility for their actions. Third, service learning is designed to meet a need, which postures the recipients as passive consumers of services, while democratic politics engages people as active creators of stories. Fourth, service is typically an activity designed to make the service provider feel good, while democratic politics can make students feel dizzy, or disoriented, from having to work across challenging differences and navigate entrenched institutions. Finally, service learning is followed by an exclamation point, the sense of accomplishment from the completion of a discrete project, while democratic politics is followed by...
a question mark because it is an ongoing and open-ended process.

Another group participating in Kettering research—this time at the University of Dayton in Ohio—illuminates some of these distinctions as they play out in the attempt to move beyond service. The Dayton Civic Scholars commit to a three-year program of ongoing community engagement. During this time, this select group spend a minimum of 360 hours working with community partners, take 12 credits of related course-work, and complete a semester-long internship. In their final year, the scholars must work as a group to implement a capstone project in the city of Dayton. The ultimate goal is simple: to help students learn how to work with others in community. The students are given a few guidelines and a small budget; it is up to them to choose, organize, and implement their own project. Far from being organized for them, it requires student organizing.

In the fall semester of 2011, the senior cohort of Dayton Civic Scholars began planning their capstone project. The scholars initially thought about starting an after-school mentoring or tutoring program with a local high school struggling with low academic standards, high dropout rates, and a host of other challenges that often accompany urban poverty. This kind of needs-oriented thinking is often ingrained in the minds of students steeped in the traditions of service and service-learning work. After we reflected on this issue, the scholars realized the direction of their project should be negotiated with the high school students themselves. That insight led the scholars to design a forum that would enable the high school students to help shape the focus of the scholars’ project. Through a forum, dubbed “Your Community, Your Future,” the scholars found that the high school students wanted to learn more about post-secondary opportunities, specifically how to prepare for and apply to college. With only two months left in the fall semester to plan and prepare, the scholars organized a resource fair geared toward first-generation college students. As a part of the resource fair, a panel of first-generation college students from the University of Dayton, Wright State University, Sinclair Community College, and Central State University engaged the high school students in a frank discussion about pursuing higher education.

Working collaboratively with people in a community, rather than traditional service, demands a great deal of flexibility. The experience can be frustrating for both students and community partners, who are more accustomed to the predictability of traditional community service. The scholars’ project illustrates a larger challenge facing higher education as it attempts to move beyond service learning and into the messier realm of civic engagement. But for the Dayton Civic Scholars, managing the uncertainties of civic engagement was well worth the effort. When the scholars reflected back on their initial plan to implement a short-term tutoring program, they recognized that they could not have imagined such a panel without engaging with the larger community.

As Mark Wilson has observed, politics is about engaging people as active creators of stories. What happens next is open-ended, a point in the journey to discover, as Marian Royston put it, “how to work with others to create change we can all live with.”

Alexandra Robinson is a former Kettering Foundation research associate and is currently a graduate assistant and graduate student at the University of Dayton. She coordinates the Dayton Civic Scholars, a program designed to prepare undergraduate students to be civic professionals and citizen leaders through sustained interdisciplinary civic engagement and scholarship. She can be reached at (email).