



EMPATHY

“The development of empathy in students (and teachers) –shap[ing] young adults who can step outside their personal experience to compassionately imagine the lives of others and act civically based upon those experiences – . . . should be considered a primary goal of education. . . . [It] offers an organizing principle for our field grounded in hope, love, and a commitment to a more equitable society. . . . Writ large, empathy becomes the foundation for a democratic society.” (Mirra, 2018, pp. 3 - 4).

CALL TO ACTION

“The kind of graduates we need at this moment in history need to possess a strong propensity for wading into an intensely interdependent, pluralist world. They need to be agile, creative problem solvers who draw their knowledge from multiple perspectives both domestic and global, who approach the world with empathy, and who are ready to act with others to improve the quality of life for all” (National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, 2012, p. 23).



Recommended Citation:

Walker, A. (2023). Empathy. In L. Garvin, P. H. Clayton, & K. Medlin, (Eds.), *Contributions of civic and community engagement in higher education series*. North Carolina Campus Engagement.

INTRODUCTION TO THE SERIES

The series *Contributions of Civic and Community Engagement in Higher Education* is produced by the Community of Practice, Inquiry, and Learning (COPIIL) of North Carolina Campus Engagement (formerly known as North Carolina Campus Compact). Focused on the benefits and value of civic and community engagement (CCE) in higher education, the series has two parts: (1) a Primer that provides an overview of each of 17 topical areas organized into three categories (priorities related to students, to institutions, and to communities) and that is designed as an accessible and evidence-based introduction to some of the key priorities that well-designed CCE can advance and (2) a set of more developed briefs in these 17 topical areas, intended to support ongoing exploration and inquiry in each of these areas and to guide ongoing deepening of practice.

Neither the Primer nor this set of topical briefs is comprehensive, but we do believe the topics included—selected through discussions within COPIIL and consultation with CCE thought leaders—are among the most relevant for this moment in the evolution of CCE and in our nation’s history. Neither the topics nor the work of CCE fit neatly into these categories; the topical priorities and the contributions of CCE to them are as deeply interwoven as the CCE work of community members, students, staff, and faculty is interdependent. The set of topical briefs may be expanded in the coming years as additional topics seem important to include and as additional practitioner-scholarship becomes available.

Each brief includes a summary of the topic and the role of higher education in general and CCE in particular in advancing it, an annotated list of associated scholarship, and a list of references and additional readings; quotes from students, alums, community members, faculty, staff, and literature related to CCE serve to concretize the possibilities and the stakes. Both components of the series incorporate examples from across the NC Campus Engagement network; descriptions of the examples draw on information available through campus websites and personal communication with key stakeholders.

NOTE: We use the term “civic and community engagement” to include many practices and pedagogies, including service-learning, community-engaged learning, election engagement, volunteerism, social entrepreneurship, community-based participatory research, social justice activism, and deliberative dialogue.

OVERVIEW

Empathy is the ability to understand and experience the thoughts, perspectives, and feelings of others or, more colloquially, to put oneself in another's shoes. It is a foundational element of personal concern for community issues and civic engagement (Krznaric, 2019) and has numerous benefits for students and society, including increased social cooperation, moral concern, and academic achievement.

Individuals with higher levels of empathy tend to be more effective communicators, collaborators, and leaders, skills that are essential in any professional field. A longitudinal study of college students over a 30-year period, however, found that empathy has been declining since the beginning of the 21st century; the same study also suggested that educational interventions can impact this trajectory (Konrath et al., 2011). Everhart (2016) and colleagues agree, suggesting that “empathy should be viewed as a learnable skill: an ability or set of abilities that can be developed, taught, practiced, and cultivated” (p. 3).

Institutions of higher education are uniquely positioned to assist students in developing empathy through civic and community engagement (CCE) programs that provide opportunities for experiencing and reflecting on reciprocal relationships among students, community members, and engaged faculty/staff. Pedagogically sound critical service-learning courses have been found to enhance levels of empathy (Bingle et al., 2018; Everhart, 2016), especially when the students have direct interactions with others and must make meaning of the dissonance and discomfort these interactions often evoke.

Well-designed CCE encourages all participants to leverage the vulnerability we often feel when stepping into the shoes of another person, thereby providing opportunities to deepen understanding of and empathic concern for one another.

ASSOCIATED SCHOLARSHIP

- Everhart's (2016) pilot study, incorporating self-assessment of empathy and a process of coding written reflection products, documented both positive change in levels of empathy and awareness of that change in all students in a service-learning course. The study also identified elements of design that led to an increase in empathy including observing others' emotional experiences, learning about and establishing connections with community members, and reconsidering previous ideas.
- Service-learning students, compared to non-service-learning students, were shown to have developed higher levels of empathy as expressed in written products (Wilson, 2011) and on the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (Ryan, 2017).
- A variety of studies reviewed by Weisz and Zaki (2017) identified specific interventions that have been shown to increase empathy including perspective-taking activities, exposure to information about others' perspectives and experiences, critical reflection, breaking down perceived boundaries between "us" and "them," establishing group norms toward inclusive behaviors, and examining pre-established beliefs. These interventions also characterize well-designed CCE.
- A task force of the American Association of Colleges and Universities found empathy to be a vital component of 21st century civic engagement, indelibly woven into the intellectual fabric of democratic citizenship. In "Engaging Diverse Viewpoints: What is the Campus Climate for Perspective-Taking?" empathy is described as "a crucial catalyst for intellectual and moral growth...Enhancing one's knowledge by attending seriously to differing perspectives and developing respect and empathy for others' views, even in the face of disagreement, must remain a bedrock element of any college education" (Dey et al., 2010, ix).
- Nussbaum (2010) writes that "A graduate of a U.S. university or college ought to be the sort of citizen who can become an intelligent participant in debates involving differences, whether professionally or simply as a voter, a juror, a friend" (8). Nussbaum elucidates the narrative imagination of perspective-taking empathy as "the ability to think what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself, to be an intelligent reader of that person's story, and to understand the emotions and wishes and desires that someone so placed might have" (10-11).

HIGH POINT UNIVERSITY

In High Point University's (HPU) LifeLines program, service-learning students are exposed to the ways in which illness is "a problem both universal and uniquely singular in our experience of it" (Walker, 2016, p. 139). Undergraduates facilitate poetry workshops, collaboratively creating, reading, and reflecting on poems with residents of assisted living and Alzheimer's/dementia facilities. The poetry serves as a gateway into exploration of "the temporality of our shared human condition," as students consider the pervasiveness of illness and healing.

Throughout the course, student facilitators learn to hear the "universal language of suffering and hope, self-doubt and transformation" while weighing how "we each play the part of the ill, the caregiver, the witness" during our lives (p. 139). Students are thus well-positioned to develop an enhanced capacity for empathy because of their personal interactions with members of older generations with whom they come to realize they share the experience of illness. Students reflect on their "own illness narratives to develop community and self-empathy" (p. 143). It is through such a combination of empathy, directed toward others and toward the self, that we all become better able to recognize our shared vulnerabilities and view everyone as worthy of compassion.

For additional information contact High Point University Service Learning.

REFERENCES

- Bringle, R. G., Hedgepath, A., & Wall, E. (2018). I am so angry I could . . . help!: The nature of empathic anger. *International Journal of Research on Service-Learning and Community Engagement*, 6(1), Article 3. <https://ijrslce.scholasticahq.com/>
- Dey, E. L., Ott, M. C., Antonaros, M., Barnhardt, C. L., & Holsapple, M. A. (2010). Engaging diverse viewpoints: What is the campus climate for perspective-taking? Core commitments: Educating students for personal and social responsibility. Association of American Colleges and Universities.
- Everhart, R. S. (2016). Teaching tools to improve the development of empathy in service-learning students. *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*, 20(2), 129-154.
- Konrath, S. H., O'Brien, E. H., & Hsing, C. (2011). Changes in dispositional empathy in American college students over time: A meta-analysis. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 15(2), 180-198. <https://doi:10.1177/1088868310377395>
- Mirra, N. (2018). *Educating for empathy: Literacy learning and civic engagement*. Teachers College Press, Columbia University.
- The National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement. (2012). *A crucible moment: College learning and democracy's future*. Association of American Colleges and Universities.
- Nussbaum, M. (1997). *Cultivating humanity: A classical defense of reform in liberal education*. Harvard University Press.
- Ryan, R. (2017). Social and cognitive outcomes of service-learning: Results from a pre-post and control group comparison. *Journal of Community Engagement and Higher Education*, 9(3), 19-35.
- Walker, A. S. (2016). Narrative medicine: Community poetry heals young and old. *Community Literacy Journal* 11(1), 138-145. <https://doi.org/10.1353/clj.2016.0024>
- Weisz, E., & Zaki, J. (2017). Empathy building interventions: A review of existing work and suggestions for future directions. In J. Doty, E. Seppala, E. Simon-Thomas, D. Cameron, S. Brown, & M. Worline (Eds.), *Oxford handbook of compassion science* (pp. 205-217). Oxford University Press.
- Wilson, J. C. (2011). Service-learning and the development of empathy in US college students. *Education Training*, 53(2/3), 207-217. <https://doi.org/10.1108/00400911111115735>

ADDITIONAL READING

- Carillo, E. C. (2018). Cultivating empathic reading, readers, and researchers. *Teaching Readers in Post-Truth America*. Utah State University Press, 35-62. <https://doi.org/10.7330/9781607327912.c003>
- Everhart, R. S., Elliott, K., Pelco, L. E., Westin, D., Briones, R., Peron, E., & Associates. (2016). Empathy activators: Teaching tools for enhancing empathy development in service-learning classes. Virginia Commonwealth University and University of Richmond.
- Gaines, A. (2017). *Black for a day: Fantasies of race and empathy*. University of North Carolina Press.
- Gerdes, K. E., Segal, E. A., Jackson, K. F., & Mullins, J. L. (2011). Teaching empathy: A framework rooted in social cognitive neuroscience and social justice. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 47(1), 109-32. <https://doi.org/10.5175/JSWE.2011.200900085>
- Johnson, J. (2020). Overcoming reader resistance to global literature of witness: Teaching collaborative listening using the devil's highway and what is the what. *College English*, 82(4), 351-80.
- Krznaric R. (2015). The empathy effect: How empathy drives common values, social justice, and environmental action. Friends of the Earth.
- Lundy, B. L. (2007). Service learning in life-span developmental psychology: Higher exam scores and increased empathy. *Teaching of Psychology*, 34(1), 23-27. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00986280709336644>
- Stueber, K. (2019, Fall). Empathy. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, (E. N. Zalta, Ed.). Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University.
- Zaki, J. (2019). *The war for kindness: Building empathy in a fractured world*. Crown.

AUTHOR

A graduate of the University of Alaska Anchorage, **Allison S. Walker** received her M.F. A. in creative writing in 2004 and joined the faculty of High Point University in 2009. She lives in Greensboro with her husband, their teenage daughter, three cats, three chickens, and a rooftop hive of industrious bees. Her poetry, creative nonfiction, and photography have appeared in numerous literary journals, and her recent scholarly work can be found in *EvoS: The Journal of the Evolutionary Studies Consortium*, the *Community Literacy Journal*, *The Journal of Writing Analytics*, and the edited volume *Visual Imagery, Metadata, and Multimodal Literacies Across the Curriculum*. In her spare time, Allison likes to run barefoot, play the cello badly, and volunteer as a vet tech for the Feral Cat Assistance Program of Guilford County.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This series, *Contributions of Civic and Community Engagement in Higher Education* is produced by North Carolina Campus Engagement's Community of Practice, Inquiry, and Learning (COFIL).

To learn more about COFIL please visit:

<https://nccampusengagement.org/community-of-practice-inquiry-and-learning-copil/>

COFIL 2019-2021 + 2022-2023 members who contributed to this series:

- Jennifer Ahern-Dodson, Duke University
- Patti H. Clayton, PHC Ventures & NCCE
- Margaret Commins, Queens University of Charlotte
- Kathleen E. Edwards, UNC Greensboro
- Leslie Garvin, NC Campus Engagement
- Cara Kozma, Duke University
- Danielle Lake, Elon University
- Melissa L. Lyon, Independent practitioner-scholar
- Kristin Medlin, Collaboratory
- Ryan Nilsen, UNC-Chapel Hill
- Allison Walker, High Point University
- Elizabeth Wall-Bassett, Western Carolina University
- Catherine Wright, Wingate University

Friends of COFIL who contributed to this series:

- Jessica D. Brazell-Brayboy
- Robert G. Bringle, IUPUI
- Emily Kohl, Rockbridge Area Relief Association