

University of Colorado at Boulder  
Institute for Ethical and Civic Engagement (IECE)

Final Report for Ben Kirshner  
EDUC 8348: Youth Development in Communities and Schools

**Course material/syllabus or detailed project description**

See attached materials:

- Kirshner Youth Development Seminar Syllabus
- Project Agreement form
- Scholarship of engagement consensus statement
- CU Boulder youth development class invite

**The number of students and faculty impacted by the project**

Fifteen graduate students participated in the seminar. These students were from Education (6), Planning and Design (6), Speech and Hearing Sciences (2), and Environmental Studies (1).

No faculty members other than me participated in the course.

**Overall assessment**

Developing the course

I began developing this course during fall 2005. In addition to typical activities related to syllabus development, such as identifying goals, readings, and assignments, I dedicated a substantial amount of time to meeting with youth organizations in Boulder County. My purpose in meeting with youth organizations was to see if they were willing to offer “placements,” in which students would do a research project that met agency needs in return for access. (See “Service Learning Project Agreement form” for details about placements). On the whole local organizations were quite receptive to working with me. I recruited a roster of nine agencies that were open to working with CU students. Some students in the course had prior relationships with agencies so I did not need to find placements for everyone. I also spent time publicizing my course across campus, in order to ensure that a broad range of students enrolled in the course.

How the course went

On the whole I felt that the course went well. Students were quite enthusiastic about the opportunity to practice a scholarship of engagement. In fact, I sensed that there is a “thirst” among doctoral students on campus to not only do their own research as part of their courses, but, more importantly, to do research that “matters” or is “useful” in some sense. We devoted several class sessions to discussing what it means to pursue a scholarship of engagement. I deliberately left this concept open-ended, because I wanted

students to construct their own beliefs and commitments based on their work with partner agencies. One strength of this course was that students could reflect on the concept of engaged scholarship in the context of their own work. By doing this our discussions were grounded in real world challenges, rather than idealistic speculation. For example, several students experienced anxiety regarding how to deliver information that was “useful” to their host agency. “What if what they did not think the programs were being effective?” Or, “How could they present information back that would be interesting or novel to staff members?” Students struggled with questions like these in small and large group conversations. At the end of the semester we had a final discussion in which we defined “scholarship of engagement” collectively. (See “Scholarship of Engagement Class Statement”).

The course culminated with a meeting for partner agency representatives and students in the course. The purpose of this meeting was for students to share what they had learned with partner agencies and also to collectively identify challenges or issues facing the field. We wanted the meeting to be focused on discussion and interaction, rather than one-sided presentations, so we kept the presentations short. (See “CU-Boulder Youth Development Class Invite” for details). Fourteen community members attended the meeting. At the end of the meeting I asked for feedback about how the course went and how to do it better next time and community members were quite enthusiastic about participating again. Their main suggestions focused on having even more time to prepare roles in advance and also having time to visit the class early in the semester to meet students and talk about their goals.

#### Impact on students and community members

I have not had the opportunity to see student FCQs so I do not have data about what students feel they learned. My own assessment, however, is that students benefited in three ways: First, they benefited by having to write a final paper that was somehow relevant or meaningful to members of the community. For many of them this was a new experience and was quite challenging. For these reasons it was also quite meaningful, as several indicated in emails or comments to me. Second, although none of the students specialized in adolescent development *per se* for their graduate studies, they all do research that involves adolescents. This course, therefore, provided a thorough introduction to psychological perspectives on adolescent development that will serve them well when they design their dissertations. Third, and finally, students gained practice doing ethically engaged qualitative research with real life people! Several told me that this was the first time they had had to make sense of academic ideas by engaging with the real world and that they appreciated this opportunity.

In terms of impact on community members, it varied quite a bit. (See “Challenges and problems” below for further discussion of this issue). Some agencies worked closely with students to design a study that would be meaningful. For these groups the student papers will likely help them think about their program in new ways and give them new ideas about program development. Some may even use papers in fundraising efforts. Other agencies (a smaller number) did not closely collaborate with students, and while they

may read the student papers they may have less of a vested interest in what students learned.

### Challenges and problems

In terms of challenges or problems in achieving project goals, the biggest challenge was balancing the demands of a doctoral course on adolescent development with my interests in helping students develop as engaged scholars. In other words, students had to both master content knowledge about developmental tasks and also ethical and methodological issues related to research. My strategy was to emphasize content knowledge through the readings and emphasize research ethics and methods through discussions and self-reflection. One problem, however, was that some students who were novices as qualitative researchers may have liked more support for their projects.

A second challenge related to inconsistency and variation in levels of commitment from community agencies. Whereas most were quite supportive of the project and had clear goals for the students' projects, a small number of agencies agreed to work with students but were very hands off. In the future I would seek to find ways to enhance the commitment of all host agencies to the student projects, perhaps by more in-depth meetings at the front end.

### Advancing IECE goals

I believe this course advance IECE goals in three ways. First, it gave doctoral students the opportunity to develop identities as engaged scholars. A central insight for me from this course is that learning about scholarship of engagement is not merely an intellectual exercise, it also requires a shift in identity: what kind of researcher do you want to be? What kinds of ethical commitments do you have to your participants? How do you handle the dilemmas that will inevitably emerge when you try to do work that is for both an academic and a practitioner audience? These questions are best answered through practice and reflection, which is what the course allowed students to do. At the end of the semester, after our culminating meeting, several students proposed that more graduate courses should provide this opportunity; I encouraged them to bring this up in their respective program areas.

A secondary way that the course fostered IECE goals was to help me develop stronger connections with community organizations. In this sense the grant contributed to my own development as an engaged scholar. It gave me great satisfaction to see that community agencies were eager to work with CU; I look forward to developing these relationships further.

Third, in terms of course content, students learned about the critical role of civic engagement in adolescent development through discussing readings and hearing about some of their colleagues' experiences in civic engagement-focused partner agencies.

### Sustainability

I intend to include this scholarship of engagement piece in future graduate courses, and also plan to teach this particular course again. The program representatives who attended the culminating meeting said they would like to work with CU students again. The only challenge is that I teach my doctoral course on a 2 year sequence. But there may be ways to address this problem. Either way, these relationships will be sustained through future courses. The hardest part was finding the time and incentive to establish the relationships – now that those are established it is much easier to maintain them.

### Financial report

As per the guidelines of my award letter, the full amount (\$5400.00) was used to fund a course buyout in fall 2005.