SNAPSHOT ARTICLE

Undergraduate Students' Perceptions of Community Engagement: A Snapshot of a Public Research University in Canada

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Abstract

Students who participate in regular community engagement (CE) often experience
benefits in different areas of their lives. Many academic institutions have implemented
action plans to increase CE within the student population. At the University of Calgary,
Canada, this is done primarily through its broader Eyes High strategy. As there remains a
gap in the literature about students' perceptions of CE and their awareness of university
CE strategies, this study aims to identify undergraduate students' awareness of the Eyes
High strategy, attitudes towards and levels of engagement, and challenges and potential
methods to increase CE participation. Data was collected through a voluntary online
survey (*n*=528). Participants were recruited through posters, social media, online faculty
platforms and by faculty members. Survey results indicated students lacked knowledge
regarding the Eyes High strategy. It was noted that students' knowledge, attitudes and
practices of CE increased as they spent more time at the university. The top perceived
challenges to CE were lack of time, accessible information, support and incentives. To
increase accessibility and student participation, we suggest introducing the Eyes High

strategy and CE activities early to the undergraduate population through workshops, credit-based courses and/or professional development requirements. Our data suggests that students are not well informed about the Eyes High strategy. There is thus a need for the university to build a campus-wide, student-informed initiative to proactively engage students. This research will serve as a gateway to further explore communicative methods that might better convey university priorities to students.

Keywords

Community Engagement; University; Undergraduate Students; Perceptions

Introduction

Community engagement (CE) is a broad term that encompasses various activities. Within universities, it is seen as an ongoing partnership between higher education institutions and the community, both at local and regional levels (Jacob et al. 2015). Previous studies have found that students who participate in regular CE often experience benefits in different areas of their lives as a result (Bowman et al. 2010; Van Wynsberghe & Andruske 2007). Students who participated in CE were able to apply their curricular knowledge to real-world contexts and gain interpersonal communication skills (Bednarz et al. 2008). Another study indicated that extracurricular experiences encouraged intellectual curiosity among students, improved institutional commitment and prompted continual high graduating and return rates (Marti 2008). One study found that actively engaging with one's community while pursuing higher education had positive long-term effects, as students who volunteered or enrolled in at least one service course during their studies experienced greater life satisfaction as an indirect effect of their CE experiences (Bowman et al. 2010).

Many academic institutions have implemented action plans to increase CE within the student population. These frameworks often address students, faculty members, other universities and the wider community. The University of Calgary has implemented a strategy called Eyes High, which focuses on several aspects of campus life, including CE (University of Calgary 2019). The CE priorities defined by the Eyes High strategy include thought leadership, cultural enrichment, community service, collaborative partnerships and alumni engagement. However, despite efforts to increase CE, little is known about students' perceptions of CE and their awareness of university CE strategies.

The current study aims to identify undergraduate students' awareness of the Eyes High strategy, their attitudes towards CE, levels of engagement and challenges, as well as potential methods to increase CE participation. Having a more detailed understanding of students' knowledge and behaviours will provide opportunities to build greater awareness and participation in CE within the student body.

Method

PARTICIPANT ENGAGEMENT

Online surveys were completed by University of Calgary undergraduate students. Survey participants were recruited through social media websites such as Instagram. Survey links and flyers were also posted on online faculty platforms such as D2L and emailed to faculty members to disseminate amongst their communication channels. In addition, posters with the survey QR code were displayed across campus.

DATA COLLECTION

Data was collected from an online multiple-choice survey using Qualtrics. The first section asked participants about their age, gender, faculty, club involvement and other demographic information. The main series of questions assessed the participants' knowledge of University of Calgary CE initiatives and their

attitudes towards and practices of CE, both on and off campus. The survey was conducted from December 2019 to June 2020. The study was approved by the University of Calgary Conjoint Health Research Ethics Board.

ANALYSIS

All completed online surveys (n=528) were included in the analysis. Data was analysed quantitatively. Weighted data was used for all analyses. Descriptive analysis was conducted for each of the components of students' knowledge, attitudes and practice-related variables.

Results

DEMOGRAPHICS

Five hundred and twenty-eight responses (total 621 responses, 93 incomplete) were analysed. The sample of respondents consisted of 85 first-year students, 103 second-year students, 179 third-year students and 161 students in their fourth year or higher. Approximately 68.2 per cent of respondents were female (n=360), 30.5 per cent were male (n=161) and 1.3 per cent identified as other (n=7). The respondents were spread across all faculties, with the greatest representation being from the Faculty of Science (n=208) and the Faculty of Arts (n=188). Participants ranged in age from under 18 years to over 65; the majority of participants were between the ages of 18 and 25 (n=488). Details of the demographic profile distribution of the survey respondents are provided in Appendix A, Table A1.

KNOWLEDGE

Students in upper years were more aware of the Eyes High strategy: 32.3 per cent of students in fourth year or higher were aware of the strategy, in comparison to 25.9 per cent of first-year students. On average, 29.2 per cent of students were aware of the University of Calgary's Eyes High strategy, which includes the CE strategy.

ATTITUDES

Table 1 (below) demonstrates students' attitudes toward CE. More students in their fourth year or higher at the university responded that CE was 'very/extremely important' than students in lower years. As the year of study increased, students' respective opinions on the importance of CE increased. However, there was a decrease in 'very/extremely important' responses between first- and second-year students. The level of CE importance least identified within each year was 'slightly/not at all important'.

Table 1.   Attitudes towards CE among university students in varying years of study (number (%) responding to the question 'How important is CE to you?')

	Very/extremely important	Moderately important	Slightly/not at all important
1st year	37 (43.5)	38 (44.7)	10 (11.7)
2nd year	38 (36.9)	46 (44.7)	19 (18.5)
3rd year	86 (48.0)	76 (42.5)	17 (9.5)
4th+ year	93 (57.8)	53 (32.9)	15 (9.6)

PRACTICES

In Appendix B, Table B1A reveals that first-year students, on average, participated in CE activities less frequently than upper-year students. More upper-year students participated in CE activities at least once every two weeks compared to first- and second-year students. Table B1B shows that, regardless of the year of study, the majority of respondents believed they could be doing more to get involved in CE. However, there was a greater percentage of upper-year students who believed they were doing enough or more than enough compared to first-year students. Table B1C indicates that first-year students were less likely to participate in CE on campus than upper-year students. CE on campus can include a variety of activities, such as research, club involvement, student politics and volunteering. As a whole, the undergraduate student population was most likely to participate in CE on campus, followed by in neighbourhoods and youth communities. Fewer students practised CE in religious and elderly communities, and a smaller proportion of students did so in other areas, including with vulnerable populations and in animal shelters.

Figure 1 shows the awareness of the Eyes High strategy among students with varying frequencies of participation in CE activities. Overall, regardless of frequency of participation, 60–80 per cent of the students in each category were unaware of the strategy. As frequency of participation increased, awareness of the Eyes High strategy also increased. Among those students who participated most frequently (27.5 per cent), 36.6 per cent were aware of the strategy, but 63.4 per cent of students were still unaware. Similarly, among students who participated in CE activities least frequently (36.6 per cent), 76.2 per cent were unaware of the strategy, with only 23.8 per cent being aware of it. Similar distributions of awareness versus unawareness were seen among students who participated in CE activities once every two weeks or at least once a month.
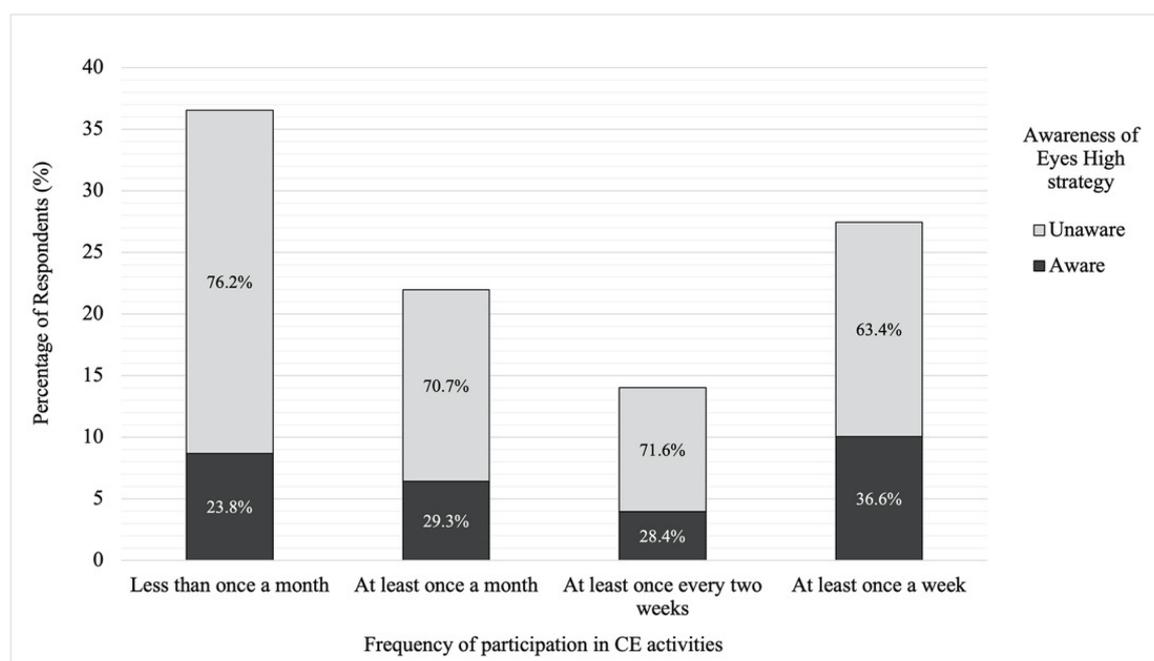

Figure 1.   Percentage of survey respondents with regards to their frequency of participation in CE activities. Split bars indicate the percentage of respondents who were unaware or aware of the Eyes High strategy within each category.

PERCEIVED CHALLENGES AND POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

When asked to select major challenges faced when trying to become more involved in CE, 81.8 per cent of respondents indicated being too busy was a barrier, while 39.0 per cent indicated that not knowing where to access information was a major barrier and 36.4 per cent indicated a lack of support from the university. Additional barriers included a lack of incentive to be involved, financial constraints and language/cultural barriers. Of respondents, 1.9 per cent indicated that they had not faced any barriers or challenges to their CE involvement.

Respondents were asked to select all options that would encourage them to participate in CE activities. Easier access to information was the most common response (64.2 per cent). Of participants, 54.7 per cent indicated that additional information on CE activities would encourage their participation and 47.5 per cent indicated receiving credit for participation would encourage them, while 2.7 per cent indicated 'other' potential ways to increase participation in CE, including increased accessibility, activities tailored to student interests, and incentives (e.g. food) to attend events.

Discussion

Compared to other students, first-year students were less aware of the University of Calgary Eyes High strategy, which includes the CE strategy, because they had been part of the university community for a shorter time. Our data suggests that knowledge of the Eyes High strategy increases with students' years of study, but it does not vary greatly. Table 1 highlights that upper-year undergraduate students perceived CE to be more important than students in lower years, although this change was small. Interestingly, there was a decrease in 'very/extremely important' perceptions of CE between first- and second-year students, which is a potential avenue for future research.

Upper-year students reported higher levels of participation in CE activities compared to lower-year students (Table B1A). A factor contributing to this trend may be that upper-year students are more likely to gain positions of leadership on campus. It is also likely that, as these students are closer to their after-graduation plans and future careers, they may be more compelled to gain experience in areas such as volunteering, research or community leadership. Career aspirations often influence an individual's participation in CE. Such experiences may also cause students to perceive CE as more important than they previously thought.

Based on Figure 1, it is possible that increased participation in CE activities increases exposure to the Eyes High strategy, rather than the other way around. This suggests that student participation in CE increases their knowledge of university CE goals and strategies. The current study revealed, however, that even the majority of students who participate in CE most frequently were unaware of the Eyes High strategy, suggesting that its relationship with CE participation is weak. Regardless of the frequency of participation, the majority of students remained unaware of the Eyes High strategy, indicating a broad lack of awareness. It is therefore important to strengthen the relationship between CE participation and awareness of the Eyes High strategy in order to ensure that the university-funded CE initiatives are having their intended effects.

Across all years, the majority of respondents believed they could be doing more to get involved in CE (Table B1B) but were hindered by time constraints and lack of information. Studies by Ellis (2004) and Tansey and Gonzalez-Perez (2006) found that a lack of time and information are major barriers preventing younger people from volunteering. These studies also found that a lack of information about opportunities could be linked to hesitance and apprehension about specific requirements or qualifications to participate in CE activities. The value of encouraging new students to get involved in CE is described by Tinto (2006). He emphasises that the way new students participate in CE appears to be a potential avenue for increasing

knowledge of CE. Depending on the type of CE opportunity being offered, it may be beneficial for organisations or clubs to widely advertise opportunities and be clear about the required qualifications (or lack thereof).

Additionally, we suggest that the university set up workshops throughout the year, particularly during Orientation Week, to inform students about the Eyes High strategy and campus CE opportunities. Integrating the concepts of the Eyes High strategy, specifically the community engagement initiatives, into Orientation Week and first-year education could allow first-year and newly transferred students to gain exposure to CE early in their journey at the University of Calgary. One study reported that integrating students as early as possible is important because this provides a sense of community and ownership (Brisbin & Hunter 2003). Alternatively, students could be expected to complete a minimum number of professional development hours as a degree requirement, and the workshops could be a way to fulfil them. Having credit-based electives dedicated to CE could also encourage students to partake in CE activities. One study demonstrated that offering academic credit in exchange for work in the community provided students with many authentic experiences that they would not have encountered otherwise (Jung 2011). As such, we suggest advertising and offering broader co-op and internship opportunities, as this could immerse more students into the community.

Limitations and Future Directions

Limitations of this work include the small sample size and that the collected data may not be representative of the entire university population. Additionally, we were unable to determine trends in CE based on faculty or compare domestic versus international students. Future studies should include a larger and more representative sample from all faculties and years of study, in proportion to the academic institution's population. This would increase generalisability and provide additional information about CE within certain student demographics. Furthermore, due to the specificity of our survey to CE at the University of Calgary, the results may not be generalisable to other post-secondary institutions. Volunteer bias is another consideration; it is likely that the students who completed the survey are already more engaged than the average student on campus. We hypothesise that the students who were unaware of the survey or unwilling to complete it would have even lower levels of knowledge and practices of CE. Finally, within the current study, there was a risk of social desirability bias, which could be addressed in future research using a precise manipulation check.

Conclusion

This study was able to identify University of Calgary undergraduate students' knowledge and practice of CE and their responses to it. Practical implications of the study include increasing awareness of CE opportunities for students by collaborating with representatives of the Eyes High strategy at the University of Calgary. It is widely known that participating in CE activities is beneficial both for the community and the participant, and the University of Calgary strives to foster vibrant campus CE through the Eyes High strategy. Our study aimed to gauge undergraduate students' awareness of the university's CE initiatives and identify any areas for improvement that could increase engagement. Survey data revealed a lack of awareness of the Eyes High strategy and related CE initiatives within the student population and a lack of involvement in CE. Our data also revealed barriers to engagement, such as a lack of information about opportunities and being too busy to engage. Creating more accessible CE-focused resources for the student population could encourage student engagement. Integrating the Eyes High strategy and other CE initiatives into different aspects of the overall university experience could enable more effective communication with students and increase student awareness and participation in CE. The benefits of

increased CE among the undergraduate population are not limited to the campus, but may be likely to lead to further engagement with local communities and groups.

With further understanding of students' knowledge of the University of Calgary's CE initiatives, we anticipate that this research will serve as a gateway to explore communicative methods that will enhance undergraduate students' engagement with the community. Furthermore, there is a need for academic organisations to collaborate with students to further promote CE and build a campus-wide CE initiative that is student-informed.

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Appendix A

Table A1.   Demographic profile distribution of survey respondents (n = 528)

Demographics	Value	Frequency	%
Gender	Male	161	30.5
	Female	360	68.2
	Other	7	1.3
Faculty[1]	Cumming School of Medicine	22	3.7
	Faculty of Arts[2]	188	33.2
	Faculty of Kinesiology	44	7.8
	Faculty of Science[3]	208	36.1
	Haskayne School of Business	29	5.1
	Schulich School of Engineering	45	8.0
	Werklund School of Education	22	3.9
	Other[4]	18	3.4
Year of study	1st year	85	16.1
	2nd year	103	19.3
	3rd year	179	33.9
	4th+ year	161	30.5
On-campus club affiliations	0	208	39.4
	1	164	31.1
	2+	156	29.6

[1] Percentages do not add up to 100 as multiple faculties could be selected by each respondent.

[2] Faculty of Arts includes Social Sciences, Languages, Communication, and Fine Arts.

[3] Faculty of Science includes Biological Sciences, Chemistry, Computer Science, Geoscience, Mathematics, Statistics, Physics and Astronomy.

[4] Other includes Undeclared, Open Studies, Faculty of Nursing and Faculty of Social Work.

Appendix B

Table B1.   (A) CE practices among undergraduate students at the University of Calgary.
(B) Perception of personal CE (number (%) of students who feel that their participation in CE is enough, not enough, and more than enough). (C) Location of CE activities.

A.

Year of study	I participate in CE activities...			
	At least once a week	At least once every two weeks	At least once a month	Less than once a month
1st year	21 (24.7)	10 (11.8)	23 (27.0)	31 (36.5)
2nd year	30 (29.1)	14 (13.6)	18 (17.5)	41 (39.8)
3rd year	44 (24.6)	35 (19.5)	37 (20.7)	63 (35.2)
4th+ year	50 (31.1)	15 (9.3)	38 (23.6)	58 (36.0)

B.

Year of study	Regarding my level of participation in CE...		
	I am doing enough	I could do more to get involved	I am doing more than enough
1st year	16 (18.8)	69 (81.2)	0 (0.0)
2nd year	20 (19.4)	78 (75.7)	5 (4.9)
3rd year	38 (21.2)	137 (76.6)	4 (2.2)
4th+ year	37 (23.0)	113 (70.2)	11 (6.8)

C.

Year of study	My CE takes place in...					
	The on-campus community	My neighbour-hood	The youth community	The elderly community	The religious community	Other
1st year	37 (43.5)	26 (30.6)	22 (25.9)	5 (5.9)	12 (14.1)	2 (2.4)
2nd year	55 (53.4)	34 (33.0)	23 (22.3)	5 (4.9)	15 (14.6)	3 (2.9)
3rd year	104 (58.1)	54 (30.2)	40 (22.4)	13 (7.3)	32 (17.9)	8 (4.5)
4th+ year	93 (57.8)	60 (37.3)	29 (18.0)	8 (5.0)	26 (16.2)	8 (5.0)

Note: Percentages do not add up to 100 per cent because the question directed respondents to select all of the locations where their CE took place.