

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND EDUCATION

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*"I have gained a lot of confidence
[and learned how] to use my voice
to stand up for something."
Ballou student*

Civic Engagement in Education originated from the idea of an undergraduate student, Sabrina Karim: to be effective in youth community leadership positions, students need opportunities to learn theoretical knowledge but they must also learn how to integrate this knowledge with real life experiences. She found a Georgetown faculty member, Dr. Heather Voke, and together they developed a course in which Georgetown students combined classroom instruction on youth civic engagement with direct experiences coaching teams of students in a local high school.

Karim and Voke partnered with Debbi Iverson, a Social Studies teacher at Ballou High School in South East D.C., a school notorious from press reports of low test scores, violence, high rates of absenteeism, and low graduation rates. As the semester began, Ms. Iverson commented: "I really hope this works. These kids really don't think that what they do matters. I don't want to disappoint them." This very real possibility of failure provided a compelling motivation for hard work for the Georgetown students and the instructors involved in the course.

For the Georgetown students, the course included a twice-weekly class in which they addressed theoretical issues related to civic engagement and education. The GU students also met in a weekly seminar to plan instruction and discuss issues that arose while coaching. The GU students then traveled to Ballou two times each week to coach the student teams.

*"Placing myself out of my comfort zone into an environment far different than one I have ever experienced has given me a confidence I could not have found elsewhere. This project has changed my life."
—Georgetown student*

The teams, under the direction of the coaches, each identified an issue of concern in the high school or its surrounding neighborhood, and developed and implemented a solution. They focused on several problem areas in the Ballou community for their projects: community littering, poor quality food and overcrowding in the cafeteria, the school's cell-phone policy, badly deteriorating bathrooms, and inadequate course counseling services. As they addressed these problems, Ballou students and their coaches developed and administered surveys, created presentations with music and photographs, organized a community trash pick-up day, created a brochure about trash services for residents, held a discussion with the school counselors, painted the school bathrooms, and made a presentation to the D.C. Board of Education. When the projects were concluded, students organized a Learning by Doing Democracy Conference in which they presented their work to their families, and Georgetown and D.C. community members. The hard work of the Ballou and Georgetown students was recognized by D.C. Congresswoman Eleanor Holmes Norton and the students were highly praised by both Norton and the members of the D.C. Board of Education.

