

Understanding the Impact of a Social Justice Minor

on Student Learning and Their Post-Undergraduate Experience: Lessons from the Community Action and Social Change Minor

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CASC: Community Action Social Change Minor

16 credit minor includes:

- a foundation course taught in the School of Social Work
- 12 credits of electives from across campus in the cluster areas of context, diversity learning, and action service learning
- a capstone on integrative reflective e-portfolio development

Students learn to analyze types, levels and sources of power to better understand how inequities are manifested, maintained and reinforced in society and how these inequities can be addressed through community action and social change efforts.

Current enrollment includes approximately **300 undergraduates** from across nine schools and colleges and over 50 different majors/concentrations. As of 2013, CASC has over 200 graduates.

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Core Research Questions

QSS #1: In what ways does the CASC minor contribute to the knowledge, skills, and experiences of its participants?

Measure: E-Portfolio Assessments
Sample: 51 E-Portfolios from students in the 2011 (N=27) and 2012 (N=60) capstone winter course, representing graduates from across campus. Sample was selected based on permissions from students.

Key Themes

Themes from CASC alumni suggest the following key take-aways and findings about their transition from undergraduate to post-graduate social justice work:

1 CASC students describe personal experiences of transformative civic engagement.

Recently, an 11-year old product of Detroit Public Schools provided me with a new perspective. "Instead of treating people how you would want to be treated, you should treat people how THEY want to be treated." ...I'll always remember this as the moment I truly understood the definition of empathy.

2 Students describe integration of learning from the classroom and civic engagement activities.

I will never forget what I have learned about people and our society from my time in college. Much of this was learned through extensions of the classroom, ...because of my minor in community action social change.

3 Students clarified personal values and beliefs through lifelong learning statements.

Having challenged my own perspectives and beliefs during my time at U-M, I have truly learned to keep an open mind about every person, situation, and issue. I feel an intrinsic responsibility to promote educational equity, cross social boundaries, and advocate social justice, all while spreading these values to create positive change one person at a time.

QSS#2: What impact does the minor, and its courses, have on student learning and their ability to translate their learning into post-graduate engagement?

Measures: We collected 100 responses from CASC graduates (2011-2013), asking three questions in a computer-based survey:
1. What three "take-aways" have you carried with you from the CASC minor?
2. What success have you had in the field? Did your experience in the CASC minor contribute to this success and if so, how?
3. What, if any, are the challenges you have faced?

Key Findings

Themes from CASC alumni suggest the following key take-aways and findings about their transition from undergraduate to post-graduate social justice work:

Skills to critically reflect and do "perspective-taking" are essential to helping graduates contextualize their experiences:

26% discussed the importance of being able to critically reflect on their experience and have a broader perspective on their actions.

The ability to build relationships has been essential to their post-undergraduate work:

24% noted the importance of utilizing skills to build relationships with others, especially in context of entering new communities.

Continued awareness of social identity, privilege, and power has been important for their ability to engage in issues and communities:

18% discussed the importance of their ability to understand their own social identities, be aware of their own privileges, and work in diverse settings as essential for their work in and with communities.

Many still struggle with transitioning to social justice in the real world:

66% report facing challenges in transition from undergraduate to post-graduate experiences, specifically feeling isolated from others who share their perspectives and passions (35%), stress of working in non-profit (23%), and feeling overwhelmed by injustices facing individuals and communities (9%).

Some respondents (13%) described the importance of having inter-personal skills including flexibility, patience, and awareness about issues of self-care. These skills were perceived as important for coping with the transitions and challenges facing new graduates.

What lessons can be learned, from the experience of recent graduates, for future improvement of the minor?

1. Impact of Minor

- Through their involvement in the minor, students report gaining critical skills and experiences that have helped them transition post-graduation: critical reflection, social identity awareness, perspective-taking, relationship building, and inter-personal skills.
- CASC students do struggle with transition and face challenges in their social justice efforts as they move beyond the college experience. More is needed to support students over time.

2. Use of Methods for Assessment

- Portfolios are effective tools for capturing learning across domains and help students identify skills and competencies related to social change and community action.
- Alumni surveys can be important tools for gathering information about student experience but also for connecting with graduates. Alumni seemed eager to connect with the program and the survey prompted many alumni to seek additional ways to reengage with CASC.

Future research plans include longer-term follow-up of graduates, with comparisons of the civic engagement paths of CASC grads and other U-M grads.