Continuity and Innovation in Honors College Curricula

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Chapter 3

Praxis Labs

Theory + Action as a Foundation of a Modern Honors Education

Sylvia Torti and Martha Bradley-Evans

In 2012, the Honors College at the University of Utah opened the Donna Garff Marriott Honors Residential Community, a place where academic, cocurricular, and living spaces concur. The building serves as a living space for over three hundred students and as a hub for 1,900 additional honors students. As students enter the building, whether they’ve just gotten off the nearby Trax commuter line, or have come back to the residence from elsewhere on campus, they pass a Utah sandstone rock with the motto “Serve the World,” inviting them to reflect on the higher purpose of their education.

This residential community was designed to meet the needs of current and future honors students by embedding their experiences in a dynamic, physical place. Purposeful creation of physical communities is, and will continue to become, increasingly important to undergraduate education in a world that is globalized and virtualized, one in which students can sometimes exist without confronting the cultural and socioeconomic complexities of the world around them. The architecture and programming for the building were inspired by the ideals developed in Honors Praxis Labs, the topic of this chapter.

The motivation behind this residential community and Praxis Lab programming follows John Dewey’s idea that the purpose of education is to develop the “capacity for associative living.” As noted by Cecile Houry’s chapter in this book, Dewey’s vision assumes that democracy, education and citizenship are inextricably entwined, and that “democracy has to be born anew every generation and education is its midwife.”1 It assumes that there is an “organic connection between education and personal experience.”2 While easy to articulate and endorse, putting these lofty goals into practice is a common challenge faced by many honors programs.
The mission of the University of Utah’s Honors College, consistent with Dewey’s notion, is to help students become ethical and engaged citizens, empowering them to be problem solvers who positively impact the world around them. The program is committed to anchoring the undergraduate experience in a strong commitment to civic engagement, interdisciplinarity, and internationalization. This commitment, however, is sometimes difficult to execute in an atmosphere where students bring heavily market-focused expectations to higher education.

Most students come to the university to prepare for careers, thinking primarily about financial wealth and professional stability—half of incoming honors students plan on becoming doctors, lawyers, or engineers—but many of them also hope for the personal satisfaction that comes with a commitment to public service.

Today’s students have complex, constantly evolving relationships to politics, power, and civic engagement that don’t always mirror those—either practiced or idealized—by faculty and administrators. National trends of pessimism and alienation voiced by students in the 1990s have given way to a new generation of students who are deeply motivated to engage their communities and want to make a positive difference in the world.

According to the Pew Trust, today’s students are “digital natives.” For example, 81 percent of Millennials are on Facebook and their median friend count of 250 is far higher than that of older age groups. They have seized the new digital platforms—the internet, mobile technology, social media—to construct personalized networks of friends, colleagues, and affinity groups. They are also part of an America that is more racially diverse than ever before. The Millennials generation is forging a distinctive path into adulthood. They are relatively unattached to organized politics and religion, linked by social media, burdened by debt, in no rush to marry—and optimistic about the future.

Responding to these generational shifts in engagement, ethnic, cultural, and demographic shifts, is a challenge, and one that is uniquely suited to honors education, especially at large institutions. Traditional honors education, grounded in the liberal arts, has provided students with historical, cultural, and academic breadth, as well as disciplinary depth through completion of a thesis or capstone in their major.

This underpinning is no longer sufficient. In the process of completing undergraduate degrees, students should not view themselves simply as autonomous entrepreneurial consumers who are paying for credentials to find employment, but they should leave the university with tangible workforce skills, a sense of social responsibility for the future vitality of their communities and the ability to negotiate the complexity that comes with civic engagement.
To achieve these goals, the University of Utah Honors College, in 2004, developed a new pedagogical model. Praxis Labs represent a version of community-based education that achieves these goals while connecting both residential and commuter students to campus and the community.8

Ideally, Praxis Labs are meant to instill in students a sustained desire to use their education in the production of public well-being, thereby nurturing a new generation of community leaders and creative problem solvers committed to cooperative thinking.

They provide a space for students to experience the uncertainty and risk that comes with moving new ideas and projects forward.

Unlike many service-learning courses, Praxis Labs vest the power and responsibility for project development, implementation, and outcomes with the students themselves.9 Students must work as teams and develop their work within the context of relationships with one another, relationships that are built and evolve over the course.

The Praxis Lab model has the potential to become increasingly important in honors education because it translates the worth of a liberal arts honors education to students, institutions, and the community. This chapter provides an overview of the model, an analysis of a ten-year data set, including the strengths and challenges associated with Labs, and a discussion of how the model might be applied elsewhere.

**SETTING AND HISTORY FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF PRAXIS LABS**

The University of Utah is an urban public university with 24,492 undergraduate students in fifteen colleges and professional schools and more than eighty majors. Eighty-seven percent of its students commute to campus, and 59 percent of them work twenty to thirty hours per week at paid jobs. Almost 50 percent of students transfer to the university after first studying at a community college or somewhere else.

The Honors College serves 2,200 students with an incoming honors class of 550 students per year. The opening of the Donna Garff Marriott Honors Community significantly increased the number of students living on campus, but still, 65 percent of honors students commute. Finding ways to connect a large student population at a predominantly commuter institution to a high quality liberal arts education, which flourishes best in close knit communities, is a key challenge.

Throughout the College’s history, the primary avenue for connecting students was through honors Intellectual Traditions and honors writing courses—the types of classes one might find in any honors program.
These have been, and continue to serve as the core requirements of the honors bachelor’s degree. However, additional efforts are necessary to deeply engage students.

In the late 1980s, with the development of the Campus Compact, service-learning courses, giving students the chance to participate in community projects as part of course requirements, became common across the country. The University of Utah responded with the dedication of the Lowell Bennion Community Service Center in 1987, which began to engage honors students in meaningful nonacademic ways, but did not fully address or develop the intellectual curiosity, civic engagement, and creative problem-solving skills expected of honors students.

College leadership realized that honors students represented an immense reservoir of talent that could be, and should be, directed toward creative solutions to pressing contemporary problems. Leadership also felt that an honors education should prepare students to live in a rapidly changing internationalized world, to consider their roles as global citizens, to understand meaning in a diversity of ideas, of persons, of cultures, and of politics and how to work across these differences.

As described as necessary in *A Promising Connection*, Praxis Labs create the “facilitated opportunities for students to examine social, political, and organizational antecedents that reinforce inequities of power and privilege within communities which are key to civic engagement’s educational potential.” The empowerment that comes with critical thinking in the context of community and global learning helps students discover how they might bring greater equity, fairness, and justice to local institutions and the global community.

The Honors College launched its first Praxis Lab in the 2004–2005 academic year. “The Revitalization of Downtown Salt Lake City,” with ten students and two professors, developed partnerships with the Downtown Alliance, the Redevelopment Agency, the Mayor’s Office and eight other community organizations to create practical solutions for a dying downtown.

Students presented at three professional conferences, published a book of their findings for public dissemination and successfully lobbied for the term “Greek Town” to be placed on the light rail stop in the neighborhood they studied, which was originally settled by Greek organizations and the location of the current annual Greek Festival.

Community response to this new initiative was overwhelmingly positive, resulting in a demand for more Praxis Labs. Between 2005–2015, the Honors College has supported thirty unique Praxis Labs, and these Labs have included 369 students, sixty-six faculty members, and over twenty-three community partners (table 3.1).
### Table 3.1 Summary of Praxis Labs 2005–2015

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outcomes that Influence Power</th>
<th>Praxis Lab Title</th>
<th>Discipline of Faculty</th>
<th>Community Partners</th>
<th>Specific Outcomes</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wallace Stegner &amp; Western Lands</td>
<td>Law, Writer/Photographer</td>
<td>Southern Wilderness Alliance, Grand County Commission</td>
<td>Comprehensive report delivered to legislators and environmental workers across state. Report cited five years later in bill proposal in Utah legislature</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Middle Class on the Ropes</td>
<td>Sociologist, Economist</td>
<td>United Way, Salt Lake Community College</td>
<td>Hosted a community panel discussion for 150 people. Produced resource guide and narrative stories a la Studs Terkel</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Air Quality, Health &amp; Society</td>
<td>Atmospheric Scientist, Writer/Photographer</td>
<td>University of Utah Medical School, Breathe Utah</td>
<td>Presentation at Stegner Conference. Presentation of letter endorsed by business leaders to Governor. Creation of an animated white-board video in English and Spanish to teach about air quality to K3–5 graders</td>
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<tr>
<th>Outcomes that Positively Impact Underserved Populations</th>
<th>Praxis Lab Title</th>
<th>Discipline of Faculty</th>
<th>Community Partners</th>
<th>Specific Outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Global Health</td>
<td>Public Health PhD, Infectious Disease MD</td>
<td>A village in Ghana, Refugee Services Organization</td>
<td>Creation of “Global Health Scholars”—an ongoing working group of 30 honors students/year</td>
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<tr>
<td>Planets &amp; Pedagogy</td>
<td>Physics, Writer/Photographer</td>
<td>Rose Park Elementary School</td>
<td>Creation of a new honors course at K12 Title 1 school, which has resulted in increases in test scores</td>
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<tr>
<td>Praxis Lab Title</td>
<td>Discipline of Faculty</td>
<td>Community Partners</td>
<td>Specific Outcomes</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Patient Experience</td>
<td>Architect/Design Professor, Medical Professionals</td>
<td>4th Street Health Clinic</td>
<td>Creation of non-profit, Connect2Health, that connects underserved populations to healthcare</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Documentary Film and Diversity</td>
<td>Videographer, English/ Creative Writer</td>
<td>Utah Humanities Council, University Neighborhood Partners</td>
<td>Creation of new honors course that brings adult learners with little previous access to higher education together with honors students to create documentary films</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New American Communities Social Change</td>
<td>Sociologist, Community Activist</td>
<td>University Neighborhood Partners</td>
<td>Creation of “Social Justice” Scholars group</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empathetic Patient Experience</td>
<td>Architect/Designer, cancer professionals</td>
<td>Huntsman Cancer Institute</td>
<td>Restorative interactive herb gardens designed and built for patients of all abilities</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alzheimer’s &amp; Aging</td>
<td>MD/PhD, Composer &amp; Ethnographer</td>
<td>Mestizo Arts Collective</td>
<td>Resource guide for families with members suffering dementia, five hundred copies distributed. Public events for patients and families designed and implemented across Salt Lake Valley</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Westside Leadership Academy Community &amp; Change</td>
<td>Sociologist &amp; Community Development Activist, Community Organizer Economics &amp; Education</td>
<td>Neighborworks, University Neighborhood Partners</td>
<td>Documentary films</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diversity and Education</td>
<td>Education Faculty</td>
<td>Hispanic Chamber of Commerce</td>
<td>Resource manual, distributed two thousand copies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of Life</td>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>Salt Lake Public Library</td>
<td>Film of testimonials of students in course</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental Health</td>
<td>MD &amp; Economist</td>
<td></td>
<td>Design and implementation of “Pace of Life” conference at library Healthy World, Health Home, Healthy You presentations to K12 students</td>
<td></td>
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</table>
Table 3.1  Summary of Praxis Labs 2005–2015 (Continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Praxis Lab Title</th>
<th>Discipline of Faculty</th>
<th>Community Partners</th>
<th>Specific Outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Crossing the Religious Divide</td>
<td>Episcopal Reverend &amp; Baptist Pastor.</td>
<td>Eight local congregations including Catholic, Episcopalian, Latter-day Saint, Islamic, and Jewish</td>
<td>Design and implementation of two community-building dialogues for Salt Lake youth.</td>
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</table>

Outcomes that Positively Influence Campus

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Praxis Lab Title</th>
<th>Discipline of Faculty</th>
<th>Community Partners</th>
<th>Specific Outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Higher Education &amp; Diversity</td>
<td>University President, AVP for Academic Affairs, VP for Business Administration</td>
<td>ASUU; Undergraduate Studies</td>
<td>Report proposing “best practices” for advising at the University of Utah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ecosystem Services &amp; the American Dream</td>
<td>Biologist, International Water Mediator</td>
<td>University of Utah, Department of Facilities and Office of Sustainability</td>
<td>Report analyzing water use on campus with recommendations to University administration for water conservation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Redefining Health &amp; Wellness</td>
<td>MD physician, PhD nutritionist</td>
<td>Department of Nutrition</td>
<td>Created a new cooking course for nutrition minor with a cook book connecting recipes to the seven dimensions of health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queer Identity &amp; Social Justice</td>
<td>Sociologist, Social Worker</td>
<td>Gender Studies Program, Equality Utah</td>
<td>Creation of “SQARE” new student group for LGBTQ artists and activists on campus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creativity on Center Stage (Education)</td>
<td>Historian, Dancer/ Choreographer</td>
<td>Stephen Brown Dance Company</td>
<td>Artistic production created and produced by students at Rose Wagner Theater</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uneasy Intersection of Law &amp; Medicine</td>
<td>Philosopher, Judge, and Obstetrician</td>
<td>University of Utah Medical School</td>
<td>Design and presentation of curriculum for medical school to teach new doctors about pain killer abuse and post-prescription management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Great Salt Lake</td>
<td>Film Director/ Producer, Ethnographer</td>
<td>Metropolitan Planning Facilities and Planning, University of Utah</td>
<td>Creative and Research Report</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Energy &amp; Sustainability</td>
<td>Biologist, City Planner</td>
<td>None.</td>
<td>Creation of “Urban Ecology &amp; Sustainability Scholars” group (ongoing group that works to implement more sustainable practices on campus)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The City as Laboratory</td>
<td>Landscape Architect, City Planner</td>
<td>None.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
PRAXIS LABS

In its simplest form, the Greek word praxis means theory plus action. Paulo Freire defined praxis as a "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it." In The Human Condition, Hannah Arendt used praxis to counter notions of "a contemplative life," a life that she judged as inadequate and incomplete. According to Arendt, praxis is the highest level of active life and the true realization of human freedom and togetherness. Praxis is a concept of participatory democracy that actively contrasts bureaucracy and elite politics because freedom in this sense means the "capacity to begin, to start something new, to do the unexpected."

Praxis Labs, then, are a dynamic, participatory, democratic, and often transformative, honors education that should become an increasingly important core component in today's honors programs. The goal of Praxis Labs is to go beyond the material value of a degree and help students see ways in which they might use their education to address society's problems and to enrich their personal lives in the process.

As Arthur Levine and Jeannette Cureton point out, "Today's students need to believe they can make a difference... But at the same time they are not convinced that they can both do good and do well." Praxis Labs provide an opportunity to teach students they can do both by equipping them with the skills and encouragement to address issues head-on.

The Model

Each Praxis Lab is a year-long course built around a pressing social issue that usually falls into one of three broad categories: Energy/Environment, Health/Society, and Social Justice/Policy (table 3.1). The dean, in consultation with faculty and community members, choses complicated, current topics that cannot be solved by one discipline alone. Faculty expertise and their availability to lead, willing community partners, as well as student interest, also play a role in topic choice. Good topics are those that are global in scope but have a unique local manifestation.

The composition of course participants and course progression are also important. Each Praxis Lab engages two professors from different disciplines—experts from philosophers to physicians and from the campus to the community—and no more than twelve students, sophomore-senior. First year students have been included in the past, but generally their inclusion has not led to fruitful experiences for them or others.

During the fall semester, through readings, intense discussion and guest speakers, the faculty and students endeavor to understand the topic as fully as possible and to develop deeper expertise and empathy for all facets of the
issue. By the end of the first semester, students define a particular aspect of the larger issue for which they will design and implement a solution in the local community.

The spring semester, then, is spent intensively designing, revising, implementing, and presenting the results of the project. Each class carries a $5,000 project budget and at the end of the year, in addition to honors elective credits, each student receives a $1,000 stipend. The project budget and stipend funds are drawn from funds raised privately through individual donors, corporations, or foundations.

As in all community-based research, Praxis Labs require students to work with people unlike themselves,\textsuperscript{18} and this includes people who are culturally and socioeconomically diverse as well as students studying other majors. Unlike traditional community-based research, though, specific Praxis projects are identified not by the community partner or the faculty, but by the students.

This is an important distinction of the Praxis Lab model. Faculty and community partners largely relinquish their power to the students. Faculty do not have predefined products in mind and community partners do not task the Lab with specific projects they need to be completed. Instead, students are given the opportunity and the responsibility to define the problem based on the theory and input they’ve received from all stakeholders.

In the best scenarios, students respond purposefully to input from community partners and faculty, but ultimately, the decision about which project to work on lies with the students. This distinction is important because it requires students to take ownership, develop a cohesive problem as a group, and assume the risk associated with creating novel and viable solutions. These skills are not ordinarily practiced in their undergraduate studies.

Furthermore, these are not skills normally practiced by faculty or community partners. To allow students the freedom to decide for themselves, and to potentially “fail” to define and implement a meaningful project, is one of the most difficult tasks for Praxis leaders and partners.

Through Praxis Labs, students become co-creators of new knowledge and have the unique opportunity to connect action to theory. The efficacy of this approach has been documented in the work of Sarah Gallini and Barbara Moely.\textsuperscript{19}

Through academic praxis (application of theoretical concepts to action), students shift from being knowledge receivers to idea creators. Abstract concepts come into relief against the background of situation and context as students consider, apply, test, assess, and reevaluate multiple disciplinary approaches to solving an array of human, mechanical, and environmental challenges.

The experience with Praxis Labs at the University of Utah’s Honors College concurs with Gallini and Moely’s work. Student growth stems directly from
the difficulty of applying abstract concepts to real problems. The value of this process cannot be overstated.

The Student Experience

Students are drawn to Labs largely because of the topics; in fact, 95 percent of students report they chose to participate because the topic appealed to them. In contrast, only 41 percent report the associated stipend influenced their decision, suggesting this model might be successful in programs and institutions without scholarship funds.

Students are drawn from a variety of majors. Over the past ten years, 369 students from seventy-three majors have participated in Praxis Labs, suggesting an average of five majors per Lab. The most popular majors of participating students are Political Science, History, English, Economics, Psychology, Chemistry, and Biology. Students from Communication, Sociology, Business, and Environmental Studies are somewhat common.

Engineering, Ballet and Modern Dance are rare because those students have heavily scripted schedules that leave little room for elective courses. That said, some of the most compelling responses about the impact of Praxis Labs have come from students in dance and engineering because the Lab provided them with a dramatic and important counterpoint to their major.

During September and October when students absorb, discuss, and complicate the material at hand, they are stretched intellectually and emotionally by a diversity of experts, conflicting studies, and diverse opinions. This stretching is key to the ability to learn how to think critically about multiple facets of an issue. As quoted by one student, “I have learned that there are no easy answers and more than likely, no absolutely right ones.”

After this early period, during late November or early December, students often experience a sort of crisis of identity and performance anxiety. The group knows they need to decide which aspect of the issue they will address and that they need to identify a specific project as well as create a plan for who will be responsible for various aspects. This is often a period of considerable ambiguity and is particularly painful for honors students who are so good at reading what professors expect them to do, how to get As, how to succeed, and how to out-perform others.

The ambiguity of the process teaches students a great deal because they are forced to navigate their way through that ambiguity. It is also an intangible outcome of this model that cannot be predetermined. Students struggle with being independent learners and with collaboration, often noting that the hardest part of a Praxis Lab is learning to listen, to not be reactive and to allow themselves and others to change their ideas. Finally, they point to being able to “agree to disagree” as a powerful experience.
The most successful Praxis Labs are ones where students come together, struggle with multiple opinions on how to approach the problem and then develop a strategy for pushing ahead. Students reflect on what they are experiencing, and then finally achieve clarity in terms of focus, intent, design, and purpose.

To facilitate this process, a number of Labs in recent years have begun to incorporate a Feasibility, Impact, Sustainability, and Achievability (FISA) analysis to help students settle on a project. By giving each element of a project a FISA score, students hone their ideas and learn that sometimes, great ideas must be passed over because of time, expertise, or resource constraints. Learning a mechanism for making such decisions is a tool they carry beyond the Praxis Lab.

When asked to reflect on the Praxis Lab experience, students note they learn they cannot rely on powers of memorization or theory, but must do something that matters because there are “real people” involved. Many students comment that the Praxis Lab experience was “life-changing” and that their largest growth area was learning to work in a group.

In a comparison of all honors courses, Praxis Labs scored higher than all other courses, especially when looking at the overall effectiveness of the course and effectiveness of instructors.

The Faculty

The selection of faculty is much like match-making and perhaps the most important decision the dean makes in producing a Lab. Faculty should have advanced knowledge and passion for the subject matter, be willing to behave more like facilitators than traditional lectures, and they should believe in the open-ended enterprise. Faculty develop the core concept, identify essential readings, invite guest speakers, prepare for additional activities (e.g., field trips) and connect with community partners. In many cases, faculty are recruited because of their existing relationship with community partners.

Ideal faculty members are committed to reciprocal-learning—learning that moves in both directions within and outside the classroom and with partners in community situations. They also should be adept at creating environments where reciprocal-learning is valued and respected. Rather than the hierarchical space of a traditional lecture hall, this type of collaborative learning, research, and creative problem-solving is produced around a table, in a circle of chairs, and sometimes on the lawn.

Praxis faculty must model collaborative behavior: how two individuals from different disciplinary backgrounds engage in intellectual discourse, make decisions, and work together toward creative solutions. When there is a power differential between the faculty, one is an established professor
and one is a new adjunct for example, there can be one who leads and one who fades into the background. If this important partnership is out of balance or isn’t working well, it casts a pall over the experience more broadly.

Most faculty who lead Praxis Labs have not worked together before. The best teams have a type of chemistry that bypasses differences, lack of common history, or experience in working as partners. As has been the case for two or three Praxis Labs, sometimes the matches don’t work and the faculty fail to connect with one another, catch the rhythm of the class, the group dynamic, the importance of the collaborative teaching style or the enterprise itself.

Praxis faculty comment that they learn a great deal about themselves as individuals and teachers through the process: when to step forward or when to let the students lead out, how to let the discussions flow, how to help students form the central project question, or how to have the trust to let group dynamics evolve with a natural rhythm rather than being overly directorial and shaping it themselves.

Although the successful marriage that comes about through faculty selection need only last one year, 92 percent of the faculty surveyed reported that teaching the Praxis Lab resulted in long-lasting professional collaborations with co-faculty, which helps to drive interdisciplinary work on campus.

The Community Partners

Community partners are critically important. Partners are chosen because they are engaged in work around the topic and have insights, hopes, and frustrations that are based in the real world. Sometimes partners are chosen early by the dean and/or faculty because of existing relationships, and in this case, they contribute to the overall topic development (e.g., Bridging the Religious Divide, Westside Leadership Institute, New American Communities, Transparency and Privacy in a Digital World, etc.). In other cases, partnerships develop during the course of the fall semester as students hear from experts and multiple community organizations that speak to the issue (e.g., Wasatch Water, Empathetic Patient Experience, Planets and Pedagogy).

Always, partners help students see the distance between theory and application, which is sometimes fraught with obstacles, challenges, and mishaps. They share how they get things done in the context of the community, within a legal framework, or with limited resources, and in the process they make the issues come alive in all their real-world dimensions.

Research on the impact of civic engagement pedagogies suggests “that the primary cognitive task of college is not simple content mastery (the traditional focus of most courses) but, rather, meaningful engagement with
content that facilitates development of complex moral judgments and understanding of self as part of larger social contexts. For the Praxis model to be successful, community partners must agree that the enterprise is largely process-oriented and geared toward student education. They must understand students are smart, passionate, and idealistic, but not likely to have had experience putting ideas into action. Deliverable products are an expectation, but everyone accepts the risk that is inherent with student-run work.

It is incumbent on the dean and faculty to ensure that community partners understand this model. Fortunately, the University of Utah has two solid organizations on and off campus (i.e., Bennion Center and University Neighborhood Partners) with established liaisons to the broader community that have played an important role in helping to connect Praxis Labs to the community.

LEARNING OUTCOMES AND ASSESSMENT

Praxis Labs have measureable and immeasurable outcomes for individual students, faculty and the community. The overall learning goal is for students to experience intellectual growth through interdisciplinary thinking and engagement with complicated, pressing social issues, thereby illuminating and expanding on what they have learned in more traditional courses. This is one of the few times, in an otherwise scripted undergraduate education, in which they practice skills they will need to successfully contribute to future organizations.

Specifically, the Labs are designed to help students: evaluate complicated issues from the perspective of their disciplines, and then examine the same issue from the perspective of other disciplines; understand the complexity of collaborative project development and implementation under a deadline that includes multiple stakeholders; experience the excitement and discomfort associated with risk-taking and uncertainty of success; practice summarizing, writing, and communicating through the production of a well-edited written report; learn the art of presentation and practice speaking to diverse audiences across campus and in the community; build a sense of belonging, responsibility and confidence in their ability to effect change.

The learning outcomes are assessed qualitatively including self-evaluations, personal narratives, faculty evaluations, and a general assessment of project worth by the dean/community, though there is still work to be done to better understand the short- and long-term learning outcomes of this model. A database is being developed to follow student success, career choices, and long-term reflection after graduation.
Figure 3.1 Student self-assessment of learning outcomes. Source: Honors College Praxis Lab Student Survey, October 4, 2013.

Overall Praxis Lab experience was transformational.

Figure 3.2 Student self-assessment of transformational nature of experience. Source: Honors College Praxis Lab Student Survey, October 4, 2013.
The majority of students that the skills they learned were extremely valuable for intellectual and emotional growth as well as marketability after college (figure 3.1) and 73.1 percent report that the experience was transformational (figure 3.2).

**Faculty Impacts**

Praxis Labs have a positive effect on faculty development; 92 percent of the faculty report that leading a Praxis Lab was a highly rewarding experience. When asked to elaborate on the positive nature of the experience, faculty say that they benefited because the increased student autonomy in Labs resulted in more engaged students. They also valued the close, extended collaboration with students and said that it was inspirational to see student growth through the course.

They also learn about themselves as professionals as expressed by Dr. Kevin Perry who co-led a Praxis Lab on Air Quality, Health, and Society:

> The class had a profound impact on me as an instructor. Prior to the class my research focused on societally relevant air quality issues. I conducted the research, compiled the results, presented my findings to the funding or regulatory agency and let them figure out what to do with the information. I have learned that it is possible to simultaneously advocate for improved air quality without jeopardizing my scientific reputation and my academic career. For me, that was a very unexpected result of participating in the Praxis Lab.

Many Praxis faculty members experience this kind of transformation as professionals, and make new connections between their professional and personal lives, an outcome that Dewey, Arendt, and Freire would surely endorse.

Praxis Labs also offer faculty a space in which they can experiment with new pedagogies that can later be taken back their regular teaching assignments. Seventy-six percent reported that Praxis Labs “allow me to try new pedagogical techniques that I can use in my regular teaching/professional work.” In this way, the Honors College functions not only to educate students, but as an important laboratory for university faculty where they can try new teaching pedagogies, explore new collaborations, and work in an interdisciplinary space.

**Products and Outcomes**

Outcomes over the past ten years can be organized into three broad categories, those that positively influence power disparities, those that positively impact underserved populations, and those that positively influence campus (table 3.1).
Examples of Praxis Labs that have taken on sociopolitical power structures include: Transparency and Privacy in the Digital Age, Immigration, Wallace Stegner and Western Lands, and Air Quality, Health and Society. In Transparency and Privacy in the Digital Age, students entered the national conversation about transparency around WikiLeaks by researching transparency in Utah’s cities and counties. They drafted a “best practices” manifesto for transparency in local governments and presented these at a student organized press conference. Later that year, their recommendations were formally adopted by Salt Lake City Corporation.

In Wallace Stegner and Western Lands, students created a report on Canyonlands National Park and published their work in the *Journal of the Hinckley Institute*. The report was used five years later as key supporting documentation for a proposed bill to enlarge the park. State senators invited students still in town to participate in the press conference announcing the proposed bill at the state capitol.

Students in Immigration wrote a primer on Utah’s immigration history, including information on legislation, data on the economic impacts of immigrants, personal narratives and diversity of community agencies working around this issue. More than two thousand copies were circulated to teachers, counselors, principals, state legislators, and community groups. Seven years later, the resource guide continues to be used locally in discussions of immigration.

Many Praxis Labs have focused on work that influences or positively impacts underserved populations (table 3.1). For example, students in the Pedagogy and Planets worked with scientists, teachers and a Title I school to design a sixth grade curriculum that uses astronomy to teach science. At the end of the Lab, a local foundation agreed to fund an ongoing honors course to teach the curriculum and the course has been offered every fall with optional paid internships for students in the spring. As the principal of the school attests, both honors students and the Title I school continue to benefit from the relationship:

Rose Park had the most growth in science literacy of any Title I elementary school in the district. . . . I believe that our success was in large part to our partnership with the Honors College.25

Clearly, the impact of one Praxis Lab can, with the right partners and funding, have ongoing, compounded effects on local partners.

One Praxis Lab, The Patient Experience, used design thinking to create a student-run program to improve the well-being of underserved community members by connecting them to, and helping them utilize, existing resources. The program resulted in the creation of a highly successful nonprofit (Connect2Health), which brings university students to work at health clinics that serve uninsured, often homeless, patients. With further charitable
donations, Connect2Health has been expanded to three additional clinics, serving over a thousand patients with forty-five student volunteers and in 2015 secured AmeriCorps support.

Finally, Praxis Labs go beyond positively impacting campus and create new sustainable programs. Eight Praxis Labs have resulted in new curricula, thereby broadening the scope and benefit of the work to subsequent cohorts. Other Labs have resulted in changes in policy, campus climate or new working groups (e.g., Energy and Sustainability, Wasatch Water and the American Dream, Community and Change, Global Health). Finally, Labs have taken on themes that are socially relevant (e.g., Queer Identity), providing learning spaces that help to define the college as an inclusive and socially progressive space.

Successes and Challenges

There are Praxis Labs that were inspired, transformative and resulted in tangible and intangible results, and there have been Praxis Labs that failed. Praxis Labs didn’t work when one of the co-instructors could not adjust to the nonhierarchical, collaborative, community-based teaching and learning style. Other times, faculty failed to help students focus, tie down an idea and clearly articulate goals early enough in the second semester to leave time for development and implementation. Sometimes students have taken on individual projects rather than a single group project, thereby failing to work as a collaborative team.

There is a sort of magic in a successful Praxis Lab that is difficult to quantify. A perfectly chosen topic helps, but the faculty selected to lead the group are also key, as are the community partners.

Ultimately, a successful Praxis Lab is grounded in trust. Students must trust the faculty to guide them through unfamiliar territory—learning to trust their instincts, abilities, and creative ideas. Community partners must trust students and faculty to hear the way they experience the world and its problems. Faculty must trust one another and be comfortable with student anxiety around ambiguity so that they do not step in and dictate solutions. They must also trust students and their untested abilities to muddle through to thoughtful, active solutions.

Funding Barriers

There are significant obstacles to interdisciplinary work that play out in the Praxis Lab. The first is the funding model. Praxis Labs typically have two instructors rather than one, a project budget, student stipends, and are capped at twelve students. All of these are critical elements that enrich the classroom experience, lend a sort of freedom or experimental quality to the class,
encourage students to take risks, and make it possible for students to opt to participate in a Praxis Lab rather than something else.

Faculty salaries can usually be covered by the base budget, but the rest of the funds come from development activity. Working to fund Praxis Labs with endowment funds is a long-term goal, but in the interim and for the past ten years, community partners—foundations, individual donors and in some cases, companies—have funded this important civic engagement activity.

Praxis Labs also take personnel time and are often started one or two years before the Lab. The dean or director must have the time to research faculty, spend time in the match-making phase, clearly explain the model and then set expectations adequately. He or she must be well connected on campus and in the community, able to choose a topic that is timely, and able to motivate others. In a typical year, the honors dean spends four to five hours a week connecting with the constituent groups in current Labs, discussing future topics with faculty, students and community members, and raising funds.

Student Barriers

A second challenge is integrating this curriculum with other university requirements. Honors students tend to be practical and focused on graduation and don’t always see the value of elective credit. Furthermore, students don’t naturally embrace the value of risk and ambiguity and must be mentored on how to negotiate their performance anxiety in this context. They don’t intuitively know that communication, reasoning, empathy, tolerance, non-routine problem-solving, creative thinking, and collaboration, as well as how to optimize project development and implementation, are skills that must be practiced again and again before one becomes proficient.

Another ongoing issue is one about pacing, life balance, and time management. Praxis Labs have been described as “greedy beasts.” Students and faculty become so engrossed in the work, in the relationships, the power of the collaboration and community that they would prefer to do it only and perhaps neglect everything else. Again, these difficulties can become incredibly powerful learning moments that generate reflection, planning, and group interaction that will impact the way students engage in meaningful work in the future.

TRANSFERABILITY OF MODEL AND FUTURE OF HONORS EDUCATION

Students need both the foundations of a liberal arts education and a space where they can engage the big issues of their times—energy, the environment, health care, social change, globalization—in ways that teach them practical skills and intangible life-lessons in empathy and civic engagement.
As John Seely Brown states, “It’s never enough to just tell people about some new insight. Rather, you have to get them to experience it in a way that evokes its power and possibility. Instead of pouring knowledge into people’s head, you need to help them grind a new set of eyeglasses so they can see the world in a new way.”

For students, community partners and faculty alike, the Praxis Lab creates an environment where risk-taking is valued and integral, where student work has a real-world application, and where the university is responsive and connected to the community.

Praxis Labs should be transferable to other research-based institutions or liberal arts colleges with access to a nearby, noncollege community. The Labs could work at two-year honors programs at research universities or community colleges as a capstone experience to be taken in year two, although in our experience having students of different ages/years is an asset.

Another model might be to connect a Praxis Lab at a four-year institution with a seminar at a two-year college. During Middle Class on the Ropes, a faculty member at Salt Lake Community College participated in early discussions about the Lab and then created writing assignments in her own seminar around this topic. This is a connection that could be built upon in future years and could be highly fruitful for students and faculty at both institutions.

Educators must find ways to embrace the ambiguity inherent in the Praxis Lab model in education because regardless of topic, faculty, or particular student population, these experiences mirror the real world where individuals are asked to be nimble, flexible, and resourceful to creatively address common contemporary issues.

In his book, Civic Provocations, David Scobey writes about the evolving nature of higher education in the twenty-first century with regard to the types of degrees and disciplines, the organizational structures of university, and funding models. As he says, “The question is not whether the academy will be changed, but how.”

A half a century ago, in 1947, Martin Luther King articulated his vision for higher education by focusing on the changed mind that should result:

Education must also train one for quick, resolute and effective thinking. To think incisively and to think for one's self is very difficult. We are prone to let our mental life become invaded by legions of half truths, prejudices, and propaganda. Education must enable one to sift and weigh evidence, to discern the true from the false, the real from the unreal, and the facts from the fiction. The function of education, therefore, is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically.

Despite the changing world stage that students confront in the twenty-first century, the core mission of higher education is still to provide the intellectual
and pedagogical context for the “changed mind,” a mind with fine-tuned critical reading, writing, and communication skills, with a developed social conscience, the ethical and moral tools for informed citizenship, and a preparation for empathetic involvement as members of communities and the global environment.

A great power in the Praxis Lab model is in the intimacy of the relationships—between peers, between students and faculty, and those individuals with the community. Theory is not only put into action, praxis in the truest sense, but it is made personal. This personal aspect is extremely important in an era marked by an increased dependency on technology, the increased distance of “virtual” social space, and the breakneck speed with which information is shared. Developing common currency in skills at creative problem-solving, effective collaboration, and the ability to form relationships with persons who are different from oneself, are of new importance.

Praxis Labs assume honors students will become effective, empathetic, and creative contributors to their communities. In addition to the hard skills mentioned above, students will see the way theory and action can help them address the most pressing issues of their times, both those that stem from the collective environments they have inherited as well as those they will experience through their own creation.

This well-structured, but open-ended community-based honors curriculum, provides students with the skills and confidence that they can individually and collectively, in small but significant ways, have an impact on the world in which they live. Thus, Honors Praxis Labs bring us closer to the ideal of an integrated undergraduate education so critical to the citizenry of the twenty-first century.

KEY IDEAS IN THIS CHAPTER

- Higher education, and honors colleges in particular, need to devote greater focus to the practical skills and sense of personal responsibility that their students gain as a result of their educational experience.
- Praxis Labs are an innovative and experiential pedagogy where students, faculty, and community partners share ownership over the questions engaged in the class and move from “theory to practice” as they consider and attempt to positively impact concrete, real-world problems.
- Such efforts involve challenges and are not for every student, faculty member, or community partner but the experience of Praxis Labs at the University of Utah suggests numerous positive outcomes that can be reaped when such innovations are approached systematically and intentionally.
NOTES


3. University of Utah President David Pershing, inauguration address, October 2012.


6. Ibid.


16. Strand et al., Community-Based Research, p. 123, 134.


20. Participant in Wallace Stegner and Western Lands.


22. Participant in Revitalizing Downtown.

23. Participant in Community and Change.


