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Community-Engaged Humanities

Summary

I teach community-engagement courses in the Honors College at George Mason University. In these courses, students learn about the Digital Divide and participate in a number of public-facing community engagement projects in order to explore how they might employ volunteer, activist, and advocacy approaches to addressing this issue. One of the goals of the course is to explore how academic study and practice come together not only through the students' work but also by bringing together academics, nonprofit organizers, and industry leaders who do work in this space to see what the next generation is working on and to communicate with each other about the work. Students in these classes complete three major projects. First, they volunteer with at least one nonprofit organization focused on some aspect of the digital divide (e.g. Black Girls Code, Computer Core, Fairfax Senior Center). Second, they develop and launch an on-campus campaign for Digital Inclusion Week in which they seek to raise awareness and funds to benefit the National Digital Inclusion Alliance. Finally, they develop a solution and prototype to a problem facing a specific community affected by the digital divide. They then pitch this solution and prototype to invited guests from academia, industry, and nonprofit organizations.

Challenges

We face a variety of challenges doing this work—some specific to the period of the Covid-19 pandemic—and some that are part of doing community-engaged work in the academic context. During the pandemic, the students were not able to volunteer even virtually because the organizations were so stressed trying to find ways to deliver their services in this new environment. This limited the students' understanding of how affected communities are impacted by the digital divide and of course our ability to do public-facing work. They attempted to complete the campaign virtually, for example, but it was much more limited than what could be accomplished in-person. Even in normal times, it can be hard on my students to work with nonprofit organizations because of how busy the organizers are and how high the turnover rate is. This is both hard on the students and on myself in terms of maintaining relationships with these organizations. In many cases, they aren't used to working with student populations in a class context which is unique because of the limited window of time the students are required to volunteer and can have major scheduling challenges that are not as prominent in more "typical" volunteers. The students also face the challenge of interacting with strangers through their volunteering and on campus—these can be incredibly rewarding experiences, of course, but they also have the potential to be challenging for them. In a typical class, students only interact with me and one another, but in this class, they are expected to interact with a wide variety of people over the course of the entire semester. It can be a lot. I personally struggle with courses as demanding as these because of my teaching load (4:4:2). I wish my institution would demonstrate its support of this kind of work by offering course releases for those of us who choose to teach these kinds of classes.

The above outline some of the practical challenges of doing this kind of work in an academic context. The more abstract challenge that I can see is the rather significant disconnect between academia and industry on tackling the various aspects of the digital divide. I have contacts in the tech industry who are ostensibly working on this issue, but lack a lot of the essential research on the current state of the issue and/or the perspectives of academics working on this topic who could offer them valuable, alternative ways of thinking about it. Academics who work on the digital divide appear more aware of what various industrial actors are doing to address the digital divide (in terms of developing tech to address it), but they are often writing and presenting in an echo chamber that doesn't reach those who could most benefit from hearing this information.

A few questions for the group:

What are some of the barriers existing between academics and nonprofit/industry leaders working on the digital divide? How might we overcome them? What are some ways academia can better support public-facing humanities projects? How might industry better support public-facing humanities work? How can academics who wish to do public-facing humanities support one another?