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# Community Service-Learning Translations in a Legal Spanish Course

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There is growing interest in including service-learning courses in higher education, and abundant literature exists on this subject. Less researched is binomial service learning, specifically related to civic learning and legal translation. Studies on the goals of combining foreign language instruction with civic participation in the Hispanic community through translation have revealed very positive outcomes. This paper presents two different community-related translation activities in a Spanish course for specific purposes (specifically, Legal Spanish), and the corresponding students' reflections. One is related to El Salvador and to asylum and refugee claims in the US, while the other is linked to a Health Center in Trenton, NJ. The conclusion summarizes the results and evaluates their significance in the context of community-learning service and their success in bringing students closer to a reality that is far beyond their context, while critically thinking about justice-related issues.

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## INTRODUCTION

During the last two decades, the presence of service-learning initiatives has been increasing in K–12 programs as well as in colleges, and yet scholars observe that “the project of internationalizing the curriculum and its relationship to engaged learning is just beginning to be addressed” (Hartfield-Méndez, 2013, p. 356). According to the National Service-Learning Clearinghouse, “service learning” means “a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility and strengthen communities.”<sup>1</sup> Initial community-engaged projects that reflect multiculturalism in language departments are thriving. The idea behind this initiative is that students who engage in international community-learning activities acquire a broader worldview. The more perspectives students engage with, the more accurate their perceptions of the world and the greater their sense of social responsibility.

Expanding students' view of the world is one of the goals of Princeton University, which devotes great effort to service and civic engagement, to the point that its informal motto is “Princeton in the nation's service and the service of humanity.” To this end, numerous successful community activities have been developed. One of the curricular programs, called Community-Based Learning Initiative, helped me make these projects a reality and connect students' academic work with their interest in and concern for local, regional, national, and

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<sup>1</sup> Corporation for National and Community Service, Learn and Serve America, National Service-Learning Clearinghouse, *What is Service Learning?* [www.servicelearning.org/what-service-learning](http://www.servicelearning.org/what-service-learning). In Ryan, M. (June 2012), *Service-learning after Learn and serve America: How five states are moving forward* (pp. 3-4). Denver, CO: Education Commission of the States.

international communities.<sup>2</sup> Based on the assumption that community-based services are ultimately a positive experience for both students and those being served, the question that this paper examines is whether translations, in particular, are an efficient tool for meeting service-learning goals in a legal language course. On two different occasions, two completely different translation projects were included in this course as community-engaged assignments. This article aims to describe both projects and reflect on the achieved outcomes.

Participating in multilingual communities at home and around the world and learning about and understanding other cultures are two of the five goal areas set forth by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) in the *World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages* (2015). “To this end, service-learning seems to expand the classroom by fostering cross-cultural links in one’s community” (Caldwell, 2007, p. 464) and enhance a sense of civic responsibility (Hollander & Saltmarsh, 2000, p. 30). Since the release of the ACTFL national standards in 1996, several studies have been published on how to encourage service learning in Spanish courses or on specific projects and their ramifications (Barreneche, 2011; Caldwell, 2007; Hartfield-Méndez, 2013; Hellebrandt, Arries, Varona, & Klein, 2003; Hellebrandt & Varona, 1999; Lear & Abbott, 2009; Long, 2003; Plann, 2002).<sup>3</sup> With service learning, educators witness the benefits to students as well as to their own institutions in the form of improvement in students’ writing skills (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee 2000), cognitive skills, and academic motivation (Bringle, Phillips, & Hudson, 2004). Moreover, service learning has been shown to raise student academic performance in class (Fredericksen, 2000) while at the same time having a positive effect on faculty members who use it as a teaching tool (Pribbenow, 2005). Other results include students’ assuming greater civic responsibility and pursuing a career in a service field (Astin et al., 2000); developing enhanced cultural sensitivity, self-confidence, motivation, and critical thinking; and increasing proficiency in the target language (Caldwell, 2007).

The projects described in this article linked the topics that students were learning about (human rights, justice, immigration, civil and criminal law) through community service, which was certainly an enriching experience and enhanced their sense of responsibility. Learning how people live in other countries just beyond the borders of their own or learning about immigrants living in the United States, motivated my students to carry out these projects and also to contribute to and participate in future initiatives.

## SERVICE LEARNING AND TRANSLATIONS

Taking into account that some of the basic principles of service-learning project designs are reciprocity, civic engagement, respect for diversity, global awareness, and improvement of communication skills, translation is a perfect fit for a community service activity, especially when considering the meaning of translation. Translation can be understood as the field, the product, and the process of transferring the content of a source text to the target language (Munday, 2012). In the sense of process, translation is not just a linguistic activity but also a cross-cultural communication act. Translation is not just a mere single pursuit (Bellos, 2011),

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<sup>2</sup> I would like to express my gratitude to this program at Princeton University for offering me the opportunity to carry out these projects.

<sup>3</sup> In 1991, Gross and Vought analyzed the LSP courses at the time and determined that one of the areas that received the least coverage was the integration of language and culture. They argued that “to be effective the study of LSP cannot be separated from the study of the culture and society in which the language is spoken” (p. 183).

a substitution of words with similar meanings in other languages: It also includes an effort to understand the background behind the source text. As Bugel (2013) has argued, “contextualizing and meaningful interaction are essential components of the link between translation practice and service-learning” (p. 371).

However, there is limited literature on how to combine translation and service learning. Lizardi-Rivera (1999) describes the use of community service translation projects as “empowerment tools for the community itself to pursue a plan of action in collaboration with the university” (p. 117). In fact, there is not only a limited research literature but also little in the way of guidelines for instructors. As Ebacher (2013) points out, faculty in higher education are receiving more pressure to design service-learning courses, but unfortunately, they lack training in the preparation, management and assessment of such courses.

We do find a few descriptions of different courses with community-based translation activities. For instance, Faszler-McMahon (2013) presents a small-scale case study of a translation course in a region that is not densely populated by Spanish speakers. Little research has been conducted on service learning in rural areas, however. Faszler-McMahon (2013) finds that service learning through online collaborations can be “linguistically effective and motivationally compelling for language learners” (p. 253). This case study reveals that community service does not need to have on-site collaboration and establish personal relationships in order to be successful, as has been maintained by Lizardi-Rivera (1999). Global service learning can also be done through online activities, which create new opportunities. The projects that are described below are based on online collaborations, and the results are very encouraging for future assignments.

In all courses involving translations for the community, we find one key commonality: the attempt to connect. Bugel (2013) describes the results of a course that was similar to the one discussed here and reveals how much translation and service learning complement each other and engage the parties involved. Service-learning projects are not simple acts of altruism only benefiting those served. Instead, these projects are based on reciprocity where both students and community mutually benefit from the service. A basis of mutual trust and genuine interest is the starting point for any productive community-engaged relationship.

However, it is true that community organizations sometimes either underestimate students’ cultural knowledge or overestimate their translation skills because of their high level of Spanish proficiency (Lear & Abbott, 2009). Some organizations are ready to accept translations from nonprofessionals due to “the cost, inability to judge the quality of the product, immediate and pressing need or the absence of a local and qualified translator” (Lear & Abbott, 2009, p. 317). Instructors thus have a key role as intermediaries. Students are not born translators even if they are bilingual. They require training in basic translation skills and in the context of the subject matter. At the same time, community organizations should connect with students and explain why they need a translation and how broad the impact will be. There must be mutual trust and no misunderstanding of what each party brings to the table; otherwise, the planned activities can completely fail to achieve their purpose. Hence, the authors of many studies insist on the importance of collecting feedback during the course and assessing the community impact (e.g., Lear & Abbott, 2009, p. 322), to reinforce and absorb what students learn (Munday, 2012) and to avoid a miscalculation of the parties’ interests.

Consequently, in order for courses with such community-based activities to have an impact on students’ education, they “require careful planning to ensure a close connection between academic content and community service” (Plann, 2002, p. 337). To this end, it is key to have correct alignment among the instructional content and strategies, learning objectives, and evaluation (Lear & Abbot, 2009). The legal course, in which the below-described projects were

included, exposed students to a wide range of vocabulary from legal, rights, and justice domains and featured civil, immigration, and criminal law cases. They learned how to use specific tools for translation purposes and particular legal phrasings in Spanish. This preparation was fundamental for the satisfactory outcome of the translations. Another important part of achieving the learning objectives was evaluation by the teacher and students themselves when they reflected on what they learned from their own experience. As Jorge (2011) points out “reflection is an integral part of the teaching/learning process, it allows us to create knowledge, to develop meaning, to give depth to an experience, and to connect our thinking to broader bodies of knowledge” (p. 47). To this end, a section is included below with students’ reflections. The teacher’s assessment was also key in the process because only with continuous feedback could I monitor the project and evaluate the group dynamics and work progress.

## STUDY AND RESEARCH METHOD

Both projects described in this paper were translations included in a syllabus for a legal and business Spanish course taught at Princeton University. The course is for students who have at least an intermediate-high or advanced-low level of Spanish (students are required to have attended at least three semesters of Spanish at the university or have a similar level). The course is offered every year, and usually there is a different service-learning activity each year. Both projects were developed in different years and were part of the legal section. The course is conceived around a notional-functional syllabus. That is, it is not organized in terms of grammatical structure but rather contexts specific to the legal field. The goal is to bring students closer to real-life contexts and issues through reading texts and debating in class. The two groups I taught for these two projects were relatively small, with eight students in one and seven in the other. The first class was composed of two juniors, four sophomores and two freshmen. The second class was composed of four seniors and three freshmen. The course was not a requirement for any of the students. All of them were majoring in a variety of fields ranging from anthropology to civil environmental engineering.

I used different means to assess the students’ work. I asked the students to deliver a “work in progress” of their project before the due date, which was considered part of the participation grade. It was particularly useful to appraise the group dynamics while students did peer review or when they worked in class. Part of their participation grade was each student’s contribution to class discussion, involvement during the interview, and a class presentation. I used a rubric for the in-class interview in the first project, and another rubric for final written assignments to evaluate the translation. The overall percentage of these translation projects was five percent of the final grade. The percentage was low because students had many other oral and written assignments and two exams to fulfill all course requirements (for both the legal and the business sections), and because the project was not considered the main purpose of the course but rather an extra activity. However, both projects were more rewarding for the students than many other assignments.

### First Project: Asylum Seekers from Central America

This activity provided four learning objectives:

- (1) acquiring specialized vocabulary on the topic

- (2) familiarizing students with a culture (Central America), a particular society (El Salvador), and a precise conflict (children crossing the border into the United States)
- (3) learning about the process of seeking asylum in the United States through immigration attorneys, the main goal of which was to obtain the maximum information about how to gather enough evidence to demonstrate persecution due to membership in a particular social group and therefore successfully prove the need for asylum
- (4) initiating students into legal translation tools to attain basic skills in this activity.

(1) First, I prepared my students with enough vocabulary about immigration so that they could understand a text in Spanish about this topic. We did various activities in the classroom (crosswords, acronyms, and abbreviations in international law; practice in how to read graphs and statistical tables, etc.) as well as some readings. We further discussed the current problem at that time regarding children who crossed into the United States without any adult supervision during the summer of 2014 (about 70,000, a 77 percent increase over the previous year). Students also learned about the difference between refugees and asylum seekers, and the translation of these terms into Spanish. Students brought into our discussions what they knew about the matter through personal experience, books, lectures, or movies such as *La Bestia*.

(2) I gave the students precise information about a human rights organization, Cristosal, that operates in El Salvador to help victims of violence. More specifically, it works with people from Central America who are victims of violence seeking asylum in the United States but whose applications are often denied. Cristosal's program is an innovative human rights-based approach to community development in search of a peaceful environment. They have a team of lawyers and community organizers who collaborate with local leaders and ordinary citizens to prosecute war crimes and provide humanitarian, psychological, and legal assistance to victims of human rights violations. The program also monitors victims who are forcibly displaced by organized crime in El Salvador.

The service-learning assignment was in cooperation with Cristosal. The plan was ambitious for students who were not in law school and whose level of Spanish ranged from intermediate to advanced. Their first task was to develop questions for the executive director of Cristosal based on the information they had and the vocabulary they were provided. He was invited to our classroom and presented the objectives of the human rights organization, but more importantly he explained the conflict situation in El Salvador, one of the most dangerous countries in the world. According to the 2018 *Global Report on Internal Displacement (GRID)*,<sup>4</sup> El Salvador had 296,000 new displacements caused by conflict in 2017 and about 200,000 in 2014. Students learned about a culture they were not familiar with and about a society that faces violence every day. Most importantly, they were also informed about the legal connection with the United States. They learned about the denials of asylum by American judges that lead to uncertainty, helplessness, and the deportation of victims. They realized that a victim can have a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of membership in a particular social group or for political opinions, but that this fear has to be extremely well supported for a victim to claim it successfully before US courts. Students engaged in lengthy discussion with the executive director entirely in Spanish.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://internal-displacement.org/countries/el-salvador/>

(3) The next step consisted of gathering information for Cristosal. Students had to contact three attorneys specializing in asylum cases from Central America. Cristosal provided the students with contact information and some specific questions for them to ask, including the following:

1. What have been successful approaches for arguing for asylum for Salvadorans/Central Americans escaping violence in their home country?
2. Which nexus requirement was used to argue the case, and what evidence or language was presented in support of that nexus requirement?
3. What were key pieces of evidence presented?
4. How does the way in which asylum seekers present themselves to authorities affect their case? For example, how does the process differ for individuals who present themselves to authorities at the border, versus those who are detained, versus those who are detained after spending a period of time illegally in the United States?
5. What other forms of relief might these asylum seekers apply for?

The class was divided into three groups. Each group had to interview one attorney via Skype or on the telephone. The interview had to be in English so that students could better comprehend all the information and not omit any important details. Students could come up with other questions or comments related to the issue of how best to document a case for a US court to grant asylum. Multiple factors are taken into account in every case, and asylum seekers have the burden of proving their past persecution or explaining their fear of future persecution. Students had to collect this information and write an interview summary in English. The detailed conversations were presented orally in class in a summarized Spanish version. Students talked about the helpful documentation and reasoning given by the attorneys and offered their opinions about the issue. The attorneys talked about emotionally intense cases in El Salvador, and the students were quite moved. Moreover, they learned about the specific contexts that victims escaped from and the high probability of being removed from the United States if the evidence provided was not deemed sufficient for attaining asylum status.

(4) The final step of this project was the translation by the students of the attorneys' interviews in English into Spanish. Feedback was provided on one translation draft through peer review and instructor review. One of the groups was in charge of helping the other two with the translation. Their final draft was reviewed at the end of the course. I edited the version that was sent to Cristosal's Human Rights Office, which used the document to assist and advise families. Most asylum seekers were fleeing situations of violence perpetrated by organized crime and even members of the national police. In 2013, the year before this project, 150 individuals had sought information from this organization on available options to leave the country and about the US asylum process.

(5) Last, students wrote final reflections to think critically about what they had learned through this service-learning experience. In general, they provided very positive comments about this project. Students loved that they had a real sense of helping in an actual legal matter, and their self-confidence was reinforced by their acquisition of new legal Spanish vocabulary.

Although we had planned everything in advance, when we began the project, we lacked the interview dates, and lawyers took a long time to reply. This scheduling problem, which is

usually a challenge in community-based activities, caused our calendar to constantly change and created some uncertainty among the students. One of the attorneys could not take part in the project at the last minute, so one group could not conduct the interview. In response, I divided that group so that students had a chance to participate by helping translate the interviews of the other two groups. Translations were quite long (about four pages), and the vocabulary and syntax were fairly complex. Students did not have sufficient time to revise the translations because the interviews took place late in the semester. Despite all of these practical issues, however, the results were astonishing. Students made active use of the material we had covered throughout the course, including vocabulary and complex grammatical structures.

## **Second project: Henry J. Austin Health Center**

Some years later, in the same legal Spanish course, students had the opportunity to participate in a translation for a health center. This was also a one-time activity, which was much simpler than the previous one, with the following learning objectives:

- (1) using very specialized vocabulary
- (2) familiarizing students with a recurring social issue (people living in the United States without any medical insurance) and the socioeconomic problems of Trenton
- (3) initiating the students into legal translation tools to attain basic skills in this profession

(1) Students were assigned to read texts about immigration issues, such as one by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), that discuss immigrant rights. The Spanish version was a highly-advanced text with lots of new words and expressions that we worked on in class. As stated above, the words that students learn in this course always appear within an expression or within a context that facilitates its comprehension and memorization. Once we worked on the vocabulary with exercises, we discussed the issue in class so that most areas related to immigration were considered.

(2) I provided the students with some background information on the Henry J. Austin Health Center, Inc. (HJAHC). Established in 1969, its mission is to provide community-based, affordable, and accessible primary health-care services. Dr. Henry J. Austin was an African-American who went to Trenton to practice medicine because he was prohibited from doing so in his hometown by Jim Crow laws. Nowadays, HJAHC serves mostly uninsured or medically underserved populations and is the largest nonhospital-based ambulatory care provider in the city (treating approximately 19,000 individuals annually).

(3) All patients who receive health care (or their guardians, if they are minors) must read and sign a document about patient rights and responsibilities, which the students were assigned to translate. HJAHC recognizes that many members of the Spanish-speaking population in Trenton who need primary care are not able to read and understand English. The Center had an English document and a machine-translated version in Spanish that could lead to misunderstandings. HJAHC needed a good translation to provide the necessary information to patients who do not know English well enough to comprehend it. That was a perfect source text for my students to work with.



In order to avoid the problems of time that I had had with the previous activity, due to circumstances beyond my control, I delivered all of the information mentioned above in the first weeks of the course, together with the source text. This led me to change the structure of my syllabus because I had to work on vocabulary related to immigration, rights, and duties before the time when that work was originally planned. Consequently, I managed to allocate more time to the translation sessions in the classroom in this second assignment, leading to a more fulfilling result.

I divided the source text into three parts and assigned each part to one group. At least once a week, I had the students work on the translation during the last minutes in class. This allowed me to give them feedback and evaluate team dynamics as well as strengths and weaknesses of each group. I realized the importance of guiding the students in a translation activity that deals with highly specialized vocabulary so as to avoid the temptation of basic online translations. I provided the students with vocabulary, grammatical structures, expressions, false friends, common mistakes, and tips for translating (such as use of specialized dictionaries).

Students were asked to give some thought to the project. We discussed in class the importance of these sorts of projects in the community, and they also wrote some reflections. The final translation was included in the Patient Handbook, available online in both English and Spanish. The fact that students could see their work being used was indeed rewarding.

## REFLECTIONS

Students found the experience of helping nonprofit organizations very positive and were happy to engage in such activities. They learned about a region that is not often an object of study and learned to approach immigration issues through real cases. As one student said about the first project, “I felt empathy for those who were helpless and who had to pass difficult obstacles to enter the US and feel secure. It also gave me a dismal view of the El Salvador government and its ability to protect its citizens.” Another student said that any time she helped as a volunteer at the Elizabeth Detention Center, she decided to talk to someone from El Salvador because she was familiar with the context and could more accurately compare their situations to those of other immigrants. She was happy to be able to use much of the vocabulary learned in class.

Apart from better understanding the context where immigrants came from, students were able to deepen their knowledge about the legal system in their own country. As one student noted, “I enjoyed the fact that the representatives were able to give us specific information about the legal system of the US and give us a more informed perspective on the immigration issue.” Another said, “I learned about how different non-profits operate and the role different individuals can take in the legal system in general.” Students also came to understand how attorneys work: “I learned how firms split up legal work and tackle immigration cases from the talk with Cristosal. I also learned how lawyers want to present cases, in particular how they exclude certain information if it will not benefit their client.” Such comments are particularly interesting given that these students were not in law school but in other disciplines.

In the second project, students worked with a health center for people with no medical insurance. In that class, half of the students were of Hispanic origin (in fact, four out of seven), and knew about the problem in Trenton, but not about this unique health center that they found particularly interesting.

As a teacher, one of my concerns was the difficulty of the vocabulary in the source texts. The overwhelming legal jargon could have caused my students to back out. However, as one

student said, “The translation was not at all a big challenge. It was all very straightforward because we learned so much of the vocabulary in the class.” Another student in reference to the first project said, “Personally, it was not too difficult, but I did have to look up various terms. I definitely felt that a lot of the vocabulary we learned in class was applicable to the translation project. When we received the text, it was a bit of a shock to see the language and syntax they used, but after a while I was comfortable with it.”

Another concern, which affected the first project, was the time constraints related to attorneys’ schedules and the complexity of the project. As one student put it, “If the project spanned the entire semester, I would like that better because I enjoyed the experience and it was a great way to master our vocabulary!”

In contrast to the first class, the second project gave students more time to work on the translation and therefore gave them a sense of having greater control. Or, as another student said in the second course, “None of the assignments were overwhelming, which was a good thing. They were paced nicely and easy to comprehend.” Moreover, students liked the continuous feedback they received while translating the text. I could only provide this in the second project and that made a major difference. It is important for them to feel reassured that they are going in the right direction as seen in this remark: “Very good guidance was given for all activities and the comments were very helpful.” In translations from a source text (English) into a second language that is highly specialized such support is essential. Students learn not only translation skills but also how to master the language at a highly-advanced level. Gathering extracts of their translations, projecting them on screen, and commenting on the anonymous mistakes made by the students was another helpful way for them to learn, repeat, and assimilate the new vocabulary and structures learned in the course. Words in a special purpose course need to be learned within a specific context and cannot be learned in isolation, and that contextualization is particularly effective when it is done in the framework of a service-learning project.

In sum, students completed complex translations while maintaining high levels of motivation. As one student commented, “I also enjoyed doing it because it felt like I was doing concrete work.” This concrete work helps them feel valuable in their community. It is this link between service learning and the content of the course that is so rewarding. Most importantly, as summarized by one student, “I liked the Cristosal project because it made what we were learning in class seem more relevant to our daily lives and it made our study of the language very relevant.”

## CONCLUSIONS

The two service-learning translation projects described here were quite gratifying for the students for multiple reasons. Their starting point was the assumption that they would learn legal Spanish or mainly a list of the most commonly used terms in the legal profession. However, the course, and particularly the community-based learning assignments, gave students a chance to go far beyond that. They had to interact with authentic texts for a nonprofit organization that needed a translation. This provided the students with a sense of responsibility, motivation, and self-confidence in a highly-specialized register of Spanish. While they realized that they might get a potential benefit from their bilingualism, they also comprehended that it is not easy to be a translator of a specialized language and that it requires specialized professional training (Bugel, 2013, p. 379). They did receive training as translators, particularly in the second task, since they were given online resources, dictionaries, specialized

books, tips for editing, and continuous feedback on common mistakes. Their ultimate conclusion was that translating is easier when it involves teamwork. For this reason, I assigned them to work in groups and had peer-review sessions because this helped them learn from each other. Working collaboratively was also key for them to get to know each other better, to create a certain relaxed working atmosphere, and to speak in Spanish among themselves.

The role of the instructor is not a minor one in these undertakings. Apart from dealing with difficulties in scheduling, time constraints, evaluations, and so forth, the instructor has to work as a facilitator, an editor of the final translation (Ebacher, 2013, p. 406), and a liaison (Caldwell, 2007, p. 468) who seeks to maintain an open dialogue with the students and the organization that will receive the end product. The instructor has the role of intermediary and “must use guided reflection to align expectations and gauge cultural misinterpretations” (Lear & Abbot, 2009, pp. 320–322). The success of these service-learning experiences lies in the instructor’s ability to transmit cultural, social, and linguistic knowledge through the translation of a source text in English into Spanish.

Service learning and translations are a good combination in a language for special purposes course because they offer an excellent way to connect course content with contextualized language. Service learning provides meaningful contexts that are indispensable to making meaningful connections between source and target languages (Bugel, 2013, p. 370). This is particularly relevant in the case of legal language, where learning isolated words is not helpful. The fact that students received information about the context of the source text they had to translate reinforced the students’ cultural competence by allowing them to better understand the challenges that Central American immigrants face when they seek asylum. By the end of the course students showed a genuine desire to contribute to similar initiatives in the future. And honestly, what could be more fulfilling than listening to your students’ willingness to engage in civic activities in the world?

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