Bridging Theory and Practice: University Students' Volunteer Engagement in Local Communities Through a Civics & Community Engagement Course

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Abstract

This study explores the transformative potential of civic and community engagement among university students through a Civics and Community Engagement course at Kohat University, Pakistan. Utilizing a qualitative case study methodology, data were collected from 15 students via semi-structured interviews and two gender-segregated focus group discussions. Thematic analysis revealed four key themes: heightened civic awareness and responsibility, skill development through service-learning, structural and cultural barriers to engagement, and pathways toward sustainable civic participation. Findings indicate that students perceive civic engagement as essential for linking academic learning with societal needs, fostering leadership, teamwork, problem-solving, and empathy. However, participation is impeded by institutional limitations, gender constraints, and heavy academic workloads. Despite these challenges, students envisioned universities as pivotal in institutionalizing service-learning to promote long-term civic culture, community resilience, and alignment with Sustainable Development Goals. This research contributes a culturally situated perspective on service-learning in Pakistan, highlighting the moral, professional, and social benefits while emphasizing the necessity of structured institutional support. The study underscores the role of higher education in cultivating socially responsible graduates capable of advancing sustainable and inclusive development.

Introduction

Universities today are increasingly recognized as not only centers of academic instruction but also as civic institutions that play a vital role in addressing societal challenges. The integration of community engagement into higher education has emerged as a global priority, particularly in the context of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which call for quality education (SDG 4), sustainable cities and communities (SDG 11), and climate action (SDG 13). Higher education institutions are uniquely positioned to contribute to these objectives by fostering civic responsibility, sustainability awareness, and social innovation among students. Civic engagement is, therefore, no longer an optional add-on but a necessary component of transformative education in the twenty-first century. Scholars such as Watson (2007) argued that universities must embrace their role as civic partners, actively working alongside communities to co-create solutions to pressing issues. Similarly, Arthur, Davies, and Hahn (2008) emphasized that citizenship education must go beyond theoretical learning to cultivate democratic participation, ethical responsibility, and practical engagement. These perspectives highlight that

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student volunteerism and service-learning are not simply extracurricular activities; they represent a pedagogical shift that bridges theory with lived realities, preparing students as agents of change in their societies.

Global evidence reinforces the transformative potential of civic engagement. In Iran, nursing students at Kerman University of Medical Sciences reported enhanced health education competencies and stronger civic responsibility when service-based learning was integrated into their community health internships (Emrani et al., 2024). In China, postgraduate nursing students designed and implemented community-oriented health promotion interventions that not only improved the well-being of local residents but also deepened students' scientific awareness and research innovation (Sun et al., 2023). The United States provides further examples: following Hurricane Katrina, nursing students partnered with Gulfport region clinics in a long-term disaster response initiative, demonstrating how service-learning can simultaneously strengthen student leadership and meet urgent community needs (Richards, Novak, & Davis, 2009). More broadly, undergraduate public health programs in the U.S. have shown that service-learning enhances civic outcomes, professional identity, and motivation to serve (Mason & Dunens, 2019). These cases illustrate how, across diverse cultural and socio-political contexts, student engagement bridges academic knowledge with community needs, fostering resilience, sustainability, and social trust.

One of the most compelling arguments for student civic engagement lies in its capacity to build social capital and community resilience. Volunteering fosters trust, collaboration, and problem-solving networks that extend beyond individual projects, enabling communities to adapt to crises such as poverty, floods, and climate change. In Pakistan, where environmental and socioeconomic vulnerabilities are pronounced, empirical studies show that social capital plays a crucial role in disaster recovery and resilience. For instance, in South Punjab, survivors of the 2010 floods with higher levels of education, income, and trust in community leadership reported significantly better recovery outcomes, largely mediated through social support and cohesion (Akbar et al., 2022). Similarly, in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, local networks and community-based organizations helped disseminate flood risk warnings and mobilize collective action, although unequal access to information constrained these processes (Shah et al., 2024). Other research has found that households with stronger community ties and membership in social networks were more resilient to flood hazards and that social capital significantly shaped recovery trajectories after the 2010 Pakistan floods (Shah et al., 2018). These findings suggest that student volunteerism can complement and strengthen such networks, filling gaps in awareness, coordination, and collective action. At the same time, integrating volunteerism into structured courses represents an educational transformation. Service-learning, as Furco (1996) defined it, deliberately links academic content with community service in ways that are mutually beneficial for students and communities. Research demonstrates that such models enhance leadership, communication, and empathy among students, while offering communities practical resources and knowledge (Astin et al., 2000). By embedding service-learning into the curriculum, universities cultivate students who are both academically competent and socially responsible— graduates capable of navigating the challenges of the green economy, sustainability transitions, and democratic participation. This study builds on these theoretical and practical insights by examining civic engagement among students at Kohat University, Pakistan. Drawing on qualitative data from students across multiple departments, the research identifies key themes in how young people understand and practice civic responsibility through local volunteer initiatives. By situating student volunteerism within broader debates on sustainability, social capital, and educational reform, this study contributes to both academic discourse and policy discussions.

The significance of this research lies in its multidimensional impact. For students, it offers opportunities to connect classroom learning with real-world challenges, strengthening leadership, problem-solving, and civic identity. For communities, it highlights how youth can act as partners in addressing local issues ranging from education gaps to environmental concerns. For universities, it underscores the responsibility of institutions to provide structures, partnerships, and recognition that sustain student engagement. Ultimately, this study demonstrates that civic engagement in higher education is not only an educational necessity but also a pathway to building resilient, sustainable, and democratic societies aligned with global development goals.

Research Objectives

1. To explore how participation in a Civics and Community Engagement course shapes students' perceptions of civic responsibility and community involvement.
2. To examine the skills, values, and attitudes students develop through volunteer activities and service-learning experiences.
3. To analyze the challenges and barriers (institutional, cultural, and structural) that influence student engagement in civic and community initiatives.
4. To identify the broader societal implications of student volunteerism, particularly in relation to sustainable development, democratic participation, and community empowerment.

Research Questions

1. How does a Civics and Community Engagement course influence students' understanding of civic responsibility and their role in society?
2. What personal, social, and academic benefits do students report from participating in volunteer and community engagement activities?
3. What challenges or barriers do students encounter when engaging in civic and community initiatives?
4. In what ways can student volunteerism contribute to societal development, including sustainability, inclusion, and democratic culture?

Literature Review

The concept of civic engagement in higher education has deep historical foundations. John Dewey's early 20th-century work emphasized that education should extend beyond the classroom to address social realities, cultivating responsible citizens capable of democratic participation (Dewey, 1916). This view positioned schools and universities not merely as knowledge transmitters but as sites for fostering democratic values and social responsibility. Later scholarship reinforced this vision, linking education to the development of active citizenship, social justice, and collective well-being (Arthur, Hahn, & Davies, 2008). Civic engagement has since evolved as a global educational priority, particularly through service-learning pedagogy, which integrates community service with academic learning for mutual benefit (Furco, 1996).

Service-learning has increasingly been framed as a tool for advancing the United Nations SDGs, particularly in education, health, and social equity. Research demonstrates that student volunteer initiatives can directly contribute to goals such as reducing inequalities, improving health outcomes, and strengthening institutions (Astin et al., 2000; Bringle & Clayton, 2012). In contexts where higher education aligns with community needs, students become active partners in addressing local challenges while deepening their own academic and civic learning. For

instance, service-learning projects tackling environmental sustainability or health disparities have been shown to simultaneously enhance student competencies and contribute to societal progress (McFadden, 2017; Lin et al., 2025). By embedding service-learning into curricula, universities can ensure that civic engagement is not an add-on but a structured contributor to broader sustainable development (Richard et al., 2017).

A critical dimension of civic engagement is its role in strengthening community resilience and social capital. When students engage in volunteerism, they contribute not only services but also networks of trust, cooperation, and shared responsibility (Putnam, 2000). Studies in South Asia illustrate this vividly. In Nepal, student mobilization during the 2015 earthquake crisis provided logistical aid, education, and emotional support to affected communities, underscoring how youth engagement can bolster resilience in times of crisis (Shrestha, 2016). In Bangladesh, BRAC University's mandatory service-learning course places students in rural development projects, linking academic study with poverty alleviation, women's empowerment, and microfinance initiatives (Huda, 2019). These cases show that service-learning fosters both immediate community problem-solving and longer-term resilience through social capital formation (Bringle & Clayton, 2012).

Civic engagement in universities is also critical to cultivating civic culture and sustaining democratic societies. Research highlights that students engaged in service-learning and volunteer programs often develop stronger democratic values, empathy, and social awareness (Richard et al., 2017). In Hunza, Pakistan, students reported that community service programs enhanced their moral values, planning abilities, and cultural understanding (Ali, 2020). In India, service-learning initiatives at Delhi University connected students with NGOs, strengthening their appreciation for pluralism and participatory governance (Mukherjee, 2018). Similarly, Arthur, Hahn, and Davies (2008), in *The SAGE Handbook of Education for Citizenship and Democracy*, emphasize that civic engagement programs are essential for equipping students to navigate increasingly complex and diverse societies. These initiatives reinforce civic culture by embedding democratic practices into everyday learning, thus bridging formal instruction with lived democratic participation.

Within Pakistan, multiple studies illustrate both the promise and challenges of civic engagement. Research on vocational training institutes shows that service-learning enhances subject knowledge, communication skills, and volunteering attitudes (Said et al., 2019). Among medical and dental students in Karachi, those who engaged in volunteer activities reported higher motivation, career orientation, and life satisfaction (Emad, Nasir, Akhlaq, Pasha, Noor, & Ghani, 2023). Studies in Southern Punjab revealed that civic responsibility remains average despite curricular exposure, indicating the need for practical engagement opportunities (Anjum, Akhtar, Hafeez, & Ali, 2024). Similarly, students at the University of Peshawar expressed strong civic values but low actual participation due to structural barriers (Bukhari, Khan, Khan, Haq, & Hussain, 2024). Across the region, evidence from India and Bangladesh demonstrates that well-designed programs linking universities with NGOs and rural development initiatives not only advance student competencies but also contribute directly to societal development (Mondal, 2000). Collectively, these cases affirm that civic engagement in South Asia aligns with global findings: student motivations are diverse, institutional support is often limited, yet the transformative potential of engagement for both students and communities is immense.

Linking to the Proposed Model

Taken together, global and regional evidence underscores that civic engagement through higher education is a powerful mechanism for advancing sustainable development goals, strengthening community resilience, and deepening civic culture. The literature confirms that

well-structured service-learning programs enhance leadership, empathy, and problem-solving skills, while also addressing pressing societal challenges in health, education, and sustainability (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000; Llenares, Sario, Bialba, & Dela Cruz, 2020). In the South Asian context, the adaptability of service-learning across diverse institutional types—vocational, medical, and traditional universities—illustrates its flexibility, though challenges of institutional support and cultural barriers persist (Said, Ahmad, & Mohamad Nor, 2019). For the proposed Civics and Community Engagement course, this literature indicates that embedding student volunteerism in a structured, reflective, and culturally sensitive framework can generate lasting benefits for both students and communities. By aligning civic engagement with SDGs, resilience, and democratic participation, the study situates itself within a global movement that sees universities as not only centers of knowledge but also engines of societal transformation (Bringle & Clayton, 2012; Bringle, Hatcher, & Clayton, 2023).

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation of this study is constructed from four interrelated perspectives that collectively illuminate how civic engagement initiatives shape student development and societal outcomes. The foundation is drawn from Dewey's (1916) philosophy of experiential learning, which posits that education must cultivate democratic values through real-world problem solving, a principle that informs contemporary models of youth and civic education (Ord, 2012). Building directly upon this, service-learning pedagogy operationalizes Deweyan principles by integrating community service with academic curricula to achieve reciprocal benefits for students and communities, emphasizing the critical role of reflection and reciprocity (Furco, 1996; Bringle & Clayton, 2012). This combination provides a robust normative and practical foundation for understanding the educational value of the Civic and Community Engagement courses.

To comprehend the broader societal impact of such initiatives, this framework incorporates social capital theory and the SDGs. Putnam's (2004) concept of social capital elucidates how volunteerism build networks, trust, and reciprocity, thereby strengthening community resilience, particularly in vulnerable contexts (Yang et al., 2025). Simultaneously, the SDG framework positions higher education as a pivotal civic institution responsible for advancing global sustainability by fostering socially engaged graduates (Binagwaho et al., 2022). The synthesis of these lenses – spanning democratic education, pedagogical practice, social theory, and global policy – positions civic engagement as both an educational strategy and a societal imperative, framing it as a transformative bridge between the university and sustainable community development.

Methodology

Research Design: This study adopted a qualitative case study design to explore how university students engage in civic and community activities through a Civics and Community Engagement course. The research was guided by four key objectives: (1) to explore how participation shapes students' perceptions of civic responsibility, (2) to examine the skills, values, and attitudes developed through volunteer experiences, (3) to analyze challenges and barriers to student participation, and (4) to identify the broader societal implications of volunteerism for sustainability and democratic culture. These objectives were operationalized into corresponding research questions, which shaped the data collection instruments and analysis. A qualitative approach was selected because it allows for an in-depth understanding of participants' perspectives, social realities, and lived experiences (Creswellet al., 2007). The case study

framework was particularly useful for investigating educational practices within a specific institutional and cultural context (Yin, 2018).

Participants and Sampling: Participants were purposely selected from Kohat University to capture diverse perspectives on civic engagement. The sample consisted of 15 students, both male and female, from different academic departments who had taken the Civics and Community Engagement course. In addition, two focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted: one with six male students and another with six female students. This dual strategy ensured both individual voices and collective reflections were included, thereby enriching the data (Krueger & Casey, 2015). Purposive sampling was appropriate because it allowed the researcher to select participants who had direct exposure to civic education and could meaningfully reflect on their engagement experiences (Palinkas et al., 2015).

Data Collection Methods: Two complementary methods were used to ensure depth and breadth in the data:

1. *Individual Student Responses* – Semi-structured interviews with 15 students enabled the collection of detailed narratives about personal attitudes, motivations, and experiences of community engagement. This directly addressed the first two research questions concerning civic responsibility and personal/academic benefits. The semi-structured format provided both flexibility and focus, ensuring that core themes were addressed while allowing participants to raise unanticipated issues (Kallio et al., 2016).

2. *Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)* – Two FGDs (one male, one female) were conducted to explore group dynamics, shared values, and collective challenges. These discussions were particularly useful for examining barriers and cultural factors shaping engagement, thus responding to the third and fourth research questions. FGDs in educational contexts encourage interaction, stimulate reflection, and reveal shared institutional or societal barriers (Morgan, 1997).

Data Analysis: The data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework: familiarization, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining/naming themes, and producing the report. Codes were inductively derived from the data but interpreted in light of existing literature on service-learning and civic engagement. This process produced four major themes aligned with the study objectives: (1) Civic Awareness and Responsibility, (2) Service-Learning and Skill Development, (3) Barriers to Student Engagement, and (4) Pathways to Sustainable Civic Engagement and Societal Impact.

Trustworthiness and Rigor: Methodological rigor was ensured by following Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria of trustworthiness. Credibility was supported by triangulating data between interviews and FGDs, alongside prolonged engagement and peer debriefing. Transferability was addressed by providing thick descriptions of participants and institutional context. Dependability was achieved by maintaining an audit trail of interview guides, field notes, coding decisions, and theme development. Confirmability was enhanced through reflexivity, whereby the researcher acknowledged their dual role as faculty and investigator, ensuring that findings were grounded in participants' voices rather than personal bias.

Ethical Considerations: Ethical protocols were strictly followed throughout the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and anonymity was ensured through pseudonyms. Gender-sensitive arrangements—conducting separate FGDs for male and female

students—respected cultural norms and encouraged open participation. The study thus upheld ethical standards of voluntary participation, confidentiality, and cultural sensitivity (Bryman, 2016).

Results & Discussions

The data from 15 individual student interviews and two FGDs (male and female, six participants each) were analyzed thematically, producing four key themes. These themes reflect how students at Kohat University understand and experience civic engagement within the framework of a proposed Civics and Community Engagement course.

Civic Awareness and Responsibility: Students at Kohat University demonstrated a profound understanding of their social roles, consistently framing education not merely as a personal achievement but as a responsibility toward the broader community. One female participant in a focus group emphasised,

"Being educated is not just for myself. If I don't give back to my community, my education has no value," highlighting the intrinsic link between personal development and societal contribution.

Similarly, a male interviewee reflected, *"Civic engagement means caring for others, not just for grades. It is part of being a good citizen,"* suggesting that students perceive civic responsibility as an ethical obligation rather than an academic requirement.

Several students stressed that theoretical knowledge of rights is insufficient without practical responsibility. As one female student noted, *"We learn about rights in theory, but responsibility is more important. Without responsibility, education is incomplete."* Likewise, male focus group participants pointed to the institutional gap in fostering civic engagement, remarking, *"Our university should encourage us to take part in society, otherwise we just stay limited to books."*

These insights affirm the pivotal role of experiential learning in cultivating civic responsibility, as posited by Astin et al. (2000), who argue that service-learning initiatives enhance students' democratic engagement and ethical awareness. The findings also resonate with Arthur, Davies, and Hahn (2008), who emphasize that education for citizenship should integrate both knowledge and action to produce socially responsible graduates. In line with regional evidence, Ali (2021) observed that students in Southern Punjab, despite exposure to civic education, exhibited only moderate levels of civic responsibility, underscoring that classroom instruction alone cannot instill active citizenship. Collectively, these findings suggest that practical, community-focused experiences are essential to translate students' awareness into meaningful societal action, positioning universities as critical catalysts for fostering ethically engaged and socially responsible graduates.

Service-Learning and Skill Development: Students consistently highlighted that participation in volunteer projects not only fosters civic responsibility but also cultivates essential interpersonal and leadership skills. A male interviewee noted, *"When we work together in community projects, we learn cooperation and communication skills,"* reflecting the practical development of collaborative competencies. A female focus group participant emphasized, *"Leadership only comes when we take responsibility in real situations, not just in the classroom,"* suggesting that experiential learning situates leadership in tangible community contexts. Other students reported gains in public speaking and problem-solving: *"Through volunteer activities, I gained confidence to speak in public"* and *"Helping in communities teaches us how to solve problems with limited resources"* (Male and Female Students, Interviews).

These findings resonate with the broader service-learning literature, which positions such programs as bridges between academic content and real-world challenges (Furco, 1996; McFadden, 2017). International evidence supports these observations: Llenares (2019) documented improvements in teamwork and communication skills, while Huda (2020) found that BRAC University's mandatory service-learning activities exposed students to concrete community challenges. Collectively, these studies confirm that structured volunteer experiences simultaneously enhance employability, leadership capacity, and civic competence, reinforcing the dual academic and social value of service-learning (Bringle & Clayton, 2012).

Barriers to Student Engagement: Despite strong interest in civic engagement, students identified multiple systemic, cultural, and personal barriers. Institutional limitations, such as lack of formal structures or administrative encouragement, were commonly cited: *"We want to participate, but often there is no proper system, no encouragement from administration"* (Male FGD). Gendered social norms also constrained participation: *"Family restrictions sometimes stop us, especially for girls, from going outside for community projects"* (Female Student, Interview). Additional barriers included limited awareness of volunteer opportunities and heavy academic workloads: *"Many of us don't even know about opportunities to volunteer. Information is missing"* and *"Time is a problem. With heavy course loads, it is difficult to manage community work"* (Male and Female Students, Interviews).

These challenges are consistent with regional and global literature. In South Asia, institutional and cultural constraints frequently limit youth engagement, even among students with positive civic attitudes (Said, Ahmad, & Mohamad Nor, 2019; Khan & Bano, 2020). For instance, at the University of Peshawar, students demonstrated strong civic values but limited participation due to inadequate support systems. Globally, Richard et al. (2017) emphasize that without structured guidance and reflective processes, students' engagement tends to be sporadic. Collectively, these findings underscore that student motivation alone is insufficient; enabling institutional frameworks, logistical support, and social encouragement are critical to sustain active participation in civic initiatives.

Pathways to Sustainable Civic Engagement and Societal Impact: Students articulated a vision of civic engagement as a trans-formative instrument for addressing pressing societal challenges, particularly when coupled with structured university guidance. A female interviewee remarked, *"If universities guide us, we can solve problems like lack of education in rural areas,"* highlighting the potential for student initiatives to complement institutional and governmental efforts. Similarly, male participants emphasized community cohesion: *"Community work can also create unity among people of different backgrounds."* Students also linked engagement to pressing environmental and health issues: *"We should connect our projects to environment and health, because these are urgent needs in Pakistan,"* and stressed continuity beyond university: *"Our engagement should continue after graduation"* (Male and Female Students, Interviews).

These insights align with Bringle and Clayton (2012), who argue that service-learning strengthens university-community partnerships and fosters sustained civic involvement. Empirical evidence confirms long-term impacts: Ma, Chan, and Chan (2016) and Lin et al. (2025) documented that students participating in structured programs remained active in civic life post-graduation. Regional parallels include Nepalese student involvement in post-earthquake relief efforts (Shrestha, 2022) and Indian student-led environmental campaigns (Mukherjee, 2018). Collectively, these examples illustrate that university-based civic initiatives can support broader societal goals,

including sustainable development, social cohesion, and alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), positioning higher education as a strategic driver of community resilience and long-term civic engagement.

Discussion

The findings indicate that students at Kohat University perceive civic engagement as a critical component of higher education, linking personal development with societal well-being. Participation in volunteer activities and structured service-learning initiatives was associated with enhanced civic awareness, moral responsibility, and practical skills. These outcomes support the literature on service-learning, which emphasizes the dual role of experiential education in fostering both civic and professional competencies (Astin et al., 2000; Bringle & Clayton, 2012; Arthur, Davies, & Hahn, 2008). Students demonstrated a strong understanding of their ethical and social responsibilities, emphasizing the importance of translating theoretical knowledge into practical action. This aligns with studies highlighting that civic education alone is insufficient to cultivate active citizenship; experiential engagement is essential to reinforce moral and democratic responsibility (Ali, 2021; Astin et al., 2000). The findings suggest that universities have a pivotal role in facilitating civic consciousness through structured programs that promote reflection, ethical reasoning, and community involvement.

In consistent with preccedings, engagement in service-learning initiatives was reported to enhance critical professional skills, including communication, leadership, teamwork, and problem-solving. These findings resonate with international evidence demonstrating that community-based experiential learning bridges the gap between academic knowledge and practical application (Furco, 1996; Llenares, 2019; McFadden, 2017; Huda, 2020). In contexts such as Pakistan, where graduates face employability challenges, integrating service-learning into curricula offers a dual benefit: fostering civic responsibility while simultaneously enhancing career-relevant competencies. Despite positive attitudes, structural, cultural, and institutional barriers limited student participation. Constraints such as limited institutional support, lack of awareness of opportunities, family restrictions, and academic workload echo findings across South Asia and globally (Khan & Bano, 2020; Said et al., 2019; Richard et al., 2017). These challenges indicate that motivation alone is insufficient; universities must provide enabling environments that include administrative support, resource provision, and systematic opportunities for sustained engagement.

Likewise, students viewed civic engagement as a mechanism for societal transformation, particularly in addressing rural education, environmental sustainability, and community cohesion. These perspectives align with Bringle and Clayton's (2012) framework on service-learning and its role in fostering long-term civic participation. Evidence from regional contexts, such as Nepalese post-earthquake relief efforts (Shrestha, 2016) and Indian student-led environmental campaigns (Mukherjee, 2018), illustrates the potential for university-based civic initiatives to contribute to broader societal resilience. Aligning student engagement with SDGS, including quality education, gender equality, and sustainable communities (SDG 4, 5, 11), offers a strategic pathway for higher education to advance national and global development objectives.

Although the benefits of service-learning have been widely documented in international scholarship, empirical research within the Pakistani higher education context remains limited, particularly concerning students' own conceptualizations of civic engagement. This study contributes to the literature by capturing the perspectives of both male and female students, thereby providing a nuanced understanding of how civic responsibility is morally framed, how

service-learning fosters professional and civic skill development, and how systemic and cultural barriers influence participation. Furthermore, the study identifies a clear student demand for structured institutional support to integrate volunteerism into formal curricula, highlighting the importance of culturally and contextually responsive approaches. In doing so, it provides a locally grounded contribution to the global discourse on civic engagement and higher education, bridging gaps between theory, practice, and policy in the Pakistani context.

Conclusion

This study ultimately reveals that civic engagement is not merely an educational adjunct but the very crucible in which theoretical knowledge is forged into practical wisdom and social responsibility. The experiences of students at Kohat University demonstrates that service-learning within civic and community engagement course serves as a powerful pedagogical bridge, connecting the academy to the community and transforming students into empathetic leaders, skilled problem-solvers, and morally conscious citizens. The findings affirm that such engagement is a trans-formative strategy, simultaneously advancing academic, personal, and professional development while instilling a deep-seated sense of civic duty.

However, this trasformative potential remains constrained without concerted institutional action. The significant barriers identified – ranging from inadequate support and gendered norms to overwhelming academic pressures – highlight a critical implementation gap. Therefore, the onus is one higher education institutions to evolve from passive facilitators to active architects of civic capacity. By heeding the recommendations to formalize service-learning, establish robust support structures, foster genuine community partnerships, and align initiatives with global sustainability goals, universities can unlock a powerful synergy. This strategic institutionalization will not only empower a generation of graduates to act as agents of change but will also catalyze a broader cultural shift, positioning universities as indispensable engines of sustainable, resilient, and inclusive societal progress. The future of community development and democratic vitality depends on our ability to embed this culture of engaged, ethical citizenship at the very heart of higher education.

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