

ABSTRACT

Title of Document: BECOMING REAL: UNDERGRADUATES'
CIVIC AGENCY JOURNEYS

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Responding to calls for higher education to play a central role in renewing democracy, a growing number of U.S. colleges, universities, and national higher education networks are experimenting with strategies for developing students' *civic agency*: the capacity of ordinary people collectively to create and exert power in action. This study explores the developmental processes of University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC) undergraduates who achieved and demonstrated exceptional civic agency, using a research methodology that combines *phenomenology*, the search for deep meanings in lived experience, with *hermeneutics*, an iterative meaning-making process grounded in the researcher's relationship with the topic being studied. By conveying the products of this exploration with poetic resonance, and surfacing aspects of everyday experience not ordinarily recognized by

the conscious mind, this study aims to empower and inspire readers to take action to promote civic agency effectively in their own environments.

For the UMBC undergraduates who participated in this study, coming to civic agency involved experiencing their own reality against the backdrop of everyday environments and relationships that often felt synthetic and scripted. In a variety of settings, the participants found opportunities to be the cause of meaningful changes in people and situations, from which they drew the inference that they were actually present in a world that could be altered through their actions. In relationships with older adults and peers that deviated from the usual scripts, the participants experienced themselves anew as subjects rather than objects, human beings rather than actors on a stage. Faculty and staff members contributed most to the participants' agency when they approached the teaching and learning process with a kind of directness and humility: a willingness to share power and status, forego pretensions, avoid assertions of absolute mastery, and allow collaborative work to unfold without knowing exactly where it would lead.