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Service-Learning in Undergraduate Education: Where Is It Going?

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Abstract: A long time advocate for service-learning continues his call for institutional responsibility while taking a look at the progress made.

Essay:

A decade ago, I was teaching service-learning courses at San Francisco State, including one on ethics and professions, which examined ethical issues in law, medicine, journalism, and business. In addition to their class work, students worked in non-profit organizations that provided professional services to people in need in the community. The course grappled with questions like "When and under what circumstances is it appropriate for a professional to lie or withhold the truth on behalf of clients, patients, news sources, or customers?" and wrote research papers linking their service with readings and class discussions. Students working in legal services offices, health clinics, and other agencies saw first-hand the ethical pressures on professionals as they wrestled with competing values and demands.

Service-learning is now a major national movement at every educational level, and is a particularly powerful force in undergraduate education. Connecting academic study with community service through structured reflection is widely recognized as contributing to learning that is deeper, longer-lasting, and more portable to new situations and circumstances. Campus Compact recently reported a three-fold increase in just four years in the number of full-time faculty teaching service-learning courses, from 14 per campus in 2000 to 40 per campus in 2004.

Campus Compact, other national organizations, and national legislation that created Learn and Serve America have helped to guide and propel the movement. But the primary engine has been the work of thousands of faculty members on campuses

throughout the country. Their work has been documented in scores of books, including an outstanding series of discipline-based monographs published by the American Association for Higher Education, in the peer-reviewed *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, and in many other publications. Most leading colleges and universities now have a service-learning center, which supports a dedicated core of faculty. The California State University is a good example, with a system-wide office of community service-learning and centers on its many campuses that work together and learn from each other.

Now that service-learning has come of age, where is it going? I see three major directions, each of which has strong proponents. The first stresses service-learning's value for enhancing academic learning, including both deeper understanding in the full range of disciplines and in professional preparation as well as the cross-cutting goals of liberal education, such as developing an inquiring mind and a liberal imagination. Community service that is integrated into an undergraduate curriculum enables students to connect thought and feeling, creating a context in which students can explore how they feel about what they are thinking and what they think about how they feel. It offers students opportunities to consider what is important to them—and why—in ways they too rarely experience otherwise.

A second direction is pursued by those faculty who use service-learning primarily as a vehicle to promote the skills and knowledge needed for leadership. Throughout the country, both curricular and co-curricular leadership programs have multiplied and many centrally incorporate service-learning. Faculty who support this approach emphasize that the knowledge and especially the skills of leadership are best gained in a real-world environment, where students must practice "in role," and where effective leaders can be observed first hand.

A third direction—civic engagement—has come to dominate much of the literature of service-learning. Most of this literature concentrates on tying academic study to volunteer activities such as cleaning up a park, tutoring a child, or serving in a community kitchen. These programs have been shown to contribute to a greater sense of civic responsibility in students. This is a critical aim, one that is often short-changed in an undergraduate education that does not include service-learning. But, as my colleagues and I point out in our book *Educating Citizens* (Jossey-Bass, 2003), the focus on community engagement is insufficient preparation for active citizenship if it is not accompanied by experiences that support more systemic political or policy-related understanding and engagement. This has been a relatively neglected role for service-learning until recently, but we see evidence of growing interest in expanding the range of service-learning experiences to include these aspects of democratic participation.

My Carnegie Foundation colleagues and I are now completing a study that focuses directly on education for political engagement. We have been examining 21 courses and programs from across the country that are expressly designed to promote political engagement, many of which include service-learning. Our results show significant positive impact of these courses on many aspects of students' political understanding,

skills, and motivation.

Just twenty years ago, Campus Compact was created because a small group of leaders in higher education thought that the "me generation" was a bum rap for their students. They believed that students should have opportunities for community service and committed themselves to providing those opportunities. By the 1990s, it was clear to those college and university presidents involved that community service would never be viewed by students or faculty as central to the mission of their institutions unless it was linked to the curriculum.

In the years that followed, service-learning has become a major force in American higher education. In my view it can and should serve all three of the functions I have outlined here: the disciplinary and other dimensions of liberal and professional learning, leadership development, and democratic participation, including individual civic responsibility and more systemic political engagement at the local, state, national and international levels. Unless it is used to strengthen all three of these important dimensions of undergraduate learning, we are not fully exploiting the potential of this powerful pedagogy.

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