Academic Service-Learning: Myths, Chalenges, and Recommendations

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Service-learning is one of the fastest growing reforms in higher education. Led by national organizations including Campus Compact, the National Society for Experiential Education, and the American Association of Higher Education as well as the federal Corporation for National Service, there is a renewed civic spirit on campuses across the country. More than 700 presidents of higher education institutions have agreed to promote community service and service-learning to "develop students' citizenship skills and values, encourage collaborative partnerships between campuses and communities, and assist faculty who seek to integrate service into their teaching and research" (Campus Compact, 1999).

One manifestation of this renewed civic purpose is the role of colleges and universities in the preparation of students for citizenship. When we speak of citizenship, we have a thicker and more robust conceptualization in mind than voting in elections and paying one's taxes, one more adequately captured by "civic participation," "community involvement," and "public work" (Boyt & Farr, 1997; Lappe & DuBoir, 1994). When conceptualized in this way, citizenship involves skills and values that are unevenly developed through familial socialization, are beyond most high school social studies curricula, and necessitate real-world practice and intentional effort for success. For advocates of higher education's civic renewal (Edgerton, 1994; Ehrlich, 1995), not only is it the institution's responsibility to develop students' knowledge, competencies, propensities, and aspirations for personal accomplishment (including the love of learning), but for public achievement too.

One means for developing college students' civic capacity is academic service-learning - a pedagogical model that intentionally integrates academic learning and community-based service (Rhoads & Howard, 1998). There is growing evidence that students in these courses not only develop their civic propensities for public accomplishment, but, equally important, when done well (Eyler, Giles, & Schmiede, 1996), strengthen their academic learning (Markus, Howard, & King, 1993) and higher cognitive skills such as problem solving and critical analysis (Eyler & Giles, 1999).

Myths and Challenges Unfortunately, the rapid expansion of service-learning has been accompanied by a fair amount of confusion reflected in its myths and challenges.

1. **The Myth of Terminology** Though often used interchangeably, "community service" and "service-learning" are not the same. In conventional community service, students are involved in activities for which there is no prescribed learning agenda, such as when sorority members serve with Habitat for Humanity. In "co-curricular" service-learning, students are involved in community activities for which there is an intentional (albeit non-academic) learning agenda, as is often the case in alternative spring break programs sandwiching the students' service between preparatory and de-briefing learning efforts. With academic service-learning, the community service is understood to be one of the "texts" in the course.

The challenge with academic service-learning is to insure that students see that community service has purposes in a course that are different than when performed outside a course.

2. **The Myth of Conceptualization** Academic service-learning and internships are not the same. While it is true that both are forms of experiential learning, they are markedly different. First, at the risk of simplification and generalization, internships privilege learning over service in the community, while academic service-learning insists that service and learning receive equal attention (Honnet-Porter & Poulsen, 1989). Second, the service in internships is driven by the needs of the curriculum; the service in academic service-learning is driven by the learning objectives of the course and the needs in the community. Third, internships prepare students for professional work,

while academic service-learning prepares students for citizenship.

The challenge here is helping faculty to see the distinction between these two teaching-learning models.

3. **The Myth of Synonymy** "Experience" and "learning" are not the same. Community-based experiences require additional work to be transformed into learning (Kolb, 1984). In fact, not only are experiences not necessarily educational, they can be mis-educative (Dewey, 1938), as when students' cultural stereotypes and myopia about structural issues are reinforced by community service experiences.

The challenge here is to develop assignments that transform the community experiences into learning worthy of the academic course with which it is integrated.

4. **The Myth of Marginality** A traditional course with a community service requirement is not the same as academic service-learning. In the former, the service parallels the course, never intentionally intersecting the learning process. In the latter, the service and the learning "inform and transform one another" (Honnet-Porter & Poulsen, 1989). When constructed so, the entire composition and tenor of the course changes.

The challenge here is to help faculty see that the investment of additional time required by academic service-learning pays student learning and faculty teaching dividends.

While these myths reveal a great deal of confusion about academic service-learning, there are in fact three essential elements found in most conceptualizations: 1) students must be involved in service that benefits the community (from the community's perspective), 2) students' academic learning must be enhanced by the participation in the community service, and 3) students must learn citizenship lessons.

Recommendations To achieve these three elements, faculty discover that a new pedagogical map is required. As poetic justice would have it, with academic service-learning, experience and reflection

upon that experience are the best teachers. But I offer the following recommendations to increase the chances for early success:

1. Just as in traditional courses, students' grades are based on the demonstration of learning. 2. Include on the syllabus the rationale for incorporating community service into the course, and share the syllabus with community agencies. 3. Include readings in the course about the role of service-learning in fortifying academic learning and in promoting student civic outcomes, and reserve at least some class discussion time and some assignments to civic issues related to the course. 4. Build relationships with the community agency personnel with whom your students will be working. 5. Insist on field placements which can contribute to the learning objectives of the course. 6. Prepare students for both service and learning roles in the community. 7. Think of the community as a context for both the generation and application of knowledge. 8. Develop assignments that enable students to demonstrate the learning harvested from the community. 9. Shift the student learning paradigm from private and individualized to public and collective to strengthen the social responsibility outcomes of the course. 10. Similarly, shift the instructional paradigm from directive to facilitative to utilize students' community learning on behalf of the entire class' learning.

Conclusion If John Dewey (1916), the early 20th century progressive educator, were alive today, we expect that he would be drawn to academic service-learning, for much of its foundation is derived from his educational and social philosophy: experience is necessary for learning; learning is for the purpose of some end beyond itself; thinking and acting are connected by reflection; democracy requires active participation by an engaged citizenry; associating with different others leads not only to learning but to having a broader view and breaking down divisions between people; and, democracy and community life are synonymous (Dewey, 1938; Giles & Eyler, 1994).

How will we know when academic service-learning has fulfilled its promise? That will be when recent college graduates answer the question"What do you plan to be doing in five years?" not only with a personal aspiration (e.g. "working as an engineer"), but also with a public aspiration (e.g "working to improve race relations in my

community"). With the excitement surrounding academic service-learning today, that time is not far off.

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