

Student Volunteers, Academic Credit

By Robert Coles

DESPITE the enticements of our competitive, consumerist culture, a growing number of high school, undergraduate and graduate students are finding time to do local volunteer work. We applaud such evidence of idealism put into daily or weekly practice in what amounts to a national service program. As one Middle Western college dean said, it is "exactly the kind of constructive extra-curricular activity this school values."

I have heard many students sharply, and properly, challenge such use of the phrase "extra-curricular." They object to this false distinction between their intellectual life and their work in, say, a ghetto neighborhood. After all, isn't the mind kept busy in many important ways when one leaves a campus to work in a neighborhood where people live constantly in great jeopardy?

When a student crosses the ocean to study French or Spanish for a year, or to assist in a social scientist's "field work," we have no reluctance to consider such an effort intellectual and worthy of academic credit.

But when that same student spends time working with people who, after all, live in a world as different in certain respects as some of those studied by anthropologists and sociologists, they are pursuing an "extra-curricular" activity.

Is this the right way to respond to the substantial amount of personal commitment involved in tutoring needy children, feeding the homeless in soup kitchens and reaching out to vulnerable families to provide medical or legal assistance?

When I listen to my students describe what they see and hear in voluntary "extra-curricular" activities, I realize how much they are learning.

For example, listen to an undergraduate — he has tutored and played basketball in a ghetto neighborhood — trying to educate his teacher:

"I never knew people live like that until I started going there. I'd read a book or two [about ghetto problems] and mostly forgotten what I read, but you don't forget the kids when you see them every week. Now I know a little of what those families are like. I know

about their history, the story of their past: They'll talk with you and take you back a few generations — from the rural South to up here."

He went on: "I know about the anthropology and sociology — what the people eat, and what they say and what they do with their time. I know about the psychology — what's troubling them, and what they want and what scares them to death. I know about the politics of that neighborhood, and the economics — where the power is, and how the people make their living. It's not only tutoring I'm doing, it's learning — the kids teach me, and their parents do, too."

He contrasted the vivid, enduring education he was getting outside of school with what occasionally takes place inside — when he sits in class or prepares in his room for tests. "I cram stuff in, and forget it right after the exam," he said. "I sit and take notes automatically, and lots of times I doze off." But he was not suggesting that he deserved academic credit for the acquisition of outside learning.

A bright, able student, successful by most standards, he craves intellectual and moral challenges, and has found them in the volunteer work he has done for several years. An able writer, he found time to contribute several articles to a local paper — descriptions of the children he teaches, of the lives they live, of the points about life they have made to him.

He wishes more would come of his volunteer work. He wants to study carefully and discuss books by novelists, social scientists and essayists that delineate and sort out the complexities, ironies, ambiguities, confusions and apprehensions he witnesses — and those in himself as an outsider who, trying to understand and change a particular world, achieves successes but also encounters obstacles and contends with failures.

He would like to compare his own observations, goals, hopes, disappointments, discouragements, and his sense of burn-out, with similar experiences described in books of the documentary tradition that have mattered over time.

Put differently, he wants to learn from what he does. He wants a chance to talk and write about his volunteer work while also discussing significant books, films and collections of photographs that would give that work a broader perspective.

Surely, we who teach in universities can develop courses that will respond to the challenge of student voluntarism — that connect its moral energy with the life of the mind. □

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