

# SERVICE LEARNING:

## A Bridge Between the University and the Community

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Volunteerism has changed significantly since its altruistic conception. The early "Lady Bountifuls", whose service centered around the giving of goods and money and who rarely had more than a slight association with the recipients, has evolved into a new type of volunteer service. That service is symbiotic in nature, a mutually beneficial arrangement. It is founded on the most basic of marketing principles, that of giving something in exchange for something of similar value. It also embraces the notion of long term commitment and direct service. It further creates a greater opportunity for practical experience and broadens the scope of potential job markets.

Today volunteerism is a global force reaching from the great cities of America to the rural villages of India. In the United States, one out of four Americans above the age of 13 does some form of volunteer work each year. Translated, this means 40 million citizens spend countless hours in work which they consider important (Naylor, p. 19). Projections show that by 1980, volunteers will contribute service

worth more than \$30 billion annually to the economy of the United States (Morrison, p. 50).

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate the mutually beneficial arrangement between volunteerism and the university. The present trend of volunteerism on college and university campuses across the nation is that of service-learning, or the giving of service in exchange for learning. Dr. Ernest Boyer, U. S. Commission of Education (1977), captures the essence of this paper when he states:

*I think we must find a way for the school to build bridges to the world beyond so that young people will earlier be able to see the relationship of the school to community service, to future jobs and to the university or college. We should find a way for there to be more flexible relationships and earlier options that the students can engage in to begin to discover how the school relates to the world in which the student lives.*

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Many leading experts believe that the service-learning concept is the best mode to "build bridges" toward a symbiotic relationship between the university and the community.

## Overview

In a recent forum held by the National Student Volunteer Program, a group of educators defined service-learning as the "integration of the accomplishment of a task which meets human needs with conscious educational growth" (Barrett, et al., p.16). Thousands of students are currently taking advantage of this opportunity through volunteer and career education programs. They have been quick to realize the value of these experiences in relation to their classroom curricula and to finding and holding jobs in their fields.

*These two factors, educationally relevant experiences and career exploration and development, have been observed as the primary motivators for students who participate in service-learning projects.* In a survey conducted by the Office of Volunteer Programs at Michigan State University in 1976, 66% of the total respondents felt their volunteer experience made their classroom experience more worthwhile. Likewise, 63% answered in the affirmative when asked if their volunteer experience affected their career choice (Smith, et al., (a) pp. 2-3).

All too often the classroom has shielded itself from outside interference. Historically, the promulgation of ideas has been the prime goal of formal classes:

*Ideas existed in a kind of Platonic purity. A student learned ideas without sullyng their pristine essence - without responding personally or interpreting them. Measurements of a student's grasp of ideas consisted of comparing the students' version with the original as interpreted by an older academic, who presumably had removed his personality and uniqueness from his understanding of the original text. All students learned the same things, and they learned them in the same way at the same time (Peterson, 1977, p. 28).*

Students, over a four year period, deal with "funny money" due to this insulated environment. Solving problems is academic, hypothetical, with few responsibilities for wrong decisions (Shingleton and Bao, p. 44). Henry David Thoreau, at Harvard College in 1855, articulated similar attitudes when he complained about the method and psychology of learning that traditional college held in its grip:

*The students, he observed, "should not play life, or study it merely, while the community supports them at this expensive game, but earnestly live it from beginning to end. How could youths better learn to live than by at once trying the experiment of living? Methinks this would exercise their minds as much as mathematics." He asks: "Which would have advanced the most at the end of a month, - the boy who had made his own jack-knife from the ore which he had dug and smelted, reading as much as would be necessary for this, - or the boy who had attended the lecture on metallurgy at the Institute in the meanwhile, and had received a...penknife from his father? Which would be the most likely to cut his fingers?" As for his own experiences at Harvard, Thoreau could only relate: 'To my astonishment I was informed on leaving college that I had studied navigation! - why, if I had taken one turn down the Harbour I should have known more about it.'*

(Rudolph, pp. 236-237)

Students are taught many theories, concepts, ideas and notions yet are rarely given the opportunity or encouraged to test them outside the classroom. Time limitations, faculty workloads, and lack of knowledge of the availability of community resources are some of the constraints which have caused the void in practical experience. Bloom, et al., point out the value of service-learning relative to course curricula in their handbook Taxonomy of Educational Objectives (p. 125):

*If the situations described by the objective...are to involve application ...then they must either be situations new to the student or situations containing new elements as compared to the situation in which the abstraction was learned...Ideally we are seeking a problem which will test the extent to which the individual has learned to apply the abstraction in a practical way. This means that the problems should have some relation to the situations in which he may ultimately be expected to apply the abstraction.*

The reality and purpose for learning is all too often lost in the shuffle of textbooks, papers, and tests. A well-designed and balanced service-learning program can effectively integrate the two types of education which Carl Rogers calls "affective" and "cognitive" learning. "On the one

hand, there is learning that involves the mind only (cognitive). It does not involve feeling or personal meanings; it has no relevance to the whole person. In contrast, there is such a thing as significant, meaningful, experiential learning" (affective) (Peterson, 1971, p. 5). Bloom, et al., elaborates on these two forms of learning:

Cognitive: Objectives which emphasize remembering or reproducing something which was presumably learned as well as objectives which involve the solving of some intellectual task for which the individual has to determine the essential problem and then reorder given material or combine it with ideas, methods or procedures previously learned.

Affective: Objectives which emphasize a feeling tone, an emotion, or a degree of acceptance or rejection. Affective objectives vary from simple attention to selected phenomena to complex qualities of character and conscience ...Such objectives are expressed as interests, attitudes, appreciation of values and emotional sets of biases (Peterson, 1971, p. 70).

Current research challenges the traditional notion that cognitive growth inevitably leads to affective growth and vice versa. Rather, Bloom, et al., describes this concept as two adjacent ladders with widely spaced alternating rungs which, for both to be climbed easily, entails stepping from one to the other. "Growth in the affective domain leads to activity and growth in the cognitive leads to more concern for the affective" (Peterson, 1971, p. 70).

#### Benefits of Service-Learning for Students

Experience is not necessarily the best teacher, but is a primary component of learning. A service-learning position which is educationally relevant does expand the student in numerous ways. The experience can help develop interpersonal and communication skills and teach the fundamentals of new techniques or equipment. Students may take on supervisory roles or have the opportunity to meet leaders in a particular field (Smith, et al., (b) p. 4). Service-learning allows the student to gain pre-professional experience, face and define problems, have exposure to cultural and class differences, promote positive relations between the community and the university and understand the relation of theory to practice (Yarrington, p. 16).

Another component, inherent in service-learning, is the opportunity for career exploration and development. Although the notion that education has the responsibility to equip people to participate in gainful occupation, it is not universally accepted across academia; however, this is fast becoming a major concern. Boyer (1977) believes that real education should include realistic expectations which relate the school more directly to the community and to vocational choices that the student has to make.

Students, parents and many academicians are urging universities to deal with this issue. The reason for pressure by these groups is easy enough to understand. Prior to 1960, colleges and universities produced considerably fewer graduates in relation to the total population than they do today. The sheepskin was an almost automatic guarantee of success in the job market. The number of graduates has increased from 389,000 in 1960 to 784,000 in 1970 and over 2 million are projected for the class of 1980. As a result of this exponential rise in number of graduates in the last two decades, a four-year degree has suddenly become an entry level requirement for jobs in commerce and industry, replacing the high school diploma (Grant, p. 3C).

Most explanations of the reality of the current situation do not satisfy the holder of Bachelor's Degrees:

*We should not be surprised by the demand that a college education assures a person of a higher paying, higher status job than that which is available with less education. That has been a widely held expectation in our society for a long time. The reasons, given by older persons, for returning to college and universities confirm the power of this belief. A college degree is viewed as a gate key that admits one to upward mobility (Duly and Gordon, p. 7).*

Currently the difficulty of finding a job has made students and colleges painfully aware that typical college degrees do not necessarily prepare a graduate to compete favorably for available jobs (Grant, p. 30).

A survey of more than 400 employers conducted by the Michigan State University Placement Office showed most employers do not think colleges are giving enough practical work-related experience (Shingleton and Sheetz, p. 44). Shingleton and Boa, in their book College to Career, (p. 44), concur:

Many students who attend college have had little or no experience in the real world. Everything has been ordered for them...Four years of this kind of cloistered existence - and, in the case of the so-called perpetual student, it might be six, eight, or even 12 years - can explode in their faces when they suddenly confront the real world. This has happened again and again. The repercussions are not pleasant.

Service-learning opportunities can make a difference and help reverse this trend in many ways.

First, they can provide a clearer understanding of which courses are important and why. This creates a much sharper intellectual appetite in the student and allows him/her to develop educated selectivity in coursework and experience a realistic application that will relate to the "life role" of work (Barrett, et al., p. 14).

*The practice of the profession has to do with determining what knowledge is useful and how it may be applied. Such knowledge is best acquired by observation of professionals and by practice under their supervision. We who teach and prepare members of the helping professions do not have at our command the best means of facilitating the linking of knowing and doing, information and practice, conceptual framework and behavioral performance if we are limited to the classroom (Duley and Gordon, p. 5).*

Secondly, "by far the best way to sample a dish is to taste it...Nothing can beat experience". Working in a service-learning situation can give more insight into a career than all the brochures and testimonies in the world. The knowledge gained is invaluable (Shingleton and Bao, p. 91).

Thirdly, a single experience can provide insight for career options and alternatives in a given area of occupations. Practical experience in a hospital or clinic can open the eyes of the participant to health careers other than that of becoming a physician, including such fields as medical technology, physical therapy, hospital administration, dietetics, medical research, occupational therapy, etc. This experience can enable students to understand and be flexible to the availability of employment now and in the future.

John and Gordon in their handbook, College-Sponsored Experiential Learning (p. 7), support this notion by stating:

*It is necessary that we prepare people for economic adaptability. They should be prepared to keep their options open, to be on the lookout and ready to respond to new occupational opportunities and needs as they arise. More and more people are changing their occupations in the midst of their productive lives. We should equip people for a life in which they are able to explore job options and make judgments about them based on their identified and developed strengths, talents, values and past experience.*

Fourthly, and along the same vein, a service-learning situation will help the participant inventory the skills, knowledge and competencies which are relevant to the career or it will help the student gain new information and improve pre-professional skills (Angus, pp. 41-24). Dr. William C. Prentiss, chairman of the Social Science Department of Valencia Community College, agrees that "service-learning can be a large part of a student's education, because the experience not only makes the student more aware of his/her career needs, abilities and lack of abilities, but also heightens his/her awareness of the community in which he lives and will probably work" (Prentiss, p. 19).

#### Benefits of Service-Learning to the Institution

Colleges can reap various benefits from service-learning programs including: people and information resources for research projects; consultation dealing with the use of volunteers in research studies; learning laboratories beyond the range of physical facilities and financial capability of the college; the checking of relevance of training with actual job situations; an added learning dimension to the traditional classroom; an additional experienced evaluation from the community to the school's assessment of the student; re-orientation of the educative process to human concerns; and an improvement of university-community relations. Such a program also enables the college to provide optimum service to the community which is a primary mission of many universities (Yarrington, p. 16).

The Carnegie Commission has listed one of its goals for the 1980s as the establishment of service programs more widely and the exploration of ways to make college more valuable to students by combining study and service as an integral part of the college experience. "Rather than long extended formal education in advance, more

jobs require some basic skills and knowledge in advance and then a willingness to keep on learning and opportunities to learn." "Volunteer service-learning programs foster a life-style that prepares for a life-long mix of formal and informal learning." (Peterson, 1971, p. 71)

#### The Establishment of a Service-Learning Office

A Service-Learning Office within the university structure would most effectively fit under the auspices of the Provost. This would give programs autonomy from particular departments thus allowing for flexibility with various placements. A Service-Learning office would include positions for: credit, negotiated with professors and departments; internships, practical, and field experience, which require large blocks of time per week; and volunteer placements for students who desire positions for a variety of reasons. Programs would also provide entry level positions as well as advanced service requiring special knowledge and/or skills acquired through previous experiences. It is imperative that these options be available in order to meet the needs and demands of traditional and non-traditional students alike.

The size of the university would dictate the size of the Service-Learning Office. A central office may suffice for an entire institution; on the other hand, it may not. At Michigan State University, some departments are currently operating Service-Learning Offices. However, many departments want, but are not able to afford, this type of support unit. A central office could efficiently provide service-learning experiences for students within these departments, thus minimizing the duplication of time and expense compared to individual departmental efforts. To illustrate this point, programs established through the Office of Volunteer Programs at Michigan State University are presently being utilized by 42 departments for course requirements, departmental requirements, course options, career exploration, field experience, independent study, practical placements and occupational experience for various majors (Smith, et al., (C), pp. 2-3).

#### Conclusion

Interrelationships and interdependency between institutions and the world will be essential in the future. Developments beyond the classroom will enhance education for generations to come (Boyer, 1977). President Wofford of the State University of New York eloquently articulated the value of education in a symbiotic relationship with experience:

*The tragedy of the world is that those who are imaginative have but slight experience, and those who are experienced have feeble imaginations. Fools act on imagination without knowledge; pendants act on knowledge without imagination. The task of a university is to weld together imagination and experience.*

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