

EXTREME ENGAGEMENT

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University engagement is both a renewal of the civic mission of higher education and a bold direction in academic practice. (Bukardt, et. al. 2004, 1)

[T]here is considerable evidence that both moral and civic learning and academic learning more generally are at their most powerful when creatively combined. (Colby, et. al. 2003, 20)

The McMaster School for Advancing Humanity has provided the framework for the development of a model of undergraduate research and service learning at Defiance College that insists on the inseparability of academic excellence and civic engagement. The premise is not merely that community involvement and academic learning can coexist, but rather that learning is deepest when students can perceive its social benefits, and that student service work is most effective when grounded in rigorous academic preparation.

McMaster School projects are organized around research that responds to the needs of communities, almost always vastly under-served communities. The student-faculty McMaster projects rely upon pedagogical and curricular elements commonly recognized as necessary to the achievement of meaningful educational engagement, such as: structured experiential learning; active learning pedagogies; interdisciplinarity; problem-based learning; and learning communities. In putting these elements together with an imperative to "examine the root causes of human suffering through academic and applied research" and "to contribute actively through sponsored scholarship and service to the improvement of the human condition worldwide" (McMaster School Purposes), Defiance College through the McMaster School has set out to



WATER SAMPLING OF RAMGOAT CREEK, BELIZE. PHOTO BY SPIRO MAVROIDIS

engage its students in a way that is extreme both in degree (through work in such places as Phnom Penh) and in kind (through the intertwining of service and research).

The description of the McMaster School model as “extreme engagement” borrows ironically from the notion of “extreme sports.” As with sports which drop skiers out of helicopters or send hang-gliders off cliffs, extreme engagement takes its practitioners well out of their comfort zones and, in most cases, out of their home communities. Like the extreme athlete, students involved in these engagement projects frequently find themselves in situations which call upon psychic and physical resources they might not have known they possessed. Again like athletes who have pushed themselves beyond what they thought were their limits, students gain a sense of deep mastery and a willingness to trust in their own abilities that can change entirely their sense of limits or lack thereof.

However valuable this metaphor for expressing an intensity of experience, it mostly serves to highlight contrast. Extreme engagement as an educational model represents values and priorities diametrically opposed to those underlying extreme sports. For the practitioners of extreme sports, exotic locales and indigenous populations serve as the backdrop for

their activities, as the elements against which they test themselves and over which they must prevail. Extreme engagement represents the opposite end of a continuum of effective interaction – at least if we are doing it right: the challenges to be addressed are determined by the community's sense of its own needs; the efforts are focused on working and learning through respectful reciprocity; and the personal and academic growth students experience results not from isolation but from integration.

The term "extreme engagement" represents hope and warning, the former in the belief that the model of service-research described in this *Journal* takes the civic engagement project to a new level of academic and social benefit, and the latter through the need to remember always to balance the goal of providing profound and intense educational experiences for students with respect for local autonomy, dignity, and self determination.

SERVICE-BASED RESEARCH

Over the course of the three brief years the McMaster School has been in existence, a promising model for undergraduate research has emerged. As increasing numbers of students and faculty participate in McMaster School activities, the model will no doubt continue to evolve, but there are several components that speak to needs identified both from within academe and from without. While there are already numerous terms that partially describe the kind of academic engagement activities the McMaster School sponsors – service learning, community-based learning, etc. – there is value in emphasizing two terms in conjunction that are so often held in opposition: service and research. To argue in favor of service-based research is to keep both terms in play in a way that not only does not prioritize, but asserts their mutual complementarity.

As the first term in the equation, the emphasis on service determines the nature of the research project and delimits its parameters. Projects that are service-based will of necessity develop research questions very differently than those projects without a specific, immediate service agenda. In some ways, of course, all academic research serves humanity, potentially or ultimately, but in the context of undergraduate education, those connections may be hard for students to perceive and enact. Projects with an explicit service purpose demonstrate to undergraduate students how professional and disciplinary expertise can be put to use for the greater good. Moreover, projects whose goals include a direct service

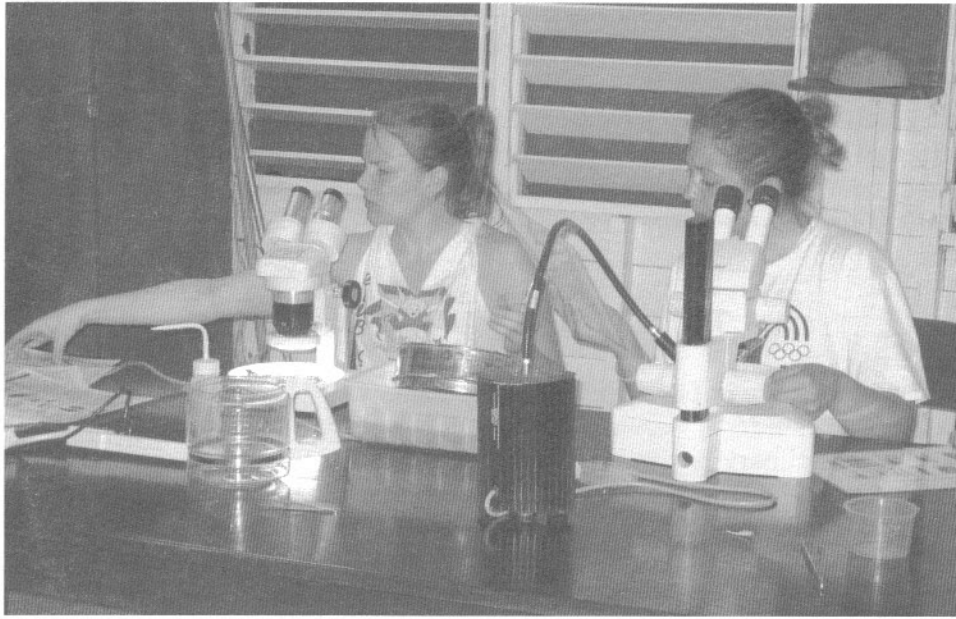
benefit to the community are more likely to structure connections with community members as partners and actors, rather than variables to be acted upon.

Without an emphasis on partnership, community-based learning can have the potential further to divide the university from the community. The imperative to avoid this pitfall is articulated well in *Colleges and Universities as Citizens* by Robert Bringle, Richard Games, and Edward Malloy:

Communities cannot be viewed as pockets of needs, laboratories for experimentation, or passive recipients of expertise if the academy is to develop meaningful partnerships. Institutions, as well as individual faculty, need to give attention to developing and maintaining healthy relationships that are enduring and mutually beneficial. If institutions of higher education are to be successful in becoming better citizens, they must discard the simplistic idea that to do so means learning how to disseminate expertise to the needy community in convenient doses. (Bringle, Games, and Malloy 1999, 9)

Emphasizing the need for direct service to be part of community-based research is not the only way to maintain focus on the concerns and perspectives of the community – nor indeed is it foolproof – but modifying “research” with “service-based” establishes a priority in principle that guides practice.

The linkage of service and research grounds the research enterprise, and at the same time expands the academic vigor of “service learning.” The academic component of service learning is not often enough linked to research within academic disciplines; instead it more frequently consists of general leadership and diversity education. While certainly valuable, these models of academic service learning do not give students professional expertise within their areas of academic specialization, and it becomes a challenge to engage those faculty members who teach largely within disciplinary frameworks. By bringing disciplinary expertise to bear on immediate and pressing community problems, service-based research has the potential both to engage faculty and students from all academic areas, and to elevate the quality of student research to ensure usable results for the community served.



WORKING AT HILLBANK RESEARCH STATION, BELIZE. PHOTO BY SPIRO MAVROIDIS

This form of academic research changes the work of faculty as dramatically as it changes the academic experience for students; while joint faculty-student research is a goal at many undergraduate institutions, the conditions under which service-based research take place make it fundamentally different from what most faculty members are used to, whether they conducted their graduate research in a lab or library. This model collapses the traditional tripartite division of “teaching,” “scholarship,” and “service” into one organic whole. The challenge and potential of such a shift has been observed by Judith Ramaley who notes that:

[B]roadening the definition of legitimate scholarly work to include the concept that a scholarly agenda can be created in partnership with community participants [allows] faculty and students . . . to establish the kind of community-based inquiry that can promote enhanced community capacity. . . . A second critical philosophical change . . . is the shift from an emphasis on teaching and the role of faculty as chief interpreters and transmitters of knowledge to an emphasis on the centrality of learning and the role of students as participants in scholarly work. This shift . . . opens up a richer repertoire of ways in which students can learn, while

at the same time offering something of value to the community. (Ramaley 2000, 234)

As Ramaley and others have pointed out, this transformation is difficult to effect. The benefits, however, are invaluable in terms of student learning, direct benefit to communities, and last but certainly not least, excellence in student-faculty research.

THE DISCIPLINARY PARADOX

To achieve the twin benefits of tangible community benefit and academic mastery for students, service-based research needs to be carried out within disciplinary research conventions. Teacher-training programs in countries where teachers have only slightly more education than their students must, to be responsible and effective, be grounded in educational best practices as reflected in disciplinary scholarship. Students working on environmental preservation projects must be trained in data gathering and analysis protocols in order to attain reliable and usable results. Those involved in a project to help establish social services for victims of domestic violence in a locale with no such services must have extensive knowledge of and be committed to professional standards. The immediacy and importance of service-based research requires that it rely upon established disciplinary practices.

At the same time, however, this kind of on-site community research cannot be fully effective without an interdisciplinary perspective. Because service-based research takes place within communities, with all attendant complications, the intellectual frameworks undergirding such projects must be broad and sensitive enough to account for multiple variables. Successful service-based research must be interdisciplinary for the simple reason that community problems do not limit themselves to questions asked and answerable only within strict disciplinary conventions. No matter what the locale, research that is sensitive to cultural, environmental, economic, historical, political, and religious contexts, among others, has greater educational and social benefit than research which, by the nature of the questions it asks, excludes consideration of these multiple frameworks.

The kind of research that addresses in a useful way the "root causes of human suffering," as the mission of the McMaster School states, contains an inherent paradox: the specialized training and skills of disciplinary experts are deployed most effectively when significant emphasis is placed

on knowledge and perspectives from other disciplines. Hence the adoption of a learning-community model within such projects does not emerge from an abstract academic value, but is a practical necessity.

This need for context does not, of course, exist only in service-based research, but within service-based research it is harder to ignore. Just as “service” and “research” are often seen as terms in tension with one another, likewise disciplinary expertise and interdisciplinary consideration of interrelationship are often seen as mutually exclusive or at least in competition. While it may not be possible for any one individual – faculty member or student – simultaneously to attain expertise that is both deep in one discipline and wide in many, a group of faculty and students working together on a project can bring this kind of varied expertise to the table. As the service-research model grows, such collaborations will be essential for practical as well as intellectual reasons.

EFFICACY, CITIZENSHIP, AND ADVANCING HUMANITY

The educational benefits service-based research can provide undergraduate students are myriad: careful professional mentoring through collaboration with faculty; hands-on experience in creating and carrying out professional research; the opportunity to work closely with and learn about diverse peoples and cultures; and the chance to do good work that desperately needs to be done. None of these single elements, however, is anywhere near as valuable as the overall effect on emergent professionals of a visceral understanding that they can make a difference through their work. It may well be that in the final analysis, the conviction of efficacy is the most important educational contribution this kind of opportunity provides students.

Many observers of the so-called “millennial generation” have observed that what can appear to be apathy on the part of young Americans is frequently a sense of powerlessness, that students today are not so much self-involved as utterly at a loss about how to intervene effectively in larger social processes that appear to them overwhelming and opaque. The result is frequently a kind of directionless volunteerism that expresses concern for social conditions, but little sense of their root causes or how to do anything about them.

Higher education has an obligation to intervene in this dynamic, if education for citizenship is seen as part of its mission. Alexander Astin argues that: “the leadership development challenge for higher education is

to empower students, to help them realize that they *can* make a difference, and to develop those special talents and attitudes that will enable them to become effective social change agents" (Astin 1999, 42). It is crucial to prove to students that they have the skills and opportunity to make a difference as about-to-be licensed social workers, as pre-service teachers, as aspiring accountants, as pre-meds, as artists.

One of the most valuable roles higher education can play in the overall intellectual and psychosocial development of students is to give them reasons to believe in themselves because of the preparation they have received. This is very different than reinforcing a sense of entitlement, which is an attitude that virtually precludes recognition of the responsibilities of citizenship and the discovery of efficacy. The message is not that students have the right to success by virtue of enrolling in college, but that they have the obligation to put to use what they learn for both their own benefit and the benefit of all the communities to which they belong, including the whole community of humankind.

Ultimately, what the model of extreme engagement asserts is that the proof of excellence in academic preparation is the willingness and ability of students to assume the responsibilities of citizenship in the context of a particular profession or discipline. If readiness for effective citizenship is the end goal, we can only hope to achieve it if we structure opportunities for undergraduate students to practice these skills under the mentorship



of older and more experienced practitioners, just as we do so with other skills we believe they need in order to be successful in a given academic field.

As a movement within higher education, the engagement initiative takes as given the importance of civic involvement but does not always stake a claim for the importance of higher education to the future of democracy. Carol Geary Schneider has called for making these claims and values more explicit and intentional.

[S]omething important to this entire discussion remains so tacit, so subtly implicit . . . that we are in danger of missing it altogether – and therefore, I sometimes fear, of losing it. That something is a direct and explicit engagement with the challenges, responsibilities, dangers, and internal contradictions of democratic principles and commitments in and of themselves. . . . [W]e have both the opportunity and the responsibility to help all our students discover meaningful connections between the knowledge, values, and skills they develop through their formal studies . . . and the democratic capacity, humanity, and sustainability of our shared world. (Schneider 2000, 119, 121)

Schneider's admonition stresses the importance of intentionally and carefully structuring connections between discrete academic subjects and the democratic values we cherish in principle but perhaps do not always teach our students how to practice.

The two McMaster School Purposes referenced in the opening paragraph – "to examine the root causes of human suffering" and "to contribute to the improvement of the human condition" – refer to the School's external benefits, its commitment to using the resources of an educational institution to meet pressing human needs. These purposes are essential, but the three others are equally important in their focus on preparing students to be the kind of citizens who can and will assume responsibility for making a positive difference in the human condition:

- ◆ To give students the knowledge and capacities to be active world citizens and to view themselves as members of the world community;
- ◆ To exchange, create and disseminate knowledge about successful models of active citizenship and public service; and,

- ◆ To create at Defiance College one of the nation's premier undergraduate educational programs with a focus on scholarship and service, with a special emphasis on developing an innovative approach to teaching.

These three interrelated emphases on global awareness, models of citizenship, and integrative pedagogy have the potential, we hope and believe, to develop in students the habits of mind and heart that will enable them to be effective advocates for humanity within their personal and professional lives.

The results so far are heartening indeed. The students whose lives have been touched by their participation in McMaster School service-research projects exhibit a depth of understanding of global problems and a passionate commitment to finding solutions that continually inspire and humble those of us who have been privileged to witness, and in small ways to facilitate, their transformative work.

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