Special Issue Editor's Notes IUJSL Volume 2 2012

Lane Graves Peny III
University of Canterbury

Billy O'Steen
University of Canterbury

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The Special Editors’ Notes

You can put a bed beneath my window,
You can put window right through my heart,
You can put heart inside this broken old chest,
You can put your head on my shoulder and rest.

-The Eastern, 2011

These poetic and telling lyrics by The Eastern, a Christchurch, New Zealand band, were inspired by and encapsulate the trials and tribulations the citizens of the city have faced since September 2010. Between then and the time of this publication, the city of Christchurch (population 400,000) has been devastated by over 10,000 earthquakes and aftershocks, which have led to its historic city center being closed to the public, the razing and deconsecrating of its heart – the Christ Church Cathedral, and the loss of 186 lives.

Because of these events and the subsequent responses of community members, the city is an evolving case study for resilience, innovation, and community engagement. The innovative and creative context during and after the earthquakes is aligning with what disaster sociologist Charles Fritz described as, "disaster provides a form of societal shock which disrupts habitual, institutional patterns of behavior and renders people amenable to social and personal change" (Fritz, 1996, p. 55). He goes on to note that the "essential effect of shock is to arrest habitual repetitive patterns of behavior and to cause a redefinition and restructuring of the situation in accordance with present realities" (p. 55). With regard to higher education institutions, this "arrest [of] habitual patterns of behavior" could be metaphorically viewed as a call to adjust the curricular and strategic response in order to lean toward the disaster, not shy away from it. This jolt can lead to new ideas, different perspectives, and a fundamental restructure of action and reaction according to immediate concerns.

From the University of Vermont's proactive response to Hurricane Irene to the University of Canterbury’s heroic account of a student movement after the earthquakes, the articles provided in this edition of The International Undergraduate Journal for Service-Learning, Leadership, and Social Change address how humans respond to natural disasters within the framework of higher education and the role of service learning and reflection in doing so. Pedagogies and curricula are some of the most flexible components a university has for being responsive to communities' needs. This is true both in times of disasters (natural or manmade) and in times of relative stability. Service-learning is an example of a flexible, events-based pedagogy that can serve as a conduit for connecting community needs with university resources. Students are a key resource all universities have and when these resources are connected with community needs through intentionally designed curriculum and reflection, the opportunity for an educative experience is strong.

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The Spark

In the days following the September 4, 2010 earthquake a 4th year law student named Sam Johnson made a call to fellow students through Facebook. The call was for students to get out into the community and help in any way possible. By the end of the month there were nearly 1,000 student volunteers who had dedicated their time to helping their battered community and within six months that number of volunteers had grown to nearly 9,000. Throughout the ongoing 18 months of earthquakes, the need for volunteers became greater and the Student Volunteer Army (SVA) was officially established and internationally recognized. A majority of these volunteers were students from the University of Canterbury (UC). With this, UC was presented an unparalleled opportunity. The university did not necessarily choose community engagement, community engagement chose the university and it chose the university through its students' actions. Clearly, when it comes to community engagement UC's students were ready, but what about UC?

In response to the SVA's initiative, we developed a course that would provide a forum for students to reflect upon the service they did and connect it to their respective disciplines. One student clearly recognized the value in this connection with the following statement, "By connecting service to something beyond it, it reinforces the value of the original act". This course is known as CHCH1101 (Rebuilding Christchurch: An Introduction to Community Engagement in Tertiary Studies) and serves as the cornerstone to service-learning and community engagement at UC and has seen over 300 students enroll and successfully complete it.

While we are collecting quantitative and qualitative data on a range of student development outcomes and variables, a poignant piece of qualitative data came through during the editing of this issue that is relevant to the student experience within service-learning environments. This passage comes from an unsolicited email that a study abroad student sent.

I just wanted to say thanks for today's class. I've been feeling a little disgruntled about this semester because the academia here is very different than I am used to at home, but almost each week, I leave your class feeling rejuvenated, excited, and passionate. It reminds me why I love school and why I value my education. I am so grateful that I decided to take CHCH101. I really enjoyed the discussion today, and I think it's so cool that you can start such engaging discussions. So, I guess that's all, but really... Thanks.

This particular passage clearly illuminates the value this student puts on dialogue and discussion. The service experience of a student is really the starting point. It is from here that the student can ask questions, have discussions, and make sense of their experiences and how those experiences relate to what they are learning within their curriculum. This is where the power of service-learning pedagogy manifests. The passage is a spotlight of this perspective; while the articles that follow are an even brighter illumination.
In times of trouble, hardship, and doubt, it is human resilience and response that counts most. It is a heightened sense of awareness and preparation crossed with a clear opportunity that can lead to great heights. On the matter of the societal shock a disaster can foster, Fritz (1996) identifies this as an opportunity to "arrest habitual repetitive patterns of behavior" and redefine our response. This edition of the Journal aims to present this heightened sense of awareness as enacted through service-learning and the clear opportunity universities have at their fingertips.

Co-Editors
Lane Graves Peny, III, PhD
Billy O'Steen, PhD
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University of Canterbury
Christchurch, New Zealand