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Editor's Notes

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The Editor's Notes

In a recent spread in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (January 12, 2018), Michale Anft asked a rather interesting question:

At a time when the “facts” surrounding socio-political disagreements are in dispute, and a politically divided nation worries that elected officials aren't up to solving seemingly political intractable problems, should colleges and universities be offering considerably more that service-learning opportunities to get students politically involved? (A8)

As Anft notes, there is a drive to infuse courses with “civic content” and shape class dialogue in courses across the curricula in part to look at complex socio-political issues. This drive to embed “civic engagement” across the curricula is part of the agenda at Campus Compact. Andrew Seligsohn, president of Campus Compact, has noted that half its member institutions have signed on to the organization's “civic action” plan and “more that 90 percent have dedicated administrative or funding to support civic-engagement campuswide”. (A9) It is also the part of the agenda for the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AACU). *Peer Review*, an AACU publication, has dedicated its Fall 2017 issue to “Civic Learning in the Major by Design”. This is not surprising. Lynn Pasquerella, president of AACU, argues that

The mission of a liberal education is to educate for democracy. Community service can promote equality by showing students how other people live. But I worry that if we don't find a way to make service learning available to a wider range of students, only those who can afford to buy the time for community service will benefit. I worry we'll end up with Jeffersonian artificial aristocracy, an intellectual oligarchy. (A10)

There is an intriguing balance that seems to be at play here – to somehow provide an experience for students through service-learning about the “real world” to introduce them to “people who are not like them” with course work that focuses on political thinking and how policy is made so students can become active on major social and political issues. (A10).

I will not speak to the implicit privilege at play. It is enough to say that the students at schools I have worked with are the “people who are not like them”. And, while I will not disagree with the concerns Anft reports on at schools like Pritzker, Tufts, Goucher, Rutgers, James Madison, and similar other schools, I argue that service-learning for the students at the schools I have worked at can prove to be a profound influence on their call to become civically engaged. As my colleague Joyce Fields will corroborate, we can intentional design service-learning into core experiences that challenge our students' beliefs that they cannot affect change, and call them to civic engagement. We can do this cost-effectively so that students at colleges without the financial resources can have transformative experience as students at the more privileged colleges. Through service-learning we can affect the equity gap.

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Let me illustrate. The students at the school Dr. Fields and I worked at, like so many schools across the county, come from underserved high schools. They bring with them a sense of disenfranchisement. We are all familiar with their demographics. We are all familiar that many of these students bring great potential but that potential is handicapped from their lack of social and cultural capital, the norming from their neighborhoods which pulls at them affecting their chances to succeed. We are familiar with these students sense being let down by systems they have come to not put faith in, and a genuine belief that “there is nothing we can do about it”. If liberal education and service-learning are thought to be transformative and educate for democracy, then our students presented the test to those assumptions.

We grounded our approach in two principles: first, we leaned on Thucydides to define politics – our activities with other people at every level, from our family and neighborhood to the broader community of our cities, state, nation, and our world. This let us lean on Mills’ “sociological imagination”. For Mills’ the sociological imagination “is a quality of mind that seems most dramatically to promise an understanding of the intimate realities of ourselves in connection with larger social realities.” (p. 15) As Hoop (2009) has argued, we can use students’ lives-as-text to help them understand how their personal “issues” are affected by institutional arrangements.

We designed a “core-within-the core”. All students would take a Sophomore and Junior Seminar. The Sophomore seminar was designed as a service-learning course, focusing on issues of diversity, gender, and social justice. The theme of each course was decided by the individual faculty. Service-learning was designed collaboratively with the community partners linked to each class. The common dynamic across classes was that students were put into a problem-based learning didactic where they would have to think with ethics, public policy, cultural studies to deal with the “fuzzy problems” our community partners had them engage.

The Junior Seminar inverted the process. This course focused on the viability of servant leadership against the context of transactional and transforming leadership. It also explored the context for social change. But the experiential component was different. Students had to design a semester-long service-learning project that would address a need in their communities. They had to go through the same steps that we do – meeting with community partners; delineating a community concern that both a class and the community could work on; and coming to grips with the problematic “messiness” of working with community members to agree on a workable solution. They had to struggle with trying to push social change for a common good as emergent, transformative and projectable (Reeler, 2007). Their service projects reflected their negotiations with the communities in which they lived.

The reflective prompts in each course were designed to foster their sociological imaginations.

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It was not just seeing if our students could tie learning in class with what they experienced in their service with community partners. If we hoped to create an experience that would call our students to civic engagement, our students had to experience personally a sense that “we can do something about it”. Did we succeed? Here is what our students said:

Until being introduced to Sandel, the homeless shelter, and the class, I was a “victim”. I never took the time to form opinions of very important matters or question the present. I either listened to what others thought about the topic or was ignorant to the fact. This class has not given me the perspective where I now have a choice.

I have signed my fair share of petitions and it all accounts for nothing...I lacked confident [sic] in the power of one. I found myself believing I can make a difference. I have the potential to change the educational system in South Caroling. I have the power to lobby for change in the gender discrimination in family courts, and I simply have the power to lead.

I found this class hard to grasp at first because I was thinking about every issue from the black and white perspective, not discovering yet how I had been normed to do so. I started dealing with issues in the “grey” or “make it messy for ya” area. The challenging of a person comes with a certain risk. Either that person will become offended and deny the truth heading their way, or they will face it with open arms and kneel at the altar of humility.

Service-learning empowers. Our students gained self-efficacy. They challenged their norming and constraints, and learned to self-author. Through service-learning they challenged their own equity gaps. The experienced, embraced and now know in tangible ways that old adage – they can be the change they want to see – being a servant leader to themselves and to the community in which they live. This is the call to civic engagement.

--Ned Scott Laff, Ph.D.--

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