

The International Undergraduate Journal For Service-Learning, Leadership, and Social Change

Volume 9 | Issue 1

Article 2

November 2019

Editor's Notes

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Recommended Citation

Opdyke, Jaime M.A. (2019) "Editor's Notes," *The International Undergraduate Journal For Service-Learning, Leadership, and Social Change*: Vol. 9: Iss. 1.

Available at: <https://opus.govst.edu/iujsl/vol9/iss1/2>

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The Editor's Notes

When I was in 4th grade, I remember accompanying my father to his mysterious 8-5 job. I never knew what he did all day – and to be honest I still don't – but I remember the excitement and anticipation of joining him for "Take Your Daughter to Work Day". My father has a Ph.D. in Computer Science and, at the time, worked for Bell Laboratories. The purpose of this event was to expose women to the STEM fields and specifically to see other women working in technology.

What I recall most clearly was a session entitled "Peanut Butter and Jelly Programming" in which all the daughters would be broken into teams and have to give step-by-step instructions to a "robot" on how to make a PB+J sandwich. Easy enough, right? However, as children we were unable to understand just how detailed we needed to be for a robot to understand our commands. For example, a robot did not know how to open a bag of bread, so we needed to give detailed instructions on where the bread was, how to pick it up, and how to open the zip tie. This demonstration ended with a big mess of peanut butter and jelly all over the floor, demonstrating that computer programmers, similar to robots, needed to be specific in their commands for their end product to turn out correctly. It also suggested that robots may not so easily replace human beings as many suggest. It not just about an algorithm to learn that makes us different from AI as it might be about our ability to speculate, think critically/creatively, and, sometimes, our spontaneity that emerges when we work together to find unexpected solutions.

As a student affairs practitioner, I see similar themes when working with our (primarily) Generation Z students. They are the first generation that genuinely worries about their future careers being overtaken by robots. Thus, universities are tasked with preparing this unique generation for jobs that currently do not exist. So how do we, as student affairs practitioners/educators/non-profit stakeholders, prepare students to be successful in an ever-changing environment? We need to focus on teaching our students a skillset that will challenge them to "see" what they do not expect.

In my parent's generation, they were taught that the 3 Rs: reading, writing, and arithmetic – these were the skills vital to academic and career success. In the 21st century, these skills are simply expected. Generation Z must have an even more refined skillset to be successful, including the National Education Association's (NEA) "Four Cs": critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity (2019). With this skill set, our students can be more successful in a highly competitive job market.

Fortunately, service-learning provides opportunity to develop and use all four Cs. Service learners use critical/creative thinking when tasked to brainstorm multiple solutions for a

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community issue, including the pros and cons of each approach. Communication among service learners, community partners and university stakeholders is vital for any service to be planned and implemented. Students can also learn this skill-set across disciplines right here on campus! Assisting a student government leadership team in planning a large-scale campus-wide program can role-model proper communication skills, including understanding the use of communication platforms and the importance of timely responses. Through all of this, our students learn to “see” the unexpected.

Collaboration requires an ability to make compromises for the common good and a desire to see a team, not just an individual, succeed. As a long-term Residence Life professional, I’ve been involved with countless campus move-in days. This requires not only the time and planning by professional staff, but also a large-scale coordinated effort by both college faculty and staff, student volunteers, and community partners. The cumulative energy, optimism, and desire for a positive outcome allow parents to feel at ease leaving their students hundreds of miles from home.

Creativity allows service learners to see possibilities they otherwise could never imagine, including solutions to problems they didn’t even know existed. As an AmeriCorps VISTA, I was tasked with fighting Type II Diabetes in South Carolina. While this task is massive, I worked with my mentor, Dr. Laff, to brainstorm small steps to chip away at a larger problem. We used our social networks to create strategic community partnerships, allowing us to have free space for a community garden and obtain thousands of dollars in grant money to financially compensate local South Carolinians to conduct middle school yoga classes. These creative solutions solved two neighborhood problems: first, an unused plot of land turned into a massive, free garden, and second, employing someone who had trust within the community and targeting teenagers to work on their health prior to it becoming a larger issue.

But as important, from the Four C’s we learned to see the unexpected. One of our community partners was the Department of Family and Preventative Health at the University of South Carolina Medical School. Their clinic was situated in the low-income community we had hoped to serve. Family and Preventative Medicine could not understand why people in the community were not taking advantage of the service they could get through the clinic. When we listened to people in the community, we discovered that the clinic needed to consider the social and cultural milieu of the community if they wanted to succeed. For the clinic to succeed, they had to bring the churches on board. The people in the community trusted their pastors. By working with the churches to create health and wellness committees and running wellness programs through the churches, we were able to develop better programming that affected the overall health and well-being of the community.

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Notice how I didn't mention academic majors or career paths in the above examples. None of these require prerequisite classes or predetermined skillsets. Rather, any of our students can develop the Four Cs, and in fact, it is our responsibility to ensure that they do. When other professionals or students ask why service-learning matters, those of us working in the field have a plethora of examples we can give. Not only do we have an ethical responsibility to the communities in which our campuses reside, but we have an outstanding opportunity to future-proof our student service learners for any career they might want to pursue. Our students can outlast robots, at least for a short while, if we help them develop the Four Cs.

Works Cited

National Education Association. (2019). *An educator's guide to the "four Cs": Preparing 21st century students for a global society*. [online] Retrieved from: <http://www.nea.org/tools/52217.htm> [Accessed 6 Nov. 2019].

– Jamie Opdyke, MA –