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Service After Being The Served

Service learning is a process that is much like composting, it is slow, requires the proper pairing of materials, and above all dirty. Field or dirty research requires actual experience within a field which is equally important as the pure research behind it. However not all pure academia matches the dirty field experiences. Within an issue area various different types of academia must be matched with a nonprofit that shares similar methodology in order for effective research to occur. In order to apply academic research to a job within the world, experience and time are essential. The process of time in particular plays a significant role in field based research due to the grandiose issues being taken up by those involved. Experience within the community is also an essential aspect of a successful pairing between an academic and a nonprofit. If the researcher is not experienced within the community they are serving then more time is required in order to adjust. In order to ground this assertion in reality I will look at three community based organizations I worked with in the capital district of New York, The Radix Center, AVillage, and Capital Roots.

My own background, living on food stamps, landscaping, and being homeless were all better preparation for my service learning than any academic experience I have had. Composting is an academic pursuit, it requires biology, ecology, and chemistry in order to understand the process, but it is not a clean one. Working within actual issue areas, even from an academic lens, requires getting your hands dirty. This summer I engaged in research into food waste in New York's Capital District. I was not expecting what I found when I entered the field. The preliminary research I had done made it seem as though food recovery was a cut and dried issue that any informed person could take part in. I was swiftly informed of the contrary.

I remember the moment that it hit me that I was no longer engaging in pure academic work, the moment my real life began to mix with my academic life. I was heading to meet my first community partner in the south end of Albany when I passed the South Capital Rescue Mission, the homeless shelter I spent a couple nights in about two years prior. It was gratifying to walk past there with a sense of pious purpose. At the same time it was humbling to be there, it allowed me to remember the reality of those living with food insecurity. To remember those shelter lunches of spaghetti with meat sauce, the delicacy of a sugar cookie, and the harsh taste of mass cooked brown beans. Memories flooded back of spending hours in my mother's home.

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with no food in the fridge, waiting for her to return with a bodega sandwich or a slice of pizza because she didn't have time or energy to cook after a ten hour work day. These experiences more than anything in academia prepared me for the research at hand. The USDA can tell you a million times that 40% of food produced in this country is wasted, but what does that mean until a face is added to it?

The human element of an issue is the most overlooked aspect of any community issue. A call to action is rather easy to make from an armchair with numbers and hypothetical possibilities in your hand. It is to act, to make what is only possibility reality that allows us to truly address an issue. Action however is problematic when we only understand an issue from the perspective of the abstract. Even some philosophers, in particular Emmanuel Levinas, understand the importance and believe that the human face relays infinite ethical responsibility to the other. This line of thinking articulates the true divide between the pure academia and the dirty field experience. The question however remains, what shall we do when face to face with this infinite responsibility, how do I take hold of my responsibility. Within the issue of food insecurity the answer may seem simple, provide them with food. That however does not solve the issue from the perspective of the other. Providing a meal only serves to quench the insecurity of food momentarily, it does not provide a sustainable life source. There’s an old colloquial saying, give a man a fish he eats for a day, teach a man to fish he eats for life. But what is teaching a man to fish in a modern society? In order to find that answer we must dig deeper into the dirty compost pile of food insecurity.

The socioeconomic issues of today leaves a man lacking not only in the knowledge of how to fish but also without a fishing pole and a river to fish in. When I walk the streets of the South End I see people everywhere who want to eat better, they want healthy food. Looking at the stores as you walk to the Radix center what do you see? It is not supermarkets but bodegas, McDonalds, and fried food. The ground in the area is toxic due to decades of industrial practices. These issues are all considered academically but the reality of seeing their struggles in play on a day to day basis creates something that is beyond any one academic field, beyond academia as a whole. Issues of great magnitude such as food security require not only academic intervention but practical intervention from community partners. In this sense that is the strength of Community Engaged research, it allows for a holistic picture of an issue by combining the academic and the practical in the world.

Community Engaged research is involved in both the pure knowledge of studies and experimentation with the real applicability of working for an organization or as an individual. This approach to problem solving proves effective for many tangible issues within society. However there is a problem to this approach, consider the combination of Nitrogen and Carbon
in a composting barrel. If you mix too much Nitrogen with too little Carbon you will not produce viable soil. The same is true for academic fields and non-profit organizations. To illustrate this I will use my experience with the primary three non-profits I worked with.

The Radix Ecological Sustainability Center is a micro-farm located in the South End of Albany. It is a non-profit organization which aims to promote ecological sustainability practices. The Radix center also conducts a Community Composting Initiative which entails 30 Albany residents, 3 coffee shops, and one bar and restaurant. Radix is run in a very day to day manner focusing on the environment and education. Their work is also very day to day oriented in their work style this makes any discipline that requires long term planning incompatible with them. They also do not quantify their results outside of themselves due to their focus on sustainability. What I mean by their focus on sustainability is to say that all of their products are used at the farm itself. Their food waste for example is either used to feed their livestock or turned into soil via composting barrels, that soil is then used to create their garden beds. The Radix Center pairs well with academic fields that are critical thinking, education, and environmentally based, or any combination of the three. These skill sets shine through most in the environmental studies, the education, and philosophy fields.

The Radix center also constructs its own garden beds, greenhouses, chicken coops, and other farm related structures. These structures are built on site using both architecture and engineering techniques. These structures provide the backbone for the initiatives that are undertaken at the center. Due to the nature of their do it yourself construction, engineering and architecture would be good fits for combining efforts with the Radix Center.

What I have laid out thus far are the obvious fits for the initiatives Radix Center are currently undertaking. However to look further at expanding their reach the Radix Center needs to improve their community awareness. One way to do this in my experience developing and distributing flyers for the Radix center many people within the community are lacking in awareness of what they do. In order to work through this problem the Radix Center ought to be paired up with someone from the Marketing field. A marketing intern or employee with a background in marketing would provide the Radix Center with the ability to reach out to their community and further improve their mission of educating the public on environmental sustainability practices. This increase in community awareness could also spur further funding from both the government and private donors allowing greater expansion of their mission.

A Village is another non-profit organization also based in the South End of Albany. It was founded and is primarily ran by Willie White, a community organizer born and raised in the South End. His presence has spurred many major projects within the community including the
yearly Mississippi Day and the South End Farmer’s Market which for which Radix provides produce for. AVillage has an exceptional community outreach spearheaded by Willie White. From my experience walking around the South End you can’t go ten feet without someone smiling at the sight of Willie. AVillage also has strong political connections, on multiple occasions Willie showed up in a suit and tie having just come from a meeting with the Mayor whom he helped get elected. AVillage has a strong grounding within their community.

Willie White himself is the heartbeat of AVillage however the beat is sometimes irregular. Willie White requires more skills in organizational behavior. AVillage ought to be paired with a management or organizational behavior specialist. The organizational behavior would allow him to make better use out of his already very valuable time. AVillage would also greatly benefit from a specialist in law advising Willie on policy related issues. Having a legal advisor would add more power to Willie’s already strong political advocacy. This relationship would provide a strong coalition for policy change that can positively affect the South End as a community.

Capital Roots is a food based non-profit located in Troy New York. My research led me to them as a primary player in the Capital District’s food systems. They operate various programs including the Veggie Mobile, Squash Hunger, and the Produce Project. Their programs are well established in the Capital District and Capital Roots has strong name recognition in the area. When I first visited Capital Roots they had just moved into a newer, larger facility. This larger facility caused increased ambition at the company which was reflected by both the staff and the director Amy Klein. For instance their Squash Hunger program aims to increase its yield of 200,000 pounds of culled produce in 2014 to 600,000 pounds in 2015. This can be largely attributed to the increase in storage capacity at their new site. Capital Roots has a far reach in the Capital District working in Albany, Troy, Rensselaer, and Schenectady. Capital Roots is a highly effective non-profit in the Capital District but its operations could benefit from an academic pairing.

A Political Scientist would be of great benefit to Capital Roots. The organization itself has great name recognition within the Capital District including among other non-profits. However Capital Roots does not at the moment have direct impact in local or state policy. Adding a political scientist would allow for the organization to more adequately assess itself and its position within local politics. Capital Roots currently provides both access to produce and education about nutrition and produce. The primary three issues for food security are access, education, and policy. In order to more holistically address the issue of food insecurity Capital Roots would benefit from politically minded academics. The legitimacy of the non-profit
provided by its successful access and education programs would allow Capital Roots to hold major power in any discussion about food insecurity on the local level. This would greatly increase the company's sway within the Capital Region and potentially allow them to expand their efforts to fight insecurity outside of the Capital District.

The three examples of community based organizations benefiting from the intervention of an academic field into their organization would greatly strengthen the respective organization. The task of integrating an academic into a non-profit requires two things which are often not accounted for, experience and time. However the experiences and time schedule of academics are often wildly different. In order for an academic to integrate into a community based organization the academic must be fully comfortable in the community he or she is serving. My time living in South Capital Rescue Mission prepared me for my role within the South End of Albany. This unique perspective allowed me to spend less time getting comfortable and adjusted to the community and more time working on the issue at hand. For researchers who enter communities that are completely foreign to their experiences more time is necessary to adjust. The rhythm of time that is experienced in the academic field differs vastly from the time patterns in the nonprofit world. In my four years at Siena I have never had to wait longer than two business days for a professor to respond to an email. When attempting to make contact with any non-profit you find yourself spending days, sometimes a couple of weeks, waiting for an email to be returned. Many times an email chain will suddenly break and that contact will be lost potentially forever. Even when initiatives begin to take form it takes months of preparation, grant writing, organizing, and assessing in order for it to move forward. Within academic world things are often much more immediate due to the pre-set system that has already been put into place. The issue of time plays a large role in the world of nonprofits due to the busy nature of their often understaffed staff as well as waiting on funding and approval from the government. Nonprofits are often following models that would be considered experimental or untested. Organizations attempting to proceed from the unknown struggle far more with time management and work excesses. Capital Roots is currently in the process of tripling its capacities across the board due largely to an infrastructure expansion. While riding the Veggie-mobile with two of their lower level employees they articulated their personal struggles caused by the amount of commitment required for a successful expansion. They explained that both of them were moonlighting as waitresses and bartenders in the area in order to make ends meet. The combined stresses of real world issues such as lack of income along with the ambition of Capital Roots placed these employees in a compromising position. They could not simply dedicate the entirety of their working life to one goal. Rather they were scattered in their ambitions, forcing them to prioritize the essential aspects of the job. The essential aspects of the job are naturally the day to day processes which are essential to functionality. When the focus becomes placed largely on the day to day functioning minor projects and ambitions begin to slow in progress. This slow

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progress however is still progress, Capital Roots current expansion is a successful venture. When composting waiting for food scraps and wood chips to turn into soil is essential to the process, just like composting patience is a key aspect of conducting community based research.

My experience doing research this summer has led me to the conclusion that there are three things which are essential to Community Based Research, matching academic fields with community partners, lived experience in the community, and time. These three factors greatly affect the effectiveness of community based research. If the field of study does not fit the goals and mission of the non-profit then no legitimate research can be carried out. Experience of the researcher within the community is required for the issue at hand to be fully assessed. Without this understanding of the community no action to remedy will be adequate. Finally time is an essential factor due to the nature of the nonprofit world. Overall community engaged research requires the researcher to step out of their pure academia, stick their hands in a compost pile and get dirty.