September 2014

Editor's Notes IUJSL Volume 4 Issue 1 Fall 2014

Ned S. Laff

Follow this and additional works at: https://opus.govst.edu/iujsl

Part of the Higher Education Commons, and the Service Learning Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://opus.govst.edu/iujsl/vol4/iss1/2

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by OPUS Open Portal to University Scholarship, Governors State University, University Park, Illinois. It has been accepted for inclusion in The International Undergraduate Journal For Service-Learning, Leadership, and Social Change by an authorized editor of OPUS Open Portal to University Scholarship. For more information, please contact opus@govst.edu.
The Editor’s Notes

I have just made a move from a small liberal arts college in South Carolina. And with any transition, there come moments of reflection. Mine have been triggered by Richard Arum’s and Josipa Roksa’s commentary in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (Sept. 12, 2014). Arum and Roksa challenge colleges and universities to do more for their students. As they put it, rather than challenging students who come in with limited academic interests and overly narrow ideas about the purpose of college, we too often ask little in terms of commitment and often little in terms of direction. Institutions rarely impress upon student that college is not just about obtaining a credential for a job, but also about accepting adult responsibility and participating in democratic citizenship.

I will admit that I do struggle with much of what they write about in *Academically Adrift* and in their new text, *Aspiring Adults Adrift*.

Their new study focuses on 1000 students whom they first introduced to us in *Academically Adrift*. They tracked these students for two years after they graduated and their findings should give anyone pause. Arum and Roska note that 23% of their cohort group either to be underemployed or unemployed; 24% were living at home, and 74% reported receiving continual financial assistance from their parents. But what Arum and Roska argue is that they do not believe we can point to the pace of the economic recovery as cause. Rather, they argue that the group they followed were struggling to make a “successful transition” to “adulthood” and that colleges “need to do a better job improving 21st-century skills such as critical thinking and complex reasoning”.

Arum and Roska point the finger at colleges and universities. They claim that colleges are more interested in building amenities to compete for student enrollments rather than designing rigorous academic programs and improving classroom instruction. And, they contend that we only make “half-hearted” attempts to assess student learning outcomes, focused more on assuaging the Council for Higher Education Accreditation’s regional organizations.

At times, I do find their arguments compelling. All of us, at one time or another, have had a taste of this on our campuses. And all of us have worked with students who seem to be disengaged in their learning. But I am also leery about the arguments Arum and Roska make. Regardless of the students, whether actively engaged with their learning and on campus or actively “disengaged” I have seen a change happen when they take a service-learning course,
even if they do so “kicking and screaming”. Consistently in the service-learning courses I have worked on with my colleagues we have found a similar set of transformative outcomes. Students express experiencing an internal re-direction deepening their sense of self; a deepening in their ethical commitments; a feeling of involvement in something greater than themselves; and a sense of personal efficacy. They express a deepening sense of their personal values and commitment to civic engagement. These outcomes were regardless of where students started from.

Service-learning is an open-ended encounter with learning. William Perry noted that by introducing students to the open-endedness of liberal learning we provide them a means “to orient themselves in the world through an understanding of acts of knowing and valuing that is more than intellectual and philosophical. It is a moral endeavor in the most personal sense” (Perry, p. 54). In this, they begin to experience Carol Gilligan’s (1981) “ethic of care.” Fueling this can start with service-learning. Perhaps we can address Arum’s and Roska’s by simply requiring a service-learning course in our core curriculum and one in each of our academic fields of study. In doing this we can help all our students travel to the edge of where their familiar and the unusual meet.

Works Cited


--Ned Scott Laff--