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Bridging Two Worlds: Professional Service and Service Learning

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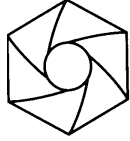
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Bridging Two Worlds:
Professional Service and Service Learning

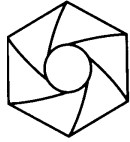
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About the New England Resource Center for Higher Education

The New England Resource Center for Higher Education (NERCHE), founded in 1988, is dedicated to improving colleges and universities as workplaces, communities, and organizations. NERCHE addresses this issue through think tanks, research, consulting, professional development, and publications.

Abstract

Authors of this essay, also published in the NSEE Quarterly, argue that proponents of service-learning and faculty professional service should join forces to pursue a common agenda of community outreach. At a time when colleges and universities are being urged to help solve society's problems, the faculty represents a virtually untapped resource. Certainly, there are presently - and always have been - individual faculty working in the community as consultants or as supervisors and guides for students. If the campus is to make a significant impact, however, the institution must be able to deploy departments, divisions, interdisciplinary centers and institutes to work on community problems. The current system of promotion and tenure stands as a real impediment to faculty involvement in community outreach. By joining forces to create partnerships or "bridges," advocates for service-learning and faculty professional service can work to expand the current promotion and tenure system to provide incentives and rewards for faculty work in this area.

Authors of this essay, also published in the NSEE Quarterly, argue that proponents of service-learning and faculty professional service should join forces to pursue a common agenda of community outreach. At a time when colleges and universities are being urged to help solve society's problems, the faculty represents a virtually untapped resource. Certainly, there are presently - and always have been - individual faculty working in the community as consultants or as supervisors and guides for students. If the campus is to make a significant impact, however, the institution must be able to deploy departments, divisions, interdisciplinary centers and institutes to work on community problems. The current system of promotion and tenure stands as a real impediment to faculty involvement in community outreach. By joining forces to create partnerships or "bridges," advocates for service-learning and faculty professional service can work to expand the current promotion and tenure system to provide incentives and rewards for faculty work in this area..¹

The time to bridge these traditions is now. Institutions of higher education all across the country are talking about, planning for and embarking on restructuring efforts that fundamentally change the way they do business. Leaders of higher education are being asked to connect the work of the academy to the social, economic, and environmental challenges beyond the campus. Students are demanding relevance in the curriculum to prepare them to enter the increasingly difficult job market they face upon graduation. By joining forces, proponents of service learning and advocates for redefining faculty roles and rewards can address these challenges and have a stronger impact than either group can do on its own.

The best linkages are those that are built up from both sides, meeting in the middle. This is also true for real bridges and for metaphorical ones such as when two organizations, two movements join in a common task. Recent discussions on faculty professional service and outreach may be just the bridge which can join the realm of service learning with the realm of redefining scholarship. When we use the terms faculty professional service and outreach, we mean work based on the faculty member's professional expertise which contributes to the outreach mission of the university. Our definition does not include those service activities that can be characterized as good citizenship both on or off campus.

The Left Bank -- Service Learning and Experiential Education

Members of NSEE and others have for many years been strong advocates of the use of practical experience as a source of student learning. The movement has a number of distinguishable dimensions. CAEL emphasizes the assessment of prior experiential learning by adults returning to higher education. NSEE fosters all forms of active and experiential learning and promotes principles of practice to support professionals in the design, implementation and research of a wide range of experiential programs. Campus Compact has given a strong boost to what has become known as service learning, which focuses on the reflective component of public and community service, and on the role of faculty as mentors and monitors for students enrolled in service programs.

Proponents of service learning have stressed the importance of creating a strong link between the service experience and classroom work, requiring substantial cooperation by the faculty. Advocates like Benjamin Barber of Rutgers argue that: "Bridging the worlds of the classroom and the street gives teeth to abstract lessons and critical edge to practical activity."¹ Others like Lee Shulman, have suggested that public and community service might even be thought of as the missing clinical component of the liberal arts and sciences.² These arguments tend to focus on the role of faculty as sponsors of student service initiatives and integrators of that service with the classroom experience. Only recently has there been any appreciable discussion of the value of having members of the faculty themselves directly involved as active participants in the service or external outreach. Such involvement is not essential to all forms of experiential learning, but adds a whole new dimension when students and faculty become collaborators on a joint project.

The Right Bank -- Rethinking Faculty Roles and Rewards

Those calling for higher education reform have focused on the need to break free from the old research vs. teaching debate and think more generally about what it means to be a scholar, to define the elements of scholarly work and how it is rewarded. Faculty, as the argument goes, driven by a system which rewards research to the exclusion of all other activities, have focused on research and publication to the detriment of teaching students and responding to society's needs. Earlier calls for a broader conception of scholarship and a more balanced system of faculty incentives and rewards³ received a major boost by the publication of Scholarship Reconsidered by Ernest Boyer of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. In this widely read report, Boyer urged that we use the term "scholarship" to capture the full scope of academic work. According to Boyer, scholarship -- of which basic research is one form -- is characterized by a "...stepping back from one's investigation, looking for connections, building bridges between theory and practice, and communicating one's knowledge effectively to students."⁴

Bridging the Two Banks -- Professional Service

We believe that faculty involvement in professional service and outreach bridges the worlds of service learning and faculty roles and scholarship. American higher education has historically been characterized by its emphasis on outreach, on service by faculty based on their professional expertise. A well known British observer of American higher education remarked that "the great American contribution to higher education has been to dismantle the walls around the campus."⁵

Though the most striking manifestation of this external orientation has been in agriculture, a commitment to outreach existed in all fields at the turn of the century. The role of faculty was to apply knowledge not only to the instructional task but to the solution of problems outside the academy. But with the growing dominance of the imported model of pursuing knowledge for its own sake, the commitment to professional service waned in most fields other than agriculture.

For the past decade or more, a number of us have been bemoaning the mismatch between societal needs and higher education's priorities, and have been calling for a renewed commitment across the board to service which is part of every institution's rhetoric and so little part of its reality.⁶ More recently, our voices have been joined by a swelling chorus urging colleges and universities to turn outward again, to recognize their obligation to use their intellectual resources to help ameliorate the intractable problems of today's society. In a recent issue of the Chronicle of Higher Education, Ernest Boyer writes: "Higher education and the

larger purposes of American society are inextricably intertwined... A commitment to service as well as teaching and research was never more needed than now... Higher education has more intellectual talent than any other institution in our culture. Today's colleges and universities surely must respond to the challenges that confront society."⁷

The resurgence of interest in service is not surprising. It reflects the condition of the world around us. Never before has society had as great a need for the rapid and effective application of knowledge. Never before has it been so important for higher education to play a major role in this effort.

We are living in a knowledge-intensive society in which economic development depends on the rapid absorption and assimilation of new ideas, discoveries and methodologies. The rapidity with which knowledge changes and becomes obsolete leaves no time for the traditional "trickle-down" approach by which new knowledge gradually finds its way from scholarly publications to those who use it in the real world.

We are also living in a time of wrenching societal problems. We are in desperate need of bringing together ideas from different disciplines and perspectives in order to respond to what William Greiner, President of the State University of New York at Buffalo, has called "a chaos of cries for help, understanding, new frameworks and ideas and solution."⁸ The challenge to societal problems cannot be met by higher education alone. But colleges and universities are the institutions dedicated to the advancement of knowledge.

Finding Common Ground

To date, those who call for greater emphasis on - and therefore also rewards for - professional service and outreach to the community have largely focused on meeting external needs. Because of this, they have not sought out systematic connections to the advocates of service learning. But attention is beginning to be given to the internal benefits of faculty involvement in professional outreach and service, namely revitalized teaching and opportunities for a new kind of applied research⁹.

As soon as one begins to think about it, the various ways in which faculty professional service contributes substantially to the quality and intellectual vitality of a college or university become obvious. Professional service, if properly carried out, does not treat knowledge as an inert commodity. It is not a one way flow of information and technical assistance to external clients, but a two-way communication that provides substantial opportunities for new information and new insights. A recent report from Michigan State University points out that "[o]utreach affords ... windows on current reality, and the perspectives gained through these windows inform a scholar's understanding of the contemporary meaning, value, and use of their disciplinary or professional knowledge. Outreach also raises fascinating and important questions. As a result, on-campus research and teaching become

more vital, more alive, and the intellectual life of the whole university is more stimulating."¹⁰

A further - and perhaps more important - benefit of faculty involvement in professional service is the impact on the quality of instruction. Professional service provides opportunities for faculty to understand first hand the relationship of their discipline to the complexity of actual situations. It substantially enhances a faculty member's ability to teach future and present practitioners, and to mentor students involved in various practical settings. And above all, faculty involvement in professional service provides opportunities for student participation as assistants or interns. In other words, it can provide that extra dimension of students working with faculty as a team in a joint undertaking. One of the strongest proponents for this "academically based public service" is Ira Harkavy of the University of Pennsylvania. According to Harkavy, academically based public service "stimulates professors to rethink what they do when they try to help students learn better how to learn and it stimulates students to rethink what they do when they try to learn better how to learn." ¹¹

Conclusion

Faculty professional service is the bridge that links the realm of service and experiential learning on the one side with proponents of rethinking scholarship and faculty roles on the other side. Clearly, both groups have closely related and complementary interests. We believe that the time has come to explore how initiatives from both sides can be extended and reinforced. To do so is to our mutual advantage. For those engaged in boosting institutional as well as individual commitment to outreach and professional service, its potential for student learning is a powerful argument to use to convince faculty and administrators. Similarly, those interested in creating more opportunities for service and service learning can benefit from the current interest in rethinking how faculty spend their time and the mounting pressure for institutions to serve the communities in which they reside.

There a number of ways that such collaborations could be structured depending on the campus and individuals involved. For example, service-learning professionals might invite faculty to work on joint projects, to serve as advisors for student projects, or to work on a joint presentation at a national conference. Faculty might engage service-learning staff to find out what relationships with the community have been established and how their research/professional interests might be linked to community needs. Clearly, such efforts to bridge different realms within the college or university take time and attention if they are to really work.

Our common goal should be to have more and more colleges and universities integrate service into their core institutional priorities and to see that their actions match their rhetoric. Widespread acceptance of experiential learning as well as faculty service and outreach will both flourish when they are recognized as two essential, mutually reinforcing facets of an institutional commitment to link theory and practice, campus and community.

Endnotes

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