Community-Centered Service Learning: Moving from Doing For to Doing With

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Community-Centered Service Learning

Moving From Doing For to Doing With

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Many colleges and universities seek to enliven their service missions through service learning. This article critically analyzes the service-learning literature, illustrating the idea that higher education institutions traditionally operate under an orientation of doing for communities rather than doing with them. Doing for is typically aligned with a charity perspective and emphasizes the position of privilege of campuses in relationship to their local communities, whereas a doing with perspective of service emphasizes collaboration and mutuality. Using special focus colleges and universities as a model, the authors provide suggestions on how to shift the paradigm to one that is more community centered.

Service learning and volunteerism are increasingly of interest on college campuses. For students, involvement in service influences career preparation, awareness of community problems, and the connection of theory to practice (Bringle & Kremer, 1993; Cohen & Kinsey, 1994; Giles & Eyler, 1994; Hesser, 1995; Markus, Howard, & King, 1993; Weschler & Fogel, 1995). For faculty, service is a way to apply theory and knowledge to local problems (Lynton, 1995). For administrators, service is a way to improve relationships between campus and community (Ward, 1996). In essence, service to the community, in its many forms, is a way for campuses to address public perception that higher education exists for its own good. Dewey’s (1938) theoretical work focused on education that is not simply for the sake of intellect but education that is tied to social action and progress. If service learning is to be a valid remedy for “troubled times” both within and beyond the academy, it must employ Dewey’s ideals of progressive education (Rhoads & Howard, 1998).

The purpose of this article is twofold: (a) to critically analyze representations of service and community as presented in the service-learning literature, bringing to light common notions of service that perpetuate the idea that higher education institutions have the answers and solutions and that communities are passive beneficiaries of these remedies; and (b) to look at the service mission of
special-focus colleges and universities (SFCUs) (i.e., tribal colleges, historically Black colleges and universities, and Hispanic serving institutions) to provide suggestions about service learning that are more community centered.

In this article, we focus on academically based service (i.e., service learning) as opposed to extra or cocurricular service (i.e., volunteerism). This is not to delegitimize the important work that campus stakeholders do in the latter tradition. Rather, our focus is on service learning because it is the emphasis of this volume and because, done well, it can fulfill the civic mission of higher education. This article is grounded in the assumption that community service is positive and that the more individuals that become involved in service learning, the better. Clearly, the benefits of service learning are great for those involved from the perspective of college and university campuses. What is missing in the service-learning literature, however, is attention to the role that communities play in enacting the goals and benefits of service learning. Without community partners, there would be no service learning. If service learning is to meet its goals of improving student learning, preparing students for civic involvement, and addressing community needs, then it is critical for service-learning practitioners and administrators to pay closer attention to the role of community in this endeavor.

What leads us to this critique is our previous experience with SFCUs, institutions dedicated to serving the needs of students from racial and ethnic minority groups. Based on work and research with these institutions, we have found that community service seems to carry a different meaning than it does at predominantly White institutions (Ward & Grant, 1996; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 1997; Wolf, 1995). SFCUs embody the essence of service learning through their missions and their actions, whereas the integration of service into the mission and actions of predominantly White institutions has been tenuous, an add-on to an already defined mission that in many instances includes community service that is ambiguously defined (Lynton, 1995). SFCUs have strong histories of giving back to their communities, which puts them in an ideal position to integrate service learning into their curriculum. Unfortunately, there is not enough published research to directly compare conceptions of service at different types of institutions, but by exploring the literature and our previous experience at SFCUs, we are able to propose suggestions for service learning that are more community centered.

The findings from our previous research (Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 1997) and our experience with the SFCUs reveal that conceptions of service can vary by campus type. The literature, which primarily focuses on service learning at predominantly White institutions, emphasizes service that is centered on the campus—that is, service that is focused on doing for the community. The literature focuses on the benefits of service learning as they are experienced by campus constituents. At the SFCUs with which we are familiar, on the other hand, is a conception of service that is focused on doing with the community. There is little
TABLE 1:  Doing For Versus Doing With

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Doing For</th>
<th>Doing With</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Town and gown split</td>
<td>Blurred boundaries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public relations</td>
<td>Relating to the public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hierarchy (i.e., ivory tower)</td>
<td>Mutuality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campus outcomes (I)</td>
<td>Reciprocal outcomes (We)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service is an add-on</td>
<td>Service is integral</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

distinction between the campus and the community. See Table 1 for a summary of characteristics of service done in the doing for and doing with traditions.

Relying upon Morton’s (1995) paradigms of service learning, service that is focused on doing for is more aligned with charity than social change. In this conceptualization, service is focused on identifying deficits in the community and then using campus resources to provide services to fill each deficit. At SFCUs, in contrast, there is little distinction between the campus and the community. The emphasis of service is on the mutual engagement of the campus and community to address local problems. Again, calling on Morton, this falls into what he characterizes as social change and relates to what Rhoads (1997) identifies as critical community service. Using the conceptual frameworks of social change and critical theory, service learning at SFCUs is something in which campuses and communities mutually engage for the benefit of one another. The focus is on us (i.e., the campus and the community) solving problems and learning what causes those problems because they affect members of both the campus and community (Mayfield, Hellwig, & Banks, 1999). Mutuality and reciprocity are the cornerstones to service learning that is focused on doing with.

We do not call on these two characterizations as a means to say that predominately White institutions do service that is bad or to say that all SFCUs do service that is good. Instead, we call on examples of service, and they are plentiful, from the SFCUs as a means to illustrate how service learning can play an important role in social change for local communities (Judkins & LaHurd, 1999; Mayfield et al., 1999; Morton, 1995; Rhoads, 1997). Using this framework, service learning requires students to engage with the community as partners to address not only what to do (i.e., service) but also to struggle to identify “root causes” (Morton, 1995, p. 22) of community problems. We now turn to a brief overview of the literature on service learning and the role of community in this literature.

THE LITERATURE:
WHAT DOES IT SAY ABOUT SERVICE LEARNING?

Based on an extensive review of the literature related to service learning, its impacts, and definitions, we found a surprising lack of attention to the com-
munity perspective. Furthermore, based on an analysis of this literature, we found that many campuses perpetuate the split between campus and community by looking at service learning as a way for higher education to do for the community as opposed to a way to do with the community (Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 1997). The literature tends to focus on how service learning benefits the campus and its constituencies more than how it benefits the community. This may be logical given that the scholarly literature tends to be about higher education and for researchers; however, if service learning is truly a way to involve higher education in real-world problem solving, then the community must be an integral and active partner in these efforts (Judkins & LaHurd, 1999; Mayfield et al., 1999).

We do not mean to suggest that every campus involved in service learning does so from a position of privilege (i.e., doing for), but the literature does point to a general lack of critical attention to motivations, intentions, and outcomes of service learning from the community perspective. A content analysis of the literature revealed distinct but related categories of published work about service learning. These categories are (a) definitions of service learning, (b) campus and project descriptions, (c) motivations for involvement in service, and (d) effects of service learning. Following is a brief overview of this literature and the role of community in scholarly writing about service learning.

**Definitions of service learning.** A significant portion of the literature on service learning is related to defining service learning and offering an overview of schemas and principles for implementing service learning. This category of literature is focused on providing information to set up service-learning programs and to encourage faculty to participate. Examples of works in this area include the edited volume by Jacoby (1996), *Service-Learning in Higher Education: Concepts and Practices*, and the Praxis series out of the University of Michigan (e.g., Howard, 1993). For the most part, the literature in this area emphasizes student and faculty involvement in service learning. The community is recognized in relation to partnerships created with the campus.

**Campus and project descriptions.** The number of campuses involved in service learning has grown significantly throughout the past decade. Expansion of service learning has relied, in part, on imitation of campus programs that are already in place. Many of these programs demonstrate how faculty can use service learning as a pedagogy and how administrators can use service to expand student involvement in the community. The articles in this category typically address how to implement service learning and provide examples of campuses (e.g., Hudson & Trudeau, 1995) and classes (e.g., Sotelo & Raskoff, 1994) that have established programs. The community, for the most part, is mentioned only in relation to how programs and classes are set up and administered.
Motivations for involvement in service. The literature in this area is largely focused on why students get involved in service learning and on potential outcomes that emanate from these motivations. There are also theoretical perspectives about motivations presented in the literature. For example, Morton (1995) offers three different motivations for students to get involved in service: charity (identifying deficits and addressing them), project (emphasizes needs, problems, and solutions), and social change (focuses on empowerment of community and campus constituents). Rhoads's (1997) work also provides an example of research in this area. He addresses the reasons students get involved in service and calls for critical community service that is rooted in multiculturalism, mutuality, community building, connections between classroom and community, social change, and democratic education. The literature in this area emphasizes that different motivations for involvement in service learning lead to different perspectives on community partners. For example, a charity perspective perpetuates the community as needy, whereas critical and social-change perspectives view the community as an equal partner involved in identifying problems and coming up with solutions.

In addition to the theoretical motivations for getting involved in service, as discussed above, there is also an empirically based literature that analyzes what motivates campus constituencies to get involved in service learning. For example, Hammond (1994) examined faculty motivations for participating in service learning and found that a majority of faculty get involved for academic reasons and not for community-based reasons. For students, there is a similar trend. For example, research by Serow (1991) and Winniford, Carpenter, and Grider (1995) found that students get involved in service for egoistic as opposed to altruistic reasons.

Effects of service learning. The research literature on the effects of service learning offers an interesting view of what researchers value. The emphasis in this literature is almost exclusively on outcomes (mostly positive) that service learning has on and for students (e.g., Giles & Eyler, 1994; Kendrick, 1996). Although the community stands to benefit from community service, these benefits are not described in the literature.

In general, the literature related to service learning views the community as more of a beneficiary of service than a partner in identifying causes, problems, and solutions. Furthermore, the literature perpetuates the separation that is prevalent between campuses and communities in addition to the isolation of community problems in relation to theory and knowledge generated by higher education practitioners. Following this, we provide an overview and discussion of service learning at SFCUs. We believe that these institutions provide a model for how service learning and its outcomes can emphasize reciprocity, with community partnerships that focus on campuses doing with their communities instead of doing for them.
SERVICE LEARNING AT SFCUs

According to a large number of research projects, SFCUs have been found to serve the needs of their students in ways that predominantly White, coeducational institutions do not (e.g., Pavel & Padilla, 1993; Solorzano, 1995; Wolf-Wendel, 1998). There is a fair amount of evidence that suggests that SFCUs create climates that facilitate the success of their students. Research literature comparing historically Black institutions with predominantly White institutions, for example, concludes that the former demonstrate higher retention rates for African American students (Braddock & McPartland, 1988; Ehrenberg & Rothstein, 1994; National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities, 1991) as well as students with higher self-esteem, greater satisfaction with overall college experience (Allen, 1987; Allen, Epps, & Haniff, 1991; Astin, 1992; Fleming, 1984), and greater evidence of postbaccalaureate success (broadly defined) (Brazziel, 1983; Constantine, 1994; Fleming, 1984; Fuller, 1989; Harvey & Williams, 1989; Pearson & Pearson, 1985; Roebuck & Murty, 1993; Solnick, 1990; Thompson, 1986; Wolf-Wendel, 1998).

Less outcome-based research has been conducted about tribal colleges and Hispanic-serving institutions. Nonetheless, the existing literature indicates that both types of institutions provide positive outcomes to students as well as to the communities in which these institutions are located (Boyer, 1997; Olivas, 1982; Pavel & Padilla, 1993). For example, research indicates that for Native Americans, tribal colleges have better retention rates and higher transfer rates from 2-year to 4-year institutions than do predominantly White institutions (Boyer, 1997; Carnegie, 1989). Furthermore, two recent studies have demonstrated that compared to predominantly White institutions, Hispanic-serving colleges grant undergraduate degrees to a disproportionate number of Hispanic students who subsequently earn doctoral degrees (Solorzano, 1995; Wolf-Wendel, 1998).

Community-centered service is not a new concept at SFCUs. For example, tribal colleges are based on the need to provide Native American students with a culturally grounded education. Tribal colleges, like the larger Native American communities in which they dwell, are deeply rooted in an ethic of service. The concept of neighbor helping neighbor is part of life on both the reservation and in tribal colleges. In contrast, to many predominantly White institutions that must negotiate the often vague relationship between town and gown, the boundaries between tribal colleges and their communities are intentionally blurred. On the tribal college campus, community groups are just as likely to use college buildings for meetings as are students and faculty. Furthermore, tribal colleges are typically the sites used for community gatherings, health screenings, job information, and other activities and services for the wider reservation community.

With the renewed emphasis on service learning at many college campuses, questions have been raised by faculty and administrators contemplating the integration of service into curriculum. Should we offer service-learning courses?
What will service learning look like? Should it be required? At campuses such as Salish Kootenai College, a tribal college on the Flathead Reservation in Pablo, Montana, the question was not whether service learning should be included but how it was going to be done. For this campus, service learning is a mechanism to formalize student involvement in service to the community. After little deliberation, the faculty unanimously decided on a service-learning requirement. One faculty member at the campus said, “We are already doing [service learning]; we may as well give students credit for it.”

Historically Black colleges and universities also have a strong commitment to working with the community. Site visits conducted at both Bennett College in North Carolina and Tougaloo College in Mississippi demonstrated the extent to which these institutions view their commitment to improving their surrounding communities. Repeatedly, respondents at both institutions talked about the mission of the college, which emphasizes the notion that “it’s not just about self-achievement but about giving back to the community.” A Tougaloo alumnus explained, “We were taught that you should go and achieve. Get as much as you can get. But don’t forget to bring somebody with you.” Similarly, a Tougaloo student stated, “Not only are we doing our best so that we can get ahead but doing our best so that we can uplift our race as a people.” Similarly, a Bennett administrator explained that service has always been part of Bennett’s mission, so that you are aware of those who are in need and so you have some connection to the community by providing a service, giving something back to the community that you came from. It is more than just an awareness of the needs of others. It’s a recognition that you need to give something back.

A Bennett faculty member concurred:

The college offers more than just education. It is a vital force in the community, and I think because the students see that, they develop an awareness of volunteerism, they develop a commitment to improving what’s around them. . . . They develop a broader scope of responsibility, and that ties back to developing the whole person.

Perhaps because most Hispanic-serving colleges were not founded explicitly to serve Hispanic students, their missions vary greatly from one another. It is not clear how all Hispanic-serving colleges treat community service. Nonetheless, a case study of Incarnate Word College in San Antonio, Texas, demonstrates an approach to community service similar to that found at the tribal and historically Black colleges. Specifically, faculty and staff at Incarnate Word suggested that their students are “encouraged to see themselves as part of the larger community.” The mission of the college is also deeply rooted in an ethic of service. A faculty member explained, “If there is anything we hear almost ad nauseam at this college, it’s service. Service is the word here. The mission of the college is
service to others." Similarly, a student explained, "This mission is to learn and to use your education for the good of all people. To make sure that you share your talents and you share the things you learn. Don't ever keep them to yourself." Incarnate Word’s approach to community service is one that blurs the boundaries between campus and community. Under this conceptualization of community service, both the community and the individual reap reciprocal rewards.

Our experiences at SFCUs have led us to question and rethink the relationship between campus and community and service-learning endeavors, because SFCUs tend to look at the community as part of the campus and not as something that is external, isolated, and separate. SFCUs exist to meet the needs of the community in very direct ways—to meet the educational needs of the cultural community (i.e., the education of African Americans and Native Americans) while fulfilling a central role in their communities as service providers (Ward & Grant, 1996; Wolf, 1995). Furthermore, these SFCUs educate the citizens of "whom a significant percentage come from the community often targeted for community service and service-learning" (Ayers & Ray, 1996, p. v). The institutional premise of SFCUs is rooted in we—one that advocates for uplifting the entire cultural population, not just those of the individual on a particular campus (Perkins, 1997). Clearly, this blurs the lines between campus and community in addition to blurring lines between service and learning. The central role of service in the mission of SFCUs contributes to a natural progression for the integration of service learning in the curriculum. For example, at Miles College, a historically Black liberal arts college in Alabama, a past president describes the college as a "community college" because its curricular offerings and supportive programs have been directed in a large part by the communities that produce many of its clientele. Because Miles has systematically attended to these needs, it has consistently contributed to the prosperity of the larger community of which it is a part (Williams, 1990). Following, we provide ideas for moving from conceptions of service rooted in doing for the community to service that is based on doing with as a means to create more relevant, empathetic, and meaningful experiences for students involved in service learning.

MOVING FROM DOING FOR TO DOING WITH

For service learning to be the solution to troubled times in the academy and its constituent communities, it must be focused on empathy and empowerment. Campuses need to work in concert with the community to mutually identify problems, cultivate solutions, and identify causes of these problems. How do we get campuses to do with their communities rather than do for them? We propose five areas for consideration.

First, connect through commonalities. One way to move service learning from the doing for paradigm is to make sure that students have some connection to the people with whom they are doing with. This suggestion stems from the
observation that service learning at SFCUs involves connecting campus constituents with those in the community who come from comparable backgrounds. In other words, those on the campus are typically similar to those in the community. This allows campus constituents to achieve a high degree of empathy with those with whom they are working in the community. This connection between student and community member can be facilitated on predominantly White institutions in a number of ways. One approach to enhance empathy between students and community members is to identify the interests and backgrounds of the students and match them with service-learning opportunities accordingly. For example, young women might feel empathy for women using a rape crisis hotline, a student athlete might find a connection by working with Special Olympic athletes, and a Catholic student might relate well to working with a Catholic service organization. These kinds of empathic connections should not be assumed based on external attributes of students. Instead, faculty members should question students about their backgrounds and interests and match them with an appropriate service-learning opportunity. Class reflection sessions, both before and after service, should include discussion of students’ experiences with community constituents.

Second, blur boundaries between campus and community. Too often, service-learning relationships are about us (the campus) and them (the community). Mutual service relationships need to blur these distinctions. This can be done by creating greater fluidity between campus and community participants in service. For example, service-learning classes can be co-taught by faculty and community agency personnel, and classes can be held both on campus and in community settings. This type of interchange between campus and the community can help blur distinctions between community and campus partners and equalize relationships. Enhancing reciprocal understandings in a service arrangement is mutually beneficial to both the students as well as community members. Continually providing students and community members the opportunity to reflect on their interaction enhances empathy and helps campuses do with their communities (e.g., Judkins & LaHurd, 1999).

Third, consider the position, history, and power (or powerlessness) of all involved in service relationships. Involvement in community service is about giving and receiving. Students and faculty in service learning need to be cognizant of their power and position in society and in service relationships. For students to walk a mile in another’s shoes, they must first be aware of their own position in society and what it brings to the service relationship. In the service-learning context, positionality is about the social histories students bring to their service (Rhoads, 1997). Faculty who teach using service learning need to dedicate class time to student explorations of their position in society and how that relates to those served. Furthermore, faculty need to be aware of student social histories in the service context. Ayers and Ray (1996) point out that at SFCUs, many students find themselves in service relationships with people who are much like themselves. This is not always the case at predominantly White
institutions nor is it always feasible. In the absence of commonalities, empathy can be enhanced by allowing students to understand members of the community. This understanding can be derived in a number of ways: Students can read essays or novels about the community with which they will work, watch films or videos portraying the life of those in similar communities, and/or bring in community members to talk about their experiences. These experiences provide a context through which students can begin to gain empathy for those in the community and to blur boundaries between the campus and community.

Fourth, encourage reciprocal assessment. As highlighted in a review of the literature (Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 1997), there is a dearth of published literature that assesses service learning from the vantage point of both the community and the campus. The typical assessment of service learning focuses exclusively on the impact on student participants. SFCUs are not necessarily any better than predominately White institutions about assessing the views of community members in relationship to a service-learning project—at least there are no published studies from that perspective. Nonetheless, conducting both formative and summative assessment from the community perspective will help institutions to move from a model of doing for by allowing those most directly affected by the service to have a say about its impact. In terms of formative assessments, by providing voice to community members, a service-learning project can be tailored or modified to best meet the needs of the community. Including the community in the assessment can have an empowering impact on community members, because it explicitly recognizes that community members are affected by the service-learning project. Sharing the assessment of community members’ perceptions with students and vice versa also helps to enhance reciprocal empathy.

Finally, rethink service missions to include and reward public service and genuine community partnerships. Most college campuses have some mention of service in their mission statements (Lynton, 1995). However, there is great disparity across institutional types as to how this mission is translated and what service actually means. For example, at Blackfeet Community College (a tribal college), service specifically includes local community involvement and outreach. Faculty members are expected to be involved in their community. Unfortunately, on many campuses, service has come to mean institutional and disciplinary citizenship as opposed to local community involvement. Service learning is a way to translate service missions to their initial and local intent, and a way to create partnerships to meet local needs. Faculty, student, agency, and community members in partnership provide an integrated way to merge the campus roles of teaching, research, and service. A faculty member from a tribal college related his experience about adding service learning to his already full schedule: “Service learning is just what I do. For me, it’s a way to integrate my work load, not to add to it. As long as I’m a member of this community, service learning makes sense.”
CONCLUSION

Service learning has become an increasingly important part of the academic world. The impacts and benefits of service learning for and on institutions are well documented. At the same time, however, there has been little attention directed to the impacts of service learning on the community. We believe this situation has arisen, in part, out of the problematic relationship that can exist between the academy and its surrounding community—one that focuses less on mutuality and reciprocity of interest and more on differences of direction and disconnection.

SFCUs offer an example of an approach to the relationship between an institution, its students, and the surrounding community that emphasizes shared interests and involvement. At SFCUs, the campus community is clearly seen as an extension of the larger community, not a separate entity. What benefits one partner benefits every partner. In this environment, the student or the faculty member is not initiating a service project strictly for pedagogical reasons, but rather, service is undertaken to benefit the community, with educational and personal benefits accruing as a natural consequence of working together.

In the formulations discussed throughout this article, service learning is not done for someone who needs the help of a college student or professor; service is done with peers in the community, and from that service, new understanding and learning arises for all parties involved. As campuses struggle to integrate service learning into their curriculum, SFCUs offer a conceptualization of service in which campuses and communities can work together, to the benefit of both, sharing both service and learning.

NOTES

1. Our experience with SFCUs emanates from findings related to our research and practice with these campuses. Lisa Wolf-Wendel’s (1995, 1998) research identifies the characteristics of colleges that graduate women who subsequently earn doctorates. In case studies conducted of SFCUs, she found that involvement in service was integral to the success of these women. Kelly Ward’s (1996) work with the Montana Campus Compact includes research and consultation with the seven tribal colleges in Montana as they move to formalize their service missions by integrating service learning into their curricula.

2. The work of Mayfield, Hellwig, and Banks (1999) describes collaborative research projects completed in Chicago that use similar perspectives as we offer here, although they focus on collaborative research projects with local communities and not on service learning.

REFERENCES


