

Connected Cocurricular Service with Academic Inquiry: A Movement toward Civic Engagement

By Wayne Meisel

Since I was a college student some thirty years ago, my activism has evolved from volunteering to community service, and from service learning to community-based research. Over the years, those of us involved in this work have experimented with new ideas and have hoisted banners with different terms, all meant in their day to suggest that we would indeed get it right this time--and all inevitably criticized and replaced for not going far enough. "Civic engagement" is the term we currently use to express the promise of a bold and hopeful vision for significant action that can create meaningful change. Conceptually, civic engagement integrates community service and social justice, as well as local engagement and global awareness. It compels us to be literate about public policy and to participate actively in the political process.

In partnership with the Bonner Foundation, seventy-five college and university campuses across the country are working to build and sustain students' four-year involvement in civic engagement. These institutions have demonstrated innovation and excellence in this area, as well as a commitment to press forward on their own campuses and to partner with other institutions. In addition, these institutions have established service-based scholarships as part of their relationship with the Bonner Foundation. Thus, all campuses in the Bonner program have a core group of students committed to significant, ongoing involvement in community issues and to engaging other students to join with them in such endeavors.

Beginning in 2003, a core group of campuses--the University of California-Los Angeles, Washington and Lee University, Mars Hill College, and the College of New Jersey--began work on the Civic Education Academic Certificate program, sponsored in part by the U.S. Department of Education Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education. After nearly two years, another dozen colleges and universities--all involved with the Bonner Foundation's service scholarship--were chosen through a competitive selection process. The diversity of these institutions was inspiring, with participants ranging from the University of Alaska Anchorage to Morehouse College. All of the colleges and universities participating in the Bonner program will implement some form of civic engagement academic journey, and it is our hope that all of higher education will be challenged by the work we have done so far.

Backdrop of service, learning, and engagement

In higher education today, most service is performed as a cocurricular activity. The result is a student development model with little attention either to age-appropriate service or to building a campus-wide culture of service and an infrastructure to maintain it. By contrast, the Bonner program developed "Service as Transformation," a student development model based on rising levels of expectation. This model for cocurricular activity has enabled us to send the clear message to students, administrators, and community leaders that service is not about the individual student, the campus service program, or the community alone; instead, service is about all three, at the same time and in equal measure.

There are challenges to implementing this student development model. There has not been much momentum to embrace the rising levels of expectation, which require students to undertake serious engagement both on the campus and in the community. Higher education leaders still tout the number of hours served or the percentage of students who participate without regard to the quality of service or the level of discovery and learning.

The other challenge we have faced concerns the great divide between the academic work of higher education and the cocurricular activities of student life. As students become more deeply involved, the administrators of our programs find it necessary to reflect upon, discuss, and educate students about the issues they encounter and the problems they face. Campus administrators often feel compelled to engage students deeply through reading and writing. Yet, given the nature of higher education and the academic demands placed on many of these students, there is a reaction against including more academic rigor in a cocurricular setting.

Students are participating in courses that include service learning and communitybased research as part of the course work. The impact of these academic experiences is often transformative for all involved: students discover a way to connect their intellect with the world outside the school; faculty encounter students who are passionate and engaged in the discipline; and community agencies receive expertise and products that they might not be able to afford and that strengthen the capacity of their infrastructures. Yet, too often, these courses come and go with the academic calendar, and the level of engagement waxes and wanes significantly.

The civic engagement academic certificate

Having already gone quite far with a community service-based cocurricular model that offered students the chance to engage in service for their entire time in school, we wanted next to create an integrated path on the academic side of things. That is, we sought to create an academic parallel to the predominantly cocurricular service activity.

We recognized that many students are already overstressed because of academic, work, and social demands. They find it difficult to take additional courses because of the time, costs, and existing requirements for majors and graduation. Moreover, curriculum change takes time and energy and occurs slowly. And it is expensive to create even a small number of new courses.

In response to these challenges, our design incorporated financial and other forms of student support--service-based scholarships, community-based federal work-study funds, and AmeriCorps Education Awards. And instead of requiring students to take additional courses, the certificate program allows them to take courses within the curriculum, and even within the majors, that touch on issues that connect to their service work. Indeed, throughout the curriculum at all of our schools, we found academic inquiry that connected to the civic engagement ideal.

While the language we have come to use is not universally accepted, and the construct is not followed by all participants, both are meant to suggest a pattern--or what we call an "academic journey"--that parallels the cocurricular student development model, which has a beginning, middle, and end. The academic journey connects service and learning without relying on a forced service-learning pedagogy, and it draws upon faculty commitment to teaching and research. We began with the idea of a certificate to suggest something less focused and stringent than a minor. Yet the culture and practice of individual institutions led some to use the construct of the minor to frame the work we were doing. Regardless of the designation, the academic journey begins with a lead-in course and ends with a capstone designed to bring closure to the experience as well as to point the students in a particular direction after they graduate.

A design for civic engagement

The academic journey is both focused and flexible. Participating institutions studied their own curricula, made adjustments, and moved forward by establishing a formal academic path. The certificate program includes the following elements:

- **A lead-in course:** Many schools have a lead-in or gateway course as part of the first-year experience. This can take the form of freshmen seminars, learning communities, or first-year

orientation courses. Within the broad parameters of such courses, there is an opportunity to include readings, writings, and discussions about service and justice.

- **Exposure to domestic poverty:** Most schools, if not all, have within their existing curriculum courses that expose students to issues of domestic poverty. These courses are found in any number of disciplines, but most frequently in U.S. history, sociology, political science, public policy, and literature.
- **International exposure:** Many different academic disciplines and multidisciplinary courses introduce students to and require thoughtful analysis of international affairs. In these courses, students are required to integrate the service experiences with international issues.
- **A service-learning course:** Over the last fifteen years, there has been an explosion of service-learning courses across the curriculum. Students pursuing a certificate are required to take a service-learning course in their academic major field of study, where such courses are offered. Where no such courses are offered, students are required to take a service-learning course from a different discipline. When possible, students are encouraged to take a minimum of two courses with significant service-learning components-- one course in the academic major, and one outside it.
- **A full-time service internship:** A full-time service activity is required to complete the civic engagement certificate. This service may be completed for credit through an internship program; if the service is not credit-bearing it may still require a certain level of preparation, reflection, and writing. Students can serve at either domestic or international service sites. Placements should expose students to poverty, cultural diversity, and public policy.
- **A senior capstone:** A cornerstone of the civic engagement certificate and the service-based scholarship is a final presentation of service and learning that comes near the end of the student's college or university experience. Students engage in an intense and demanding service placement that integrates academic work. This senior service capstone may take place as part of a senior seminar, an independent study, or community-based research.

Participants in the Bonner program have identified several elements that are vital to civic engagement work. We call these "pillars" to indicate their prominence, and we divide them into two distinct categories. The "pillars of content" are essential areas of focus for any community-service or civic engagement initiative. The "pillars of design" are elements of program design that are required in order to move standard for accomplishment to a higher level.

Pillars of content

For too long, we have congratulated ourselves simply for sending students out into the community or for taking them on a weeklong trip that requires a passport. But students must know the world they are to enter, and they certainly must know the communities they are to serve. We cannot do service well if we do not understand the reality of poverty and explore its causes (and potential solutions). Therefore, we have established it as a new standard that students encounter issues of poverty in the classroom before and during their outreach to the community. This *focus on poverty* is the first pillar of content, and there are many ways to address it within an academic setting--whether it is through literature, history, political science, or chemistry.

When I was a college student, there were two ways to get involved in the world: community service and political action. In the service world, students were told to do service but to keep out of politics; politics was not volunteering. Not anymore. We believe that good community service makes good politics, and that good politics affect the service we need to do. We embrace a comprehensive approach to civic engagement informed by the key indicators identified by the University of Maryland Center for Information and Research about Civic Learning and Engagement (see www.civicyouth.org). The bottom line is that if you care about the people you serve, you will study, engage, and participate in the political process. If you don't make the connection to politics in your service, you are not serving well. This *connection to politics* is the second pillar of content.

Recently, I was asked to travel to France and speak at the Council of Europe. Understanding that I would face educators and leaders from around the world, many of whom were hostile to America, I wondered how to talk about the service work that we do. If I merely talked about the hours of service we did, or the percentage of students who said they did service--indicators we use regularly in the States--I would not be able to tell a story of value. We may be mentoring a child, but do students know what is happening in the Sudan, Cambodia, Venezuela, and North Korea? We know that most do not. We often use the slogan "think globally, act locally," but today we are compelled to think globally and act globally as well. Accordingly, *engagement in the world* is the third pillar of content. We are compelled to understand the impact of our service and to consider how it might improve the lives of people halfway around the world--not just in the neighborhood that borders campus.

There are many ways to learn about and engage in the world. The most common is to participate in a semester abroad program or short-term service trips. The Bonner program encourages more of the same. However, we also encourage students to participate in study abroad programs that are oriented toward issues of poverty and politics and that connect the service and learning that goes on "over there" with the civic engagement students begin and return to "over here." We recommend that short-term service trips be extended from seven or ten days to twenty or thirty days, because the opportunities to learn, build relationships, perform service work, and deepen understanding increase with longer stays. Furthermore, we look to engage and develop long-term partnerships with agencies and individuals who work with immigrant and other cultural organizations in this country. In America, you don't need to get on a plane to have an international experience.

Pillars of design

From the first gathering of participants in the Bonner program, we have shared stories about ourselves and our life's work. Everyone has been fully engaged in extensive programs through which students make meaningful commitments. The one word that describes our activities is "intense." There is nothing random or light or simple about the work we do. This *intensity of experience* is the first pillar of design. In the Bonner program, students are expected, at a minimum, to serve in the community ten hours per week for the entire time they are in college. This may seem like a lot--and it is. Some even consider it excessive, until they realize that students make similar commitments all the time--whether to sports, the student newspaper, the performing arts, or student life. This commitment of hours contrasts with the dabbling that often goes on in the many programs that create a setting of volunteer tourism, where participants see without understanding and act without feeling.

The service performed outside of the classroom must line up with the education received in the classroom. This *integration of the two curricula*--the second pillar of design--may sound simple, but it is perhaps the single most difficult part of this work. The idea for the Bonner program grew out of the failure and fatigue of good people who led service initiatives and who understood the need for quality education, reflection, and discussion. Ask even the most committed student to read and write more in a cocurricular setting and you will have mutiny or fallout. Yet every school has courses already in the curriculum that engage students with poverty, politics, and global issues. What we have done, and what we are encouraging schools to do, is to be intentional in identifying, lifting up, and connecting the things we learn in the classroom with the actions we take in the world. We recognize that, to achieve integration, it is not necessary to build a service component into every academic course. For example, in order to participate in a summer service internship, students at Washington and Lee University take a course in poverty during the spring semester; they are then encouraged to take a follow-up course during the fall semester. Neither course has a service requirement, but both inform students' service by providing grounding in the theoretical, philosophical, and political dimensions of poverty.

The design of our service work is based on the academic calendar. Every semester, students' lives begin anew and their schedules change. As a result, much of the service activity conforms to the quarter or semester system. When the course schedule changes, the service changes or, in many cases, ceases

because of conflicts and new demands. Directly addressing this reality is one of the major challenges we face. Our strategies for engagement have to transcend the academic calendar to include a multiyear engagement. When we start and stop our service engagement according to the academic calendar, we revert to dabbling and volunteer tourism. What we need is a multiyear approach that acknowledges the school calendar but is not limited by it. Such a multiyear approach would focus the academic journey on forms of civic engagement that parallel and intersect with the service and the study that students do on a daily basis. This *multiyear, sequential, developmental approach* is the third pillar of design.

Conclusion

I constantly reflect on the difference between my work in the mid-1980s as a young advocate for more volunteering and the work I do as a foundation director building a program to expand and sustain civic engagement. The motivations and the actions don't feel all that different. But what is different is where the windows of opportunity are and how hard we can push. What gives me a sense of accomplishment and hope is that, unlike twenty years ago, we can claim a genuine relationship between service and social justice. We have transformed the divide between service and academic inquiry that informs our citizenship; we are able not just to think globally but also to act globally; and we are now required to connect the service we do with the political structures that shape and govern our society.

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