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Back to the Future:

From Service Learning to Strategic, Academically-Based Community Service

Introduction

The service learning movement is expanding throughout American higher education. The extraordinary success of the Campus Compact's Project on Integrating Service with Academic Study, which has worked with approximately 162 institutions of higher education across the country to embed service into the curriculum, the growing acceptance of service learning by departments and disciplines, and sessions on second generation issues for service learning at meetings of national organizations are just three indicators that service learning has (nearly) arrived.

What does this mean? Surely acceptance is merely a tactic for achieving other, more meaningful goals. What indeed is the goal of the service-learning movement? This is not merely an academic (in the pejorative sense) question. "It is," as Francis Bacon stated in 1620, "not possible to run a course aright when the goal itself is not rightly placed." In my judgment, the service-learning movement has not "rightly placed" the goal. It has largely been concerned with advancing the civic consciousness and moral character of college students, arguing that service-learning pedagogy also results in improved teaching and learning. Although service to the community is obviously an important component of service learning, it does not fo-

cus on solving core community problems. The most influential work advocating what might be termed a "trickle down theory" of the impacts of service learning is Benjamin R. Barber's *An Aristocracy of Everyone: The Politics of Education and the Future of America* (Barber, 1992). In a discussion of mandatory citizen education and community service, Barber asserts:

> To make people serve others may produce desirable behavior, but it does not create responsible and autonomous individuals. To make people participate in educational curricula that can empower them does create such individuals. The ultimate goal is not to serve others but to learn to be free, which entails being responsible to others (Barber, 1992, 250-251).

In its classic form, service learning is merely the pedagogical equivalent of exploitative community-based research. Academics have often studied and written about poor—particularly minority—communities. The residents of those communities have largely been subjects to be studied, providing information that would produce dissertations and articles that someday, somehow, would contribute to making things better. Meanwhile, the poor have gotten poorer, and academics have gotten tenure, promoted, and richer.

Similarly, advocates and practitioners of service learning have tended to agree that the goal of that pedagogy is to educate college students for citizenship. Citizenship is learned by linking classroom experience to a service experience that is at best seen as doing *some* good for the community. The real beneficiaries, however, are the deliverers, not the recipients, of the service. Someday, somehow, when we have effectively educated a critical mass of the best and the brightest for citizenship, things will be made better. Meanwhile, the causes of our societal problems have remained untouched, the distance between the haves and have nots has widened, and universities have continued to function as institutions engaged in symbolic actions rather than institutions producing knowledge (to use Bacon's phrase) for the "relief of man's estate."

Urban universities are in a unique position to "rightly place the goal [and] run [the]. . . course aright" by going beyond service learning (and its inherent limitations) to *strategic, academically-based community service*, which has as its primary goal contributing to the well-being of people in the community both now and in the future. It is service rooted in and intrinsically tied to teaching and research, and it aims to bring about structural community im-

provement (e.g., effective public schools, neighborhood economic development, strong community organizations) rather than simply to alleviate individual misery (e.g., feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, tutoring the slow learner). Strategic, academically-based community service requires a comprehensive institutional response that engages the broad range of resources of the urban university, including the talents, abilities, and energy of undergraduates involved in traditional service and service-learning activities, to solve the strategic problem of our time: the problem of creating democratic, local, cosmopolitan communities.

One reason for urban universities to go beyond service learning to strategic, academically-based community service is that they will increasingly have no choice. The need for communities to be rooted in face-to-face relationships and exemplify humanistic values is most acute in the American city. More simply put, the problems of the American city have increasingly become the problems of the urban college and university. Since they cannot move, there is no escape from the issues of poverty, crime, and physical deterioration that are at the gates of urban higher educational institutions. The choice is to hold on to the mythic image of the university on the hill and suffer for it (as faculty, students, and staff become increasingly difficult to attract and retain, and as communities of scholars give way to collections of scholarly commuters), or to become engaged in an effective and proactive fashion. The future of the urban university and the American city are intertwined.

Urban universities will also move to strategic, academically-based community service because it is consonant with the historic mission of universities that began with the founding of The Johns Hopkins University in 1876. University presidents of the late nineteenth century worked to develop the American university into a major national institution, capable of meeting the needs of a rapidly changing and increasingly complex society. Imbued with boundless optimism and a belief that knowledge could change the world for the better, these academic leaders envisioned universities as leading the way toward a more effective and humane society for Americans in general and for residents of the city in particular.

The Role of Strategic, Academically Based Community Service in the Development of the Urban Research University

The tradition of problem-driven, problem-solving strategic, academically-based community service is easily identified in the history of four leading

urban higher educational institutions: John Hopkins, Columbia, the University of Chicago, and the University of Pennsylvania, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Hopkins President, Daniel Coit Gilman, for example, was the guiding force behind the formation of the Charity Organization Society (COS). The COS, an organization designed, among other things, to provide a scientific approach to helping Baltimore's poor, studied the causes of poverty, collected useful data, and worked to get at the root causes of destitution. Moreover, a number of Gilman's leading faculty members, such as Herbert Baxter Adams and Richard Ely, had close ties to Levering Hall, the campus YMCA, which was deeply engaged in work with Baltimore's poor. Students in Adams and Ely's Departments of History, Political Economy, and Political Science worked "to use the city as a laboratory for economic study." John Glenn, chair of the executive committee of COS, remarked in 1888 that Hopkins was the first university where social welfare work was "almost a part of the curriculum" (Elfenbein, in press).

Hopkins may have been the first, but it was certainly not the only university to integrate social welfare work as part of the curriculum. More generally, for academics of the progressive period, the city was an arena for study and action. It was the site of significant societal transformation; the center of political corruption, poverty, crime, and cultural conflict; and a ready source of data and information. It was, according to Richard Mayo-Smith of Columbia, "the natural laboratory of social science, just as hospitals are of medical science," the place where academics could combine theory and practice.

In most cases, progressive university presidents and academics had an expert-driven model of change. The model was founded on the assumption that the expert with scientific knowledge in hand would point the way toward increasing efficiency and skill in governmental agencies and designing institutions that improve the quality of life for the urban poor and immigrants. The expert's role, quite simply, was to study and assist, not to learn from, the community.

Not all progressive academics of the period shared this authoritative, elitist conception of the university's role. Seth Low, President of Columbia from 1890 through 1901, is notable for his decidedly democratic approach in dealing with New York City and its communities. In his inaugural address, Low stated, "the city may be made to a considerable extent, a part of the university." Columbia was also to be part of the city, resulting in a democratic, mutually-beneficial relationship between town and gown. In his ar-

ticle, "The University and the Workingman," Low wrote that the "workingmen of America . . . [should know] that at Columbia College . . . the disposition exists to teach the truth . . . without fear or favor, and *we ask their aid to enable us to see the truth as it appears to them* [emphasis added]" (Bender, 1987).

Nicholas Murray Butler, Low's successor, emphasized authority, expert knowledge, and autonomy as the appropriate stance for elite universities. Nonetheless, Low's vision of a university both in and of its city exemplifies the institutional stance necessary for putting strategic academically-based community service into practice. Low's interactive, optimistic, democratic vision is exemplified in his 1895 article, "A City University," particularly when he wrote: "When I dream of Columbia and its possibilities, I always think of a university not only great enough to influence the life of New York, *but a university able to influence the life of New York because it is a part of it.*" [emphasis added] (Bender).

While Low provides the most compelling vision of university-city relationships, the University of Chicago in practice had the closest ties to its locality. Work emanating from Hull House, the social settlement founded by Jane Addams and Ellen Starr on Chicago's West Side in 1889, was enormously significant in forming ties between the university and its city. Adopting a multifaceted institutional approach to the social problems of the immigrant groups in the Nineteenth Ward, Hull House residents offered activities along four lines, designated by Addams as the social, educational, humanitarian, and civic. In addition to its various residents' programs, Hull House was a site for labor union activities; a forum for social, political, and economic reform; and a center for social science research. It antedated the first sociology departments in universities by three years and the establishment of the first foundations for social research by ten years.

In 1895, Jane Addams and the residents of Hull House published *Hull House Maps and Papers*, a sociological investigation of the neighborhood immediately to the east of Hull House. In Addams' words, it was a record of "certain phases of neighborhood life with which the writers have been familiar" (Hull House, 1985). The Hull House residents compiled detailed maps of demographic and social characteristics, and produced richly descriptive accounts of life and work in a poor immigrant neighborhood. Theirs was not dispassionate scholarship, as evidenced by Florence Kelley's poignant advocacy on behalf of sweatshop laborers, whose "reward of work at their trade is

grinding poverty, ending only in death or escape to some more hopeful occupation. Within the trade there has been and can be no improvement in wages while tenement house-manufacture is tolerated. On the contrary, there seems to be no limit to the deterioration now in progress" (op.cit.).

In its early years, the University of Chicago demonstrated that by doing good, a research university could do very well. When Chicago's first president, William Rainey Harper, described the mission of his newly minted university as "service for mankind wherever mankind is, whether within scholastic walls or without those walls and in the world at large," he expressed the pervasive attitude of progressive-era academics that scholarship, teaching, and public service were fully compatible. It is not surprising that male sociologists at the University of Chicago were closely associated with Hull House, acknowledging that "it was Addams and Hull House who were the leader and leading institution in Chicago in the 1890s, not the University of Chicago." Indeed, as Mary Jo Degan points out in her book on Addams, *Hull House Maps and Papers* "established the major substantive interests and methodological technique of Chicago sociology that would define the school for the next forty years" (Degan, 1988).

The Chicago School of Sociology was created in this nexus of "serving society by advancing intellectual inquiry." In the early years of the Chicago School no invidious distinctions were made between the applied sociology pursued by Jane Addams and the Hull House residents, and the academic research of the first generation of University of Chicago sociologists. Indeed, the two groups had a close working relationship, grounded in personal friendships, mutual respect, and shared social philosophy. Like the women of Hull House, the Chicago sociologists were social activists and social scientists. Action in social research, Chicago-style, encompassed scholarly documentation of a social problem and lobbying of politicians and local community groups to obtain action (cf. e.g., Bulmer, 1984).

After 1915, Chicago sociology, under Robert Park and Ernest W. Burgess, increasingly distanced itself from social reform, notwithstanding their continued focus on the form, structure, and problems of city living. Increasingly that focus was circumscribed by a natural science model and an underlying commitment to "the detached and objective study of society," which "allowed no room for an ameliorative approach." Park and Burgess emphasized "urban studies...within a scientific framework" (Bulmer, 1984). Nonetheless, from the founding of the university in 1892 until 1932, and the elec-

tion of Franklin Roosevelt, the reform movement in Chicago was closely tied to the university. Leading scholars, such as John Dewey, James Tufts, George Herbert Mead, and Charles Meriam, all played leading roles in efforts to improve education and politics in the city.

Chicago was by no means the only city that engaged academics in reform movements. In Philadelphia the independent administration of Rudolph Blankenburg received much assistance from faculty in the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School, which believed that research and teaching could benefit from political activity. Endowed in 1881 as the School of Finance and Economy, it quickly developed into the School of Political and Social Science, under the direction of Edmund James. James, a future president of both Northwestern University and the University of Illinois, saw that Wharton's future was dependent upon its successful involvement with local issues and real-world problems. He created, therefore, a unique organizational innovation—a school devoted to providing a social scientific response to the problems of industrialization (Sass, 1982).

James' innovations went beyond his fashioning of the Wharton School's direction. In 1889, he established the American Academy of Political and Social Science as an organization linking academics and leading citizens for the study of societal problems. James and his Wharton colleagues also played key roles in establishing the Municipal League of Philadelphia and the National Municipal League. Like the American Academy, these organizations were predicated on the concept of partnership between academics and reformers.

Under James' friend and successor, Simon Patten, Wharton arguably became the premier center of American social science between 1900 and the outbreak of World War I. Continuing James' strong urban emphasis, Patten enlisted Wharton undergraduates and graduate students in Philadelphia's progressive movement. As an eminent scholar, he exemplified the idea that being actively engaged in public affairs could contribute to academic success. Within a few years, however, Patten and like-minded colleagues ran afoul of hostile University of Pennsylvania trustees.

Already in the 1890s a number of social scientists at leading universities had faced serious difficulty because of their reform-oriented writings and activism. The trial of Richard Ely by the Wisconsin Board of Regents and the dismissal of Edward Bemis from the University of Chicago are two of the best known cases. Although Wharton's more comprehensive reform approach

may have helped shield individual faculty, the school became quite vulnerable as its campaign for reform went farther than local elites had wished. Indeed, the Penn trustees fired Simon Patten's close friend and junior colleague, Scott Nearing, in 1915; two years later they refused to extend Patten's tenure beyond the age of retirement, as was routinely done for distinguished faculty members. By 1917 and America's entry into World War I, most of Wharton's reform faculty had resigned or been dismissed.

World War I closed one chapter and began another in the history of urban university-community relationships. The brutality and horror of that conflict ended the buoyant optimism and faith in human progress and societal improvement that marked the progressive era. American academics were not immune to the general disillusionment with progress. Indeed, despair led many faculty members to retreat into a narrow scientistic approach. Scholarly inquiry directed toward creating a better society was increasingly deemed inappropriate. While faith in the expert and in expert knowledge was carried on from the progressive era, it was divorced from its reformist roots. The dominant conception of science was clear and simple: it was what physical scientists and engineers did.

The four historical studies presented above are not designed to evoke images of a paradise lost. For one thing, except for Seth Low's Columbia, these efforts were neither democratic nor participatory. More importantly, they failed to become the dominant model for the American university. They were, quite simply, far in advance of their time, particularly given America's engagement in what Robert Nisbet has termed a "Seventy-Five Years War." That war, in effect, ended with the crack-up of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War. New conditions now prevail. Years of looking beyond our borders have resulted in unresolved domestic problems developing into unresolved, highly visible crises.

These crises are most visible and pressing in our cities. The future of our cities and the institutions located within them, particularly institutions of higher education, depend on resolving such crises as urban poverty, poor schooling, inefficient bureaucratic delivery of services, and collapsing communities with significant dispatch. Universities, more than any other societal institution, have the broad array of intellectual resources needed to take the lead toward finding solutions. For universities to do so, however, requires that they do things smarter and better than they have ever done them before.

Service learning, as currently defined and practiced, is much too weak a

reed to carry universities from here (internally-directed, solipsistic, self-referential institutions) to there (problem-solving, cosmopolitan, civic institutions). To mix metaphors, we need a stronger reed that can serve as a powerful lever for moving universities and society forward. Even if we agree that strategic, academically-based community service is the lever, the question remains of how and where do we apply it? Too general an approach will take us only so far. More concretely, what steps can urban colleges and universities take to transform themselves and contribute to revitalizing the American city? A first step might be building on John Dewey's theory of instrumental intelligence and his identification of the core problem affecting modern society.

Service as a Deweyan Approach to University and Community Revitalization

According to Dewey, genuine learning only occurs when human beings focus their attention, energies, and abilities on solving genuine dilemmas and perplexities. Other mental activity fails to produce reflection and intellectual progress. As John Smith has written about Dewey's theory of instrumental intelligence, "Reflective thought is an active response to the challenge of the environment" (Smith, 1993). In 1910, Dewey spelled out the basis of his real-world, problem-driven, problem-solving theory of instrumental intelligence as follows:

> Thinking begins in what may fairly be called a forked-road situation, a situation which is ambiguous, which presents a dilemma, which proposes alternatives. As long as our activity slides smoothly along from one thing to another, or as long as we permit our imagination to entertain fancies at pleasure, there is no call for reflection. Difficulty or obstruction in the way of reaching a belief brings us, however, to a pause...*Demand for the solution of a perplexity is the steadying and guiding factor in the entire process of reflection*...a question to be answered, an ambiguity to be resolved, sets up an end and holds the current of ideas to a definite channel...[In summary]...the origin of thinking is some perplexity, confusion, or doubt: Thinking is not a case of spontaneous combustion; it does not occur just on general principles. There is something specific which occasions and involves it [Emphasis Added] (Dewey, 1990).

Employing Dewey's theory of instrumental intelligence is, of course, only a starting point. Universities can focus on an infinity of perplexities and dilemmas. Which problem or set of problems are significant, basic, and strategic enough to lead to societal as well as intellectual progress? In 1927, in *The Public and Its Problems*, Dewey unequivocally identified the existence of the "neighborly community" as indispensable for a well-functioning democratic society: "There is no substitute for the vitality and depth of close and direct intercourse and attachment....Democracy must begin at home, and its home is the neighborly community." In that same book, he also noted that creating a genuinely democratic community is "in the first instance an intellectual problem" (Dewey, 1927). Sixty-nine years later, we still do not know how to create democratic neighborly communities. Events in Bosnia, the states of the former Soviet Union, South Africa, France, Germany, and Northern Ireland indicate that this very practical and core theoretical problem of the social sciences is more than an American dilemma. The problem of how to create these communities is, in my judgment, the strategic problem of our time. As such, it is the problem most likely to move forward the university's primary mission of advancing and transmitting knowledge to advance human welfare.

For urban universities, the particular strategic real-world and intellectual problem we face is how to overcome the deep, pervasive, interrelated problems affecting the people in our local geographic area. This concrete, immediate, practical, and theoretical problem, needless to say, requires creative interdisciplinary interaction. Urban universities encompass the range of human knowledge needed to solve the complex, comprehensive, and interconnected problems found in the city. To actually solve the problem, however, will require universities to change and increasingly become organizations that encourage and foster a Deweyan approach of "learning by strategic community problem-solving and real-world reflective doing."

Community Service and the Application of a Deweyan Approach

Anthropology 210: Pennsylvania as An Evolving Case Study

It is, of course, infinitely easier to call for a Deweyan approach than to actually put that approach into practice. For nearly eleven years, faculty, students, and staff from the University of Pennsylvania have been participat-

ing in a partnership with public schools, community groups, and other organizations to create university-assisted community schools in West Philadelphia. This partnership, the West Philadelphia Improvement Corps (WEPIC), has identified the university-assisted community schools as the concrete vehicle for creating a face-to-face, neighborly community in an area plagued by urban blight, poverty, and decline. Anthropology 210, a Penn seminar focused on advancing community school development, has made particularly significant contributions to teaching, research, and service. A sketch of its evolution also illustrates how Dewey's theory of instrumental intelligence might be applied.

Anthropology 210 focuses on the relationships between "Anthropology and Biomedical Science." An undergraduate course, it was developed to link premedical training at Penn with the anthropology department's program in medical anthropology. The course has always emphasized deepening students' awareness and knowledge of health and disease as rooted within human biological variability, human evolutionary history, and the synergism between human biology and culture. That orientation has remained constant. In 1990, however, the course was revised significantly after Professor Francis Johnston, who teaches it, decided to participate actively in a project to assist the Turner Middle School in West Philadelphia in transforming itself into a community school.

From 1990 to date, students in Anthropology 210 have carried out a variety of activities at Turner, focusing on the interactive relationships among diet, nutrition, growth, and health. Readings and class discussions in Anthro 210 deal with theories of health and disease, concepts of population health, evaluation of health, nutrition, and growth status at the aggregate level, and the formulation, application, and evaluation of intervention programs following the model of participatory action research. Beginning in 1990, these more theoretical aspects of the course have been applied in practice through an interrelated set of semester-long student group projects carried out at the Turner School, spanning a range of research and service activities.

Since its 1990 revision, Anthro 210 has been explicitly organized around strategic, academically-based community service. Students are encouraged to view their education at Penn as preparing them to contribute to the solution of societal problems through service to the local community, and to do so by devoting a large part of their work in the course to a significant human problem, in this the case the "nutriture" of disadvantaged inner-city children,

defined as the balance between the intake and expenditure of energy and nutrients by an organism. Direct linkage between students' work in the field—a long-standing tradition in anthropology—and their readings and class discussions help them put their practical experience into a framework of theory and generalizable knowledge. The students conceive and conduct their projects as rigorous investigations of problems (in both the human and scientific senses) that require careful attention to the methods of scholarly investigation. Moreover, because their projects deal with different aspects of a single significant and complex problem and are carried out as group activities, students come to understand better the complexity of societal problems and the advantages—and difficulties—of collaborative attempts to solve them.

In effect, after Anthro 210 was reoriented and reorganized in 1990, its members have worked with teachers and students at the Turner school to construct a real-world "nutrition laboratory" in West Philadelphia. Part of that laboratory's work has been to design and carry out the Turner Nutritional Awareness Project. Among other goals, that project aims to enhance the nutriture of Turner students by providing them with the framework for making informed decisions about diet, nutrition, and health. To help achieve that goal, Penn students have worked closely with Turner students and teachers and conducted a variety of projects grouped into four main categories: 1) teaching nutrition; 2) evaluating nutritional status, 3) recording and evaluating the actual diets of Turner students, and 4) nutritional ecology, i.e., observing behavior in the school lunchroom, and mapping sources of food in the Turner neighborhood and the types of food featured and sold in them.

To carry out the four types of projects cited above, Penn and Turner students engage in a variety of activities that require systematic research, data collection, analysis, and interpretation. That is, in accordance with John Dewey's precepts, the Penn and Turner students collaborate in learning by doing real-world things about significant real-world problems and reflecting on what they are doing. As a result, according to Professor Johnston, Anthro 210 is working better for Penn students than it ever has; he finds the course continually more stimulating, enlightening, and enjoyable to teach; and the Turner students seem highly motivated to work seriously on the subjects involved in the nutritional awareness project. Moreover, the descriptive data produced in Anthro 210 have been presented at university seminars and scholarly meetings and published in the scientific literature. These data focus on aspects of the quality of the Turner students' diets, and on the high preva-

lence of obesity—among the highest yet reported for American youth of any ethnic group. They have also stimulated at least one doctoral dissertation.

Conclusion

I have argued and tried to illustrate that strategic, academically-based community service holds promise for producing the structural change needed to markedly reduce the deprivation and (inhuman) human suffering found in our cities. I have also argued that the early history of the modern urban American university provides us with a useful example from which to learn and build. For the founders, the mission of the university was to create a better city and society through advancing and transmitting knowledge. Even with its limitations, their model was essentially one of strategic, academically-based community service, integrating research, teaching, faculty service and student service learning, and attempting to make fundamental improvements in the lives of people and their communities. That model, I believe, can inspire America's urban universities to function as Deweyan learning organizations that help solve the strategic intellectual and societal problem of creating and maintaining attractive, highly livable, humane cities that will be centers of learning and progress in the 21st century.

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