Integrating Service Learning With Systemic Change

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter examines the redesign of the Petey Greene Program (the PGP), which prepares under-graduate and graduate student volunteers at 30 higher education institutions to tutor people in prison. Through a redesign process, the PGP shifted from a service learning organization that only supplements existing prison education programs with volunteer tutors to one that also pursues systemic improvement in educational access for justice-impacted people and facilitates volunteer activism. The chapter explores how service learning programs may perpetuate unjust systems if they are not integrated into systemic change initiatives and offers a guide for using service learning programs as a platform for pursuing systemic change. The case study illustrates how higher education institutions can partner with external organizations to educate justice-oriented citizens who understand and address the structural root causes of injustice.

BACKGROUND

The Petey Greene Program (the PGP) was founded in 2008 to supplement education in jails, prisons, and detention centers by preparing college student volunteers to provide free tutoring to incarcerated people. The organization was named after Ralph Waldo Petey Greene, Jr., a formerly incarcerated community activist and television personality, who dedicated his life to advocating for racial and social justice. The organization's founder, Charles Puttkammer, first met Petey Greene in 1963 while leading the United Planning Organization in Police Community Relations, and was so inspired by Greene that he founded the organization to honor his legacy. To launch the PGP, Puttkammer enlisted the support of several of his college classmates who graduated from Princeton University in 1958, including the organization's founding executive director, Jim Farrin, who served through 2019.

The PGP implemented its first program in New Jersey, recruiting Princeton University students to tutor incarcerated youth. In 2013, a quasi-experimental evaluation of the organization's programming

showed incarcerated students tutored by the PGP gained one to two grade levels more than non-tutored students in math and reading over the course of one semester (Kowalski, 2013). Following these results, the organization launched programs in Massachusetts, Connecticut, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Washington D.C., Virginia, and Maryland. By 2018, the PGP operated the largest multi-state tutoring program in jails and prisons, coordinating 1,000 volunteers annually, 80% of whom were college students recruited through partnerships with 30 universities, the remaining 20% community members from a range of professions. The organization tutored approximately 2,200 youth and adults in 50 correctional facilities each year, 80% of whom were pursuing adult basic and high school education, and 20% post-secondary education.

While the PGP's founding intent was to support incarcerated individuals, the program deeply affected volunteers from the start, many of whom considered the experience the most meaningful of their college careers. As a result of their participation, some volunteers founded student advocacy organizations, beginning with Students for Prison Education and Reform (SPEAR) at Princeton. Many shifted their academic, civic, and professional focus to criminal legal system reform and other social justice causes. Over time, the organization complemented procedural training for volunteers required by departments of correction with PGP-led education on mass incarceration and ethical volunteerism. The PGP elevated and supported campus leaders, forming university-sanctioned student groups that recruited volunteers and organized campus events featuring social justice activists. Staff facilitated volunteer reflection on their tutoring experience each term, including how it influenced volunteers' understanding of the criminal legal system, its racial and socioeconomic underpinnings and implications, as well as their relationship to it. In educating volunteers on the structural context and causes of the need for volunteerism, the organization shifted from its original community service model to a service learning program. Whereas a community service program addresses a community need through volunteerism, a service learning program also educates volunteers on the societal causes and consequences of that need (Cipolle, 2010; Kegan, 2000; King, 2004; Mitchell, 2007).

As the organization expanded volunteer education on the carceral state and events featuring social justice activists, a tension emerged among board trustees and staff: Should the PGP focus on educating future activists, or on educating incarcerated students, and to what extent are the two mutually exclusive? While both board and staff included proponents of one or the other, trustees were slightly more concerned than staff about the increased focus on providing volunteers with a social justice education. While some trustees felt educating activists was a critical element of the PGP's work, others who were concerned by it felt that activism was necessarily partisan, and that the PGP ought to remain nonpartisan. Many trustees were also unaware of the difference between lobbying and advocacy, and the regulations governing and allowing a nonprofit's engagement in both activities. Most trustees were also unfamiliar with the concept of systemic change, and how it might apply to the PGP's mission of providing high-quality education to justice-impacted people.

While most staff were also unversed in nonprofit lobbying law, it did not prevent them from believing volunteers should be educated on and encouraged to promote criminal legal system reform. The majority of staff were recent college graduates, with campus activism experience. Nearly all staff joined the PGP because they felt the criminal legal system was deeply unjust, and that the PGP could do something about it. Some staff believed the PGP ought to be advocating for criminal legal system reform directly as an organization, not just tangentially by inspiring volunteers to become advocates. Whereas most trustees felt the PGP should remain value neutral on the criminal legal system, some staff felt that neutrality was

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