

Chapter 12

Service Learning as a Scholarly Pursuit

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ABSTRACT

This chapter will show how one of the top scholars programs at the University of Tennessee incorporates meaningful service-learning into its curriculum. Their model, which includes academic courses, service dialogues, and service, promotes greater scholar engagement in the community and undoubtedly enhances the classroom experiences for its students. Following the practices of many of the earlier movements, the program tries to recognize the valuable resources, the human competence, and the rich cultural legacies in the schools and communities in which they serve. It is a constant and dynamic process of assessment and reflection that will hopefully transform not only the scholars but the communities they serve.

INTRODUCTION

In Knoxville, the community-schools movement is supported by the University of Tennessee. Through the Office of Teaching and Learning Innovation, the University actively promotes service learning as a course-based, hands-on pedagogical approach in which students make connections between three key components: (1) their service experience, (2) their classroom learning, and (3) reflection (“What is Service Learning?”). Service-learning is a mutually beneficial relationship in which communities receive support for addressing specific needs. Students, on the other hand, gain real-world problem-solving skills, which can be juxtaposed against some of the theoretical approaches they learn in class, as well as learn how to negotiate social and institutional relationships. In addition, service learning encourages students to [re]view the world through the lived experiences of people who have different experiences than their own and provides a new way of interpreting a “familiar reality” (Kronick, Cunningham, & Gourley 2). Learning to see the world from differing perspectives, particularly from the perspective of people and communities from different ethnic backgrounds, can enhance multicultural competencies, reduce stereotypes, and increase students’ awareness and understanding of structural inequality (Einfeld, & Collins, 2008).

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The most critical component of service-learning involves the process of reflection – the process of “creating meaning from newly sensed information, ... [and] integrating disparate sensed facts and general knowledge, ... to creat[e] a new understanding about those facts” (Kronick, Cunningham, & Gourley, 28). At its core, service-learning involves helping communities address specific needs and helping students understand and address systemic inequality. In order for this transformation to occur, students’ actions must be coupled with meaningful reflection. This process of engagement is critical to helping students move from being passive learners to critical thinkers (Freire, 1968) about the socio-historical, cultural and political contexts in which social problems evolve (Einfeld & Collins, 2008).

In “The Truthful Mirror: Reforming the Civic Engagement Movement in Higher Education,” Taylor, Luter, and Uzochukwu argue that “the civic engagement/service learning-movement is informed by a liberal amelioration model rather than a social transformation model” (Kronick, 9). To transform communities, universities must work with communities to address the underlying issues that undermine Black and Latinx communities including poor housing conditions, health disparities, high unemployment, income and wealth inequality, and poor educational outcomes. The complexity and entrenched nature of these core problems necessitates universities working with communities on the issues community members deem as most pressing. While universities may bring valuable resources to bear on these core problems, communities provide expertise in identifying the challenges and resources within their neighborhoods. This approach further recognizes the unique social, cultural, economic and historical context in which communities evolve.

Progressive scholars launched the civic engagement movement in the 1970s. At the time Kwame Ture and Charles Hamilton argued that “to get the right answers, one must ask the right questions. In order to find effective solutions, one must formulate the problem correctly. One must start from premises rooted in truth and reality rather than in myth.” (Taylor, 2). Within this framework, scholars set out to answer “What is the university?” Certainly, understanding the role of the university in society in general and its responsibility in alleviating the social problems that undermine and devastate communities more specifically is more than appropriate. Within this framework, employing a service-learning model allows (1) students to integrate theory and practice in both the classroom and the community in which they live and learn; (2) students and community members to engage in a dialogical process of teaching and learning; and (3) students to understand their experiences through traditional academic methodologies but also through their own reflective journaling. Further, this approach allows students to move beyond their status as solely students and consider their position within and responsibility to society. From a theoretical perspective our service-learning Program’s experience begins with a different question -- that is, “Why are community schools necessary?” Starting here allows us to examine some of the structural factors (e.g. institutionalized racism, unemployment, the lack of affordable housing, lack of affordable health care, over-policed communities) that community schools and the civic engagement movement seek to overcome.

In this chapter I will provide a brief history of The Haslam Scholars Program and our process of incorporating service learning into the Program curriculum. I will also highlight the work of scholars in the Program at two local community schools that focus on improving the health, safety, and academic success of students and their families. I will end the chapter with a discussion on how we help scholars frame their experiences at the schools within a structural context. But first, I will highlight how my own family context influenced my commitment to the community school movement.

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