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Commitment and Connection: Service-Learning and Christian Higher Education

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Commitment and Connection: Service-Learning and Christian Higher Education

Heffner, Gail Gunst and Claudia DeVries Beversluis, Eds.; (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 2002).

Reviewed by Monica L. Mullins

Published in 2002, *Commitment and Connection: Service-Learning and Christian Higher Education* provides readers with a detailed picture of the manner in which Calvin College has implemented the popular “academically based service-learning” component of American higher education on their campus. The text proposes that by providing the in-depth examination of one program readers may be able to find application for establishing similar programs on their own campuses. Calvin, a Christian liberal arts college in the Reformed Protestant tradition, is a leader in her home state of Michigan and in the United States in the area of academically based service-learning. As such, Calvin provides a highly qualified voice of experience to those seeking to establish or strengthen a program within the context of a Christian college. While none of the contributors are student affairs professionals, this edited work provides points of connection for the Student Development program serious about linking the hearts, hands, and minds of students. *Commitment and Connection* is edited by Gail Gunst Heffner, Associate Director for Applied and Community Based Research at the Calvin Center for Social Research and Claudia DeVries Beversluis, Dean for Instruction and Professor of Psychology at Calving College. The editors articulate the results of the edited work in their introduction by saying “The authors of this volume contend that academically based service-learning is one way to meet this challenge to explore new ways of packaging the learning so that students are equipped to reform society and are motivated for the task of being, and living as Christians in the world” (xxv). In other words, the programming to which this text points creates students who can be salt and light in a lost and dying world.

The editors provide thorough if somewhat lengthy introduction which argues strongly for the need of the unique perspective offered by their book. That perspective, service-learning in the environment of the Christian liberal arts college, has not been previously presented on the scale of a book of such length, scope, or focus. The introduction successfully prepares readers for the 15 individually authored selections which are divided into four major subject areas: “Building Community”, “Developing Students”, “Developing Faculty”, and “Building Institutional Support”. Student affairs professionals will benefit tremendously from the introduction as it details the purpose and motivation for academically based service learning in a manner that can speak

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well to both those with heavy involvement and experience with service-learning and to those with little or no exposure to such programs. In addition to the introduction, student affairs professionals will find the sections “Building Community” and “Development Students” most practical in the implications that can be made for their own work.

The main argument set forth by the editors and subsequently by the contributors is that three of the primary themes present in Christian higher education (service, learning, and faith) naturally come together in the form of academically based service-learning. As a result, Christian colleges and universities have a distinct calling to serve both their students and their communities through such programs. By assembling purposeful articles which are well researched from educators across the curriculum, the editors are able to address the challenges facing such programs along with the triumphs experienced by Calvin College and the community it serves. While the editors refuse to pander to the reader simply seeking a “how-to” approach, they do provide a practical and detailed examination of a successful academically based service learning-program. The methodology employed by the fourteen authors varies considerably in keeping with the academic field represented by the author. Nevertheless, the articles which necessitate the demonstration of assessment do provide it. Assessment tools mentioned include the gathering of feedback from both students and service recipients through the form of survey instruments, peer assessment, discussion groups, and individual meetings with professors. Very little data is included in the articles, but that doesn’t seem to reduce the validity of the argument. The work is well researched and bibliographies demonstrate a balance between both secular and faith based sources including moral and ethical developmental theorists and notable higher education authorities and journals.

Of particular interest is a selection located mid-way through the text which is authored by a Calvin alumnus who is a product of the program. Chapter 8: “Lessons in Service-Learning: Dilemma of Guilt, Lesson in Reciprocity” is authored by Laura Hoeksema Cebulski who currently directs an after-school program for at-risk children in Jonesboro, Arkansas. Cebulski gives readers the opportunity to examine the impact of service-learning on one student. The implication is that this student’s experience is

the desired result of the program. It is evident that Cebulski's service through Calvin's program impacted her life and career choices. She herself indicates that her worldview changed as a result of academically based service-learning. Learning to question the motive and benefit of service, she found that service and learning are ultimately inseparable. Finally, Cebulski seems to be answering the criticism of skeptics when she sums up her experience by saying, "A college that places an emphasis on service takes that training of the mind and synthesizes it with training of the heart. Not emotionalism devoid of reason, but rather thoughtful, meaningful, useful compassion to the community it exists within" (124). Cebulski's chapter is in essence a case study which provides readers with evidence to support the validity of the efforts of the authors and ultimately of Calvin College's academically based service learning-programs.

In the final analysis, *Commitment and Connection* is an introduction, a tool, an assessment, and a travel guide. While it demonstrates that academically based service-learning is not something to which universities can merely give lip service, it does provide an honest challenge to the higher education professional who sincerely desires to develop such a program. Readers will discover that service-learning demands a tremendous level of commitment, intentionality, and resources from the entire university community. Higher education professionals who find in themselves a passionate desire to implement academically based service-learning on their campuses would do well to place this book into the hands of as many key players as possible. Student leaders, academic deans, university presidents, trustees, and faculty members alike will benefit from a careful reading of this text and from discussing the implications on their own campuses.

Publications Policy

Growth: The Journal of the Association for Christians in Student Development

All articles should be consistent with the Doctrinal Statement, Article III of the Constitution and By-Laws of the Association for Christians in Student Development.

Material in the following categories will be considered for publication:

1. Research articles that have relevance to the field of Christian Student Development.
2. Theoretical or applied articles that have relevance to the field of Christian Student Development.
3. Research, theoretical or applied articles dealing with the integration of faith and learning within the field of Christian Student Development or within the broader field of Christian Higher Education as a whole.
4. Reviews of articles in other journals relevant to Christian Student Development.
5. Reviews of books relevant to Christian Student Development practice.
6. Reactions to current or past journal articles.

Submission Guidelines

Authors submitting a manuscript should:

1. Send three copies (typewritten and double-spaced) to Skip Trudeau, Co-Editor of *Growth: The Journal of the Association for Christians in Student Development*, Taylor University, 236 West Reade Avenue, Upland IN 46989-1001. Two of the copies should delete the author's name throughout for purposes of blind review.
2. Follow the guidelines on format, style and submission procedure provided in the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (5th ed.).
3. Manuscripts should adhere to the following length parameters:
 - 10-15 pages for original research articles
 - 7-10 pages for applied research articles
 - 3-4 pages for article reviews
 - 3-4 pages for book reviews
4. Avoid submitting manuscripts which have been previously published or that are being considered for publication in other journals. If an article has been rejected by another journal it may then be submitted to *Growth*.
5. Include an abstract of no more than 150 words on a separate sheet of paper.
6. Include the current vita information for each author: address, title, degree(s) and institutions where earned and specializations.
7. Include telephone number, fax number and electronic mail address.

All submitted manuscripts will be promptly acknowledged and processed in a timely fashion. The review process generally requires a minimum of three months.