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Community Engagement at Roger Williams University: Community Service – Service Learning – Civic Engagement

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Introduction

Late night pizza, dances in the gym, backpacks and... service? Service to the local community has become a part of the college tradition as more campuses incorporate service into their curricular and co-curricular cultures. Students are arriving on our campuses from high schools that either promote service or require it as prerequisite to graduation. Those students are continuing to embrace service as they begin their college careers. College students nationally contributed \$5.6 billion in labor through service during the 2004/2005 academic year (Campus Compact member survey, 2005). Of the members surveyed, 86% have an office or center dedicated to coordinating community service and service learning activities and 98% offer courses which incorporate service into the curriculum.

Roger Williams University parallels this trend. Service has evolved from “a nice thing to do” to an important element in our academic and co-curricular culture. We have outgrown the blanket term “service” and can place campus-wide service activities in three distinct categories: community service, service learning, and civic engagement. While based on the common goal of promoting active citizenship, each category contains distinct experiences with distinct learning outcomes.

History of Service at RWU

Community service was formally introduced to the RWU community in 1990 with the establishment of the Volunteer Center. The center, housed in the Department of Student Life, was run by a graduate intern and provided limited community service opportunities for undergraduate students. The first annual Day of Service, a precursor to the current Community Connections program, was facilitated in November 1994 and Alternative Spring Break launched in March 1996. The Volunteer Center moved under the Career Center in September 1996. Rationale for the move included both programs’ relationships with the non-profit community and common experiential learning goals.

Service became more prominent at RWU in 1998 through the establishment of the Feinstein Service Learning Program. The program was a result of a gift from Alan Shawn Feinstein, a local philanthropist who funded similar programs throughout the state at high schools and universities. Through the FSL program, the University instituted a service graduation requirement and established its first service-learning courses. In 2002 the language “commitment to community service” was added to the University’s core values and, now considered a “core requirement” of the RWU academic experience, the program was moved to the Feinstein College of Arts and Sciences under the direction of a full-time coordinator. Quantitative data on service activities of full-time undergraduate students shows immense growth—149 hours in 1998/99 vs. 28,645 in 2005/06. A qualitative review of campus-wide service activities shows the emergence of three distinct categories of service: community service, service learning, and civic engagement.

Community Service

Community service, or co-curricular service, is defined as service that “raises students’ consciousness and familiarity with issues related to various communities” but that often lacks intentional academic learning outcomes (Howard, 2001). The output of community service is work that addresses the symptoms of social issues, i.e. hunger, affordable housing, but not the systems that perpetuate the issues. Community service is often a “one-off” experience that involves a student volunteering for a short period (from one hour to one week) at a non-profit organization. Community service at RWU is widespread and includes programs such as Alternative Spring Break, Senior Citizen Yard Work Day, Community Service Work Study Program, and initiatives by athletic teams, student clubs and organizations, and individual students who want to “make a difference” in their new community. This category also includes charitable work, such as our Thanksgiving Basket Drive, Giving Tree, and residence hall food collections.

The most notable example of community service at RWU is the Community Connections program. The mission of the program, which was piloted in 2005, is “to continue the orientation process for new students by providing a common service experience that actualizes commitment to service, a core value of the University while meeting the real needs of organizations and individuals in the local community.” The one-day program involves the entering class of the University in service alongside 175 site leaders comprised of faculty, staff, and returning student leaders. The group serves non-profit organizations with a variety of focuses including urban development, historic preservation, hunger, community development, affordable housing, and elder support. Though the program has been criticized for a lack of depth, its mission clearly states that Community Connections is intended as an *introduction* to service for our students that also addresses immediate community needs. Systemic community change cannot be achieved through such a brief service experience. Real community change and intentional learning outcomes are achieved when the service is paired with academic material and longer community involvement through service learning.

Service Learning

Service learning is defined as “a credit-bearing, educational experience in which students participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility” (Long, 2001). In short, service learning is a reciprocal relationship between the agency and the university. Real community needs are met as students hone academic skills and consider their responsibilities as members of a community. Service learning is a more intense service experience for both the student and the community partner as more emphasis is placed on a sustained service experience lasting at least one semester and reflection that intentionally connects the service to learning outcomes. Since its official introduction to the RWU community in 1998, service learning has grown to include direct service, research-based service, and experiential learning.

Direct service is being provided by students enrolled in “Literacy in the Schools” I and II. All students are required to serve a minimum of 15 hours in literacy-based experiences in the elementary school system and act as literacy coaches for group and one-on-one reading activities. This service augments the efforts of teachers, literacy specialists, and homework club coordinators by providing more assistance to elementary students of all skill levels in a time when funding for additional staff in the classroom and after-school programs is being cut. In exchange, the college students are given a ‘real life’ context to practice their teaching and mentoring skills. This often provides college students with a first glimpse into the public school setting for education majors, an important first step in career exploration. College students journal their experiences and discuss them in class with their peers and professors, making direct connections to classroom material and to social issues that impact the educational community.

Research-based service is a growing trend in service learning that allows students to construct survey tools or conduct research that is shared with the community partner. Students enrolled in “Qualitative Research Methods” in Fall 2005 partnered with Girl Scouts of Rhode Island to create research tools that would help the agency determine why enrollment has decreased statewide. The goal of the course was to provide an introduction to the “concepts and principles of the research process; data collection and analysis, including hypothesis formation and testing, research, design, sampling, and measurement validity and reliability” (Roger Williams University Course Catalog, 2006/2007). These goals were met through students’ work to understand the Girl Scout culture and identify indicators of dissatisfaction. The students volunteered for at least five troop meetings where they worked alongside troop leaders and met parents and children. Their work in the community allowed them to better understand the agency and its constituency as they considered the research question. The final product was a set of parent, scout, and troop leader survey instruments for use by Girl Scouts of Rhode Island.

Internships and co-ops offer an increased depth of hands-on experience for the student, the opportunity to significantly contribute to the agency, and a more intense involvement in the community. During the 2005/2006 academic year, RWU students contributed over 3,000 hours of service to non-profit community partners and government agencies through internships and co-op experiences. This extended service-learning experience of approximately 130 hours allows the students to learn more about the community partner, the social problem that necessitates the work of that agency, and, most importantly, why that student’s work was important to the community.

Civic Engagement

Civic engagement can be its own form of community service or a byproduct of both community service and service learning. Students become engaged civically whenever they serve, whatever the length of

that service because they venture off our campus and into the local community to connect with individuals and organizations. When we speak of civic engagement for its own sake, we think of more political work. Where community service addresses the symptoms of social issues, civic engagement addresses the systems that perpetuate those problems. Project 540, a civically-focused high school student group funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts, defines civic engagement as “adding one’s voice to community conversations. Advocacy on behalf of others. Participation in public life. Encouraging other people to participate in public life. Joining in common work that promotes the well being of everyone.” Examples of civic engagement include writing letters to the editor, running voter registration drives, and hosting political candidates on campus. Civic engagement can also be seen in activism. Students at Roger Williams recently formed groups that will work on the One Campaign and justice in Darfur. Their civic engagement involves educating their peers as well as protest against what they perceive as domestic and global tyranny.

Civic engagement can also have more personal side. Students who gathered in 2001 for the Wingspread Summit for Student Civic Engagement stated, “The manner in which we engage in our democracy goes well beyond the traditional measurements... like voting. Student civic engagement has multiple manifestations: personal reflection/inner development, thinking, reading, silent protest, dialogue and relationship building, sharing knowledge, project management and formal organization that brings people together” (Long, 2001). These students make the argument that merely being informed on civic issues means that one is civically engaged. Our students are offered such an experience in Core Curriculum classes. When addressing the Core questions—Who Am I? What do I know? Based on what I know, what should I do?—students synthesize reflection, knowledge, and action, as the Wingspread Students advocate.

As Professor Jennifer Campbell argued in the inaugural issue of *Reason & Respect*, it is important that we add our voices to an on-going dialogue about what matters to our communities. As our students make clear, service matters to our community—not only performing service, but grappling with the meaning of service itself. In the winter and spring 2007 issues of *Reason & Respect*, student writers commit their ideas about community service, service learning, and civic engagement to paper for the benefit of the entire RWU community and those whose lives we touch beyond our campus borders. In effect, we can recognize yet another historic moment of service at RWU, where the academic and civic enterprise become one

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