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Jena Spindler

Roger Williams University

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Service Learning: A Concept We Are Not as Familiar with as We Might Think

Jena Spindler, Foreign Language/Classical Studies '08

We are no strangers to service. As a country, as a university, and as individuals, most of us have not only been exposed to service, but we also gladly participate in it. When Hurricane Katrina struck Louisiana last fall, we as a Roger Williams community struck back. Even though most were not affected directly, we all extended a helping hand. We opened our campus to students evacuating from their schools down south. We ran blood drives to help the injured and, most importantly, students signed away meals in order to have that food money be better used in the south. If we are already such staunch supporters of service, then why are institutions like Roger Williams University trying to make service part of the academic curriculum? Why are mandatory programs like Community Connections springing up? Some Core classes, such as Human Behavior, incorporate community service as one of the class requirements. Also, the main topic of this year's civil discourse journal is service. Why is service being highlighted so much if we already have service on our minds? We as a campus community are already service oriented. What is the point of trying to teach service to a group that knows how to perform service?

It is not a matter of degrees of service, but rather of what kinds. Although it appears that as a community we already know how to perform community service, now we are trying to teach a different kind called service learning. Service learning is considered highly important to college students' educational experience because it generates active citizenship among an unaware community.

Despite a common belief, service learning is completely different from community service. Service learning is different from community service because not only is work being accomplished in a community, but also students are learning how to apply service to their everyday lives as citizens of the community. When one participates in community service, one is more inclined to put patches on problems. Volunteering in a soup kitchen during the holidays is great since help is needed, but if one is not willing to help out more than two times a year, then what really is the impact? On the other hand, service learning in higher education, as reported in the NEA higher education journal *Advocate*, "[can] balance the educational needs of students with practical needs of the community" (Karasik 6). Service learning requires students to participate in service more than just once or twice a year; students are required to repeat the service to the community while at the same time meeting some educational needs of the student. The *Advocate* offers different experiences that can constitute as service learning: "writing students can find opportunities to write the life stories of those who can't. Mass communications majors gather valuable experience assisting non-profit groups generate publicity. Education majors offer reading workshops... Political science students arrange local candidate forums" (Karasik 6). All of these majors exist on our campus in great numbers. We already have numerous ways to serve without having to perform pointless labor. For instance, Architecture students could help design outdoor areas for under-funded schools. Business majors could help organize floundering non-profit groups, who have good intentions, but may have poor bookkeeping habits. Marine Biology students could routinely clean the shores through programs like Save the Bay. These few examples of service learning opportunities teach students very much as an internship teaches. Students are put into the real world where deadlines must be met, people get disappointed if students do not follow through, and more than one strategy to solve a problem may be needed. Due to these experiences, service learning helps students transition better from the academic world to the professional world. Moreover, service learning leads to active citizenship because students become engaged in finding ways to apply their education in instances that help other people in the community. But should active citizenship be taught as part of the curriculum? Haven't we had active citizens in the past without teaching them to be so?

Active citizenship is an essential skill to add to higher education curriculums because the students graduating are more likely going to become our future leaders, such as doctors, lawyers, educators, politicians, and business owners. All of these positions should generate incomes that would allow the former students not to have to worry about personal financial security. If these people are not civically engaged, while having the

means to support themselves, then why should anyone else become engaged if he or she has to worry about his or her income? Yet active citizenship has always been a concern to our country as a community. John F. Kennedy once said, "Ask not what your country can do for you: ask what you can do for your country." Why would a man being inaugurated as our president ask his followers not to ask him what he can do for them, but rather what they can do for him? At first it seems contradictory. Was he not elected to office to help support the needs of his fellow citizens? Why is he turning the problems back on them? Well, in our society, the government cannot function without active citizens. This is still true today. But people, such as John F. Kennedy, have been produced from our educational systems without specifically teaching service learning. What change has occurred that we need to be taught this value now?

Our society in the 2000's appears to have returned to being individual-based instead of communal-based. For example, fewer college students vote regularly in elections nowadays. To get students out to vote in the fall 2006 elections, Roger Williams University went as far as to provide an "incentive" to unregistered freshmen: upon registering they would be given candy bars. A school offering chocolate to convince to students to exercise their civic rights is incomprehensible! That would be like offering money to defendants in order that they allow themselves to be represented in a civil dispute. Unheard of! Universities like Roger Williams need to implement ways to teach students how to be active citizens because, as Jordy Rocheleau said in his piece "Theoretical Roots of Service: Progressive Education and the Development of Citizenship," democracy calls "for active citizen participation in identifying social problems and proposing and implementing solutions" (7). If we do not have citizens who know how to apply their education for the good of the community, be it country, state, or town, then how can we expect any of our social problems to be solved?

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