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# The Limits of Service-Learning in Higher Education

*Dan W. Butin*

## INTRODUCTION

The service-learning movement has become a major presence within higher education. More than 950 colleges and universities are Campus Compact members, committed to the civic purposes of higher education. Tens of thousands of faculty engage millions of college students in some form of service-learning practice each and every year. Major federal and private funding sustains and expands an increasingly diverse K-16 service-learning movement.

The substantial spread of service-learning over the last ten years mirrors a larger development in the academy—namely, higher education has begun to embrace a “scholarship of engagement” (Boyer, 1990; Shulman, 2004), be it manifested as experiential education, service-learning, undergraduate research, community-based research, the scholarship of teaching and learning movement, or stronger relationships with local communities. A scholarship of engagement is seen to link theory and practice, cognitive and affective learning, and colleges with communities. Such a paradigm of teaching and

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learning seemingly breaches the bifurcation of lofty academics with the lived reality of everyday life to promote critical inquiry and reflective practice across complex and contested local, national, and international issues.

Yet even as the idea of service-learning moves into the academic mainstream, its actual institutional footprint appears uncertain. Service-learning is all too often positioned as a co-curricular practice, funded through “soft” short-term grants, and viewed by faculty as “just” an atheoretical (and time-consuming) pedagogy that may be detrimental for traditional tenure and promotion committees to take seriously. It is in this context that service-learning advocates have begun to devote intensive efforts to institutionalize service-learning within higher education. As service-learning practice and theory has reached a critical mass, attention has turned in the last few years to ensuring its institutional longevity.

In this article, I take a critical look at the attempted institutionalization of service-learning in higher education. I query whether service-learning can become deeply embedded within the academy; and, if so, what exactly it is that becomes embedded. Specifically, this article suggests that there are substantial pedagogical, political, and institutional limits to service-learning across the academy. These limits, moreover, are inherent to the service-learning movement as contemporarily theorized and enacted. As such, I argue, there may be a fundamental and unbridgeable gap between the rhetoric and reality of the aspirations of the present-day service-learning movement.

It should be noted that the goal of this article is not to dismiss, denigrate, or derail the immense work put in by two generations of service-learning scholars and advocates. Service-learning has immense transformational potential as a sustained, immersive, and consequential pedagogical practice (Butin, 2005a). Yet such potential, I suggest, can be fostered only by explicating the limits of present-day theoretical foundations and pedagogical practices that may inadvertently inhibit and constrain service-learning scholars and practitioners. As the concluding section makes clear, such an explication may in fact offer substantial alternative possibilities for institutionalizing service-learning in higher education.

This article situates the service-learning movement through an analysis of its drive towards institutionalization. Such an analysis reveals some of the fundamental and underlying assumptions of the service-learning field. I then show how these assumptions harbor significant pedagogical, political, and institutional impediments for the authentic institutionalization of service-learning. I conclude by suggesting how a reframing of such assumptions may allow service-learning to be repositioned as a disciplinary field more suitable for becoming deeply embedded in higher education.

### INSTITUTIONALIZING SERVICE-LEARNING

After a heady decade of exponential growth, the service-learning movement appears ideally situated within higher education. It is used by a substantial number of faculty across an increasingly diverse range of academic courses; administrative offices and centers are devoted to promoting its use; and it is prominently cited in college and university presidents' speeches, on institutional homepages, and in marketing brochures.

Yet as the recent Wingspread statement (2004) put it: "The honeymoon period for engagement is over; the difficult task of creating a lasting commitment has begun" (p. 4). For underneath the surface, the service-learning movement has found its institutionalization within higher education far from secure. Fewer than half of all service-learning directors are full-time, and 46% of all service-learning offices have annual budgets below \$20,000 (Campus Compact, 2004). While the idea of service-learning is given high support across the academy, it is infrequently "hard wired" into institutional practices and policies. Service-learning is overwhelmingly used by the least powerful and most marginalized faculty (e.g., people of color, women, and the untenured), by the "softest" and most "vocational" disciplines and fields (e.g., education, social work), and with minimal exchange value (e.g., tenure and promotion prioritization) (Antonio, Astin, & Cross, 2000; Campus Compact, 2004). Recent research (Bell et al., 2000) suggests that even institutions at the top of the "service-learning pyramid" consistently have to revisit and rework service-learning implementation and institutionalization.

More troubling still is that the academy's "buy in" to service-learning may be much easier said than done, with few political or institutional costs for failing to achieve substantial goals. Rhetoric may be winning over reality. It is thus that the Wingspread Statement "call[s] the question": "Is higher education ready to commit to engagement?" (Brukardt et al., 2004, p. ii). This can be framed in poker parlance of calling the bluff. Does higher education have the desire, the long-term fortitude, and the resources to remake itself? Is higher education able, for the sake of itself, its students, and American society more generally, to embrace a more engaged, democratic, and transformative vision of what it should be, should have been, and was before? (Benson, Harkavy, & Hartley, 2005). If so, then it had better ante up.

There is thus a burgeoning literature on the institutionalization of service-learning. I want to focus on Andy Furco's work (2001, 2002a, 2002b, 2003; Furco & Billig, 2002) and on the Wingspread statement because each takes a diametrically opposed stance on the *means* of institutionalizing service-learning; both, however, carry exactly the same assumptions of what the *outcomes* of such institutionalization should be. While the literature is ever-growing and far from singular in perspective (Bell et al., 2000; Benson, Harkavy, & Hartley, 2005; Bringle & Hatcher, 2000; Gray, Ondaatje, &

Zakaras, 2000; Hartley, Harkavy, & Benson, 2005; Holland, 2001; Kramer, 2000), Furco's work and the Wingspread statement are emblematic of the dominant vision and goals for service-learning institutionalization and the two primary and divergent paths to achieving such goals.

Specifically, Furco's work offers a systematic rubric for gauging the *incremental* progress of service-learning institutionalization; the Wingspread statement, in contrast, promotes a *transformational* vision for service-learning in higher education. Educational historian Larry Cuban (1990, 1998) has cogently referred to this distinction as first- versus second-order change and has explored the historical contexts and conditions that support one form of educational reform over another. More interesting for this article is that, irrespective of the divergent means propounded, both perspectives have a vision of service-learning as a meta-text for the policies, practices, and philosophies of higher education. Thus, irrespective of how it is to be institutionalized, service-learning is seen as the skeleton key to unlock the power and potential of postsecondary education as a force for democracy and social justice. By further explicating the divergent means propounded by incrementalist and transformationalist perspectives, it becomes possible to grasp the overarching assumptions and implications of the service-learning movement.

Furco (2002b) has developed a rubric for viewing the institutionalization of service-learning. The rubric acts as a road map that individuals and institutions committed to embedding service-learning throughout their campuses may follow. It further works as a formal or informal assessment mechanism to gauge progress along the institutionalization path. Furco operationalizes institutionalization across five distinct dimensions "which are considered by most service-learning experts to be key factors for higher education service-learning institutionalization" (p. 1): (a) philosophy and mission, (b) faculty support and involvement, (c) student support and involvement, (d) community participation and partnerships, and (e) institutional support. While Furco argues elsewhere (2001, 2002a, 2003) that research identifies the key institutional factors as faculty and institutional support, the rubric makes clear that "What is most important is the overall status of the campus's institutionalization progress rather than the progress of individual components" (p. 3).

The real value and usefulness of the rubric is that it clearly and succinctly lays out the step-by-step increments by which a campus can institutionalize service-learning. Faculty support for and involvement in service-learning, for example, moves from "very few" to "an adequate number" to "a substantial number" of faculty who are knowledgeable about, involved in, and leaders of service-learning on a campus. Staffing moves from "no staff" to "an appropriate number . . . paid from soft money or external grant funds" to "an

appropriate number of permanent staff members” (p. 13). The rubric does not suggest how such incremental progress is to be achieved; each campus culture and context is different. Instead, it lays out an explicit framework for (in Cuban’s terminology) “tinkering” toward institutionalization.

The Wingspread participants (Brukardt et al., 2004) have a fundamentally different agenda: “Our goal in calling the question is nothing less than the transformation of our nation’s colleges and universities” (p. ii). Six specific practices are articulated to institutionalize engagement and accomplish this goal: (a) integrate engagement into mission, (b) forge partnerships as the overarching framework, (c) renew and redefine discovery and scholarship, (d) integrate engagement into teaching and learning, (e) recruit and support new champions, and (f) create radical institutional change. Many of these practices mirror Furco’s rubric and are possible to implement without radical transformation: integrating engagement into a mission statement, forging stronger partnerships, fostering more engaged pedagogy, and recruiting new voices to speak for engagement are all doable without fundamentally altering the structure and practices of higher education.<sup>1</sup>

What is radically different are the third and sixth practices. Redefining scholarship and creating radical institutional change by, for example, overturning higher education’s “hierarchical, elitist and competitive environment” (p. 15) is a revolutionary call to arms. And the Wingspread participants are well aware of this. Each specific practice in the statement has a “What Is Needed” section that offers concrete action steps. For example, it recommends “expanded assessment and portfolio review options for faculty” (Brukardt et al., 2004, p. 14) to integrate engagement into teaching and learning. This seems eminently reasonable. Yet under the “Create Radical Institutional Change” section, what is needed is “Courage!”, “New models”, “Serious . . . funding”, “New links between academic work and critical public issues”, and “Institutional flexibility and willingness to experiment—and to fail.” These are not action steps. They are a battle cry.

Thus, where Furco’s rubric offers a deliberate and deliberative procession of rational increments, the *Wingspread Statement* provides a fiery manifesto for reinvention. Irrespective of which model is better (or whether, perhaps,

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<sup>1</sup>Of course such changes *shouldn’t* be doable without fundamentally altering the structures and practices of higher education. The Wingspread statement is premised exactly on the notion that these practices would be taken up in “thick” ways. Unfortunately, these practices as articulated are all too easily misappropriated within the world of higher education. This is not to suggest that these practices are not important. In fact, they may actually be the most sustainable aspects of service-learning as presently conceived. The point here is simply that they are not at the heart of what the Wingspread statement really *means* when it talks about institutionalizing service-learning. What it really means, and what the third and sixth practices make vivid, is the desire to transform higher education through service-learning.

both are necessary), of relevance is that both assume that, by whichever means necessary, service-learning should become an overarching framework for higher education. This framework, moreover, should be embedded both horizontally across departments and vertically throughout all levels of an institution's pronouncements, policies, and practices. Both presume that service-learning can and should be done from accounting to women's studies; that all students, faculty, administrators, and community partners can be involved; and that everything from line-item budgets to institutional webpages have the imprint of service-learning.

Such a scenario is nothing less than a grand narrative for higher-education-as-service-learning, for it positions service-learning *as a politics* to transform higher education and society. The implications are both prominent and problematic. Such a perspective presumes that service-learning is a universal, coherent, cohesive, amelioristic, and liberatory practice. It further presumes that service-learning is not somehow always already a part of the institutional practices and norms it is attempting to modify and overcome. Yet as the following sections clarify, such presumptions are unfounded.

### THE LIMITS OF INSTITUTIONALIZATION

In this section I question the notion of service-learning as an overarching and transformative agent of social change and social justice in higher education and society more generally by focusing on three specific claims made by the service-learning movement—that service-learning is a means (a) to transform pedagogy, (b) to usher in a more democratic and socially just politics in higher education, and (c) to redirect postsecondary institutions outward toward public work rather than inward toward academic elitism.

These claims, it should be noted, are premised on an inherent compatibility between service-learning and the academy. This seeming compatibility indexes assumptions that civic engagement and “real world” learning are hallmarks of the future of higher education. Yet such assumptions are, of course, open to contestation and critique, perhaps the most biting of which has come from Stanley Fish. Fish (2004) has opined that we should stick to questions about the truth and not bother with issues of morality, democracy, or social justice: “We should look to the practices in our own shop, narrowly conceived, before we set out to alter the entire world by forming moral character, or fashioning democratic citizens, or combating globalization, or embracing globalization, or anything else” (p. A23; see also Butin, 2005b, for a contextualization of this argument). Fish was responding directly to a publication from a group of scholars at the Carnegie Foundation's Higher Education and Development of Moral and Civic Responsibility Project (Colby et al., 2003), but his critique has general resonance for those who see the academy as primarily a site of knowledge production and dissemination

rather than of something as nondefinable and potentially partisan as moral and civic betterment.

I am sympathetic to Fish's arguments and have elsewhere explicated the theoretical limits of service-learning as beholden to a teleological and ethical stage theory framework in which students and faculty are supposed to move from a perspective of "service-learning as charity" to "service-learning as social justice" (Butin, 2003, 2005b, in press-a). Yet such larger theoretical debates about the values and purposes of service-learning vis-à-vis higher education are ultimately beyond the scope of this article, for the question today is no longer *if* service-learning is to become a part of the academy so much as *how* it is already becoming a part of it and the resulting implications.

### ***Pedagogical Limits to Service-Learning***

Advocates see service-learning as a transformative pedagogy that links classrooms with the real world, the cognitive with the affective, and theory with practice, thereby disrupting a banking model of education premised on passive students, expert faculty, and the "simple" transfer of discrete and quantifiable knowledge (Freire, 1994; hooks, 1994). Service-learning is supposed to foster respect for and reciprocity with the communities that colleges and universities are all too often in but not of.

But is this possible? Campus Compact's (2004) annual membership survey shows the following departments with the highest offering of service-learning courses: education (69%), sociology (56%), English (55%), psychology (55%), business/accounting (46%), communications (46%), and health/health related (45%). In a now-classic formulation, Becher (Becher & Trowler, 2001) argued that academic disciplines can be differentiated along two spectra: hard/soft and pure/applied. Hard-pure fields (e.g., chemistry and physics) view knowledge as cumulative and are concerned with universals, simplification, and quantification. Hard-applied fields (e.g., engineering) make use of hard, pure knowledge to develop products and techniques. Soft-pure fields (e.g., English) view knowledge as iterative and are concerned with particularity and qualitative inquiry. Soft-applied fields (e.g., education, management) make use of soft, pure knowledge to develop protocols and heuristics. What becomes immediately clear is that service-learning is overwhelmingly used in the "soft" disciplines. Biology is the highest "hard" field (at number 10 with 37%), with the natural sciences next at number 18 (with 25%).

I, of course, acknowledge that the hard/soft and pure/applied distinctions are socially constructed typologies that carry longstanding ideological baggage and serve as proxies for contestations surrounding the power, legitimacy, and prestige of any particular discipline. Scholars in the sociology of knowledge and history of science have shown not simply the ambiguity



and permeability of the boundaries between so-called “soft” and “hard” disciplines, but have fundamentally questioned the (to use Foucault’s terminology) “scientificity” of claims to the objective and neutral practice of mapping reality (Hacking, 1999; Lather, 2005; Latour, 1979). Yet what is at issue here is not whether there is “really” a distinction between the hard and soft sciences, but how such a socially constructed distinction is ultimately determined and practiced in our day-to-day life. As Cornel West (1994) once wryly noted, taxicabs in Harlem still didn’t stop for him even if race was a social construction. Likewise, there is a plethora of empirical evidence (Biglan, 1973; Lueddeke, 2003; NCES, 2002) that teaching practices differ significantly across disciplines; as such, these disciplinary distinctions serve as useful heuristics for understanding how service-learning may or may not be taken up across the academy.

The service-learning field acknowledges that soft disciplines are much more apt to make use of service-learning, yet proponents presume that this is simply a consequence of *either* poorly marketing what service-learning can offer the hard sciences (from an incrementalist perspective) or the inability of the hard sciences to transform themselves into useful public disciplines (from a transformational perspective). What both perspectives miss is that Becher’s typology demonstrates that each grouping of disciplines manifests “its own epistemological characteristics . . . [of] curriculum, assessment and main cognitive purpose . . . [and] the group characteristics of teachers, the types of teaching methods involved and the learning requirements of students” (Neumann & Becher, 2002, p. 406).

Of most salience here are divergent concepts of teaching styles and assessment procedures between hard and soft disciplines. I will focus only on the hard disciplines here to make vivid their antipathy to service-learning assumptions. Given the sequential and factual nature of the hard disciplines, lecturing predominates as the teaching style. Moreover, the cumulative nature of knowledge makes moot any notion of student perspectives or “voice” in the field. It is simply not relevant how students “feel” about subatomic particles. As such, “in keeping with their atomistic structure [hard/pure knowledge fields] prefer specific and closely focused examination questions to broader, essay-type assignments” (Neumann & Becher, 2002, p. 408). “Objective” tests, norm-referenced grading, and lack of rubrics (given the right/wrong nature of what constitutes knowledge) are typical.

U.S. Department of Education statistics support these theoretical insights. The most recent available data (NCES, 2002, Table 16) show that the social sciences and humanities use apprenticeships and fieldwork much more often (10–15% depending on the discipline) than the natural sciences (2–3%). Humanities and social sciences faculty are almost twice as likely to use research papers than natural science faculty (70–85% versus 40–50%,

respectively), and half as likely to grade on a curve (20–30% versus 40–50%) (Tables 18, 22). While some of these data are confounded by the type of institution (e.g., doctoral versus nondoctoral institutions), fairly distinct patterns and differences among disciplines are visible.

Above and beyond these disciplinary differences, though, emerges a more troubling realization. Fully 83% of all faculty use lecturing as the primary instructional method in college classrooms. This percentage does not drastically change across the type of institution, faculty rank or tenure status, or discipline (NCES, 2002, Tables 15, 16). Thus, irrespective of disciplinary and epistemological differences, the vast majority of faculty in higher education see themselves as embodying the normative (read: non service-learning-oriented) model of teaching and learning.<sup>2</sup> This dominant trend is further exacerbated by the reality that non-tenure track faculty by now constitute almost half of all teaching faculty in higher education (Snyder, Tan, & Hoffman, 2004). A normative model of teaching is thus reinforced by the marginal and transitory status of faculty. There thus appears to be a very low upper limit to the use of service-learning across higher education.

If faculty demographics do not conform to who should make use of service-learning, then student demographics do not align with the type of students supposedly doing service-learning. I have argued elsewhere that the service-learning field assumes an “ideal type” of service-learning student: one who volunteers her time, has high cultural capital, and gains from contact with the “other” (Butin, 2003). The service-learning literature is replete with discussions of how students come to better understand themselves, cultural differences, and social justice through service-learning. The overarching assumption is that the students doing the service-learning are White, sheltered, middle-class, single, without children, un-indebted, and between ages 18 and 24. But that is not the demographics of higher education today, and it will be even less so in 20 years.

NCES (Snyder, Tan, & Hoffman, 2004) data show that the largest growth in postsecondary enrollment will be in for-profit and two-year institutions; already today, fully 39% of all postsecondary enrollment is in two-year institutions (Table 178). Moreover, 34% of undergraduates are over 25 years of age; 40% of undergraduates are part-time. Even considering just full-time undergraduates, more than 18% are over 25 years of age (Tables 176, 177). Additionally, college completion rates continue to be low: fewer than half of all college entrants complete a baccalaureate degree, with gradua-

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<sup>2</sup>The NCES data have numerous methodological ambiguities. For example, the lack of a distinctive service-learning category may obscure its use, the lack of Likert-scales may distort actual use of instructional methods, and lecturing may be conflated with discussion. The primary point of the data, though, is the unambiguous marginality of non-lecturing pedagogical methods across higher education.

tion percentages dipping much lower for two-year institutions and among part-time, lower-class, and/or non-White students. Finally, U.S. census data forecast that White youth will become a numeric minority in our K-12 schools within a generation; this changing demographic wave is already impacting the makeup of higher education.

These statistics raise three serious pedagogical issues for the service-learning field. First, service-learning is premised on full-time, single, non-indebted, and childless students pursuing a "liberal arts education." Yet a large proportion of the postsecondary population of today, and increasingly of the future, views higher education as a part-time, instrumental, and pre-professional endeavor that must be juggled with children, family time, and earning a living wage. Service-learning may be a luxury that many students cannot afford, whether in terms of time, finances, or job future.

Second, service-learning is premised on fostering "border-crossing" across categories of race, ethnicity, class, (im)migrant status, language, and (dis)ability. Yet what happens when the postsecondary population *already* occupies those identity categories? The service-learning field is only now beginning to explore such theoretical and pragmatic dilemmas (e.g., Henry, 2005; Henry & Breyfogle, in press; Swaminathan, 2005, in press), and these investigations are already disrupting some of the most basic categories within the service-learning field (e.g., the server/served binary, student/teacher and classroom/community power dynamics and reciprocity).

Third, there is a distinct possibility that service-learning may ultimately come to be viewed as the "Whitest of the White" enclave of postsecondary education. Given changing demographics and the rise of the "client-centered" postsecondary institution, service-learning may come to signify a luxury available only to the privileged few. Educational research has clearly shown how inequities across K-12 academic tracks (in e.g., teacher quality, adequate resources, and engaging curricula) correlates to youth's skin color and socioeconomic status. Such hierarchies within service-learning in higher education are not unthinkable.

Arguments can, of course, be made from both incrementalist and transformationalist perspectives. The former will argue that these issues will simply take more time to work through while the latter will argue that, in transforming higher education, such issues will become irrelevant. Perhaps. The goal here is not to be defeatist, presentist, or conservative; it is not to argue that higher education is a static and unchangeable monolith. Rather, my goal is simply to map out the structures and norms that inhibit the institutionalization of a viable and powerful service-learning pedagogy.

### ***Political Limits to Service-Learning***

Even if service-learning succeeds in overcoming the pedagogical barriers just described, what exactly is it that will become institutionalized? By

framing service-learning as a politics, advocates may in fact be undermining their most valued goal. Specifically, by viewing service-learning as a universal transformative practice, advocates may allow it to become misappropriated and drained of its transformative potential.

Service-learning has a progressive and liberal agenda under the guise of a universalistic practice. The *Presidents' Declaration on the Civic Responsibility of Higher Education* (Campus Compact, 2000), for example, declares:

Higher education is uniquely positioned to help Americans understand the histories and contours of our present challenges as a diverse democracy. It is also uniquely positioned to help both students and our communities to explore new ways of fulfilling the promise of justice and dignity for all. . . . We know that pluralism is a source of strength and vitality that will enrich our students' education and help them learn both to respect difference and to work together for the common good. (p. 1)

This is a noble and neutral sounding statement. Who could be against "the common good"? Yet clearly, the "diversity" and "dignity" being spoken are not those belonging to political conservatives. Rather, the reference is to the multiple populations within the United States who have suffered historically (and many still do today) due to social, cultural, economic, and educational marginalization, degradation, and destruction.

This view has a certain natural-seeming quality within the academy, as higher education is supposed to expand its participants' perspectives about how to think and act differently in becoming a public citizen. Yet while this goal also has a deep resonance with the service-learning field (and, some might say, is at the heart of the service-learning field [see Stanton, Giles, & Cruz, 1999]), it is certainly not the norm in our highly divided red state/blue state America. The most obvious example of this division is David Horowitz's (n.d.) "academic bill of rights."

Horowitz, the president of the Center for Study of Popular Culture, has crafted a seemingly neutral policy declaration demanding that colleges and universities not discriminate against political or religious orientations, thus enabling "academic freedom and intellectual diversity" to flourish in the academy. "Academic freedom," the document states,

consists in protecting the intellectual independence of professors, researchers and students in pursuit of knowledge and the expression of ideas from interference by legislatures or authorities within the institution itself. This means that no political, ideological or religious orthodoxy will be imposed on professors and researchers through the hiring or tenure or termination process, or through any other administrative means by the academic institution. (p. 1)

The document goes on to enumerate numerous principles and procedures that flow from this statement of principle. These include, among others, that a faculty member cannot be “hired or fired or denied promotion or tenure on the basis of his or her political or religious beliefs,” that “students will be graded solely on the basis of their reasoned answers,” and that “exposing students to the spectrum of significant scholarly viewpoints on the subjects examined in their courses is a major responsibility of faculty. Faculty will not use their courses for the purpose of political, ideological, religious or anti-religious indoctrination” (p. 2). These proposals sound eminently reasonable until one realizes that Horowitz is deliberately attempting to dismantle what he sees as the liberal orthodoxy permeating higher education.

Horowitz and Lehrer (n.d.) have shown, and social science research confirms (Lindholm et al., 2005; Klein & Stern, 2005; Rothman, Lichter, & Nevitte, 2005), that higher education faculty are overwhelmingly registered as Democrats, with (according to his data) an overall ratio of 10 to 1 across departments and upper-level administrations. On some campuses (e.g., Williams, Oberlin, Haverford), Horowitz could not find a single registered Republican faculty member. This, Horowitz (2003) argues, is not diversity:

What is knowledge if it is thoroughly one-sided, or intellectual freedom if it is only freedom to conform? And what is a “liberal education,” if one point of view is for all intents and purposes excluded from the classroom? How can students get a good education, if they are only being told one side of the story? The answer is they can't. (p. 1)

The attack on the liberal leanings of higher education is not new. What is new, though, are Horowitz's (2003) proposed strategies:

I have undertaken the task of organizing conservative students myself and urging them to protest a situation that has become intolerable. *I encourage them to use the language that the left has deployed so effectively in behalf of its own agendas.* Radical professors have created a “hostile learning environment” for conservative students. There is a lack of “intellectual diversity” on college faculties and in academic classrooms. The conservative viewpoint is “under-represented” in the curriculum and on its reading lists. The university should be an “inclusive” and intellectually “diverse” community. I have encouraged students to demand that their schools adopt an “academic bill of rights” that stresses intellectual diversity, that demands balance in their reading lists, that recognizes that political partisanship by professors in the classroom is an abuse of students' academic freedom, that the inequity in funding of student organizations and visiting speakers is unacceptable, and that a learning environment hostile to conservatives is unacceptable. (pp. 2–3; emphasis mine)

Service-learning is not explicitly on the list of Horowitz's grievances, but it very well could (and might) be. The service-learning literature is replete with students' resistance to the implicit and/or explicit social justice emphasis. Susan Jones (2002; Jones, Gilbride-Brown, & Gasorski, 2005), for example, has carefully shown how student resistance manifests itself in service-learning experiences and how instructors might—through a “critical developmental lens”—begin to overcome such resistance. Yet what is clear is that such resistance is not about liberals resisting a conservative agenda; as one resistant student wrote in Jones's end-of-semester evaluation: “I don't enjoy the preaching of a debatable agenda in the first hour. Perhaps teaching from a more balanced perspective would be better than ‘isms [that] are keeping us down.’ . . . More emphasis on community service. Less on ideologically driven readings and lessons” (qtd. in Jones, Gilbride-Brown, & Gasorski, 2005, p. 14).

The point is not that service-learning should stop having an ideological agenda, nor that service-learning should now embrace conservative service-learning to provide “balance.” Rather, it is that service-learning embodies a liberal agenda under the guise of universalistic garb. As such, it is ripe for conservative appropriation; to date, close to two dozen states have either proposed or are about to propose legislation patterned on the academic bill of rights.<sup>3</sup> In Pennsylvania, where I teach, the state legislature has approved a committee to investigate potential bias in the academy. Leading higher education organizations have recently released their own responses of what constitutes academic freedom (AACU, 2005). An era of legislative and public scrutinizing of higher education's political practices has begun.

Horowitz (or any university president under public pressure) can thus very easily raise the specter of service-learning offices that are indoctrinating first-year students into biased, unscientific, and indefensible liberal groupthink practices through, for example, daylong conferences about capital punishment or women's rights. The solution? Horowitz would argue that either the entire service-learning office needs to be dismantled to avoid such blatant political abuse of public funds or that the university needs to completely rethink and redo how it helps students to think about such issues—by allowing undergraduates to work, for example, with a pro-life group to send out mailings or picketing with a retentionist organization committed to keeping the death penalty.

Service-learning is in a double-bind. If it attempts to be a truly radical and transformative (liberal) practice, it faces potential censure and sanction. If it attempts to be politically balanced to avoid such an attack, it risks

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<sup>3</sup>See the website of Students for Academic Freedom, <[www.studentsforacademicfreedom.org](http://www.studentsforacademicfreedom.org)>, for the most up-to-date tracking of these developments.

losing any power to make a difference. At the root of this double-bind and the reason it cannot escape from this dilemma is that service-learning has positioned itself as a universalistic and thus neutral practice.

But as Stanley Fish (1999) has pointed out, there is no such thing.<sup>4</sup> “If, for example, I say ‘Let’s be fair,’ you won’t know what I mean unless I’ve specified the background conditions in relation to which fairness has an operational sense” (p. 3). No statements or positions are value-free; they come saturated with particular historical, social, and cultural baggage. Thus, not only do genuinely neutral principles not exist, but when seemingly neutral principles *are* articulated, it is a blatantly political and strategic move. Fish continues:

Indeed, it is crucial that neutral principles not exist if they are to perform the function I have described, the function of facilitating the efforts of partisan agents to attach an honorific vocabulary to their agendas. For the effort to succeed, the vocabulary (of “fairness,” “merit,” “neutrality,” “impartiality,” “mutual respect,” and so on) must be empty, have no traction or bite of its own, and thus be an unoccupied vessel waiting to be filled by whoever gets to it first or with the most persuasive force. (p. 7)

Seemingly neutral principles are thus used strategically to promote one’s specific ideological agenda, irrespective of political orientation. This is exactly what Horowitz has done with “intellectual diversity” and what the service-learning movement is attempting to do with “civic engagement.” But in attempting to hold the (imaginary) center, such strategizing in fact politicizes the term in question through binary extremism. In the former case, “intellectual diversity” becomes a stalking horse for right-wing conservatism; in the latter case, “civic engagement” becomes linked to radical left-wing demands for “social justice” (Butin, in press-a).

Service-learning thus finds itself positioned as attempting to deliver a very specific and highly political notion of the truth under the guise of neutral pedagogy. Its overarching stage theory of moving individuals and institutions from charity-based perspectives to justice-oriented ones, in fact, maps directly onto our folk theories of what constitutes Republican and Democratic political positions: Republicans believe in individual responsibility and charity while Democrats focus on institutional structures and social justice (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004).

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<sup>4</sup>I am very well aware of the animosity of the service-learning field to Stanley Fish. Not many people have an entire Campus Compact website devoted exclusively to attacking them (<http://www.compact.org/newssc/fish.html>). Yet while I acknowledge the highly personal nature of some of Fish’s attacks (Ira Harkavy, personal communication, 3/30/05), I suggest that his insights into this political dilemma are critical for understanding the issues at stake.

To claim service-learning as a universalistic practice available to all political persuasions is thus to ignore its politically liberal trappings as presently conceptualized and enacted. To cite just one obvious counter-example, is it service-learning if Jerry Falwell's Liberty University requires as a graduation requirement that all undergraduates spend a certain amount of time helping to blockade abortion clinics and thus saving the lives of the unborn? What if this activity was linked to reflection groups and learning circles and students had to create portfolios showing how such community service was linked to their academic courses?

Few service-learning advocates, I suggest, would quickly or easily accept that this is service-learning, much less service-learning committed to social justice. But to not accept such a counter-example is to admit that service-learning is not a universalistic practice. It is to admit that service-learning is an ideologically driven practice. And in so doing, service-learning falls neatly into the "intellectual diversity" trap. Once trapped, there is no way out. Service-learning, in order to survive in higher education, will have to become "balanced."

### *Institutional Limits to Service-Learning*

I have suggested so far that service-learning faces major pedagogical and political barriers to becoming institutionalized. Yet if service-learning could overcome these pedagogical and political barriers, would it then be the truly transformative movement envisioned? Again, sadly, I doubt it, for higher education works by very specific disciplinary rules about knowledge production, who has the academic legitimacy to produce such knowledge, and how (Messer-Davidow, Shumway, & Sylvan, 1993). The very institution that service-learning advocates are trying to storm, in other words, may drown them.

The clearest example of this already-ongoing process is what I'll term the "quantitative move" in the service-learning field. Put otherwise, service-learning scholarship is becoming adept at using the "statistically significant" nomenclature. The idea is to show that service-learning can, holding all other variables constant, positively impact student outcomes. Thus, a wide variety of scholarly studies has shown service-learning to be a statistically significant practice in impacting, among other things, students' personal and interpersonal development, stereotype reduction, sense of citizenship, and academic learning. (See Eyler et al., 2001, for a comprehensive summary.) Much of this research has very low betas (i.e., the actual impact is not, statistically speaking, profound); nevertheless, service-learning has been "proven" to make a measurable difference in a positive direction vis-à-vis other pedagogical and institutional variables.

The idea behind this quantitative move is obvious. Service-learning advocates want to show that service-learning is a legitimate practice with



legitimate, consequential, and measurable outcomes in higher education. When in Rome, the thinking goes, do as the Romans. The problem is that Rome has burned. There are three distinct reasons why the quantitative move ultimately will not help to institutionalize the kind of service-learning hoped for.

The first reason is that quantifying the value-added of service-learning is methodologically impossible. There are simply too many variables commingling and interacting with each other to allow for valid and reliable conclusions. The number of variables, from type of sites to types of interactions to types of reflection to types of teaching styles, becomes too unmanageable to accurately quantify and measure. In this way service-learning is analogous to teaching and other “wickedly” complex problems defying quantitative solutions.

For example, educational researchers have for 30 years been trying to adequately quantify the most basic principle in the field: what makes a high-quality teacher. Yet as the research supporting the No Child Left Behind legislation and the push for alternative certification pathways shows, there are no such data (at least none that can be agreed upon).<sup>5</sup> While on its face such uncertainty is absurd, it is also the end result and consequence of a quixotic search for absolute and quantifiable surety. None exists, and attempts to find it quickly become beholden to political pressures about which variables are measured and how. I do not deny that the quantitative move offers some basic guidance on some basic proxy variables. This is an important development. But to pin the legitimacy of service-learning on its quantification is to misunderstand how legitimacy ultimately works.

This strategy of legitimization is, in fact, the second reason why the quantitative move falters in the academy—namely, the paradigms by which we see the world are inextricably linked to our value systems as legitimate scholars. Thomas Kuhn, in his classic *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1996), posited that paradigms shift, not because of rational discourse among objective scientists but because the old guard dies away and is replaced by the young turks with their own particular paradigm. While the conservative status-quo nature of this view has been roundly critiqued, the underlying psychological framework seems sound (see, e.g., Gardner, 2004): the more contested and revolutionary an issue, the stronger our resistance to it.

To again use an example from teacher education, a recent review of the literature on teacher change argued: “What we see expressed in these current studies of teacher education is the difficulty in changing the type of tacit

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<sup>5</sup>The data and debate around this issue are legion. See, for example, Cochran-Smith, 2001, 2003; Goldhaber & Brewer, 1999; NCDTE, 2004; NCTQ, 2004. The basic point, though, is this: If the educational field, after all this time and research, is still this stuck, woe to service-learning.

beliefs and understandings that lie buried in a person's being" (Richardson & Placier, 2001, p. 915). Thus after four years of coursework, field experiences, and self-selective dispositions toward becoming a good teacher, the vast majority of teacher candidates leave their programs believing pretty much what they came in with.

It is thus naive for service-learning advocates to believe that a large number of academics will be persuaded to accept service-learning simply because data show it to have a statistically significant impact on any particular student outcome. As I have argued elsewhere (Butin, 2005b), a simple thought experiment puts this lie to rest: If data showed that students' work with terminally ill AIDS patients negatively impacted student understanding of the social health system, would that be reason enough to stop the program? Probably not. Service-learning advocates would instead

question the validity and reliability of such data: How is "understanding" being measured? Is success defined instrumentally (i.e., test grades) or holistically (i.e., emotional intelligence, long-term changes)? What was the timeframe of my assessment procedures? Did I use pre- and post-tests or interviews? Was there an adequate control group? (p. 102)

Of course, if such data were consistent and long-term there might be good reasons to desist or substantially modify the service-learning component. But not only are most data not rigorous enough to warrant immediate acceptance, they also function as only a small part of how we marshal evidence to support our views of the world. The quantitative move toward statistically significant measurement thus cannot, on its own, convince scholars to embrace or reject service-learning.

The third reason that the quantitative move in service-learning undermines, rather than promotes, the institutionalization of service-learning is because it *is* quantitative. David Labaree (2004) has used Becher's typology of academic disciplines to point out the decidedly problematic implications of a soft discipline (in this case educational research) in search of a hard disguise:

In order to create a solid ground for making hard claims about education, you can try to drain the swamp of human action and political purpose that makes this institution what it is, but the result is a science of something other than education as it is experienced by teachers and students. As I have argued elsewhere [Labaree, 1997], such an effort may have more positive impact on the status of researchers (for whom hard science is the holy grail) than the quality of learning in schools, and it may lead us to reshape education in the image of our own hyper-rationalized and disembodied constructs rather than our visions of the good school. (p. 75)

The scientific quantification of any human practice is what Max Weber (Sica, 2000) termed "rationalization." It is the attempt to order and system-

atize, for the sake of efficiency and (thus supposedly) progress, practices that were formally intuitive, haphazard, and grounded in heuristics rather than science. The point again is not that we should avoid scientific inquiry; rather, simply put, the point is that this is not at the heart of service-learning, nor should it be. To promote service-learning in the academy through quantification is to buy into a paradigm not of its own making. The quantitative move may help service-learning scholars gain a certain legitimacy in the academy. What it will not do is expand the boundaries of how to think about the academy, and it will not provide a decidedly different discourse of how service-learning should be institutionalized.

### POSSIBILITIES FOR SERVICE-LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Thinking about service-learning as a form of politics has deep rhetorical resonance. Service-learning advocates argue that its practices and policies are uplifting and transformational for all involved. Yet as I have argued in the sections above, such rhetorical resonance also has limited and limiting possibilities for institutionalizing service-learning in the academy. Such an approach cannot overcome the deep and specific pedagogical, political, and institutional barriers.

It is beyond the scope of this article to provide a comprehensive alternative to the problematics just outlined. Rather, what I want to make clear is that the limits just outlined are fundamentally linked to the undergirding theoretical presuppositions of contemporary service-learning theory and practice. I want to thus briefly explicate such presuppositions in order to rethink and reframe how service-learning may be otherwise institutionalized.

Fundamentally, advocates presume service-learning to be a politics by which to transform higher education. As such, service-learning becomes positioned within the binary of an "oppositional social movement" embedded within the "status quo" academy. Moreover, this perspective reifies (and thus assumes) service-learning as a coherent and cohesive pedagogical strategy, able to see its own blind spots as it pursues liberal and always liberatory agendas.

But such is not the case. The service-learning movement is an amalgam of, among other things, experiential education, action research, critical theory, progressive education, adult education, social justice education, constructivism, community-based research, multicultural education, and undergraduate research. It is viewed as a form of community service, as a pedagogical methodology, as a strategy for cultural competence and awareness, as a social justice orientation, and as a philosophical worldview (see, e.g., Butin, 2003; Kendall, 1990; Lisman, 1998; Liu, 1995; Morton, 1995; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). An immense diversity of oftentimes clashing perspectives thus cohabits under the service-learning umbrella.

Likewise, the service-learning movement has often downplayed or glossed over the minimal social justice outcomes of service-learning practices. For all of the human, fiscal, and institutional resources devoted to service-learning across higher education, there are, in fact, very minimal on-the-ground changes in the academy, in local communities, or in society more generally.

I do not dispute that, in isolated situations with unique circumstances, profound changes have occurred. What I am simply pointing out is that service-learning should not have to bear the burden (nor the brunt) of being the social justice standard-bearer. To do so would be to set up an impossible causal linkage between service-learning and social betterment. Much scholarship, for example, can be marshaled to show that the divisions in our society based on categories of race, class, ethnicity, and language have, in many cases, become worse, not better; that democracy for all intents and purposes has become a spectator sport as most of us (and particularly youth) have disengaged from the public sphere; and that the United States is the worst offender in the developed world of human principles and ethical norms for the treatment of its incarcerated population. Is this service-learning's fault? If service-learning succeeds as hoped in higher education and if these conditions continue to deteriorate, does this mean that service-learning is to blame? The issues cited have much more to do with a host of interconnected economic, social, political, and legal policies than they do with the percentage of faculty implementing service-learning on any particular campus.

What this realization makes clear is that thinking about service-learning as a politics to transform higher education is a theoretical cul-de-sac. I do not doubt that service-learning may in fact become deeply embedded within higher education. Yet I suggest that, service-learning scholars do not account for the pedagogical, political, and institutional limits enumerated, service-learning will have a minimal and unstable foundation for its long-term sustenance. Service-learning will become embedded only by giving up any analytic opportunity to understand how and why it is ultimately deeply limited.

All of the theoretical assumptions of the service-learning movement that I have just enumerated position it as a gleaming grand narrative. Service-learning scholars and activists want service-learning to be all things to all people. Service-learning wants to roam free across disciplines, across institutions, across society. It wants to change and transform any and all obstacles in its path. It wants freedom.

But that is not how things work in academia. Higher education is a disciplining mechanism, in all senses of the term. And that is a good thing. For to be disciplined is to carefully, systematically, and in a sustained fashion investigate whatever one is interested in doing, whether that is building

bridges, changing communities, or understanding Kant. Positioning service-learning as a grand narrative is a set-up for implosion—from a vision to a mirage—for there is no mechanism by which a grand narrative can prevent itself from being questioned and critiqued once it has become a part of the academy. That is the basis of higher education and that is where, for better or worse, service-learning wants to be positioned.

The possibilities for service-learning, I thus suggest, lie in embracing rather than rejecting the very academy the service-learning movement is attempting to transform. More precisely, it is to speak about service-learning as akin to an academic discipline with the ability to control its knowledge production functions by internally debating and determining what issues are worthy of study, by what modes of inquiry, and to what ends. This approach assumes a plurality of perspectives of what service-learning is and should be. It assumes that the scholarship surrounding service-learning is not solely centripetal or convergent in focus.

Rather than continuing to think *about* service-learning as a politics to transform higher education and society, we might more fruitfully reverse the terminology and begin to think *through* service-learning about the politics of transforming higher education and society. (See Butin, in press-b, for a detailed explication of this argument.) I take this distinction from Robyn Wiegman's (2005; see also her 1999, 2002) analysis of the future of women's studies, specifically because I find the arc of institutionalization of women's studies in higher education instructive and applicable to the service-learning movement.

What women's studies has done over the last quarter century—through reasoned discourse and political pressure—has been to expand the academy's notion of what constitutes the "academic." Weigman argues that so long as women's studies and feminism were (and are) conflated with social activism, they risked being dismissed as yet another form of identitarian politics beholden to the unquestioned uplifting of an essentialized category (e.g., race, ethnicity, and gender). What makes women's studies an academic discipline and the gender(ed) subject the mode of inquiry is that its scholarship is able to both look outward (to examine an issue, such as education or the criminal justice system) and inward (to internally debate and determine what issues are worthy of study, by what modes of inquiry, and to what ends).

Women's studies, for example, was able to weather the storm of second-wave feminist critique (of being a White, middle-class and Western-centric enclave [see, e.g., DuBois, 1985; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1981]) precisely *because* it could accommodate and appropriate such criticism within its academic purpose of teaching and research on the gendered subject. Wendy Brown (1997) could write an article entitled "The Impossibility of Women's Studies" only *because* such a critique was made possible by the academy's norms of what disciplines and the scholars within them are allowed to do.

There is no doubt that women's studies was disciplined in its institutionalization. It distanced itself from the "street" and from the fervent activism therein; it had to devote attention to bureaucratic maneuverings for funds and faculty rather than for institutional change and transformation; it had to settle for yearly conferences instead of round-the-clock activism. As Messer-Davidow (2002) phrases it, women's studies became routinized. Yet by becoming "disciplined," women's studies was able to produce the domains of objects and rituals of truth to be studied and recast. As such, I would argue, disciplinary institutionalization is not the negation of politics but the condition of its possibility. For it allows, in the safety of disciplinary parameters, scholars to debate and define themselves and their field.

Women's studies accomplished this goal by reversing its terminology to make the gender(ed) subject the mode of inquiry rather than using gender as the political project. I suggest that the service-learning field can do likewise by making community studies the mode of inquiry rather than using the community as a political project (Butin, in press-b). By reversing the terminology, by making community studies the disciplinary field, an entirely new model of practice becomes possible. It becomes possible to use all of the tools of the academy to analyze a very specific and bounded issue. Service-learning may no longer claim that it will change the face of higher education. But women's studies does not do that either anymore. Instead, women's studies scholars carefully and systematically elaborate how feminist perspectives are slowly infiltrating and modifying the ways specific disciplines and sub-disciplines work, think, and act (see, e.g., Stanton & Stewart, 1995). This is not radical and transformational change. This is disciplined change. It is the slow accretion, one arduous and deliberate step at a time, of contesting one worldview with another. Some of this contest is blatantly political. Some of it is deeply technical. Much of it is debatable, questionable, and modifiable—just like any good academic enterprise. And it is this process which is truly transformational.

At present, though, such heteroglossic analysis and critique is largely absent in the service-learning field. If service-learning is assumed to be "simply" a universal, coherent, and neutral pedagogical practice, then such an absence is understandable. But such is not the case, as this article makes clear. It thus becomes incumbent on scholars committed to a scholarship of engagement in general and to service-learning specifically to probe the limits of service-learning in higher education. For without an explicit articulation of its own limits, service-learning may be doomed to a limited and limiting model of transformation.

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