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Service Learning, Diversity, and the Liberal Arts Curriculum

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The connections that can be made in a service-learning context between practical experience and theoretical insight are quite powerful

**Rutgers University
Urban Gardening
Program in Newark,
New Jersey**

IN THE MANY YEARS I have been teaching, I have attempted to engage students in issues surrounding their place as citizens in a multicultural democracy. In my second year of involvement in AAC&U's American Commitments: Diversity, Democracy, and Liberal Learning project, I have become acquainted with the perspectives of faculty from different disciplines and institutions and with a wide array of excellent multicultural materials and curricula; but even the best of curricula tend to be somewhat abstract.

Students explore questions concerning their membership in diverse communities primarily through their encounters with multicultural texts, or at best, with one another. Experience in the wider community outside the campus, often a multicultural source much richer than any text, is rarely incorporated into the classroom. In my work directing academically based service-learning programs, first at Rutgers University and now at Providence College, I have found what I consider a more effective way of connecting issues of diversity and democracy within a liberal arts framework.

At Rutgers, where concerns about divisions within the campus community initially motivated then-President Edward Bloustein to call for a community service requirement for graduation, courses were established which connected service to a curriculum grounded in concepts of democracy, community, and diversity. Diversity issues were explored through texts and classroom discussions, but

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RICHARD BATTISTONI
**SERVICE LEARNING
 THE LIBERAL ARTS**



EDUCATION, AND CURRICULUM

The Feinstein Institute was established in 1993 when Providence College was named the recipient of a five million dollar grant from Rhode Island philan-

thropic Alan Shawn Feinstein to educate a new generation of caring community leaders. The college has since been working to develop a unique and innovative academic program in public and community service integrated into the liberal arts curriculum. As part of the process of laying the foundation for the curricular program, a team of Providence College faculty and students drafted the following statement of principles and goals that guide the operation.

THE FEINSTEIN INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC SERVICE

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Principles

The Feinstein Institute for Public Service is guided by the following principles:

- Understanding human diversity results from the exercise of compassionate public service when those who serve also seek to learn from those they serve. A better understanding of diversity is a necessary component of good citizenship.
- Participative citizenship recognizes personal responsibility toward the common good and promotes cooperation in the

midst of a competitive culture. Public and community service increase social awareness and civic participation.

- Social justice requires

that people pose critical questions concerning the ways in which social, political, and economic institutions affect individuals. Social justice also requires collaboration in a process of social change.

- Human solidarity, according to Pope John Paul II, is "a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good, that is to say to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all." Public and community service, then, is a means to achieve human solidarity.

Continuing Goals

The institute pursues its goals through a set of continuing activities, organized around the three purposes of academic institutions—teaching, service, and inquiry. The institute seeks to teach the value of service to others by:

- promoting service learning as a pedagogical tool in courses across the curriculum;

- stimulating an appreciation for, and understanding of, community;
- educating service leaders who can foster and manage social change;
- equipping students to become intelligent, productive, and responsible citizens of a democratic society; and
- creating a student voice in the community and teaching students to hear the voices of communities.

The institute seeks to serve the community of humankind by:

- inspiring a life-long commitment to service;
- increasing ties between Providence College and diverse communities;
- promoting citizenship and problem-solving capacities; and
- providing leadership to others in forming service partnerships with their communities.

The institute seeks to inquire into the nature of service to community by:

- increasing our understanding of the manifold nature of communities;
- stimulating interdisciplinary scholarship on public service and community; and
- bringing together scholars to study and reflect upon service and community.

most importantly, in community service placements, where students, themselves from different backgrounds, worked in the larger community of Camden, New Brunswick, and Newark with people from diverse racial, economic, and religious backgrounds.

At Providence College, we are working with faculty from across the campus toward developing a new interdisciplinary major and minor in public and community service studies. Understanding human diversity is a foundational value that begins our mission statement and runs through the entire academic curriculum. Students who major or minor in public and community service studies will explore together the historical and social contexts of race, class, and gender within the American, and specifically United States setting, and will examine questions of multiculturalism and difference as they manifest themselves in the field of human and social services. Again, community service placements will reinforce the curricular connections between diversity, democracy, and public service.

Theory meets experience

The connections that can be made in a service-learning context between practical experience and theoretical insight are quite powerful. I have seen my students struggle as they read Derrick Bell, Audre Lorde, Gloria Anzaldúa, Susan Okin, and Jonathan Kozol, as they work in communities stratified by gender, race, class, and culture, in a way that the text by itself—or the service by itself—would not demand. Listen to the words of a Rutgers student that reveal the possibility of learning about citizenship in a pluralistic society through education-based community service:

The structure of this course has helped me to do something which may seem so simple; it has helped me to think. For example, difference and racism are issues very close to me, and yet at times so distant. I have often been at the receiving end of racial prejudice. Despite this fact, I am not too knowledgeable on this issue, for in order to know an issue well, one has to be able to discuss both sides of it. I often treat it as a closed issue, seeing myself as a victim and the rest of American society as oppressive. I see this problem amplified several times in my father and his Indian friends. I listen to the way that my father and other adult friends

talk about such issues. The unfortunate thing is that such talk often influences my thinking and results in a polarization of myself into my private and public selves. In public I may at times hide my particular biases, in order to appease the other ethnic groups. But then in private, I see myself often as trying to justify my biases through my friends, family, and the Indian community. Why do I have this problem? Because I don't think about the issue in depth. I recognize the issues like prejudice and racism in conversations and while watching TV. But I do not pick apart these issues often. I store them away in the cobwebs of my brain. So, I feel that by making me reflect deeply on such issues through class discussion, various readings and journals, and in my community service, where I work with African-American and Hispanic youth corps members, it has helped me to some extent in unifying my two selves.

Often, it is not just the service, but the larger environment, the culture of an agency or school or neighborhood, that produces enriched learning. Once again, hear the words of a Rutgers student from one of my service-learning classes:

Over the course of this semester I have become a citizen of New Brunswick. It could be argued that I was a citizen here well before registering for the course, but I did not feel as if I were one. I cannot even say, for sure, that my work at the Adult Learning Center brought about this change in perspective for me. One of the most instrumental facets of my experience was simply my walk to the Atrium building each day. Every time I went I became more aware of my surroundings. I now see the city differently. I'm no longer scared walking to the ALC—far from it. I feel like I know that small portion of the city now. Now when I pass people on the street, some say hello to me and call me by name. Through my work at the ALC I've gotten to know individual people, and they've gotten to know me.

Challenges involved

I don't mean to suggest that teaching about democracy and diversity through a pedagogy of service learning is unproblematic. For the college teacher, it involves extensive coordi-

nation and class preparation not present in other courses. The conflicts that may emerge, for both teacher and students, can be difficult. One day my service learning group exploded when a group of students working at a shelter for homeless women and their children repeated the class-based assumptions of shelter staff about their clients; they were attacked by other students in the class. I am also reminded of the experiences of individual students. A Mexican-American student on full financial aid was challenged as one of the privileged elite by the high school dropouts with whom he was working at his service site. An African-American student from Newark was faced with lives full of violence and sexual assault in working with younger African-American girls from similar urban backgrounds but a generational world apart. A Korean woman had to courageously

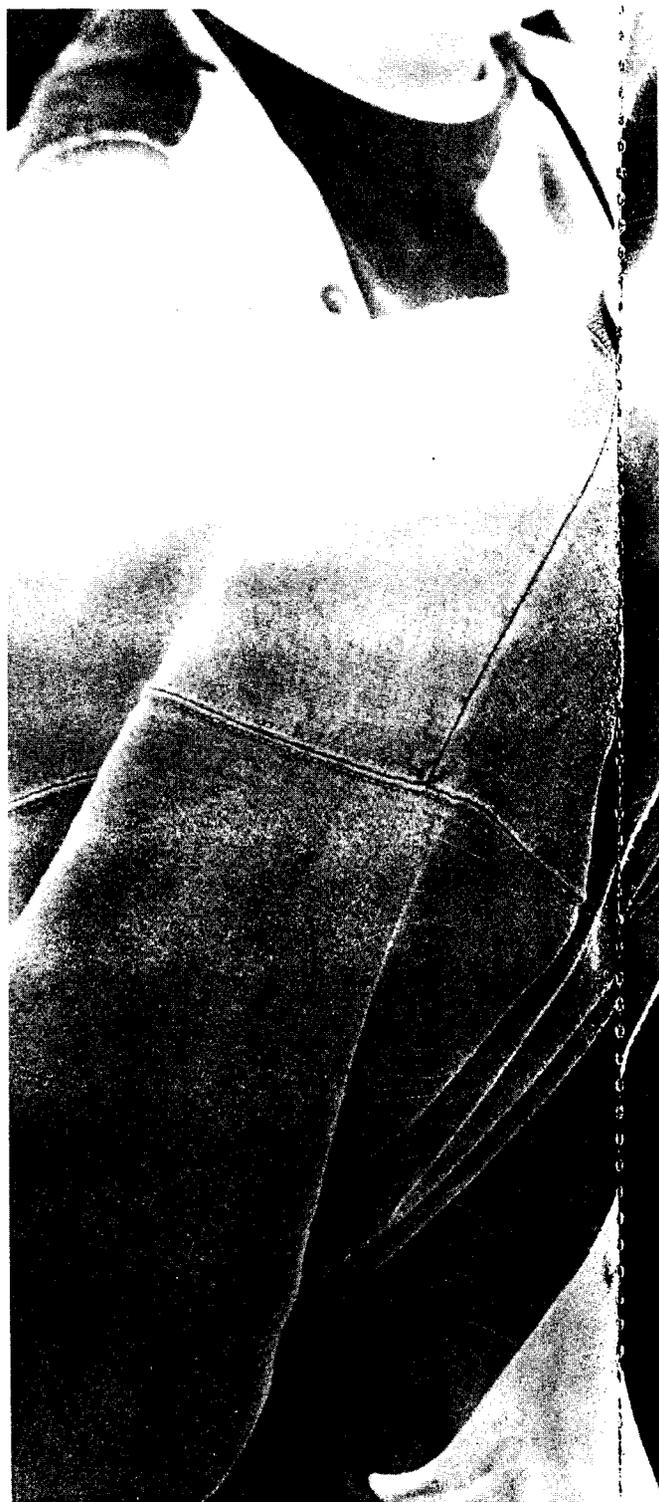
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deal with the racism of her family as they tried to forbid her from even participating in a service-learning class. And a gay student was forced to confront the homophobia of minority children in an urban after-school enrichment program. Still, these and other experiences not only fostered learning and growth, but served to render the concept of diversity much more complex than at first glance. This alone was an important contribution to my students, many of whom entered

my class thinking about diversity issues in "black and white."

A pedagogy of service learning

Virtually all of our institutions of higher learning are committed on paper, through their mission statements, to equipping students "to become productive and responsible citizens of a democratic society" (from Providence College's mission statement). Increasingly, we come to see that education for democracy in late twentieth-century America means education for participation in an increasingly diverse world. And this education must involve, to use the words of the American Commitments National Panel, "immersion in multiple perspectives...[coming] to know ourselves as we come to know



others, by comparison and exchange, through multiple dialogues."*

In this view, then, community service learning is not merely a good idea, a faddish add-on to an already overburdened curricular reform agenda. Service-learning programs like those at Rutgers, Providence, and other



Providence College student Brian Petsch taking part in a "Day of Community Service"

schools offer a model that integrates liberal teaching, experiential learning, critical reflection, community service, and citizen education into a pedagogy of freedom. It also offers one of the most effective vehicles for concretely and meaningfully engaging issues concerning diversity and democracy in the

classroom and in the larger struggle over the core curriculum. □

* Elizabeth K. Minnich, scribe, *From Contradictions to Generative Tensions: "E Pluribus Unum?"* Draft report from the American Commitments National Panel, January 1994.