Diversity

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Service-Learning and Multicultural/Multiethnic Perspectives: From Diversity to Equity

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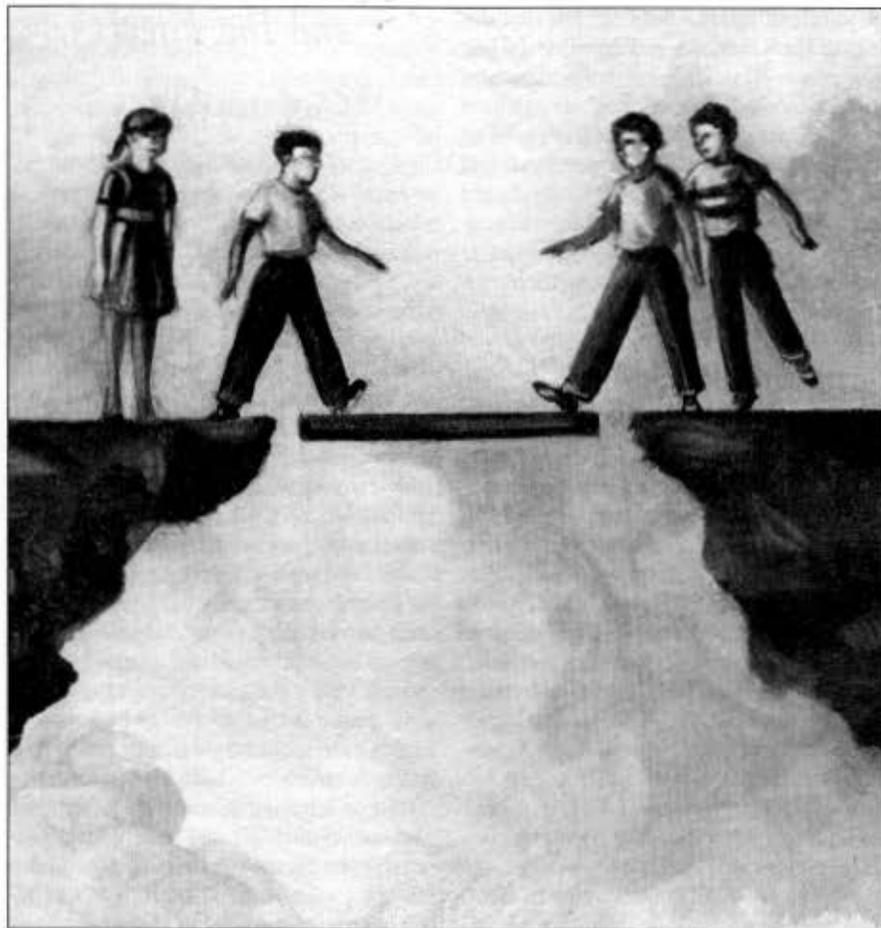# Service-Learning and Multicultural/Multiethnic Perspectives

From Diversity to Equity

The "missionary ideology" that currently underlies much of the service-learning movement is mostly the result of a series of decisions intended to "do good things" for others, and so the movement does not directly acknowledge what those others, particularly communities of color, might have to offer, the authors say. It's time to change that.

BY WOKIE WEAH, VERNA CORNELIA SIMMONS, AND McCLELLAN HALL

THE ETHIC of service is deeply rooted in American society. But what exactly is that society? And whom do we see as productive, contributing citizens? In our efforts to answer these questions, what are we to make of the contributions of communities of color? Has the

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field of service-learning evolved into a white-dominated movement, driven by a missionary zeal? In this article, we explore the complex phenomenon of service-learning from a multicultural, multiethnic perspective. We have framed our exploration in the form of questions that we hope readers will reflect on. We believe that, if this nation is serious about diversifying the leadership and control of service-learning, then all of us must seriously consider who is doing what, to whom, and for what reason.

Alexis de Tocqueville noted more than 150 years ago that the America he chron-icled was sharply divided along the lines of race. And the experiences of successive groups of immigrants have demonstrated clearly that dividing lines have been set down with regard to ethnicity as well. Consider, as just one egregious example, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which prohibited the entry of immigrants on the basis of nationality. Nor have the issues that divide us been resolved to this day. In 1993, when President Clinton called for a "color blind" nation as a strategy to build positive race relations, his approach was widely criticized and consequently dropped from

Illustration by Karen Stolper

his conversations about race in America.

Because these issues are still current in our society, we feel we must ask the question, Service for what and to whom? Carol Maybach found that students who are taught the value of providing service to the community are often made to focus on the *cause* of an intervention; the *effects* are rarely studied. Indeed, worthy service projects are often described solely as the pursuit of a good cause. We have ignored the effects of service and the voices of the recipients of service for so long that we generally don't even notice that we are doing so. How, then, do we know that the service provided is both needed and judged to be effective? Our critique is not about placing blame, however. Maybach goes on to argue, "It is crucial to understand that the majority of servers most likely do not intend to oppress in the process of service; they do not intentionally set out to exploit others for the purpose of their own growth."[1]

Multicultural/Multiethnic Perspectives on Service

Service projects that transcend the racial and ethnic divisions in America do exist. Indeed, the notion of service has been a core value in most American communities, particularly in communities of color. For example, the National Indian Youth Leadership Project (NIYLP) has demonstrated that service-learning is grounded in the methods of learning and education of indigenous peoples. This project focuses on key values common to Native Americans, such as family, service to others, spiritual awareness, challenge, meaningful roles, recognition, responsibility, natural consequences, respect, and dialogue. "Service to others," McClellan Hall wrote in 1991, "has been highly valued in Native American cultures from the earliest times. Cultivating the spirit of service and generosity provides young people with an opportunity to transcend self-centeredness, to develop genuine concern for others, and to put into action positive attitudes and skills."[2]

Indeed, service to others is a natural extension of the traditional sense of communal responsibility among Native Americans. Recent program models operated by the NIYLP have reflected deepening levels of understanding and connection with native traditions. For example, the Turtle Island Project is a national demonstration project that puts its energy into implementing, documenting, and evaluating Native American experiential education and service-learning projects in K-12 settings. The project has also offered training to native

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teachers and to teachers of native students who wish to implement similar approaches. Such experiential education and service-learning efforts, while reconnecting native youths to their cultural heritage and communities, have proved to be among the most effective ways of achieving academic excellence and raising student self-esteem.

Meanwhile, David Ray, director of the United Negro College Fund, directed a two-year project designed to promote productive community-service partnerships between 10 historically black colleges and their surrounding communities. According to the authors of the project report, strengthening the service-learning movement requires that all voices be heard — in this case including those of historically black colleges, which have a long tradition of advancing community service. They concluded that historically black colleges represent a national treasure and have made significant contributions to the national service movement in America.[3]

For the past decade, the W. K. Kellogg Foundation has focused on strengthening and expanding the field of service-learning. One project was designed to study and document service-learning and community service as effective strategies for empowering young people to address issues of race and cultural diversity in positive ways. The project concluded that service-learning is a viable strategy for addressing issues of race and cultures for a number of reasons. First, service-learning is more experiential and engaging, motivating students to go beyond personal perspectives to learn about the perspectives of others.

Second, service-learning provides structured opportunities for students to reflect on and discuss their concerns, questions, and confusions regarding the challenges that relate to race, culture, and other differences. Such reflection and dialogue are keys to actually changing long-term attitudes and behavior.

Third, service-learning gives students opportunities to practice respect for diversity as they confront tensions and conflicts that arise among people of different cultures and as they strive to find commonalities. And fourth, unlike other approaches to addressing racial and ethnic issues, service-learning provides opportunities for all people in a community to participate in the solutions.

Examples of Service-Learning And Diversity/Equity

To return to Maybach's point about attending to the voices of those who are served, we must ask ourselves, When we hear *service-learning*, *diversity*, and *equity* in the same sentence, do we automatically think of valuing differences? After all, as Maybach argues, "If in the process of service-learning we are not hearing the individual service recipients' voices and are not addressing their long-term needs, whose voice and needs are of utmost concern?"[4] To limit our thinking about service-learning to constructing "helping" models is to diminish the reciprocal power of service-learning for all parties involved.

One example of making this critical connection between the servers and the served occurred on the Camden campus of Rutgers University, where Latina students took on a project to facilitate the upward mobility and economic development of Latina women in the city of Camden. In particular, the students organized other Latina college students to advocate for legislation that would address the needs of poor Latina female heads of households. Eventually, they drafted a bill called the Hispanic Women's Demonstration Resource Center Act.

The success of the students' efforts to publicize the plight of Latina women was evident when major newspapers began to cover the issue in detail. The group met weekly to monitor the progress of its lobbying efforts and to address other issues.

In addition, the group wrote to the governor and kept him informed of the progress of the bill. The group also organized women's support groups all over the state, and these groups were prepared to visit the governor and to speak on behalf of the bill. The bill was eventually signed into law.

Another program that went beyond the simple notion that the "servers" arrive, render their service, and then go home was a course offered to preservice teachers at Michigan State University. Titled "Human Diversity, Power, and Opportunity in Social Institutions," the course was designed to allow white, middle-class students to apply their leadership skills through placements in urban service-learning sites. The service-learning sites included elementary and middle schools, community-service agencies, and the homes of newly arrived refugees. In these settings, the university students were brought into direct contact with members of diverse ethnic, socioeconomic, and linguistic communities.

The actual service activity in the course was balanced by heavy doses of critical reflection on the issues of diversity, student empowerment, and reciprocal learning, in which the students were required to write a narrative case study on a child or adult whose background differed substantially from their own. This work challenged the students to face their own perceptions, biases, stereotypes, and fears about issues of diversity and social inequalities.

Donald Hones, the course instructor, found that as the students became immersed in serving others, they were compelled to raise critical questions about social inequalities in schools and society. By connecting service-learning to preparing teachers to teach in diverse settings where social inequalities were present, Hones sought to challenge the students to reflect on their own roles in the classroom, in the community, and in the society and to develop their capacities to become change agents.

The program examples we've cited here are supported by research on how undergraduates are affected by service participation.[5] Research shows that the most common reasons students give for engaging in service are to help others feel personal satisfaction, to improve community, and to improve society as a whole. Clearly, students want to be actively engaged in helping in the community, but we must teach them

to understand the reciprocity in service-learning, whereby they become both the server and the recipient of service. In other words, both the students and the community members become learners and teachers in the service-learning process.

The key to reaching this goal is ownership. Service must never be done *for* others but *with* them. Before she became Principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma, Wilma Mankiller attracted national attention through her work with self-help community-service projects in isolated Cherokee communities. The most dramatic of these involved the tiny community of Bell, where local Cherokee designed and carried out a project that became a catalyst for bringing their community together. The project could have been done *for* the people (the approach usually taken by government agencies) rather than *by* the people. But that wasn't what Mankiller had in mind.

As is customary among the Cherokee people, a process of consensus building in the form of a painstakingly thorough grassroots needs assessment was undertaken to find out exactly what the people of Bell felt were priorities.[6] What the people agreed that they needed was running water in their homes — and, when that consensus became clear, the families put in the hours required to develop a water system, despite repeatedly hearing that the project wouldn't work. Indeed, much more was created in Bell than just a water system.

Service-learning has existed in communities throughout this country for centuries and has provided us with numerous opportunities to learn from and about one another. Every contribution has been valuable. Now we must invent new models and create new ways of thinking about service that will demonstrate democracy at its core. This means working together to find ways for everyone to be responsible, productive, and empowered.

We began this article by asking questions, and we readily acknowledge that there are no quick and easy answers. The "missionary ideology" that currently underlies much of the service-learning movement is mostly the result of a series of decisions intended to "do good things" for others, and so the movement does not directly acknowledge what those others, particularly communities of color, might have

to offer. Perhaps the service-learning movement should renew its dedication to discovering the essence of service. We take heart in the fact that practitioners in the field are now saying, "Let's move the discussion beyond diversity: let's talk equity." They are beginning to seek the origins of service that are rooted in the values and traditions of all cultures. And we ought to set about finding ways to translate and transfer best practices from those cultures in an effort to strengthen the whole.

Are we doing enough to promote a multicultural/multiethnic perspective? Are we asking the right questions? We ask readers to consider this article a work in progress, one that will evolve in response to the insights and thoughts of many people, including those in the communities that are the recipients of service. The Kellogg Foundation's soon-to-be-launched Service-Learning Diversity Project will provide a vehicle for structured reflection and continued discussions on this topic.[7] The project's first "leadership forum" was held in Rhode Island in March of this year, in conjunction with the National Service-Learning Conference. The leadership forum will create a safe space for the various service-learning organizations working on the diversity/equity agenda to come together for honest dialogue, resource sharing, and capacity building. We hope the Service-Learning Diversity/Equity Project will be a bold new direction for the field and will help establish a network of organizations committed to a philosophy of inclusion and equitable practice.

1. Carol W. Maybach, "Investigating Urban Community Needs: Service-Learning from a Social Justice Perspective," *Education and Urban Society*, vol. 28, 1996, p. 230.

2. McClellan Hall, "Gadugi: A Model of Service-Learning for Native American Communities," *Phi Delta Kappan*, June 1991, p. 756.

3. George E. Ayers and David B. Ray, eds., *Service-Learning: Listening to Different Voices* (Fairfax, Va.: Ford Foundation/United Negro College Fund Community Service Partnership Project and the College Fund/UNCF, 1995).

4. Maybach, p. 229.

5. Alexander W. Astin and Linda J. Sax, "How Undergraduates Are Affected by Service Participation," *Journal of College Student Development*, May-June 1998, pp. 251-63.

6. Hall, p. 755.

7. The Service-Learning Diversity Project is managed by the National Youth Leadership Council in collaboration with Learning In Deed. For more information, please contact NYLC, 1910 W. County Rd. B, St. Paul, MN 55113; ph. 651/631-3672; e-mail wweah@nylc.org.

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