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Changing Landscapes: Enduring Values

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As individuals and as a nation, we must substantially increase our effort to learn from and accommodate to those among us with different cultures and life styles. We who are educated must reach out to the uneducated; those of us who have a full measure of the world's wealth must hold out our hands and our hearts to those who lack even a bare portion of it. Giving is no less part of the good life than receiving.

--Edward. J. Bloustein, (1988) President; Rutgers,
The State University of New Jersey

The Changing Landscape

The campus of Raritan Valley Community College (RVCC) seems pastoral with 160 acres of woods, a pond, and gentle grassy slopes. Two miles to the west are two golf courses and farmland. Two miles east are homes built in the 17th and 18th Centuries close to the North Branch of the Raritan River, close to a colonial cemetery and the soaring spire of the Reformed Church. This setting reminds us of an early American ethic of hope and change, the promise of vast spaces, new destinies and new communities.

The surrounding 21st century landscape, however, suggests the opposite. New Jersey is quickly running out of space. The College is in the center of a populous State, at the intersection of four major highways, and one hour away from the site of the Twin Towers, from Philadelphia and Princeton. The community is experiencing an influx of immigration, primarily Hispanic and Asian Indian, and the ripple effect of downsizing at two global, local corporations, AT&T and Lucent. There are pockets of homelessness and poverty, incidents of racism and addiction in the schools, issues of domestic violence, and global illnesses like HIV-AIDS and HCV in spite of the upper middle class incomes of Somerset and Hunterdon Counties.

The Enduring Ethic of Civic Virtue

Yet, in its mission and its service-learning curriculum, in its responses to these grass roots needs, RVCC is reaffirming and extending the legacy of that early American ethic, in both the commitment of individuals to serve their community and the freedom of individuals to redefine themselves. To an important degree, the boundaries of class and ethnicity, age and level of education become increasingly blurred in the landscape that is the service-learning culture of RVCC.

Echoing the concerns of Alexis de Tocqueville about the isolating tendencies of extreme individualism in American life, Robert Bellah (1985) writes,

We believe that one of the keys to the survival of free institutions is the relationship between private and public life, the way in which citizens do, or do not, participate in the public sphere (vii.)

At the heart of the service-learning curriculum is the role of students who make that connection, on the one hand between the problems they see in their personal lives and at the grass roots level, and on the other with the public domain of community organizations and disciplinary knowledge. Although RVCC is a relatively small community college of approximately 6,000 students, service-learning students have served with more than 200 community organizations and provided more than 20,000 hours of service annually.

The Changing Academic Landscape

In his seminal research into the conditions essential for the success of any innovation, Everett Rogers (1962; 2003) cites the role of change agents in the social system, the relevance and clarity of the new idea, and most importantly, the interpersonal channels that communicate the idea. Those key channels of interpersonal conversation were fostered by three grants beginning in 1985: a three-year writing-across-the-

curriculum (WAC) grant from the Fund for the Improvement of Collegiate Education (FICE), an Ethics-Across-the-Curriculum grant from the National Science Foundation (NSF), and a Tech Prep grant from the New Jersey Department of Education.

In the “Future of WAC” (1996) Barbara E. Walvoord cites Rogers to describe the WAC as a movement with a “change agenda” brought about by “faculty talking to one another, moving to effect reform” (58.) The effective focus of interdisciplinary faculty conversations at RVCC was on reformist pedagogy and meaningful applications of writing (Mauermeyer, 1988). In *Writing the Community*, Linda Adler-Kassner (1997) connects WAC pedagogy to the importance of authenticity in service-learning assignments, and to the importance of writing in a variety of forms:

Both faculty and students widely attest to the increased motivation produced by the alliance of Composition with service-learning. Though evidence is largely anecdotal, it points to a source in the sense that service-learning makes communication – the heart of composition – matter, in all its manifestations. Whether teaching, learning, planning, and executing assignments, exploring the writing process, or even grading papers, students and instructors feel a greater sense of purpose and meaning in the belief that their work will have tangible results in the lives of others. (2)

Writing assignments began to resist what Paul Heilker (1997) calls “mythically universal” academic discourse (72).

As George Hillocks (1999) notes, ways of teaching emerge from ways of thinking. Thus, assumptions about applied learning, connections between writing and reflection, and the culture of interdisciplinary collaboration all nurtured the pedagogy of service-learning. In Ethics-across-the Curriculum and Tech-Prep assignments, students had already begun to apply disciplinary knowledge to real world contexts in writing assignments. The emergence of writing as social action was thus a step rather than a leap.

In 1991, the College received a federal grant from the Corporation for National Service, administered through Rutgers, the State University, to establish a service-learning program. Sixty-five percent of the faculty at the College now support and teach service-learning courses, and the majority of these courses are writing-intensive.

The Landscape of the Service-Learning Curriculum

While service-learning assignments emerge in every discipline across the College, there are in general three categories of outreach: teaching and tutoring on campus, in local schools, and in the community; sharing of expertise with business and community groups, and writing and publishing. Each of these forms of service-learning accomplishes several goals simultaneously; both academic and personal:

Teaching and Tutoring. A shared mission of teaching and learning is one means of fostering intercultural communication within the changing demographic of the community; one that affects the server as much as those served, in ways that are indirect as much as direct. In one pairing, in a Foundations of Calculus class, international students became the math mentors of American students; in another, students in an English class tutored ESL students in reading and writing. In the process, both pairings encouraged conversations about cultural differences as well as common bonds.

In 1994, the RVCC Nursing Department initiated a project for health promotion for a shelter population including single parents, couples, infants, and children. Their education agenda addressed hand washing, healthy food choices, dental care and the fostering of self-esteem and hope. In the process, the nursing students and faculty were themselves transformed. In keeping with the research, stereotypes melted away as

faculty and students witnessed the bonding in families and the concern of residents for each other in times of dire need (Ptlene, et. al, 1998; Ugatizza and Fallon 1994).

Students in a Computer Fundamentals course developed a training program for the only disadvantaged school district in Somerset County, a school made up of a significant population of low-income and minority students. Eighteen percent of the population was enrolled in a bilingual or ESL program. The focus on technology established a common language, a means of improving the literacy of students in grades 3 through 6, and a foundation for mastering a key contemporary competency. In 1998, the Campus Compact National Center for Community Colleges awarded RVCC its Service-Learning Collaboration Award for projects that model multicultural understanding.

Computer science students also worked to help the unemployed learn to access the Internet for employment opportunities. To increase awareness and prevention of substance abuse and HIV/AIDS students in Science and Society assisted with outreach programs in area schools and assisted health centers with blood drives

Sharing of Expertise with Community Groups. Service-learning collaborations with community groups also served those most invisible and marginal in the mostly white and wealthy counties of Hunterdon and Somerset: the elderly and the poor, the young and unemployed, the recent immigrant and the troubled adolescent.

Accounting students assisted the elderly with their finances and preparation of income taxes; business law students handled consumer complaints at the local consumer affairs office and assisted clients with legal service forms in tenant and landlord disputes; marketing students created needs assessment surveys for local community organizations and schools; legal assisting students helped mediate municipal conflicts and served as small claims advisors; fine arts students taught nursing home residents to paint with watercolors; foreign

language students used their translation skills to help new immigrants complete processing forms and offered bilingual story hours to preschool children at local libraries; psychology students worked with a crisis hotline and provided counseling for victims of domestic abuse; and sociology students mentored at-risk youth in shelters and drop-in centers.

Writing and Publishing: Students in a Trends of Nursing course researched the invisible and global epidemic of HCV and developed brochures for distribution in doctors' offices, noting ways of preventing, detecting, and treating the disease. Statistics students compiled data on HIV/AIDS for local social agencies and compiled results of DWI court hearings for national distribution. Given the historic involvement of New Jersey in both the ownership of slaves and the development of the Underground Railroad, students in an African-Literature class documented the oral history of local descendants of slaves and helped archive a historic database for a local African-American museum. Journalism students wrote newsletters for local municipal offices and non-profit groups, while marketing students wrote promotional materials for local fund-raising groups. Students in Desktop Publishing designed brochures for non-profits, including museums.

Changes Effected

Service-learning collaborations, sharing of expertise, and publications have provided in-kind financial support to community groups at a time of increasing budget constraints. Seventy percent of service-learning students have continued their commitment to service after graduation; 5 % have found jobs. Another outcome, noted in an RVCC study by Board member Dr. Richard Wellbrock, is that service-learning

participation may be an agent of retention for minorities. Nursing students have become politically active on the State level and more prepared for mandated nursing degree programs that move baccalaureate education into the community (Macnee 1998).

Changing the Inner Landscape

Also significant is an inner transformation. The changing landscape without, in effect, changes the existential domain within students, faculty, community agencies and all those served. What is different from an earlier ethic is the locus of change, no longer in the escape of the individual to new land, but rather in the capacity of the individual imagination to solve societal problems in dynamic communal collaboration.

We live in a time of daunting landscapes, perhaps unprecedented in their scope: terrorism, global disease, and the dislocations of job loss, immigration, and shifting traditional values. But service-learning seems to offer a compass of constancy, tied to what is most old and human and healing in us all, a connection of our uniqueness to the transcendence of community. Viktor Frankl (1959,1984) survived Auschwitz to emerge as a witness of what is most revealing and hopeful about the human condition. He wrote:

Being human always points, and is directed, to something or someone other than oneself – be it a meaning to fulfill or another human being to encounter. The more one forgets himself – by giving himself to a cause to serve or another person to love – the more human he is and the more he actualizes himself. (115)

The Transformative Campus

RVCC is ensuring that its commitment to civic action remains visible and permanent. It is establishing a Center for Civic Engagement to sustain existing programs and to create new ones, to encourage the connection between education and community, and between privilege and the empowering of all Others.

About the Author:



Angela Bodino is a professor of English at Raritan Valley Community College with a background in literature and composition. She is also the Co-Director of the National Writing Project at Rutgers University and an adjunct professor at the Graduate School of Education at Rutgers University. In 1998, she was named New Jersey Professor of the Year by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning. In May she was given the Spirit of Somerset Award for her collaboration in the publication of a textbook, *Racism: A Global Reader*, published by M.E. Sharpe.

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