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Timothy J. Corcoran

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National Information Center
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1954 Buford Ave, Room R290
St. Paul, MN 55108-6197

Service and Learning

College Preparation and Community Service: A Conflict?

Timothy J. Corcoran

What did Amy want to be when she grew up? "A hummer," she replied quickly. At age five, such decisions come easy. She was unaware of her father's consternation as she colored on the floor of his study. Not having anticipated this answer, he now found himself distracted.

"A hummer? What's a hummer?" he asked.

"Oh, Daddy! You know . . . hmmm."

Amy's father thought about this for a few minutes. "I think I asked the wrong question," he finally told his daughter. "I guess I really wanted to know how you plan to make a living at it."

Amy was stuck. Although she kept on coloring, her furrowed forehead made it clear that she was pondering the new question. Then her face cleared. "I know," she said, "I'll teach it."

"Teaching humming" has become my buzz word for creating courses to serve the interests of one or more of a school's faculty members. If a teacher enjoys backpacking, for instance, a course in backpacking becomes a component of the curriculum. Good rationales for the curricular change are published and were probably part of the original

proposal. But the motivation for the course—and sometimes for entire programs—arises basically from a teacher's desire to be paid for teaching a favorite pastime.

Most independent schools' statements of goals and objectives include serving the community. Accrediting boards are wont to ask schools how they realize these goals. And so schools are particularly vulnerable to faculty members who are intrigued by "community service." Presentations are made to the curriculum committee, which enthusiastically responds that the school is finally addressing its theoretical commitment to the community—and perhaps creating a cure for senioritis. The program is established and, without intent, the attempt to serve the community compromises every other goal of the school.

College preparation, the goal of many independent schools, is closely related to college acceptance. But in "A Memo to Secondary Schools, Students and Parents," Stanford University admission director Fred Hargadon notes that "community service" courses can have strong negative effects on university admission committees. Certain questions may come to the mind of the admission officer: Did this premed applicant take hospital service because he was reluctant to take Advanced Placement biology? Is this student's grade point average high because

Tim Corcoran is head of Windward School, Santa Monica, California.

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she is stronger in service courses than in academic subjects?

— Community involvement is most helpful to college applicants when it is combined with the strongest possible academic program, and it should not be instituted unless it is congruent with the academic goals and objectives of the school. Curriculum developers at independent schools should be reluctant to support courses that only have “service” or “participation” aspects.

— Practical experience is not entirely new in education. Most science teachers, for example, believe that science education reaches its pinnacle in laboratory courses, because students do science rather than just study it.

When community-related programs take a lesson from the lab science model, they forward the student’s education and provide valuable experience as well. Participatory programs that place students in the community to experience careers, professions, or just life in general do not go far in attempting to serve college-bound students.

To independent schools with college preparatory responsibilities, “teacher aide” programs achieve full status in the curriculum when they become advanced social studies electives in which students discuss philosophy of education. In an essential and pivotal “lab” component, students work as teacher aides in local elementary schools.

Such courses presuppose a demanding reading list, a stimulating lecture program, and probably a research paper. Their overall effectiveness can be evaluated by the same complex of tests and quizzes as in any purely academic course. In addition, students’ lab work is harnessed through lecture/discussion periods, journal entries, and personal visits by faculty members to volunteer sites.

A teacher aide program can serve as a fine beginning point because it keeps the matter on a ground with which teachers are familiar—education. Expansion into other fields doesn’t always seem feasible because educators are reluctant to chart courses in the realms of other professions. The trip can be made, but safe passage can only be assured if a pilot is on board: if schools move into law, a lawyer is needed;

schools developing a lab course in government need a government official.

If they really want a lab course, schools shouldn’t ask an academician to act as pilot. A retired professor of law or medicine—or anyone else whose primary field is education—only partially complements a program. A person who is active in a field on a day-to-day basis brings an important perspective to a program. While the recruitment of such an ally seems formidable, especially when salary resources are limited, people can be found, for educators have a great motivational advantage. I call it the Walter Mitty syndrome.

Walter Mitty is James Thurber’s milktoast character whose fantasies, not his personality, make him popular. In Mitty’s dream world, he is a brain surgeon, a brilliant district attorney, and a courageous pilot. A little of Walter Mitty lives in everybody.

Doctors, lawyers, elected officials, and others—all who have spent years in school—believe that teaching has an aura of romance and drama that educators often fail to see. They recall teachers who moved them in magical ways and, in true Walter Mitty fashion, imagine themselves in the classroom, working the same magic for a young and worshipful audience.

If we seek assistance from the professional community, the spirit of Walter Mitty may help us find the people we need to design courses, to accept students as interns, to develop reading lists and bibliographies—even to lead seminars and help students put their experience into perspective. But we must commit faculty resources to work with these professionals, or we will lose the academic base upon which community service courses must be built.

It is difficult to generalize about community service trends in independent schools. Many have successfully developed the sort of programs I advocate. Others have chosen to give academic credit for paying jobs in the community, including pumping gasoline at the local service station.

That may not be a wise idea. To be successful, programs at indepen-

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dent schools must reconcile themselves to the values and history of their schools. At college preparatory schools, building community service programs on basic academic skills is crucial. Courses that fail to make

peace with their school's academic values risk second-rate status with both faculty and students. And that may ultimately cause failure.

More important, courses that do not provide for adequate analysis of

personal experience are of little benefit to either students or the community. The only people to benefit are the teachers who created the program, who spend their days "humming" in contentment. □

Service and Learning

Service-Learning: Who Defines the Service, and Where Is the Learning?

George B. Roberts

My father disliked gardening. He would come home after work, inspect the long grass or the weedy potato patch, and turn to me. "Why do I have to do everything around here? It only takes half an hour to mow the lawn, and you're home from school by four."

The next day my mother would ask the same question more persuasively. "Why don't you help your father? He does a lot for you, and it won't take much time. It will so please him."

So I would get the job done and be back in the house in 20 minutes. The garden looked a lot better, my father was pleased, my mother was happy, and I wasn't greatly put out. Most people would call this a satisfactory outcome. But, to this day, I detest gardening.

Experience, therefore, may not be the best teacher after all. It does not necessarily produce learning, for few of us can, by ourselves, extract valid meaning from our own experience. If we rely only on what we know at first hand, we may learn partial or distorted truths and skills.

George Roberts is director of community service at Harvard School, North Hollywood, California. He is also a consultant for the National Center for Service Learning, Washington, D.C.

In their haste to add community service programs to their catalog of offerings, many schools have ignored these conclusions. In recent years, some form of service has become a graduation requirement in many schools. The growth of programs suggests that volunteerism may be as fashionable in high schools today as it once was among women who did not have to earn a living. As more women join the work force, their places as volunteers are being taken by high school and college students, in many cases.

Unfortunately, students are often sent into volunteer jobs without preparation, with little or no off-campus supervision, and with no time allotted at the end of their experience for discussion and reflection. Schools attempt to justify volunteer programs by calling them "experiential education."

Community service has a place in our schools, but its validity depends on the quality of service that is given. Moreover, such programs are educationally justifiable only when learning can be demonstrated. Concentrating on service and learning can transform the average community service offering into a service-learning program whose quality will rival any course in the curriculum.

Service-learning programs should have a coordinator, for students benefit most when programs are planned and supervised by a coor-