

College Makes New Connections With Service-Learning Program

Academic departments at Wagner collaborate with community agencies to deepen students' volunteerism

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Stuffing envelopes instills many qualities: humility, patience, tough fingers, and a pasty tongue. It is not, however, known for expanding the intellect. That's what college is supposed to do.

And there's the rub. It has been a persistent tension since the 1990s, when service learning became de rigueur on college campuses. At its most basic, service learning moves volunteer work from campus clubs into the classroom. How that actually plays out varies widely from place to place. Many colleges scatter students across dozens or even hundreds of community groups. Even within a single service-learning course, students might be working with a half-dozen different agencies.

The movement has gained new energy with the election of President Obama, who has made increasing service a central plank of his higher-education agenda. But across the board, colleges and universities struggle with service learning's twin goals of providing meaningful help to the community and academic rigor to students.

The challenge is to focus not only on the quantity of volunteers but also on the quality of the work they are doing. At **Wagner College**, on Staten Island, the provost dreamed up an idea to do just that.

The approach, dubbed Civic Innovations, connects entire academic departments with single agencies on the island. That setup enables the college to draw up a financing proposal for a soup kitchen rather than just serve meals. And faculty members and their partner agencies develop syllabi for courses together — ensuring a clear connection between the soup line and the sociology tome on poverty.

"That is a really powerful combination," says Julie Plaut, head of national academic initiatives for Campus Compact, the largest nonprofit group promoting service learning. The arrangement is also a model that the Corporation for National and Community Service supports.

So far, six academic departments at Wagner are participating in the program, and the college intends to bring on more over the next few years. At the same time, college leaders plan to concentrate their efforts in one neighborhood, Port Richmond, in an attempt to noticeably improve the quality of life on the island's north shore.

Richard Guarasci, the college's president, hopes that federal grant money will support the expansion — but says Wagner will bankroll the whole project if need be. "It's up to higher-education leaders," he says, "to make sure this is a core part of what we do and isn't just an additive or fad."

Persistent Link

Many fads came and went in the 1980s. But the idea of linking service and learning never went away.

The concept was kick-started in 1985, when several college presidents decided to counter the popular image of college students as disaffected, materialistic, and self-absorbed. That year the presidents of Brown, Georgetown, and Stanford Universities started Campus Compact to promote — and publicize — volunteer work on campuses.

The nonprofit group embraced the service-learning model, and by 2003 its membership had grown to include a quarter of all colleges in the United States. Students were logging millions of hours each year. But around that time, leaders in the field began to ask, "Service to what end?"

Robert Hackett, one of those leaders and vice president of the Bonner Foundation, says colleges began to take a closer look not only at learning outcomes but also at whether students' volunteer work was actually making a difference in their communities. On both counts, he says, many colleges were falling short.

That is something even colleges on the leading edge of service learning still worry about. California State University at Fresno was recently honored by the national service corporation at the American Council on Education's national meeting in Washington. The university sends more than 10,000 students into the community each year, and its president has set a goal of logging a million service hours annually by 2011. But sheer numbers aren't enough, says Chris Fiorentino, director of Fresno's Jan and Bud Richter Center for Community Engagement and Service-Learning.

As at Wagner, the university plans to start directing those volunteers to one particular neighborhood, in West Fresno, to maximize their impact. It is a move more colleges need to consider, Mr. Fiorentino says.

"One of the risks is that a lot of schools think, 'Oh, well, we're just going to do something,'" he says. "My fear is that people rush into this stuff, as they see donations and press, and that they don't really think about, 'What are the needs in the community?'"

Teamwork

At Wagner, Civic Innovations was a collaborative effort from the beginning.

"Agencies keep telling us in higher education, over and over, 'We don't know if any students are coming to us next semester. We don't know the ability of the students,'" says Devorah Lieberman, the provost. Plenty of Wagner students were volunteering, she says, but the college needed a more coherent approach to service learning.

In 2005, early in the development process, Ms. Lieberman shared her idea with the leaders of United Activities Unlimited Inc., a Staten Island agency that provides educational, recreational, and social programs for residents. Kim McLaughlin, director of the In-School Youth program at United Activities, and Ms. Lieberman decided to apply for a three-year, \$600,000 grant from the national service corporation's Learn and Serve America program.

When a technical glitch erased much of the application, they stayed up all night to finish it. Ms. McLaughlin would type furiously for a few hours, while Ms. Lieberman slept. Then the two would switch.

Once Wagner got the grant, in 2006, getting Civic Innovations up and running was a bit of a rush job, too. "I was called in a few weeks before classes started," says Patricia Tooker, an assistant professor of nursing. Administrators thought the three courses she taught were best positioned to try out the new service-learning approach. Ms. Tooker was game.

Now students in her freshman course mentor children on health and nutrition in schools that have formed partnerships with United Activities. Juniors work with school nurses to research and tackle systemic health problems, like childhood obesity and asthma. And seniors serve as health educators, developing lessons and working directly with kids. "School nurses are doing mostly triage," Ms. Tooker says. "They don't really have the opportunity to be creative."

As at most colleges, the nursing curriculum at Wagner is packed, and at first many students grumble about the extra time commitment, Ms. Tooker says. But most come to see the value. "I had a student who saw a kid whose teeth were rotting, and the student talked to the kid about the importance of brushing his teeth, and he'd never heard about brushing teeth before," she says. Moments like that, Ms. Tooker says, make for better lives, and for better nurses.

"If you care about what's going on in health care," she says, "you've got to get them out there in the community."

Outside the Comfort Zone

Wagner's approach is rooted in place.

From its perch atop Grymes Hill on Staten Island, the college has an expansive view of New York Harbor. The campus's previous occupant, a wealthy shipping magnate, built his manse on the spot so he could literally watch his ships come in. Other titans of industry, the Vanderbilts among them, also once called the hill home.

At the base of the hill today is an active but impoverished Liberian community. For years, few Wagner students ever made it down there.

Erica Vasaturo was downright frightened when she learned she'd be volunteering in the neighborhood, called Park Hill after the onetime housing projects of the same name. "I was scared, because I'm from Staten Island," she says. "You hear stories and they're like, 'Oh, God, don't go in there. You're gonna die.'"

What Ms. Vasaturo found in Park Hill, however, was a passion for teaching.

She had transferred from Sacred Heart University, in Connecticut, in her junior year, unsure of what career she wanted to pursue. "I'm a history major, and people kept asking me, 'What are you gonna do, teach?' And I was like, 'No, there's a lot of other things you can do.'"

Last spring, when she and two classmates first arrived at the neighborhood's Fox Hills Tutoring Center, they were confronted by chaos. The children, Ms. Vasaturo discovered, were eager to learn. They just needed more structure. To provide it, she and her classmates decided to have the students work on family-history projects — interviewing family members, writing their stories, and even creating poetry.

The Wagner students realized how little they knew about life beyond their own homes. "A lot of kids at Wagner are really privileged," Ms. Vasaturo says. "We're kind of sheltered."

For her, the contrast was particularly stark. The students she tutored attended elementary school at Public School 57, where fewer than half the students meet state standards for English and, in most grades, do only marginally better in math. The vast majority of the kids are poor enough to qualify for free or reduced lunches. The public schools Ms. Vasaturo had attended on the south side of the island "might as well be private."

She hopes to spend her career remedying such inequities and plans to teach on the island after she graduates.

Time in Park Hill has altered Lori R. Weintrob's career path, too. Ms. Weintrob, chair of the history department, trained at the University of California at Los Angeles as a historian of French civic culture.

But increasingly, she is interested in the history of Staten Island. A lot has been written about the ferry, Ms. Weintrob says, but not nearly as much about the people and the civic life of the place itself. She thinks her next book will be on the topic. In the meantime, she is living out an area of academic interest for her: intellectuals in civic life.

'Like Any Marriage'

At Wagner, faculty members and community groups meet several times before each semester begins to hammer out the syllabus. Not everything has gone smoothly, of course.

This year, for example, the sociology and anthropology department teamed up to work with a branch of New York's Retired & Senior Volunteer Program, or RSVP, on the island. Faculty members wanted the organization to think big — dreaming up a survey or research project that could take it to the next level. The small agency felt a little overwhelmed by all the attention at first.

"It's like any marriage," says Julia Barchitta, dean of learning communities and experiential learning. "We have to find our comfort levels together."

The college hired Cassia Freedland to help facilitate those conversations. As director of the college's Center for Leadership and Service, she is also the go-to person for questions that are less academic. Can you send a few extra volunteers to this one-day event? Could Wagner students help round up 30 turkeys for Thanksgiving dinner? Is there temporary storage space available on the campus? It is all the little stuff that relationships are built on.

Over the next few years, Mr. Guarasci, the president, hopes that Wagner can strengthen its relationship with one neighborhood in particular. Port Richmond has a growing Hispanic immigrant community, and by concentrating its service in one area, Wagner hopes to reduce the poverty that has grown up in the neighborhood as well. "The next big challenge for us," he says, "is to ask the question, 'Are we really changing the coefficients of poverty in these communities?'"