

HIV: Opportunities for Faculty Engagement

Ralph Aloisi and Peter Kennedy

Abstract

Boyer and others have called for academe to become more actively engaged in service and outreach activities to address pressing issues that demand the attention of our culture. The HIV epidemic has affected our culture in critical ways; it has had both a local and a global impact that demands the attention of academe. Faculty, staff, and students need to bring to bear human and intellectual assets to assist communities in dealing with the full impact of the epidemic in a meaningful and personal way.

More than thirteen years ago a faculty group from diverse disciplines at the University of Hartford, including biology, health sciences, philosophy, art history, and communication, developed a course called "Epidemics and AIDS." This course engages faculty and students in this epidemic in ways that have resulted in substantial service to the community, improved teaching and learning, and new and important scholarship.

Despite the skepticism of many university professors about the value of service in their professional lives, colleges and universities have a long history of commitment to their communities. Faculty and student social action have brought outreach activities and scholarship as well as new energy and excitement to bear on the major social issues of the day. In recent decades professors and students have responded with some degree of effectiveness to what they perceived as important issues. Unjust wars; poverty, discrimination, and racism in our society; the plight of the homeless; the education crisis in urban school systems; and discrimination toward minorities within school systems and toward the disabled in the United States are but a few of the issues that academics have embraced in recent years. Student and faculty social engagement is indeed part of the fabric of American democracy and is an important force for social change. According to the late Ernest Boyer, "the academy must become a more vigorous partner in the search for answers to our most pressing social, civic, economic, and moral problems, and must reaffirm its historic commitment to what I call the scholarship of engagement" (*Boyer 1996*).

Clearly, the pandemic of HIV today presents the academy with the kind of social, economic, moral, and human crisis that should capture the attention of students and faculty groups across our nation. However, issues that have generated apathy toward persons with AIDS may have increased the spread of this disease and the magnitude of the epidemic here and around the world. In the United States, people with AIDS were initially perceived by many as the outcasts of society. These individuals typically included intravenous drug users and homosexual men. Because these groups were the primary populations affected by the epidemic, many people considered this epidemic to be of no concern to them; they felt that it was a disease of others. And while the disease spread, the government was slow to act, and few stood up to rally against the lack of action by public officials or to promote education as the only practical means to slow the spread of the disease, particularly in young people.

“[I]ssues that have generated apathy toward persons with AIDS may have increased the spread of this disease and the magnitude of the epidemic here and around the world.”

Now, in 2001, the face of HIV has changed. Although AIDS is still found in young gay men, the epidemic in the United States looks more like the epidemic that has devastated sub-Saharan Africa. Approximately half of the new cases of HIV in the United States are in people under the age of 25. Most new cases of HIV have been transmitted heterosexually, and a person newly infected today is as likely to be a young woman as a young man. More often than not, those newly infected with HIV are people of color. According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), since 1991 HIV has become the leading cause of death among African American men ages 25 to 44 and is the third leading cause of death among African American women. There are about 40 thousand new cases each year in the United States alone, and more than 36 million people are living with HIV worldwide. Worldwide there are about 8,500 new cases each day (Cox, 1999). HIV today has become primarily a disease of relationships; AIDS is a sexually transmitted disease that is spreading like a brush fire out of control and is threatening a generation of young people. It is an epidemic that has the potential to wipe out much of the progress made in developing countries in the

last decade; it has already significantly lowered the life expectancy of their populations. In the end, HIV will cost us all substantially. Despite the advances made in recent years with new therapies, history may record the AIDS epidemic as the most significant global and local event of the last half of the twentieth century. Without a doubt it is the kind of “social, economic, and moral problem” Boyer must have had in mind when he called the professoriate to become engaged.

Institutions of higher education have a wealth of resources that are needed by the communities that they serve. These resources extend the reach of the faculty far beyond that dictated by the goals of excellence in teaching and excellence in research (including empirical research). Some of the most important assets available on campuses are human resources: the knowledge, skills, and creativity of college faculty members; the commitment of staff to support faculty in achieving their goals; and the energy, creativity, and enthusiasm of students.

In recent years scholars have promoted the value of various outreach activities such as service-learning experiences and experiential learning activities as ways to connect students with the real world while giving new value and meaning to a college education. The University of Hartford, like many private colleges and universities, grew rapidly during the post-World War II period and has periodically tried to refocus itself and its mission, originally emphasizing teaching excellence, then scholarship, and most recently service to the community.

“Some of the most important assets available on campuses are human resources: the knowledge, skills, and creativity of college faculty members . . . and the energy, creativity, and enthusiasm of students.”

My experience as a member of the faculty in both the College of Arts and Sciences and the College of Education, Nursing, and Health Professions has shown me that the education that students in the health professions receive is dependent on the quality of their clinical experiences and the effective integration of these experiences into the curriculum. While some argue that these activities represent community service, in reality these experiences serve the student more than the community; in fact, one could argue

equally well that the professional agencies where students obtain such experience are providing a valuable service to our students. Students bring to clinical agencies new ideas, enthusiasm, optimism, and excitement about their future and health care, while clinical agencies and clinical supervisors provide students with real-world opportunities to integrate diverse information into marketable clinical skills.

The importance of these clinical experiences and other outreach activities in the more typical liberal arts courses or in general education is less commonly accepted by academicians. Before coming to college, students in secondary schools are often involved in community service. However, when they enter college, opportunities for relevant community service tend to be limited. The value of outreach activities and experiential learning to good education is well

“In recent years scholars have promoted the value of various outreach activities . . . as ways to connect students with the real world while giving new value and meaning to a college education.”

documented in the literature. However, the literature also shows clearly the confusion that faculty members feel regarding the value of community service in the employment of graduates and in their own tenure and promotion processes. Academic administrators describe faculty professional responsibilities using the three-legged stool metaphor. The professional life of a faculty member gains strength and value from the

equal length of its three legs: excellence in teaching, in scholarship, and in service to the community. Nevertheless, despite the efforts of administrators, faculty members believe that the employment, promotion, and tenure process does not reward service (*Bok 1992*).

An interdisciplinary faculty group at the University of Hartford became engaged in the AIDS epidemic in 1986 when they received funding from the Alfred Sloan Foundation to develop a general education course that addressed science, history, politics, and other issues related to epidemics in general and AIDS in particular. The primary goal of the faculty group was to involve students and faculty in the AIDS epidemic in a way that would enable students to understand their role in the epidemic, even if they were free of behaviors that would put them at risk. This faculty group provided an important service to the community by working diligently to

develop a general education course in the sciences for nonscience majors that would allow students to develop an accurate and personal understanding of HIV. Additionally, this group has developed a required service-learning component through which students participate in HIV-related community service activities. Faculty members have also worked to assist other colleges and universities in developing similar courses.

Students and faculty in this course face who they are, their own mortality, and their attitudes toward death, dying, and disease and toward HIV and people with HIV, as well as the role of discrimination in perpetuating the HIV epidemic. Students also study behaviors that put them at risk and their own role in the epidemic. In the community service-outreach activity students are required to volunteer for at least twenty hours during the semester at various community agencies that serve people with HIV. University students bring meals to people with HIV who are house-bound, serve meals in an HIV community center and bring people with HIV to campus events; they help with housekeeping responsibilities and other work in homes established for people with HIV. Students maintain double- or triple-entry diaries to provide an opportunity for reflection. What typically begins in fear and ignorance for the student often ends with tremendous feelings of compassion for those with HIV, a personal commitment to do more, and a new understanding of what it means to be infected with HIV. Of the more than four hundred students who take this course each year, over 90 percent provide strong support for the course in course evaluations; most comment that the course should be required for all university students and that this course changed their lives in ways that they had never expected. In spring 1999 the student newspaper chose this course as one of the five best courses on campus.

“[An interdisciplinary faculty] group has developed a required service-learning component through which students participate in HIV-related community service activities.”

Faculty members involved in this course have essentially worked to make each and every student an HIV advocate, knowing that each student returns to their dormitory rooms in the evening talking about what happened today in “Epidemics and AIDS.” Each

student comes to the course believing that they already know about AIDS, but few understand what it is like to live and die with HIV; few have considered the possibility of dying young and the impact of such deaths on survivors, or how public policy has affected the growth of the epidemic; few appreciate their role in the epidemic, or the global impact of this disease.

Faculty members in this course commit to far more than just staying abreast of HIV facts and theories. They commit to getting involved, to becoming AIDS educators in and out of the classroom and to working locally and nationally to help other schools develop courses like the University of Hartford's "Epidemics and AIDS." The HIV-related deaths of three members of our university community in the early and mid

"What typically begins in fear and ignorance for the student often ends with tremendous feelings of compassion for those with HIV, a personal commitment to do more, and a new understanding of what it means to be infected with HIV."

1980s provided some of us with a powerful incentive to become more involved, to do something significant to help the cause. Others recognized the importance of the message "AIDS is our epidemic and we all play a part" as well as the critical need for community action to use education to slow the spread of HIV. Like many schools, the University of Hartford has stressed the importance of service in the promotion and tenure process; however, like most faculties, ours often questions whether or not service is really considered an important component of their curriculum vita.

The University of Hartford's faculty policy manual addresses the importance of service in the tenure and promotion process: "the purpose of service is to promote public good." Further administrative support of the importance of service is evidenced by recognition of the service accomplishment of an individual faculty member at commencement each year with the Tractenberg award. Indeed, over the last decade the University of Hartford has recommitted itself to service to the Hartford region and has worked diligently to identify and obtain the resources needed to support faculty and student service commitments. One of the most significant examples of this effort is the development of Educational Main Street. This

program includes a series of alliances between the university and nearby elementary, middle, and secondary schools. More than two hundred students from all nine colleges at the university volunteer each semester at these schools as tutors and teacher aids, with the university bus transportation. Additionally, disciplinary alliances bring the university faculty together with the teachers to help find resources and to work on curricular innovation. The success of Educational Main Street has gained national attention and recently was recognized by a significant grant from the Coca-Cola Foundation.

Under the direction of President Walter Harrison, the University has become energized for engagement in the community. The first major innovation was the establishment of the Center for Community Service. This center has a twofold mission: (1) to assist students, faculty, staff, and alumni who wish to volunteer their time and services to the communities and public service agencies in the Hartford region and (2) to increase the opportunity for faculty and students to incorporate service learning into classroom experiences. The center's goal is to increase the level of volunteer service provided by our students, faculty, alumni, and staff by identifying community needs, maintaining a needs database, coordinating and publicizing service opportunities, and assisting clubs and organizations in defining a service commitment.

Over the last few years the University of Hartford has been intimately involved in rethinking its priorities and, in particular, responding to Boyer's plea to reconsider scholarship priorities of the professoriate (*Boyer 1990*). With this in mind the university has reworked its standards for promotion and tenure in an effort to recognize a broader definition of scholarship that includes teaching and service. The College of Education, Nursing, and Health Professions at the University of Hartford adopted Boyer's definitions and has included them in its standards since the 1999–2000 academic year. While many faculty members indicate that service is not rewarded in the promotion and tenure process, I cannot stand among them. I believe that the recent changes in our college guidelines make official what was in reality, already being practiced.

In order to be recommended for tenure, candidates must demonstrate excellence in teaching. Teaching embraces organization of course material, classroom presentation, substantive content of courses taught, stimulation of students' desire for continued learning and conscientious evaluation of student performance. The Committee on Promotion, Tenure, and Academic Freedom considers scholarly activity and service necessary to meet the standard of

excellence in teaching. Therefore, in addition to being judged excellent in teaching, per se, the candidate must be judged substantial in scholarly activity and service (CENHP 1999). Accordingly, excellence in teaching is linked to substantial service and scholarship.

“To become tenured and promoted in essence requires that we embrace every aspect of professional life, which includes an obligation to share knowledge and expertise . . .”

To become tenured and promoted in essence requires that we embrace every aspect of professional life, which includes an obligation to share knowledge and expertise with our peers, our students, and the community we serve. That these activities are integrally connected or linked is critical in their assessment. Typically, teaching, scholarship, and service are intertwined in a manner that make it difficult to categorize an activity as any

one leg of the three-legged stool. Consider our faculty’s recent service activities related to HIV education. Faculty are teaching a course that is helping to prevent the spread of HIV, and our program is helping other schools and organizations initiate effective HIV education programs. These activities constitute substantial scholarship in that they have provided faculty members with new opportunities to initiate research, publish articles and books, and present papers within their professional arenas. Our faculty has also recognized in HIV a unique opportunity to use a topic that is important to students to enhance liberal learning and to develop an understanding of public health.

References

- Bok, D. 1992. Recovering public trust. *Change* (July/August): 18–19.
- Boyer, E. 1990. *Scholarship reconsidered—priorities of the professoriate*. Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press.
- Boyer, E. 1996. The scholarship of engagement. *Journal of Public Service and Outreach* 1(1): 11-21.
- College of Education, Nursing and Health Professions (CENHP). 1999. *Standards and procedures of Committee on Promotion, Tenure and Academic Freedom, the College of Education, Nursing, and Health Professions 1999-2000*. Hartford, Conn.:University of Hartford.
- Cox, F. 1999. *The AIDS Booklet*. 5th ed. New York, NY.: McGraw-Hill.
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. HIV/AIDS—United States 1981-2001. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report June 1, 2001* 50(21): 430-433.

TRIBUTE

Ralph M. Aloisi, longtime faculty member at the University of Hartford, died November 25, 2001. A full professor, Dr. Aloisi served as chair of the Division of Health Professions and associate dean of the College of Education, Nursing, and Health Professions. He played a critical role in the creation of the university's six health professions programs and in establishing articulation agreements with four professional medical programs.

Early in the AIDS epidemic, Dr. Aloisi's background in immunodiagnosics contributed to his recognizing the need for more effective involvement of faculty and students in HIV education. In 1986, in cooperation with a faculty group, he obtained a grant from the Alfred Sloan Foundation to develop a faculty response to AIDS. Over the last two decades, he has led a faculty group in developing a university-wide interdisciplinary course, "Epidemics and AIDS." First offered in 1989, this course has served as a national model for undergraduate AIDS education. "Epidemics and AIDS" is designed to make students aware of the far-reaching nature of the HIV epidemic, which will have a profound impact on their lives well into the twenty-first century. The course seeks primarily to reduce risk behaviors and change attitudes toward people with HIV by involving students in the epidemic through encouraging the development of personal relationships between students and people with HIV.

More recently Dr. Aloisi's service activities have included assisting in expanding the reach of this course beyond the campus to the community and to other schools, both nationally and internationally. In 1997 he received the Donald W. Davis All-University Curriculum Award for excellence in teaching, scholarly activity, and service in the area of interdisciplinary education. In 2001 he received the Roy E. Larsen Excellence in Teaching Award at the University of Hartford. His work in "Epidemics and AIDS" was a significant factor in his earning this recognition. Dr. Aloisi will be remembered as a dynamic teacher, colleague, and friend.

About the Authors

- Ralph M. Aloisi, a faculty member of the University of Hartford for twenty-four years, was a clinical laboratory scientist and professor of biology and health science. He received his baccalaureate degree from Quinnipiac College, his M.S. from Long Island University, and his doctorate from the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C. In addition to his work in HIV/

AIDS education, Dr. Aloisi led the development of allied health programs at the university over the last twenty years. He authored three books on immunodiagnostics and numerous articles related to health professions education.

- Peter W. Kennedy, Ph.D., is an assistant professor at the University of Hartford and director of respiratory care. He has been involved with teaching the “Epidemics and AIDS” course since 1992, and with the service learning component of the course since its inception in 1997. He received his B.S. degree from Heidelberg College, his M.A. from Trinity College (Conn.), and his Ph.D. in adult and vocational education from the University of Connecticut.