



## **Shared Consequences: Recent Experiences with Outreach and Community-Based Learning**

Judith A. Ramaley, Ph.D.  
President  
Portland State University

From Theory to Practice: Portland State University  
Part One

### **Introduction**

Recently, William M. Sullivan asked “whether [higher education] has the ability and the will to respond through leadership, institutional design, teaching, and research, in creating a new form of intellectual life for the public good” (Sullivan 1996). A call has been issued for our nation’s research universities to embrace public engagement (Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities 1996), and to acknowledge that “higher education should be about values — the values of informed citizenship, the values expressed in a sense of responsibility . . .” (Atwell 1996).

The purpose of this article is to describe the rationale for the new public scholarship and community-based or service-learning movement. Experiential learning has been a component of this nation’s curriculum for a long time. Many universities and colleges are now experimenting with much larger-scale interpretations of learning communities, service-learning and university-community partnerships, and outreach in order to: respond to growing demands to prepare civic-minded students who are also ready for the workplace; address the complex social, economic, and cultural needs of our communities; and manage our institutions on a constrained resource base. At the same time, these institutions are expressing a deep commitment to civility, community, and civic and social responsibility.

### **Service Learning and the Reform of Higher Education**

In a recent report in *Change* magazine, the Institute for Research on Higher Education at the University of Pennsylvania described the

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themes that have emerged from Pew Roundtable discussions at 120 colleges and universities across the country. The three predominant themes that emerged were:

1. The need to ensure continued financial viability and continued support from an institution's external constituencies;
2. The need to focus on the enhancement of curriculum and pedagogy and on the fostering of successful student learning; and
3. The need to foster an institutional culture that is more conducive to change and capable of overcoming barriers to action.

One of the most valuable aspects of integrating service learning into the curriculum for as many students as possible, and of developing the capacity to support and encourage significant university-community research and outreach activities, is that the engaged and community-based campus is also more likely to respond effectively to the challenges facing our campuses today, including the themes that have emerged from the Pew Roundtable discussions. In part, this is because the conditions necessary to support service learning and outreach also can open up the possibility of resource-sharing that can extend the capacity of the institution to respond to community needs. Another consequence of university-community interactions can be the creation of strong and knowledgeable external constituencies that support the university and its mission.

The Aspen Institute Forum on Communications and Society recently outlined the elements that must be in place if we are to reform education to address the needs of our rapidly changing world. We must rethink the role of "education" — the institutionalized system that we have designed to promote learning — and recognize that learning takes place in many environments both within and outside our formal educational institutions. To create a learning society where learning occurs throughout life, we must place *learning* at the center of our thinking, rather than *education per se*, and establish a learning environment created by "the effective collaboration of individuals and organizations in government, business, foundations, the nonprofit sector, communities, and educational institutions" (Garmer and Firestone 1996).

A healthy service-learning environment is similar to any strong campus community. It incorporates and values diversity; develops a shared culture; promotes caring, trust and teamwork; supports participation by everyone and a sharing of responsibility and leadership tasks; and has links to the community-at-large that integrate campus and community-based learning opportunities (Kuh 1991). In recent years, a connection has been made between how direct experience can promote learning and the value of using a particular kind of direct experience — service learning — to cultivate particular kinds of learning — leadership and civic skills as well as workplace skills — and to contribute to larger societal purposes — the building of social capital.

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## Consequences of Service Learning and Outreach

### 1. *Good Citizenship and the Renewal of Social Capital*

A new emphasis on volunteerism and service learning began a decade ago, when Campus Compact was formed to prepare students to embrace the value of civic responsibility and good citizenship and to give them experience in playing roles that promote the common good. The Compact has since grown to be "a coalition of 520 college and university presidents committed to helping students develop the values and skills of civic participation through involvement in public service" (Campus Compact 1996).

Ten years later, the Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities issued a three-year agenda for change that urges our nation's universities to place the student experience at the heart of institutional priorities, to become more productively involved with our communities, and to create a learning society that encourages learning throughout life (NASULGC 1996). In launching this initiative, William C. Richardson, the president of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, said, "[The ethic of] equal access to education and service to communities remains one of the noble, worthy ideas in American society."

Public interest in community building is high. Robert Putnam captured a growing national concern in his article titled "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital," in which he defines social capital as: "By analogy with notions of physical capital and human capital — tools and training that enhance individual productivity — 'social capital' refers to features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit" (Putnam 1995).

Whether we are really losing our social capital or are simply generating it in new ways, there is a growing belief that our nation's colleges and universities must become "engaged campuses" in order to prepare our students to be good citizens, community leaders, and effective professionals, and to create conditions that facilitate the ability of our campuses to contribute to the solution of societal problems.

### 2. *Leadership Development*

In addition to conferring economic advantages, education also improves well-being and "enhances the reasoning and problem-solving capacities of the citizenry . . . (so that) our graduates should have the ability to lead this society to more consensus on the issues that today divide us to the point of paralysis" (Atwell 1996). These qualities of mind and the habits of action that accompany them must be practiced. "Students need reinforcement and practice in collaboration, in working toward common goals, and in shared leadership" (Komives 1996).

Sax and Astin (1996) reported recently on their extensive study of the impact of college experiences with volunteerism upon post-college involvement in volunteer work and community service. To

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examine the effects of college experiences on later behavior, Sax and Astin followed a group of college freshmen from the time they first enrolled in college in 1985 to a point nine years later. They found that what seemed to have the most lasting influence on the students' likelihood of participating in community volunteer work after college was the extensiveness of their general involvement during college — the intensity of their interaction with students and faculty in both curricular and co-curricular activities.

The premise behind the new approaches to learning in a community context is that the practice of reasoning and critical thinking, when applied to real problems that have obvious and demonstrable consequences, will create a livelier and more productive engagement with society's most critical questions, and in time, sustain the democracy that we Americans have long held as an ideal. This assumption is reinforced by studies that suggest that the people who become most community involved after college are individuals who had the most intense student involvement in college, whether they participated in any volunteer work at that time or not (Pascarella and Terenzini 1991; Sax and Astin 1996).

### *3. Employability*

Another factor that has caused educators to turn to outreach and service learning is the growing demand from students and family members that an education prepare students not only for a good life and a commitment to the common good, but also for the workplace, as well as the demand from employers that students have practical experiences in problem-solving and in the workplace before completing their degrees. We must, in short, educate "real-world problem solvers" for the workplace, too (Lappe & Dubois 1994). There has been consistent criticism from employers that our graduates do not make good employees and very clear recommendations about what employers want and need (Verville 1995).

The Oregon Business Council captured these concerns in a 1996 report developed to assist the Oregon State System of Higher Education in its planning efforts. The council noted, "Employers by and large are very reluctant to hire graduates right out of school, because of the perceived costs of training new graduates to be productive. Lack of experience in both specific job requirements and workplace skills is often cited as the obstacle." The Oregon Business Council recommends that Oregon's colleges and universities should "offer more practicum experience to students, and possibly faculty members, too, to make course work more relevant to real work and to give more new graduates the practical experience that employers prefer" (p. 4).

### *4. Effective Learning*

Recent evidence suggests that students tend to learn better when they are dealing with subject matter that really interests them and when their work will have real consequences (Chickering & Gamson

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1991). The roots of the experiential-learning movement go back in this country at least as far as William Penn, but are most often associated with the work of John Dewey, who, in 1915 wrote, "...we cannot overlook the importance for educational purposes of the close and intimate acquaintance got with nature at first hand, with real things and materials, with the actual processes of their manipulation, and the knowledge of their social necessities and uses. In all this there was continual training of observation, of ingenuity, constructive imagination, of logical thought, and of the sense of reality acquired through first-hand contact with actualities" (p. 11).

Schools that work closely with their communities can provide a more meaningful succession of learning opportunities for their students through modeling a culture of shared responsibility that links the school or college with its immediate community. Lappe and Dubois studied a number of public schools that have set out to produce "young adults who are capable of shouldering responsibility and contributing creatively to our society for the rest of their lives" (p. 241) and who can enter the workforce successfully (Lappe & Dubois 1994).

The lessons that Lappe and Dubois draw from their study of public schools apply equally well to higher education and its outreach efforts.

- Caring relationships create a culture of mutual responsibility. No one is likely to act responsibly toward others when those others are nameless.
- Successful programs require mutual ownership. Mutual ownership is promoted by shared decision-making.
- Real learning takes place when learning is meaningful and connects in some significant way to the world outside the classroom and to the interests of the students involved.

It is possible to blend all of these goals together — building a sense of shared community and trust (i.e., social capital), promoting civic and social responsibility, leadership development, and preparation for careers — through the use of service learning. The knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to accomplish all four goals are basically the same and they can be fostered during appropriately designed learning experiences in the community. There are three basic modalities of community-based or service-learning: (a) volunteerism, (b) service learning and community-based research opportunities for selected students in designated programs, and (c) campus-wide community-based experiences for all students.

Most institutions that have chosen to move beyond utilizing volunteer work as a means to promote civic responsibility and leadership have chosen to offer service-learning opportunities for selected students. A few, like Portland State University, have built community-based learning into the curriculum for all undergraduates and a majority of graduate students.

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## Service Learning for Selected Students

One notable service-learning model that has permitted the integration of research, teaching, and service in a community-based setting has been the University of Pennsylvania's Center for Community Partnerships. The Center has focused primarily on the local public schools in West Philadelphia using three types of activities: (1) academically-based community service that encompasses problem-oriented research and teaching as well as service learning, (2) direct traditional service, and (3) community economic development. The center serves as an effective community link for students and faculty at Penn who wish to work with local schools (Harkavy 1996).

## The Whole University as a Service-Learning Community: The Portland State University Experience

At Portland State University, the learning community concept is utilized at each level of the undergraduate curriculum from the freshman through the senior year and a strong community linkage is integrated into the curriculum at each stage. Opportunities for community-based work are provided in all academic programs in disciplinary, interdisciplinary, and problem-focused modes.

What distinguishes Portland State's approach from that of many other universities is that we have sought to achieve our mission of contributing meaningfully to the community's capacity to address local problems and concerns not only by encouraging faculty scholarly outreach and by developing student placements in local organizations, but also by building university-community interactions into the curriculum at both the undergraduate and graduate level in such a way that all of our students will participate in community-based learning and research at some point during their education.

To support the many efforts to design, implement, and assess new kinds of curricular and scholarly activity that involve community-based work as well as other innovative research and instructional strategies, the university has introduced new support structures that assist faculty and students in identifying service-learning opportunities and managing the university-community partnerships and agreements necessary to support a campuswide approach to community-based research, outreach and service learning. The complexity of service learning and outreach requires new assessment tools, a new pedagogical repertoire, and new approaches to faculty and staff roles. A detailed description of the creation of a supportive environment for the whole campus approach to service learning and outreach can be found in a companion paper in this issue (Davidson 1997).

## Notes

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### About the author

Dr. Judith A. Ramaley has been president of Portland State University since 1990. Before that she held executive administrative positions at the University of Kansas, The University at Albany, State University of New York, and the University of Nebraska. She is also a professor of biology and is the author of more than 65 works on reproductive biology. During her administrative career she has continued to teach, and has recently been studying the changing character of organizational development in higher education and the creation of distinctive institutional missions, especially the urban mission, university-community partnerships and regional alliances, and large-scale organizational change.

In the past year, Portland State University received major awards from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation for its innovative approach to institutional transformation and the Pew Charitable Trusts for its pioneering work in the reform of undergraduate education. Dr. Ramaley is a member of the Board of Directors of the American Association of Colleges and Universities, chair of the educational reform subcommittee of the National Advisory Committee on School to Work, a member of the Campus Compact Executive Committee and vice chair of Oregon Campus Compact, and a member of the Kellogg Commission on the Future of the State and Land-Grant University. Portland State University is a participant in a number of national higher education reform initiatives including the Pew Roundtable, the AAHE K-16 Reform Initiative, and the ACE-Kellogg Project on Leadership and Institutional Transformation.