



“Carry It On”: Connecting Our Lives in Service

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One night a week for fifteen years I have traveled fifty-two miles round trip to enter the walled or barbed wired enclosures that house some of America's 1.8 million prisoners. Since the first prisoners' invitation to Georgetown in 1984, I have mentored a teaching and tutoring program in the District of Columbia's maximum- and medium-security prisons, aided recently by two faculty in government and, over the years, by faculty and graduate students from history, philosophy, business, and English. A central component of this outreach work has been the part played by GU students, mostly undergraduates, who volunteered as tutors in our classes and who became collaborative learners in the courses taught inside the walls and fences. More than 250 inmates have taken credit-bearing courses, predominantly in the humanities, and more than 150 students have volunteered in this outreach work.

Since 1995, at a residential addiction treatment center for women with infant children, I have mentored a group of students who teach adult education in preparation for the General Education Development (GED) test. In an educational program in a residential adolescent drug treatment facility, I provided help in high school courses and GED preparation, and in evaluating the facility's academic program. These service commitments led to two of my research projects: data are drawn from narratives of prisoners and narratives of addiction.

Authors Ann Watters and Marjorie Ford of *Writing for Change* and *A Guide for Change* said in the latter book, "Now is the time to return to that principle of higher education which emphasizes the role that high schools and universities can play in preparing students to be citizens through service to communities" (1995, xi). And yet, I anguish in frustration at how little real change has occurred in my fifteen years in service, beyond the particulars of my own life.

I grew up knowing that institutions made efforts at helping people in need, but often fell short in making one feel embraced. Perhaps that explains my interest in going inside maximum security and in residential treatment facilities to offer educational help. Maybe I'm looking for answers to how so many people wind up in

such emotionally abandoned locations. Maybe I believe that institutions can yet help.

Both of my community-service programs have resulted from community invitations to provide services. I think that is important to meet requests and needs rather than to assume those needs. Maximum-security prisoners wrote to area institutions of higher education, requesting courses. My campus responded and several graduate students began a reading session with inmates. Eventually, the students asked if I would teach a credit-bearing course. The modest program has continued for 15 years.

The treatment center work began with a direct request from a program director at the women's residential facility who asked if we could help her clients to prepare for the GED exams. First- and second-year writers in my Georgetown English classes who puzzled about "what can we do" formed the Demeter Project, providing

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tutoring services in treatment centers for women. They advertise, recruit, and train tutors, and coordinate training with the program director at Demeter House in Washington, D.C. My faculty role is to serve as a trainer for orientation and trouble shooting as each year progresses.

Newcomer first- and second-year students replace those who achieve junior or senior status: newly committed, they have amazing energy and are pleased to be tapped for potential leadership when the older class graduates. Seniors provide direction and continue to tutor; sophomores and juniors run the Demeter and the Lorton Prison projects, and the drug treatment project. Students learn that serious regard for community involvement requires *time* in the community — time to understand how someone else is living her or his life. Many tutors remain with these programs throughout their Georgetown careers. Helping students from within and outside the United States to become deeply attached to a community sets an example of how deep attachment can be, regardless of the students' ultimate choice of community of residence.

This work has been most compatible with the institution's mission. As a private research institution proud of its Jesuit and Catholic heritage, GU is often vexed by its own prominence and promise. The problems of Washington D.C.'s deteriorating urban neighborhoods could be naively ignored, for GU sits within one of the more affluent northwest D.C. areas. However, GU's strong commitment to volunteer work as both a moral responsibility and a civic duty is evident in the infrastructure built up within the campus, especially in the last thirty years. The university has programs and services throughout the District of Columbia.

As both a Jesuit and Catholic institution and as one of the originators of the Campus Compact organization of college presidents in support of community service, GU has been steady in its support of volunteerism. The work also reflects Georgetown's mission as a Catholic institution: Jesuits are an educating order, a group of priests told to "dream large" and to think deeply about their roles with others, to question, to be "Jesuitical." Catholic doctrine embraces the idea of Corporal Works of Mercy, such as visiting the sick and shut-in.

My own involvement in service to prisoners has been supported by the deans of Student Affairs, School for Summer and Continuing Education, and the College, the current and former presidents of the university, the Volunteer and Public Service Office (VPS), and the English department. I have been granted small, but

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important concessions, such as teaching schedules that fit with the one night a week I am allowed in the prison and use of University vans. The university contributes the extraordinary gift of tuition for inmates taking courses. Student associations raise money to purchase books and supplies.

However, performing acts of community service, collaborating with community constituents, training, and orienting students have been easier tasks than explaining their merit to faculty. Abstraction is inherent to the academic life. As faculty we are all about abstraction. We abstract knowledge from texts and present it to others. Thus, in holding a symposium or institute for faculty about service opportunities, we

often go no further than the descriptive phase, suggesting which activities in a course might be enhanced by hands-on experiences. Student volunteers soon are immersed in the prison setting and ask the tough questions: "How can I like these men, respect their opinions about this literature they have obviously studied diligently — despite my knowledge that they are convicted murderers?" The heart of inquiry and our academic attempts to categorize and make sense come rapidly to the forefront and we make great progress (or at least ask ourselves tough questions) and puzzle in concert. If faculty themselves remain distanced from service sites and service "recipients" or constituents, they make slow progress on seeing the value of service learning.

Faculty new to service learning are well-advised to work with a faculty partner, start slowly, and work on site in the community by developing and nurturing a contact. Community members and students should assume leadership roles. Participants should help to recruit other participants. Faculty should serve as models, doing the

work they expect students to perform even when they are on their own. Community partners should be invited to classrooms, group meetings, or informal gatherings to debrief volunteers. Off campus, students and community partners should form panels at local and national presentations and conferences in order for academics, administrators, and government officials to assess the ways universities serve their communities.

In service learning, we experience the formation of knowledge and attempt to glean from that experience an understanding of others' lives as well as our own. Rarely do we take this step to the next stage: extracting new knowledge, testing it, and subjecting it to public debate. Faculty could carry this search and research further if their service met a research agenda of use to both public and academic communities. I crafted my academic career around work I was doing in prison and expanded the focus to include one of the major contributors to incarceration — drug abuse. As a sociolinguist studying narrative forms I was able to publish in that realm by investigating the discourse of moral agency in interviews I conducted with inmates about crime and violence. My research contributes to studies of narrative, rehabilitation, criminology, discourse analysis, and social psychology, showing that service learning and participatory action research are widely interdisciplinary in nature. Service learning and our accounts of and reflection on it are connective by nature.

That connectivity is the central point — both to beware and to embrace. Drawbacks to service on many campuses include isolation in departments which consider this work a distraction from the missions of research and teaching and local (i.e. departmental) service. That has decidedly and fortunately not been my experience, though colleagues on my campus in different disciplines have experienced just that coldness to service learning efforts, even to their published research on service learning. An enigma? Yes. Faculty must be prepared for lost opportunities and disappointments: I have known despair when prisoners with whom I've worked return to prison after release. Most disappear from my life. Others, however, continue contact — fifteen years later — a rarity in teaching to be so embraced. Tutors who have become teachers and lawyers and politicians have written to tell of the impact of those years in community service which shaped their lives and their views of community commitment. These tangible rewards outweigh the occasional frustration faced when setting up a new crop of tutors, fielding the skeptical questions posed by bureaucracies of institutions better designed to keep citizens out of seeking funding, and finding the energy to connect ourselves to service. We carry on the work begun by Dorothy Day, Jane Adams, and Mother Teresa — fiercely benevolent models who acted upon hopes they held for improving lives. We should require our institutions, our students, ourselves, and our broadening communities to do no less. ■

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About the Author

Patricia E. O'Connor (Ph.D., Georgetown University) is associate professor in English and the associate director of the Georgetown University Writing Program, director of the Georgetown University Friends of Lorton Prison Educational Program and the faculty advisor for GU students' Demeter Educational Project for Women in Substance Abuse Recovery. O'Connor is co-director of the GU Service Learning Institute and founding member and chairwoman of the national service faculty, the Invisible College.

O'Connor's research on narratives of prisoners explore the language of violence and speakers' claims about these acts. This research directly stems from her fifteen years of teaching and service in the District of Columbia's maximum security prison.

Her publications on narratives of prisoners appears in *Pragmatics, Text*, and in her edited volume, *Discourse & Society*. O'Connor is also co-author of *Literacy Behind Prison Walls*. Her book on prison discourse, *Speaking of Crime: Narratives of Prisoners*, is forthcoming from University of Nebraska Press. O'Connor is a frequent lecturer on the topic and has written an article describing the collaborative learning of inmates and GU students, *Reaching out/Reaching In: Learning in a Maximum Security Prison*, in the National Society for Experimental Education Journal *Quarterly*.