Service Changes Lives

Cathrine Seymour

Patricia Vaccaro
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Creating a culture of service on our campuses is one way we can ensure that our students become reflective of the educational, civic and spiritual values of our Jesuit mission.

After the recent Baccalaureate Mass at The University of Scranton, Truc DeSa, a graduating Electronics Engineering major, approached a staff member and expressed his gratitude for the opportunity to learn and grow through his service experiences in his senior year. He also expressed regret that he hadn’t gotten involved sooner. "The work that I did with Collegiate Volunteers made me who I am today," he said. Each week, Truc coordinated a Saturday reading and recreation program in a low-income housing project in northeastern Pennsylvania. He participated in an Alternative Spring Break service trip to a Native American reservation in Arizona, which gave him "new resolve to push through and accomplish the goals I set for myself in a life of service." He feels his service work made his résumé stand out, and helped in landing the job interview and the aerospace engineering position he was offered.

The children who received Truc’s energy and dedication knew that someone cared enough about them to show up once each week to help them with reading. One mother said that her "sons had never really been interested in reading before" and were much more motivated about doing homework. The community agency personnel had a sense that students from The University of Scranton were interested, caring, and positive role models for education in this area. Service changes lives.

The early Jesuits chose education as one of the primary ways to be of service to those in need. It is inherent in the mission of Jesuit schools to encourage their students to participate in serving the needs of the communities in which they are located, with a special focus on the poor. This value of service, however, was not clearly linked to academics until the 1990s.

Building A Culture Of Service

Coordination of service programs had traditionally been the charge of Campus Ministry and/or Student Affairs offices. This assumes that service provides students with a means of helping others, a way to put their faith into action, and a tangible way to assist local communities. Although these were valuable benefits, there was no formal integration of the service experience into the curriculum. During the last ten years there has been a movement toward creating a more intentional academic relationship. Service has evolved from a modest student activity into an exciting pedagogical opportunity. In the past, service was viewed as a co-curricular activity; today it plays an integral role in the learning process.

Since The University of Scranton is situated in an urban setting, service gives us a chance to share resources with surrounding communities and allows for reciprocal relationships to form between the university and local residents. Immersion into different cultures - - economic, racial, educational, social, and religious -- is the vehicle by which students make connections. Working side-by-side with people of varying backgrounds significantly impacts our students, forcing them outside of their comfort zones and into the gritty reality of how others live. Through reflection, our students have the opportunity to integrate these powerful experiences into their lives, opening their eyes and hearts to the larger questions of social justice. The Very Reverend Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, S.J., Superior General of the Society of Jesus, in his address on justice in American Jesuit universities in October, 2000, used the words of the Holy Father to challenge Jesuit educators to “educate the whole person of solidarity for the real world” not only through concepts learned in the classroom, but also by contact with real people.¹

Deirdre Lynn, a junior, recently related these thoughts from a service experience: “I grew as far as my

Catherine Seymour is an Associate Campus Minister at The University of Scranton, Scranton, Pennsylvania. Patricia Vaccaro is the Director of Collegiate Volunteers at The University of Scranton and Marywood University, Scranton, Pennsylvania.
awareness of the poverty that exists in the world. No matter how many times I have been taught and told how fortunate I am, it is very easy to block all of that out. Seeing firsthand the impoverished people in the homeless shelter or hearing that church hymnals cannot be used due to an eighty-five percent illiteracy rate are things I just could not block out. Placing myself in a situation where I was exposed to poverty taught me greater lessons than any teacher or book ever could.” Service changes lives.

Over the last fifteen years the service program at The University of Scranton has evolved from a project assigned to a part-time work-study student into a movement that includes four professional staff and six work-study students. The Collegiate Volunteers program provides extensive support to students doing service, including placement, training, transportation, and reflection opportunities. The program, which is an endowed consortium with Marywood University, is a valued resource and a catalyst for campus and community-wide outreach. The University of Scranton office alone coordinates over 142,000 hours of student service to the local community. The program continues to grow using student initiative in assessing and developing service projects that meet current community needs. This growth has manifested itself in a diversity of programs, strong community partnerships, and a focus on education rather than charity. As a department in the Campus Ministry Division, Collegiate Volunteers offers students an avenue to actively demonstrate their faith through being of service to others.

Interest in alternative winter, spring, and summer break trips is at an all time high, as is interest in the University’s two international experiences. Many students inquire a year in advance to be placed on trips. This past spring, 115 students traveled to twelve different sites including Arizona, Illinois, and North Carolina. Students at The University of Scranton raise all the funds required for their trips, including transportation, housing, and meals. Although these are much cheaper than the traditional beach and beer party spring breaks, there are still significant costs for the service trips. The average cost of housing and meals at established organizations is about $175 per student per week (not including transportation). These trips have such a profound effect on students that they often return as alumni to chaperone the trips, using vacation time to do so. University faculty and staff have become trip companions as well. The understanding they gain from these experiences is as important as the services they perform.

Rachel Henry, a sophomore, spent her Spring Break in Cincinnati with the Mercy Corps. “I’ve never really seen poverty face to face. It was a very eye-opening experience to be a minority. I felt so selfish as a white, middle-class college student in the presence of these people who were born into a cycle of poverty. There were times that I felt extremely helpless, but I learned that many people doing small things like we were doing is what has and will bring about great social change and justice.” Service changes lives.

Rachel unwittingly paraphrases the thoughts of another Superior General, Very Reverend Pedro Arrupe, SJ. In 1973 he declared: “our prime educational objective must be to form men for others; men who will live not for themselves but for God and his Christ; for the God-man who lived and died for all.

Alumni from the San Diego Alumni Club of Creighton University help to repair the Catholic Shelter of St. James in Tijuana, Mexico. Dan Kelley (husband of Kelly Osborne, BA’94), left, and Dan Curran, BA’94, MEd’97, unload a new supply of wood.

Photo by: Alan Decker
the world; men who cannot even conceive of love of God which does not include love for the least of their neighbors; men completely convinced that love of God which does not issue in justice for men is a farce.”

**Service As A Bridge**

The service-learning movement has legitimized the educational benefit of all experiential activity. The term "service-learning" means different things to different people, and debates on service learning have been around for decades, running the gamut from unstructured "programmatic opportunities" to structured "educational philosophies." At The University of Scranton, service-learning is a bridge that connects faculty, staff, and students with community partners and their agency needs. It connects academic and student life views about the educational value of experiential learning. It also connects students’ textbooks to human reality; and their minds and hearts with faith and action. The program is built on key components of service-learning including integration into the curriculum, a reciprocal relationship between the community agency and the student, and structured time for reflection.

At Scranton the service-learning initiative began in the J. A. Panuska College of Professional Studies (CPS) with majors in Physical Therapy, Occupational Therapy, Nursing, Education, Human Services, Health Administration, and Exercise Science. The initial effort six years ago included a blanket ten hour per semester service-learning requirement for all majors. There was minimal faculty interaction and limited reflection opportunities. After many challenges and significant changes, CPS currently has service-learning fully integrated into individual courses with faculty support and critical reflection. These changes came about through consistent evaluation and cooperation between the faculty and the Collegiate Volunteers office. Faculty in other colleges within the institution also incorporate service-learning into their courses. Professors in the special Jesuit Liberal Arts program, for instance, require twenty hours of service with reaction papers for theology and philosophy classes.

Participation in service by college students, whether as a co-curricular or a course-based experience, correlates to where they are in their developmental process. Service work allows students to explore their skills and limitations, to find what excites and energizes them, to put their faith into action, and to use their God-given talents to benefit others, to discover who they are and who they want to become. By encouraging students to reflect on their service, we assist in this self-discovery. The reflection can take many forms: an informal chat, a facilitated group discussion, written dialogue, journal entries, reaction papers, or in-class presentations on articles. As author H.C. Silcox says, "reflection engages students in consciously thinking about their experience and provides an opportunity for them to examine and question values and beliefs and to develop problem-solving skills.”

By integrating the service experience through critical reflection, the student develops self-knowledge, knowledge of the communities in which

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*Photo by: Jason Wise*

**Bob Rissi, Creighton University BS’51, JD’55, helps prepare the day’s food for the homeless at the St. Vincent De Paul Food Bank and Kitchen in Phoenix, AZ. Alumni from the Greater Phoenix Alumni Club helped in the Kitchen and in the storage area of the food bank.**

*Conversations / Fall 2001*
Current Initiatives And A Culture Of Service

The University of Scranton continues a long tradition of concern for the people of the area. In the late 1800s, Scranton was a boomtown. Huge waves of European immigrants had populated the Lackawanna Valley with workers for the coal mines and railroads. In 1888, the Diocese of Scranton founded St. Thomas College to serve the educational and religious needs of the poor immigrants of northeastern Pennsylvania. Today the needs of the Scranton area are many and varied. The manufacturing and industrial jobs that were the mainstay of the majority of residents have greatly declined. The elderly population is significant, and diversity among area residents is increasing. Due to a decrease in federal, state, and local funds, the area's many non-profit agencies are trying to meet more needs with fewer resources.

The University of Scranton today continues to have a positive relationship with the region through its many community initiatives, and the participation of its students, staff, and faculty in the non-profit organizations, the schools, and the lives of the people of the Scranton area. The University of Scranton Center for Public Initiatives offers assistance to local businesses, entrepreneurs, and non-profit organizations through the Small Business Development Center, the Electronic Commerce Resource Center, and the Non-Profit Resource Center. The University of Scranton Band and Singers performs seasonal concerts and a World Premiere Concert each Spring. These events, as well as the Performing Arts Series, are free to the public.

The University of Success program, staffed by faculty, staff, and students, provides local middle school students with mentors, tutoring, and an opportunity to prepare for the challenges of high school and college. All of the services of the Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Memorial Library are extended to any resident of Lackawanna County who is a cardholder in any local public library.

Children from local neighborhood groups are invited by Collegiate Volunteers to seasonal activities with University students, such as trick-or-treating in the residence halls, Christmas and Thanksgiving family dinners, and an Easter Egg Hunt. Local Hispanic immigrants participate in evening ESL classes run by
student volunteers; their children can attend an after-school tutoring program, both of which were developed by Professor Marie Karam of the foreign language department. Over 150 elementary and secondary school children are tutored weekly by student volunteers on campus.

We know that at least 60% of the students at The University of Scranton are involved in service. Student Government funding for all clubs and organizations is contingent on the completion of three service projects each semester. Residence hall programming includes service, students can choose to live in the Community Service Theme House, and there are plenty of clubs which emphasize service. Faculty, professional, clerical, and maintenance staff offer their expertise as volunteers and board members at more than 150 non-profit organizations in the Scranton and surrounding area. In the Fall of 2000, The University of Scranton instituted a new Mission Leave Policy which gives faculty and staff paid leave to pursue University-sponsored or endorsed spiritual retreats and mission or community service-related activities. An ethic of service permeates the university community.

With each of these programs, and many other efforts, The University of Scranton fulfills its mission of being firmly committed to serving the people of the region, meeting the needs of the poor, and striving to cultivate a devotion to justice in the members of its community. The University of Scranton answers the challenge posed by Ignacio Ellacuria, SJ, that each Jesuit university "should be present intellectually where it is needed: to provide science for those who have no science; to provide skills for the unskilled: to be a voice for those who do not possess the academic qualifications to promote and legitimate their rights." Service changes lives.

Commitment To Service

Service work at Scranton leaves an indelible imprint on students exposed to injustices in society. For many students, such an experience affects their post-graduate plans. While some choose a year or more of full-time service, most pursue their careers and commit their time and skills to worthy organizations on a part-time basis. Scranton alumni know their faith and education demand that they be unselfish neighbors and responsible citizens.

1993 alumna Dominique Ponzo, MSW/MBA reflects: "In college service experiences opened my eyes to a world much broader and diverse than the one in which I had been raised. After graduating and beginning an accounting job, I sought volunteer opportunities to continue to ground me and help balance my priorities. My faith and social conscience were driving me to keep service a part of my life. I was not satisfied in my accounting career and knew I needed more. In Jesuit lingo, "magis" was what I was feeling. I know I am continually called to do more. This desire allows me to push forward every day, trying to right what is not right and empower those who need more." Service changes lives.

The University of Scranton needs to be known not only as an educational and cultural hub that opens its campus to people, but also as one that encourages its faculty, staff, and students to enter into the Scranton community: to learn, to teach, to serve, to minister, to listen, to act, to challenge, and to initiate efforts to create a faith-filled, just society. As Fr. Kolvenbach reminded Jesuit educators this past year: "the measure of Jesuit universities is not what our students do but who they become and the adult Christian responsibility they will exercise in future towards their neighbor and their world...students need close involvement with the poor and the marginal now, in order to learn about reality and become adults of solidarity in the future."