

The Providence Journal

January 9, 2007

Colleges with conscience

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ALMOST EVERY HIGH SCHOOL student volunteers in some capacity today. Community service is a real, positive trend — not simply a way to pad resumes and college applications. But some college students increasingly have an opportunity to move one step further, to be involved in “service learning” as an important component of their higher education. These students emerge from their college experience with a broader view of the world and a confidence in their own capacities to contribute to it.

How does service learning complement community service? At Connecticut College, the model seems simple. Students learn in the classroom, apply their knowledge outside the classroom through structured community service, and then return to the classroom for reflection, analysis and synthesis. The execution is more complex than the model may seem, and that complexity adds to the value of the learning experience.

The learning process, more than the subject, provides the intellectual faculties that can be easily transferred to new careers and new life challenges. It is the same with service learning, and that’s why an increasing number of colleges and universities are incorporating service learning into their curricula.

Jessica Sarah Bayner’s curriculum was very much defined by her service-learning experiences. As a result of her community involvement, this English major from New York added a self-designed double major, “Multicultural Medicine and Communication, with a Concentration in Hispanic Society.”

Ms. Bayner wants to be a psychiatrist. Working as a translator for Spanish-speaking patients in our local community and abroad in Spain and Mexico, she often was the only bridge over a barrier between English-speaking medical practitioners and their Spanish-speaking patients. This experience will undoubtedly benefit her, and her future patients, in years to come.

In Duncan Rollason’s case, the social issue itself helped steer him to choose a liberal-arts college with a comprehensive service learning program. Mr. Rollason, a senior from Vermont majoring in psychology-based human relations, developed an interest in HIV/AIDS in his mid-teens. He knew he

wanted to study it further, but wasn’t clear on the focus.

After working one-on-one with AIDS patients, both locally and in Africa, and developing a better understanding of the issues this community faces and the impact people can have, Mr. Rollason has opted to pursue a fellowship that would enable him to travel and research culturally specific HIV/AIDS prevention measures. A master’s degree in public health is also on his agenda. He credits his community experiences, coupled with his broad-based liberal-arts education, with preparing him to undertake these significant goals.

Service learning is a two-way street that builds a mutually beneficial relationship in which everybody wins. Students gain real-life experience and a keen understanding that goes far beyond classroom content and communities gain valued work that benefits, in many cases, its underserved populations, including children, the elderly, the poor and disenfranchised.

Campuses with this type of culture of engagement are listed in the book *Colleges with a Conscience: 81 Great Schools with Outstanding Community Involvement*. This resource includes a number of schools in the immediate Connecticut, Massachusetts and Rhode Island area, as well as colleges and universities across America.

For people looking to continue their educations, and who want service learning to be a part of their experience, it pays to do some campus research. Find answers to these questions: What kinds of students are involved in service learning? How does it affect their futures? How integrated is service learning into the curriculum? Does the college have an office that coordinates community/service-learning? With which local organizations does the college have partnerships?

With the seemingly unlimited higher-education options available today, selecting the right college or university may seem daunting. By adding service learning to your criteria, you can simplify the college-search process, enrich your education and pursue a meaningful life as an active engaged citizen. It may even help you define your life’s work. Just ask Jessica Bayner and Duncan Rollason.

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