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## Curricular and Co-curricular Community Engagement at a Spiritan University

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## CURRICULAR AND CO-CURRICULAR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AT A SPIRITAN UNIVERSITY

### INTRODUCTION

I recently completed my doctoral dissertation entitled “Approaches to curricular and co-curricular community engagement with college students: building relationships, shifting power, and developing a social justice mindset.” In my literature review, I pulled from authors writing for various higher education settings from large land-grant schools to small religiously affiliated schools. Despite the literature coming from a variety of contexts, it quickly became clear to me how easily one can draw connections between the Spiritan charism as we experience it on Duquesne’s campus, and the way in which we approach community engagement in both curricular and co-curricular spaces.

This article pulls largely from the literature review portion of my dissertation. It begins by outlining how service, now known in higher education as community engagement, has developed into separate but complementary components of curricular and co-curricular community engagement. It will then explore the central role of authentic relationships in both areas of community engagement. Authentic relationships are an indispensable piece of both community engagement and the Spiritan charism. As such, ties between the charism and the role of authentic relationships in community engagement will be highlighted. As there is not consensus on definitions of terms within the field of community engagement, it is necessary to define terms as they will be used in this article. Curricular community engagement is academically rooted and is usually a part of a credit-bearing class. Co-curricular community engagement is done outside of the classroom often as a part of the work of student organizations or as a component of faith-based activities.

Catholic colleges and universities have long considered service to community as emblematic of their mission and identity. At Duquesne University of the Holy Spirit, this consideration has long been the case. Our Catholic Spiritan identity has driven our outreach to those on the margins since

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*Our mission calls us to serve God by serving students so that they in turn can serve others.*

our inception in a room above a bakery in the Hill District neighborhood of Pittsburgh, PA. While service to the community has always been a part of our work here at Duquesne, the formalizing of that work came much later in our history. This formalization of service to the community is seen across divisions over a fifteen-year span. In 1988, the Division of Mission and Identity created both alternative spring break and alternative fall break mission trips. The Division of Student Life, in 1989, formalized and coordinated volunteer work in the community with the creation of the Duquesne University Volunteers (DUV) Office. The idea of academically rooted service to the community, first known as service-learning was formally established with the creation of the position of Coordinator of Service Learning in 2005. After two years, the University established the Office of Service Learning in 2007, which was later followed by the mandate in 2010 to include service-learning courses for all students. While these offices and initiatives came out of different divisions, the projects included commonalities from the beginning including working in local and global communities in the spirit of the mission of Duquesne University. It is easy to see how the Spiritan charism works so well with the themes present in current approaches to both curricular and co-curricular approaches to community engagement explored in this article.

Critical service-learning theory provides a strong framework for the exploration of curricular community engagement.<sup>1</sup> This framework is applicable at any institution whose mission includes themes of social justice or service to the common good. It is particularly relevant at a Spiritan Catholic university such as Duquesne University of the Holy Spirit where our mission calls us to serve God by serving students so that they in turn can serve others. Often, the focus of curricular community engagement is integrating students into social change models while using critical reflection as a tool.<sup>2</sup> Focus on personal development of the student is much more prominent in co-curricular community engagement work.<sup>3</sup>

## **APPROACHES TO CURRICULAR AND CO-CURRICULAR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT**

### *Curricular Community Engagement: A Critical Approach*

A critical approach to curricular community engagement appears as early as 1997 in Robert Rhoads' work *Community*

*A critical service learning model.*

*An alternative to a traditional service-learning model.*

*service and higher learning: Explorations of the caring self.*<sup>4</sup> Rhoads, using the term service learning to refer to curricular community engagement, lays out themes that include mutuality in the relationship between the academy and the community, intent to create social change, and relationship building both in the classroom and between the institution of higher education and community partners. These concepts are central to the social justice framework found in later writings on critical approaches to curricular community engagement.<sup>5</sup> Mitchell, in particular, outlines the advantages of what she calls a critical service learning model arguing that this model, while more complex, leads to richer reciprocity and interdependence between students and communities and allows for greater transformational learning experiences for all involved.<sup>6</sup>

Rhoads is intentional about not dismissing the desire to do community engagement while making clear that the work of critical community engagement must supersede a “feel good” experience for the students. This piece in particular is important when studying co-curricular engagement work. The positive emotional experience of curricular community engagement can be dismissed when it is viewed as the primary goal,<sup>7</sup> or as the primary driver for the work being done.<sup>8</sup> It is viewed by some as conceivable that the emotional experience can be a building block for the social analysis work done by students inspiring them to become effective agents of social change.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, student experience and emotional dispositions toward service are often central in co-curricular service work.<sup>10</sup> Rhoads’ work can be used to argue that emotional experience and academically rigorous reflection on social justice education are not mutually exclusive.

Critical curricular community engagement, also called critical service-learning,<sup>11</sup> is an alternative to a traditional service-learning model that differentiates itself through the focus on three key aspects: a social change approach that requires students to examine the root causes of the problems they are addressing; an examination of the distribution of power in the community-university relationship; and the building of authentic relationships between both the teacher and the students as well as between the academy and the community.<sup>12</sup> Critical curricular community engagement provides a framework consistent with a Spiritan approach to engaging in community

*Framing a non-critical approach to service-learning as a pedagogy of whiteness is particularly central to informing work done at Duquesne University.*

*Critical service-learning versus traditional service-learning.*

while remaining applicable at any institution with a mission toward serving the common good.<sup>13</sup>

As much of the research done around curricular community engagement is focused on predominantly white institutions working in communities of color, an examination of this work would be incomplete without a short exploration of the impact of a pedagogy of whiteness. The idea of a pedagogy of whiteness, for some, is embedded in the very fabric of service learning itself. Writings on intersectional approaches to critical service-learning and service-learning as a pedagogy of whiteness illustrate the importance of social change education and shifting the power distribution.<sup>14</sup> While integrating other frameworks, the intersectional approach to critical service-learning gives more weight to its significance.

Framing a non-critical approach to service-learning as a pedagogy of whiteness is particularly central to informing work done at Duquesne University. It is a campus with a predominantly white student body, faculty, and administration; inadequate examination of who we are as a predominantly white institution and the impact that fact has on our work in communities of color can produce unintended consequences. By failing to examine power and privilege in the relationship between predominately white colleges and universities with the communities of color in which they often serve, higher education can further oppress the very groups it is attempting to help. This is arguably the largest unintentional consequence of not using a critical service-learning model in both curricular and co-curricular settings.<sup>15</sup> Likewise, critical approaches to service-learning that assume students are from the dominant culture can also inadvertently support a pedagogy of whiteness.<sup>16</sup>

While the academic community as a whole does not agree that critical service-learning is a superior model, some institutions challenge the dichotomous model of critical service-learning versus traditional service-learning and instead argue that criticality is a component of all service-learning work.<sup>17</sup> Possibly the most disturbing point made in this argument is that a social justice approach might be off-putting to students of privilege.<sup>18</sup> Still significant contributors to the literature posit that getting students out of perceived comfort zones can contribute to their growth toward an understanding of power dynamics as well as an understanding of systemic injustice.<sup>19</sup>

*From a Spiritan perspective, the relationship itself supersedes all else including the task at hand.*

*Increase students' ability to understand differences across cultural borders as well as increase a student's understanding of social issues.*

Another notable point of the traditional service-learning perspective is the idea that relationships may be burdensome on community partners.<sup>20</sup> While there are certainly ways one could build any relationship that would be burdensome on one party, mutually beneficial relationships are not structured this way and are at the heart of community engagement work in the modern era.<sup>21</sup> The centrality of relationships in community work is also present in Spiritan literature and is articulated as "walking with." From a Spiritan perspective, the relationship itself supersedes all else including the task at hand.<sup>22</sup>

The core themes of a critical curricular community engagement model are also present in co-curricular contexts of community engagement as well as literature supporting reciprocal community-university relationships.<sup>23</sup> Rhoads' 1997 work and subsequent writings in critical service-learning are foundational to the examination of community engagement as it is done in curricular, co-curricular, and institutional spheres.

## **CO-CURRICULAR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT APPROACHES**

Like curricular community engagement, co-curricular community engagement often has a significant positive impact on students. Co-curricular community engagement can contribute to the development of social responsibility, understanding of working across cultural boundaries, and personal growth in college students. Keen and Hall note in their 2009 longitudinal study of the Boners Scholars Program (BSP) that the area of co-curricular community engagement, as it contributes to building engaged citizens, is largely unexplored. This study remains as one of the only longitudinal study of a large-scale co-curricular community engagement program on college campuses. The study concluded that reflection done consistently with co-curricular community engagement can have a profound impact on how students understand their work and their future engagement in communities beyond graduation. The findings are supported by smaller case studies done on Alternative Spring Break experiences as well as later studies of the BSP.<sup>24</sup> The research seems to converge in support of reflection as a key component in co-curricular community engagement and its capacity to increase students' ability to understand differences across cultural borders as well as increase a student's understanding of

social issues.<sup>25</sup> This focus on the centrality of reflection is present in curricular community engagement as well.<sup>26</sup> The significance of reflection in both curricular and co-curricular models of community engagement supports the idea that the impact of the community engagement experiences may be more closely related to the components of the individual program than to its grounding in the academic or student development arenas.

## COMMON QUALITIES IN CURRICULAR AND CO-CURRICULAR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

In looking at curricular and co-curricular approaches to community engagement, it is apparent both approaches focus in on different priorities. Curricular community engagement, particularly from a critical curricular approach, prioritizes shifting the distribution of power from the university to the community, building authentic relationships, and working from a social change framework. In contrast, co-curricular engagement prioritizes personal development of the student as it pertains to students' understanding of their own civic engagement and personal growth. When the priorities of both models are combined, a list of characteristics emerges that distinguishes quality community engagement for higher education. Those characteristics are: (1) authentic relationship building; (2) redistributing power from the university to the community; and (3) focus on personal development of students. For the purposes of this article, authentic relationship building will be explored as well as its natural ties to our lived experience of the Spiritan charism and the Duquesne mission here on campus.

*The centrality of relationship building in the work of community engagement.*

## AUTHENTIC RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

### *Historical Context*

An exploration of authentic relationships is crucial to this discussion because of the centrality of relationship building in the work of community engagement in higher education. The term, "authentic relationship," while notably present in the work around community engagement is not a universally used term.<sup>27</sup> Mitchell (2008) defines the term authentic relationship as relationships based on connection that challenges the dualistic understanding of self and other and instead emphasizes interdependence.<sup>28</sup> In the same article, Mitchell outlines authentic relationships as ones that acknowledge and value difference and

*It is our Spiritan heritage that models the importance of being in relationships with one another, of being present with one another, and truly listening to one another.*

similarity between the student and community member. She goes on to explain that in order to maintain authentic relationships in the context of curricular community engagement, ongoing partnerships as well as proper preparation for the community agency and the students are necessary.

The Kellogg Commission used the term “mutually beneficial and reciprocal partnerships” to describe the desired community-university relationships at an institutional level.<sup>29</sup> This definition of partnerships refers more to mutual respect, and the reciprocal exchange of goods and knowledge. The term “authentic partnership” is also widely used to evoke the idea that authenticity in a partnership requires all parties to be open to transformation in and through the relationship.<sup>30</sup>

Since the literature offers no consensus regarding common terminology, this article will pull from literature on partnerships, authentic relationships, and democratic engagement to best define “authentic relationship,” a term that is central to this study and best fits the context of Duquesne University. Within the University’s mission and Catholic Spiritan identity, authentic relationship is the term that is most reflective of Duquesne’s Spiritan heritage.<sup>31</sup> It is important, therefore, to explore the meanings behind several terms that best represent concept of “authentic relationship” in the context of Duquesne University.

Frequently on our campus we hear the phrase “walking with those on the margins.” The word “with” is the operative word in how we live the mission at Duquesne. It is our Spiritan heritage that models the importance of being in relationships with one another, of being present with one another, and truly listening to one another. In the words of Blessed Daniel Brottier C.S.Sp., “Friendship is to forget oneself for the happiness of another person. It is a rare and divine gift – the most perfect of human virtues, by sharing joys, we increase their delight, by sharing sorrows we soften their bitterness.”<sup>32</sup> It is in this spirit that we approach our understanding of authentic relationship building in service to others.

We must identify the stakeholders commonly engaged in relationships from within the work of community engagement on college campuses. Often the terms “campus-community partnerships” or “community-university partnership” are used to describe how higher education interacts within the local community and with communities abroad. These terms, however, are vague and



do not define the campus constituencies that can range from faculty, to students in various capacities, to higher levels of administration. In addition, they do not define the community as an individual or organization. Important distinctions exist with each of the entities within universities and communities that change the dynamic of individual dyadic community-university relationships. The dynamics impacted by the specific entities engaging in the community-university relationship include, but are not limited to, access, power, and length of involvement in the partnership.

Across the literature, common attributes can be found that support the idea of authentic relationship as discussed in this article.<sup>33</sup> Although much of the literature still speaks of the relationships as dualistic between the community and the university, the themes present in literature regarding community-university relationships often outlined more specific subsets of community and university: students, community organizations, faculty, university administration, and community residents.<sup>34</sup> That is to say, even the literature that refers to dualistic community-university relationships often presents research that explores more specific groupings. Researchers commonly support three attributes of authentic relationships: (a) partnerships in which institutions of higher education (IHE) work *with* communities, not simply in communities; (b) partnerships that, at the least, are open to, if not intentionally leading to, transformational relationships; (c) partnerships that foster equity through asset based understandings of community.

*Working with  
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## **WORKING WITH**

First and foremost, authentic relationships require a mindset of working with a community, not merely in a community. Working *with* implies equity and a shared work toward a common goal.<sup>35</sup> The various parts of IHEs cannot engage with communities merely as a geographic reality. Working with evokes the idea of standing on equal footing with another, sharing in both the work and the rewards. When an IHE works for a community, the language suggests the community lacks agency to work for itself. Researching on a community dehumanizes and problematizes the community. It is not the length of time spent in the relationship, but rather how that time is spent that impacts the building and quality of authentic relationships. In

fact, relationships that last over a long period of time may only do so because of a unilateral and habitual dependence, and not result in authenticity.<sup>36</sup>

Likewise, relationships limited by time and/or range of work are not by default bad relationships. It might be that a narrow scope of work over a brief period of time in the context of a transactional relationship is what is needed and wanted by all parties concerned.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, shorter-term relationships with a specific and narrow focus can still be authentic or have elements of authenticity if all involved commit to coming together frequently to work in a just and fair atmosphere. Clayton et al. proposed a continuum of relationships between IHEs and communities that begins with exploitative relationships as the lowest level, moves up to the middle level of transactional relationships, and places transformational relationships as the highest and deepest level.<sup>38</sup> They refer to this continuum as the E-T-T continuum. The idea of transformational relationships will be addressed more deeply in a subsequent section, but it is worth noting here the ideas proposed in the research around the desirability of short-term transactional relationships as they can still have authentic components. Clayton et al. asserts the following:

*The quality of the relationship is not always defined by how long or broad the relationship is.*

*One possible interpretation of the E-T-T continuum is that transformational relationships are always to be preferred over transactional relationships. Sometimes, however, transactional, mutually-beneficial levels of relationship are satisfying and perhaps appropriate. Because of time constraints and other responsibilities of both persons, a more involved transformational relationship may be neither possible nor desirable. Expecting transformational relationships when such is not appropriate (e.g., given the goals and investment of either or both persons involved) might inhibit the relationship operating effectively at a transactional level to the benefit of all participants.<sup>39</sup>*

The quality of the relationship is not always defined by how long or broad the relationship is, but rather by how equitable and genuine the relationship is. For relationships of any length and scope to be successful, they must provide time and space for all partners to share and work through disagreements, personal narratives, and other emotions around the project.<sup>40</sup> This can

be achieved through frequent and diverse interactions between partners. As Bringle and Hatcher propose, “Campus-community partnerships are closer when they grow beyond the original focus of the partnership (e.g., service-learning student placements), identify additional projects on which to work, and develop a broader network of relationships for collaboration.”<sup>41</sup>

## OPEN TO TRANSFORMATION

*Transformational relationships make room for what might be called a civic metanoia.*

The second critical aspect of authentic relationships is an openness for the relationship to become transformational. Enos and Morton (2003) characterize transformational relationships as ones that “proceed with less definition, with an openness to unanticipated developments, and with a deeper and more sustained commitment.”<sup>42</sup> Transformational relationships make room for what might be called a civic *metanoia* where the driver of the change is deep community engagement instead of deep spiritual commitment. It is important to note two things at this time. The first is that all relationships begin as transactional. The second is that central to the work of building relationships is understanding from all parties involved what type of relationship is needed and wanted.<sup>43</sup>

Transactional relationships focused on one-time events or short-term placements may best serve the need of all involved. This is because transactional relationships do not necessarily require a commitment to time spent together in various ways as long as all stakeholders agree the relationship should exist as narrow in focus and temporary. As mentioned previously, transformational relationships often develop when the work grows beyond the original task to include a broader scope of work and relationship system. However, long-term transactional relationships, when not attended to, can become unilateral flows of charity from IHE to community that fosters unhealthy dependence, problematizes communities, and blocks progress to the transformational level.<sup>44</sup> IHEs wanting thicker and richer work in communities should look toward evolving some transactional relationships into transformational relationships.<sup>45</sup>

Transformational relationships often are hallmarked by what Dostilio et al. (2012) called generative reciprocity.<sup>46</sup> Generative reciprocity embraces the connectivity of the larger ecological system in which the relationships exist, and the synergistic way of being in relationships that can ultimately lead to transfor-

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mation. This way of being breaks the dichotomous model of one faction holding all power, goods, and knowledge and the other faction lacking in power and in need of goods and knowledge.<sup>47</sup> This approach asserts that a more web-like exchange of power, goods, and knowledge that also includes a mindfulness of our own positions of power, disadvantage, and niche in the ecology in which the relationships exist.<sup>48</sup> This allows for transformational relationships that lead to a co-creation of knowledge, an asset-based mindset of communities, and a redistribution of power to those that are historically robbed of power by the very entities that intend to be of service to them. It is worth noting here that an understanding of power is critical to the discussion of the E-T-T model. If members of IHEs are not aware of their own power going into these relationships and how that power can impact the relationships, it will be impossible to progress from transactional to transformational relationships.

When discussing the E-T-T model laid out by Clayton et al. (2010) we did not address the lowest level of relationship, the exploitative. While it can be argued that all relationships begin as transactional; just as it is possible for them to morph into transformational relationships they can also morph into exploitative relationships. While exploitation of any group is an undesired outcome, it is still important to make mention that exploitative relationships can develop in community-university relationships when they are not properly sustained and nurtured.<sup>49</sup> The idea that IHEs can potentially exploit the communities they set out to help is a large motivator for this study particularly in the context of Duquesne University where our Spiritan roots call us to serve and be present to those on the margins.<sup>50</sup>

## **ASSET-BASED UNDERSTANDING OF COMMUNITIES IN RELATIONSHIPS**

The final characteristic of authentic relationships is an asset-based understanding of communities. In Keith Morton's 1995 seminal article on charity and service at IHEs, he argued that the way universities attempt to "help" communities is both shaped by and at the same time reinforces beliefs about the community. If IHEs believe themselves to be fundamentally the keepers of knowledge and wisdom, and the community is the empty vessel in which they pour that knowledge and wisdom, this concept will have a profound impact on any attempt to build an authentic

*An asset-based  
understanding  
of communities.*

relationship.<sup>51</sup> This epistemological stance strips the community of agency, and disregards any expertise present there.

Many of the ideas present in democratic engagement support an asset-based approach. Democratic engagement lifts up the ideas of inclusiveness, participation in problem solving, and mutual deference between the university and community in regards to expertise.<sup>52</sup> Asset-based approaches through democratic engagement support the co-creation of knowledge through mutual respect for and understanding of all the gifts that all partners bring. This approach also prevents IHEs from falling into the common trap of problematizing communities. For those in higher education to see themselves as the experts, they adopt the inherent view of the community less as people and more as problems.<sup>53</sup> The idea of asset-based approaches to community as an important component of impactful relationships can be found in critical service-learning theory as well. This theory roots authentic relationships in connections that challenge the dualistic understanding of self and other and instead emphasizes interdependence between IHEs and community.<sup>54</sup>

*Relationships  
are at the heart  
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## CONCLUSION

The principles of authentic relationships explored here – working with others, openness to transformation, and asset-based mentalities – are particularly relevant to our work in community engagement at Duquesne. Inspired by our Catholic Spiritan identity, relationships are at the heart of our work.

*We go to a people not primarily to accomplish a task, but rather to be with them, live with them, walk beside them, listen to them, and share our faith with them. At the heart of our relationship is trust, respect, and love.<sup>55</sup>*

While the ideas proposed in this article are founded in current academic literature, it is easy to see their connection with our Catholic Spiritan identity at Duquesne. During my eighteen years at Duquesne, my work has always included community engagement with students. For most of that time, I was aware of the ways in which our work reflected our Catholic Spiritan identity. It was such a privilege during my dissertation work to be able to connect that back to the bigger picture of community engagement in higher education. It allowed me the opportunity

to realize that what we have always called “mission-driven work” in community engagement here at Duquesne is also viewed as rich, authentic, community engagement by the broader higher education community.

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