

# 5

## Service-Learning and Public Policy

Craig A. Rimmerman

[T]he ingenuity and idealism of the younger generations represent a potent resource for civic renewal.

—Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*

Today's young adults are less politically interested and informed than any cohort of young people on record.

—Thomas Patterson, *The Vanishing Voter: Public Involvement in an Age of Uncertainty*

What does it mean to be a citizen in a country that calls itself a "democracy?" How does one take a charity model of helping, of service, that our students have been socialized into and know so well and inspire students to instead contemplate a more centrally focused political and policy model, one rooted in the language of social movements and participatory theories of democracy? In what ways does a service-learning course in a liberal arts institution provide a unique space for encouraging students to reflect on the real meaning of service for their lives as well as the lives of the members of the community with whom they interact? This chapter broaches these questions within the tensions represented by the above quotations and within the context of a 300-level public policy course—Social Policy and Community Activism.

This analysis begins with several claims. Virtually all of the students who I teach in all of my courses have participated in some form of service after

they have arrived at college. Very few of these same students have been involved in anything that we would remotely call politics: (1) political organizing in their communities; (2) working on a campaign; (3) going to a town meeting and participating at that meeting; and (4) working with others to develop or influence policies for the communities in which they live. When I ask my students on the first day of class if they have a good understanding of the American political system and the policy process that governs our lives, many of them readily admit to me that they know little about the larger political system in which they live. They have little sense of history, especially of various social movements that have been so important in serving as a catalyst for policy change on behalf of those at the margins of American society. And they generally think of politics merely in terms of the vote and cannot conceive of a more expansive vision of what it might mean to be a citizen.

One of the central goals in all of my courses is to inspire students to think about what it means to be a citizen from a number of perspectives. What role do citizens play in the American policy process? What role should they play? The argument of this essay is that service-learning courses afford faculty and students a unique opportunity to explore these questions and issues related to democracy and public policy. In doing so, we integrate the model of critical education for citizenship as the underlying theme of the course.

#### CRITICAL EDUCATION FOR CITIZENSHIP AND THE NEW CITIZENSHIP

The critical education for citizenship model is at the basis for what I have called the New Citizenship. This model of education contains the following elements: (1) it should present the full critique of American democracy to the student; (2) it should allow students to see the importance of participating in public decisions; (3) it should ask educators and students to conceive of democracy broadly to include community discussions, community action, public service, and protest politics; (4) it should ask students to conceptualize participation very broadly to include workplace and community opportunities for participation; (5) it should encourage students to take into account the important relationship among gender, race, sexual orientation, and class concerns in the participatory process and to develop a respect for and understanding of difference; (6) it should place a discussion of democracy within its appropriate historical context by focusing on democratic movements, such as the African American civil rights movement, the antiwar movement, and the women's movement; (7) it should ask students to confront their assumptions regarding power and leadership as well as the

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sources of such assumptions; (8) it should prepare students for their place in the world by affording them a chance to make an informed choice about what it is that they want to do with their lives and how they connect what they do with the communities where they live and work.

How does the critical education for citizenship model connect to the New Citizenship? It is the foundation for a more expansive vision of the role that the citizenry plays in a society that purports to adhere to democratic goals. The New Citizenship is rooted in participatory democratic principles and emphasizes grassroots organizing, mobilization based on community building, cooperation, and alliance formation. It embraces unconventional politics when they are necessary to achieve public policy goals. It is reflected in the rise of citizen organizations at the grassroots and in the proliferation of college student organizations committed to economic, social, and environmental justice. It is reflected in the increased use of the Internet for political organizing across campus communities. Finally, the New Citizenship encompasses the commitment on college campuses to service-based learning. Service-based learning is a pedagogical method that combines student (and sometimes faculty) participation in the community with curriculum-based learning. It requires students to have an opportunity to build in time for students to reflect on their community experiences and to explore various elements of the New Citizenship. As the chapters in this volume suggest, it is also very much interdisciplinary in nature.

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## SOCIAL POLICY AND COMMUNITY ACTIVISM: COURSE OVERVIEW

This is a course about social policy and community participation and activism; it is also a course about democracy, community, and difference. All students are required to be fully engaged in a semester-long community activism/service project. In addition, students are afforded an opportunity to reflect upon how their participation in the community influences their own lives, their perspectives on democracy, and their understanding of democratic citizenship. Several questions are at the core of the course: (1) What should the role of the citizenry be in the American political system and the American policy process? (2) Is it possible to construct a society that encourages people to assert their identities and celebrate their differences, while maintaining the community, stability, and civility of that society? Would we want to live in such a society? Why or why not? (3) What role should the federal government play in funding and overseeing social service programs at the local level? How might modern conservatives, modern liberals, and democratic socialists respond to that question? (4) How are all of these questions played out in Geneva, New York?

In answering these questions, students consider their service/public policy work in the larger Geneva community. The course requires them to engage their service experience from at least two perspectives. First, Geneva itself is a community that represents, in many ways, the negative consequences of the deindustrialization of America. Students' work in the community involves them, in many cases, with human beings who have been cornered by a very limited menu of social and economic choices. How they negotiate these interactions is a significant part of their service-learning experiences. Students are given the opportunity to do so within the context of a public-policy-focused course, one that interrogates education, welfare, health care, AIDS, and criminal justice policy from a number of perspectives through the course readings, discussions, films, and lecture materials. In addition, community members visit the course throughout the semester to share their diverse perspectives on the many challenging issues raised in the course. All of this is meant to complement and to enhance the work that students do in the community as the course unfolds.

Second, the service/policy work that the student does within the context of the course (and any work that they have done before the course began or after it concludes) is, itself, a project in citizenship. The course asks students to connect their service-learning experiences with the nature of and challenges to democratic citizenship in our time. This component of service-learning is an essential and quite important commitment in its own right. What does citizenship mean now? What ought it mean? How does it relate to various perspectives on justice, democracy, community, and difference? The service-learning model allows us to consider and possibly rethink these very basic and quite critical concepts by requiring students to engage various theoretical approaches to citizenship, including the democratic theory of elitism and participatory democracy. In addition, the service-learning model enables faculty and students to explore challenging issues of power and inequality as they are played out in the community at large as the policy process unfolds at the local level.

A further course theme is the relationship between a privileged liberal arts campus, Hobart and William Smith Colleges, and the surrounding Geneva, New York, community. Service-learning affords an excellent opportunity to explore this theme in all of its complexity. Throughout the course, students are asked to consider these questions: Just what is that relationship? And what should that relationship be? How might we achieve a more positive relationship? What are the barriers? How might the barriers be overcome? Various community members visit the class throughout the semester. The underlying rationale for bringing community members into the classroom is that we have much to learn from the Geneva community; and what better way to signal that commitment to learning than to break down the artificial barriers that colleges and universities often construct. If

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students are going out into the community as a required component of the course, then those same students should have an opportunity to hear from community members within the context of the classroom. For example, the local director of the Head Start program and the director of Family Services for that organization discuss the evolution of Head Start over time with particular attention to funding issues (and issues of federalism) in the Clinton/Bush years. What role should the federal government play in terms of funding, implementation, and oversight? How do Head Start administrators address the paucity of funding for their program initiatives? These are important public policy questions that students will have an opportunity to access first-hand, depending on the nature of their semester-long community project. One of the most interesting, moving, and inspiring moments in the course occurred when I asked the Head Start representatives to discuss how they maintain their commitment, energy, and positive spirit from year to year. One of the organization's representatives responded by saying that she is "inspired every day by the people she interacts with, people who have so much stacked against them in life but who won't allow that to defeat them." In amplifying this point, she described one woman who walks many miles several times a week to visit the Head Start office even though she has physical disabilities. The administrative assistant to the Geneva Episcopal Church also visits the class to discuss the Neighbor's Night Program, which she coordinates. Her visit is an important component of the course because her program represents the kind of faith-based initiative that President Bush has extolled as a part of his compassionate conservatism. Her contribution is also important because it nicely connects to Marvin Olasky's book, *Compassionate Conservatism*, which is required reading for the course.

What happens to those Geneva residents who need legal assistance but cannot afford proper legal representation? The executive director of the Legal Assistance of the Finger Lakes addresses that question when she visits the course. Some students who are enrolled in the course are interested in the intersection of community activism, public policy, and the law. This class session enables students to make appropriate connections across race and class divides.

Hobart and William Smith Colleges president Mark Gearan visited the course to discuss his sense of the relationship between the colleges and the larger Geneva community with attention to how that relationship has developed over the course of his presidency and areas where improvement is also needed. President Gearan also brought his expertise as former chair of the National Campus Compact, as a member of the Partnership for Public Service, and as former Peace Corps director under President Clinton to the classroom. Dean of faculty and provost Teresa Amott visited the class, as well, to discuss some of the same themes but

also made an invaluable contribution to the class by discussing her work as a welfare rights organizer in Boston in the late 1960s. Her presentation and discussion facilitation allowed students to make useful connections to Michael Katz's book, *The Price of Citizenship: Redefining the American Welfare State*, which is required reading for the course.

How does all of this relate to the course assignments? Students were required to participate in community fieldwork for at least two hours per week for the entire semester. Many of the students worked longer hours given their commitment and interests. Students are engaged in an array of community-based organizations, including literacy programs, the local food pantry, the Boys and Girls Club, the Geneva Family YMCA, Neighbor's Night at the Episcopal Church, after-school tutoring, the Geneva community lunch program, the Geneva Housing Authority, and Legal Assistance of the Finger Lakes, among others. Our campus Office of Public Service placed students, offered an evening of orientation and training before they went into the field, provided field assessment and offered overall logistical support.

A central component of the course is a required course journal. The idea behind the journal is that communication, experience, and critical reflection are crucial components of intellectual and ethical growth. In addition, I asked students to relate their twice-weekly journal entries to the public policy issues that we were discussing in class and, most importantly, the course readings. The journal is meant to provide opportunities for communication and reflection while also creating a community of learning within the course itself. The goal is for our students to write journal entries that enable them to reflect upon their field work in some detail so that they can see how their observations have changed as the course unfolds. There are opportunities throughout the course for students to offer substantive observations regarding their fieldwork in light of the course material. In this way, the students learn from one another and get a much richer understanding of the larger Geneva community.

Another important course requirement is a major course research paper, one that examines a public policy issue from a number of perspectives, by providing an historical overview of their chosen issue, discussing past policy solutions, outlining where the issue stands now in the legislative process, and then proposing policy recommendations in light of their understanding of the American policy process by discussing possible barriers to their recommendations and how those barriers might be overcome. Students are required to integrate relevant course readings (as well as material presented by our guest speakers/discussion facilitators) and to engage in considerable outside research. They are also encouraged to integrate their community fieldwork to enhance their overall policy analysis.

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## THE CRITIQUE OF SERVICE

Many of those opposed to courses that require students to participate in community or public service believe that such service simply cannot possibly achieve all that it purports to achieve. For example, "community service is not a cure for young people's political apathy," because "it teaches us little about the arts of participation in public life."<sup>1</sup> In addition, it falls far short of providing the everyday connections to the political process that students must have. Furthermore, most courses that require community service fail to afford students the opportunity that they need "to work effectively toward solving society's problems."<sup>2</sup>

Other critics of service-based fieldwork lament the fact that most student participants avoid tackling larger policy questions and issues. In this sense, the participants often conceive of service as an alternative to politics. Indeed, service is often a way for participants to avoid talking about politics.<sup>3</sup> Boyte points out, for example, that the language of community service is infused with the jargon of "helping" rather than "a vocabulary that draws attention to the public world that extends beyond personal lives and local communities." Service volunteers rarely have the ability to grapple with the complex intersection of class, race, and power that is created when middle- or upper-middle-class youths engage in projects in low-income areas. In the absence of "a conceptual framework that distinguishes between personal life and the public world, community service adopts the 'therapeutic language' that now pervades society."<sup>4</sup> It is this therapeutic approach that cannot begin to deal with the inequalities that structure the relationship between the so-called servers and the served. Boyte explains further that "the current emphasis of volunteerism 'dumbs down' citizenship by highlighting personal traits like caring and individual acts of kindness and eclipsing questions of power, collective action, the cultures and functioning of institutions, and larger systemic problems."<sup>5</sup> In the end, service activity is devoid of politics, and, therefore, it is a relatively empty way of tackling the complex structural issues that arise out of the conditions that prompt service activity in the first place. Some contend that it ultimately contributes to "the narrowing political role of American citizens."<sup>6</sup>

Yet another set of criticisms raises questions about the relationship of the individual to the State. According to Eric Gorham, "Community service is an institutional means by which the State uses political discourse and ideology to reproduce a postindustrial capitalist economy in the name of good citizenship."<sup>7</sup> For Gorham and other critics, community service reinforces the worst form of clientelism and tacitly accepts the structural inequalities growing out of the limited American welfare state. It does so by largely working within the confines of the current system without always affording students the opportunity to critique that system in a fundamental way. It

thus promotes an invidious form of authoritarianism. In addition, service assumes that all participants can afford to volunteer for little or no pay. Unfortunately, many students need one or two jobs merely to make ends meet while they pursue their undergraduate education. As a result, many are prevented from participating in service opportunities because of economic barriers.

Gorham raises serious practical considerations that need to be addressed by proponents of any community service. To Gorham, these are the most important questions:

1. How well can the practice of national service fulfill its theoretical goals?
2. What does "inculcating civic education" mean in concrete terms? In what sense will national service offer opportunities for democracy, equality, and participation to those who serve?
3. Is the goal of citizenship appropriate to all people, regardless of their race or gender?
4. Does national service contribute to citizenship in any material way?
5. Furthermore, how should citizenship be nurtured?
6. Do the ideas of the planners of national service coincide with those of the philosophers who might view it as appropriate to their ends?<sup>8</sup>

Critics such as Eric Gorham point out that most proponents of service fail to ask these questions and, as a result, avoid discussing the kind of theoretical underpinnings that should be at the core of any courses that require students to participate in service activities.

The libertarian perspective offers a final critique of national service programs. Libertarians—for example, Doug Bandow—point out that President Clinton's national service proposal will ultimately lead to government coercion because all government service programs assume at their core that citizens are not responsible to one another, but are responsible to the State. In this way, the "volunteers" are actually coerced by the government to participate in service programs, thus losing their liberty and freedom. Bandow's critique is particularly relevant to the present analysis because it raises interesting questions about whether students should be required to participate in any service experience as a part of a college course or courses.<sup>9</sup>

### ONE RESPONSE TO THE CRITIQUE OF SERVICE

In addressing the critique of service, I return to the course that underlies this chapter. One way to engage the critique is to inspire students to engage the

arguments offered by those who criticize service-learning and to offer thoughtful responses in light of their own work in the community. Indeed, a service-learning public policy course affords many opportunities to do so. For example, one of the most important issues is to try to ascertain how the community perceives student fieldwork. And what does the community think of a service-learning requirement that ends once the course is over? Students invariably make important ties to human beings who come to count on their presence in their lives. This is always a difficult issue to negotiate and does not have easy answers, since it is built into the very nature of the relationship between the community and any college or university that offers service-learning courses. The key is to confront it head on and to ask students to write about it in light of their community participation. In addition, the Office of Public Service should work with the sites where students are placed to insure that the relationship is a positive one from the vantage point of the community.

Another useful way to engage the critique of service-learning is to establish clear criteria at the outset for evaluating service-learning courses. Anne Colby, Thomas Ehrlich, Elizabeth Beaumont, and Jason Stephens pose these important evaluation questions:

1. Are the service-learning placements challenging (providing growth in important moral and civic skills)?
2. Are the students well prepared for the placements?
3. Do the field experiences contribute directly to the academic goals of the course?
4. Does the course have a structured reflection component that examines the issues addressed by the service in terms of systematic causes and policy responses as well as in interpersonal terms?
5. Do students use the reflection opportunities to think through their assumptions, values, and identities when appropriate as well as to focus on the substantive issues raised in the service experience?
6. Was the student participation effective from the point of view of the community partners?<sup>10</sup>

In addressing these questions and the critique of service, what students report as the course unfolds is crucial. The sources for this material are student observations in class, their course journal reflections, and their discussions with me in my office or in other campus settings. In its most successful moments, the course encourages students to develop the democratic imagination and personal commitments to be an active citizen.

One compelling example of student growth involved a young female student working with a local food group that is responsible for distributing groceries to low-income individuals and families. She wrote in her journal

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about her intense feelings of guilt and her privileged position in society when compared to the plight of the people she worked with as a part of her service experience. She came from a middle-income family in New England, a family that embraced fairly progressive political positions and had keen sensitivities to the needs of others. Nevertheless, she experienced deep anxiety about her own feelings of social distance and privilege. Ultimately, however, she worked through these emotions to grapple coherently with issues of class, race, and difference within the context of her fieldwork. In doing so, she was discovering crucial elements of what it means to be a citizen.

Another student worked at the local food pantry and had a transforming interaction there one morning. He reported in class discussion that a young man who shared his birthday (and was also the same age) came in to get food for his girlfriend and their two children. The student, who came from a privileged background, stared in the face of poverty like he had never seen it before. What he described in class to all of us made for a spellbinding listening experience, one that helped to set a context for issues regarding inequality and poverty that helped to frame the entire course. The student later wrote about this experience in his course journal by connecting it to larger analytical issues of poverty policy. What was particularly interesting about this journal entry was how he was able to situate his interaction in the community within the context of broader public policy course themes.

Individual student experience varies among the service opportunities. Some students challenged their own value systems, whereas others had routine involvement with agencies. One young woman working with a women's organization confronted issues of sexual abuse that resonated with her own personal experience. Her journal revealed deep reflection about the assigned readings, especially those that discussed the intersection between gender and poverty. Although her field experience was deeply personal, it was not so qualitatively different from the experiences of many of the other students. Most of them were able to relate their service work to issues of equity, justice, individualism, and community. For almost all of them, it was their first opportunity to frame their community work in a larger context of rigorous intellectual work and group reflection.

Other students encountered firsthand some of the fundamental social barriers to ethnic and racial harmony within the Geneva community. Working with neighborhood improvement groups, they witnessed the underlying racial antagonism that surrounds such issues as providing program services to low-income people, usually Latino or African American. Over time, the depth of racial and class divisions became very real to them, and most students increase their determination to reduce these divisions. The ability of some of these students to grapple with race, class, and social justice con-

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In addition, most students witnessed first hand the pernicious consequences of funding cutbacks in the implementation of social programs such as Head Start. How do social service agencies and not-for-profit organizations cope with funding challenges and uncertainty? What do these cutbacks mean for the operation of the organization and the provision of services on a day-to-day basis? These are important public policy questions that students had an opportunity to engage in light of their fieldwork. They were also required to connect their observations about program funding and fiscal austerity to required course books that addressed HIV/AIDS policy, poverty policy, affirmative action, and economic policymaking. None of this could have been accomplished without the required service/fieldwork component of the course.

At the same time, however, the course has suffered from some of the weaknesses identified by critics of service-learning. For example, some students were reluctant to relate the course reading and discussion materials to politics and the broader issues of democracy and citizenship. There are several possible explanations for their unwillingness to do so. First, it is possible that the faculty facilitator was not tough enough in encouraging the students to make the appropriate connections. Yet it is difficult to be forceful in a course that is rooted in participatory democratic principles. Second, there can be little doubt that most students have been socialized to accept the basic elements of American "democracy" without the questioning or critical self reflection that the course and the notion of critical education for citizenship requires. As a result, we should not be surprised that students are reluctant to engage in this important critical process. Third, as some critics have pointed out, it may well be that there is a flaw in the structure and nature of courses that require service to the extent that they fail to connect service appropriately to issues of democracy, politics, and citizenship, as Harry Boyte has suggested.<sup>11</sup> Some students probably resisted discussing issues of democracy, politics, and citizenship because, in their minds, their service activities had little relevance or connection to these broader issues. In addition, some students may hold antidemocratic or elitist attitudes, views that make them fundamentally hostile to the participatory democratic vision. Finally, a few students were uncomfortable with the service-learning model and the radical critique, one that allowed them to think of politics much more broadly in terms of community organizing, advocacy, and creating progressive social movements.

I am also convinced that one course cannot possibly tackle issues of democracy, citizenship, diversity, and difference with the kind of depth and attention to detail that such important concerns deserve. A central question underlying the course is, how are democracy, citizenship, diversity, difference,

and multiculturalism connected to or disconnected from one another? One cannot just assume that these connections will be readily apparent to all students. Participation in service-learning gives some students an opportunity to confront some of these concerns, but it is in the classroom that the task of making important connections must take place. One semester-long course cannot possibly do justice to the magnitude of the issues raised by service-learning and the literature on democracy, citizenship, and service.

What all this means is that students need to have opportunities to tackle important citizenship issues within the broader context of several different policy courses. To be sure, courses on citizenship are limited to the extent that they do not connect students directly with politics and the policymaking process. But that does not mean that such courses should be abolished. Indeed, we need more courses that allow students to think as public citizens, that link their classroom discussions with concerns in the larger society. At a time when students are socialized to think in highly private ways, they need opportunities to connect to the larger public sphere, where they will spend much of their lives. Faculty should build on the obvious commitment to public service that many students bring with them when they arrive on their campuses. Robert Putnam has pointed out:

Young Americans in the 1990s displayed a commitment to volunteerism without parallel among their immediate predecessors. This development is the most promising sign of any that I have discovered that America might be on the cusp of a new period of civic renewal, especially if this youthful volunteerism persists into adulthood and begins to expand beyond individual caregiving to broader engagement with social and political issues.<sup>12</sup>

This commitment on the part of young people is clearly a source for optimism about the future. Courses in community politics, organizing, public policy, and service-based learning can build on this commitment by addressing the goals associated with the New Citizenship and by engaging students who are alienated from the political system at large. This is not easy work, but it is important and necessary work that lends itself well to education in a liberal arts setting.

## NOTES

1. Harry C. Boyte, "Community Service and Civic Education," *Phi Beta Kappan*, June 1991, 765.
2. Boyte, "Community Service and Civic Education," 766.
3. Nina Eliasoph, *Avoiding Politics: How Americans Produce Apathy in Everyday Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 61.
4. Boyte, "Community Service and Civic Education," 766.