

Transformation and Long Term Community Partnerships

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One of the greatest challenges I constantly experience is how to build longer term relationships between academic institutions and community partners, an issue which I set within a larger framework of how academics can be connected to social justice. I began to think through this challenge during my first teaching job at Virginia Tech where I was one of the founding members of a new service-learning program. While I was glad to be encouraged to incorporate community experiences into my classes, I soon recognized several difficulties which I continue to work with in my somewhat different context working with ministerial and doctoral students at Emory/Candler.

The challenges can generally be traced back to issues of power and context. I'll list a few such challenges:

Different senses of time: Students are shaped by semester calendars and multiple courses—their urgent priorities are not necessarily the same as those of the community partners with whom they work. Also, most of our students will connect with a community for one semester, while the community folks are there for the longterm. I am longterm too, but I still have a freedom to leave the context (linked to the accountability issue below) that puts me a more flexible or transitory position. I got an acute sense of this problem the very first semester I did service-learning when I ended the semester sitting with 3 very upset frat brothers who realized that, as the semester ended, they were abandoning the elderly, sick man they had been visiting at a local old age home.

Different accountabilities: Students are oriented towards course goals (including grades), professors have certain accountabilities to their schools, community organizers and organizational directors are accountable to those with whom they work. I have struggled with this at Candler when some faculty and administrators have insisted that the persons and organizations where we do our first year “community” placements have to follow our school priorities and have no place helping shape our curriculum. And I have struggled even more with how my own scholarship can embody both guild accountability and community accountability.

Different financial situations: I am frequently aware that with my regular salary, I am more privileged than my community partners who often desperately searching for funds to ensure survival for the next months. At Candler, I have far more economic privilege than my students who may be doing this work for my course on top of other work they need to do to pay rent and eat, not to mention keeping up with other coursework.

Different goals and needs: while my students (most of them) and I do want to contribute to the work of the community partner, we also have learning goals that may or may not be important to the partner. For example, in one place I have worked, the director was desperately hoping that my students would help write grants which my students did not consider an experience of ministry (I did.....there was a quite a bit of discussions about this!). Or my students may want to understand something about how poverty works while the folks in the community just want to get through to the next day.

These are just a few of the themes that have been part of my reflection through a variety of forms of school/community engagement. These institutional tensions are lessened when I work with an “established” community partner that has developed a set

of volunteer possibilities into which students can be placed. But those volunteer needs may not coincide exactly with all of my educational goals so I have to figure out how to use those experiences in ways that will enable students to ask critical questions. Also, organizations with well-established volunteer patterns are often not organizations engaged in direct social action so I have to consider trade-offs in terms of the kind of work and learning that is occurring.

What I have realized is that my best hope is to develop some long-term partnerships where there can be dialogue over time between me/my institution and the community partner. First, this way of framing the connection puts me in a more shared framework with my partner who is certainly there for the long term. Second, over time, we gain more knowledge of each other and what we do/who we are so we can begin to plan commitments and programs together that realize multiple goals. Third, this connection can begin to shape the nature of the educational institution so that it recognizes more fully the kinds of accountabilities it could (and should) have to the surrounding community and the connections not only to its mission of service, but also to its missions of teaching and scholarship.

I have two examples of these partnerships, one which I have developed over several years and one that is just emerging. The first is work between Candler and the Metro State Women's Prison in Atlanta. The formal relationship has been an internship placement which has worked well within the volunteer program run by the chaplain. However, over the years, my friendship with this chaplain has developed into two different types of courses I have taught within the prison, a prison ministries committee and a major prison ministry conference sponsored by Candler which attracted over 300 persons. I am working with the committee and with Candler's director of contextual education to offer courses that could include both the women in prison and our students (something that Vanderbilt Divinity School does) and to expand support of educational opportunities in the Georgia prison system. And I am trying to develop some critical scholarship through supervision of dissertations on the NYTS master's program at Sing Sing and the use of restorative justice conferencing with young persons in Colorado, along with developing my own book on Christian ethics and prisons.

The second partnership is just emerging as our new religion, conflict and peacebuilding initiative at Emory is participating in a coalition to support the Liberian Truth and Reconciliation Commission's efforts to gather statement from Liberians now resident in the Atlanta area. Our coalition includes representatives from Atlanta schools, the Carter Center, the MLK Center, refugee groups, and law firms. Why I call this a longterm partnership is that several of us involved envision the work done in supporting the Liberian TRC could build expertise and relationships that could support a future TRC on slavery and segregation in Atlanta. In this work, I am challenged to think very carefully about just what universities can offer, from funds to expertise. And, again, I am challenged to consider what is responsible scholarship in Christian ethics in relation to this work.....what kind of expertise does the study of theology or of religion offer in contrast to sociology, law, public health, etc.?