

A Reflection on Service Learning, Public Leadership, and Social Change

Gwendolyn Coiley
Mount Holyoke College

During my four years at Mount Holyoke College, the Community-Based Learning Program (CBL) has given me the unique opportunity to connect with different communities in the area around my college campus known as the Pioneer Valley. These experiences have had a profound impact on the way that I see myself in the world, my academic and personal interests, and my goals for the future. Doing meaningful work in the community and reflecting on what it means to provide service has made me much more aware, critical, and interested in the social challenges our society faces today. My desire to make a positive and lasting impact in people's lives has grown significantly during my time at Mt. Holyoke, much of this growth taking place in CBL classes and Fellowships. I have learned about privilege, poverty, racism, elitism, and many other societal and structural inequalities that are and will continue to be my driving force in advocating for those who are disadvantaged by the intersecting systems of oppression.

I first became interested in this program as a freshman when I took the introductory CBL course *Engaging the Pioneer Valley*. The next semester I took *Educational Psychology* and had CBL placement weekly at a nearby after-school program in Holyoke, Mass. I continued volunteering at the after-school program my sophomore year and applied to become a CBL Fellow as my work-study position for my junior year. For one semester, before going abroad, I worked with another after-school program in Holyoke called *Girls, Inc.*, geared toward empowering young women. When I returned from my semester abroad, I applied once again for a CBL Fellowship and began working in a different after-school program, this time at the local middle school in South Hadley, just down the street from our campus. I am now in the second year of this Fellowship and I have successfully collaborated with Mount Holyoke faculty and students, a Connecticut-based organization that leads diversity workshops with middle school-aged students, and the local middle school to create a program called *Mount Holyoke Allies in Mentoring*.

The idea of the CBL Fellowship program is to connect Mt. Holyoke students with community partners and to apply academic learning to meaningful social challenges. Fellows receive federal funding through work-study and can work on a variety of projects that are usually prompted by the student's desire to work with a specific community or on a specific social issue. Over the past few years, my Fellowships and volunteer opportunities have allowed me to strengthen my leadership skills, build a foundation for a successful partnership, and gain a better understanding of my role as a Mount Holyoke student and future alumna, an agent of social change, and an active community member.

Part of being a Community Fellow is the mandatory course *Integrating Learning, Service, and Social Action*. In this course, I was able to explore critical questions about how to be an agent of social change and how this relates to campus-community partnerships. Through readings and class discussions, we brought to the table the difficulties and important lessons of being involved with non-profit work, especially coming from an elite institution. We examined our own backgrounds, assumptions, and assets and also evaluated the assets of our community partners to try and make sense of our roles as Fellows and how we could make the partnership worthwhile for both sides.

The partnerships that we are building in these communities take time, dedication, and strong communication skills. I have learned that our jobs are not as much about changing the immediate situation, but rather creating a lasting relationship between our institution and community partners that over time will create positive change. This was a challenge for me at first because I wanted to see more results and feel that my time and energy put into starting a mentoring program was beneficial for all involved. Our presence at the middle school is very appreciated and now that the teachers know and trust Mt. Holyoke students to show up regularly and participate in their activities, we are beginning to have a more integral role in the after-school program. My hope is that next semester Mt. Holyoke students can effectively collaborate with the middle school staff to lead their own after-school program at the middle school to lighten the load on the after-school teachers, build leadership skills, and create meaningful relationships as mentors for the middle school students.

We participate in the after-school club Homework Club, where we help students struggling with their school assignments. I see how many of the students of color don't believe they can do well in school and give up on themselves. I have also seen how some teachers reinforce this by giving up on the success of those students and focusing on their "problems" rather than their potential. Although teachers should know better than to discourage students who already have low self-efficacy in school, I place less blame on the teachers and more blame on the society that breeds racist attitudes and holds back students of color.

In my various experiences interning and volunteering in public school classrooms and after-school programs, I have seen first hand the lack of resources and the way the system sets certain groups of students up for failure from the start. With an education system that has many deep-rooted problems and is part of the larger machine that promulgates racism and inequality in this country, I have made the choice not only to work as a public school teacher but to also be part of a larger movement of social change and social justice. As homework for our class, we listened to a recording of a talk given by anti-racism activist and writer Tim Wise. Wise states that the problem of inequality comes from the top, in the culture of affluence that somehow makes people feel entitled to such privilege. Wise also says that in order to create change we must recognize that the history of people of color is a history of displacement and marginalization. Thus, failing schools in communities of color is no coincidence. The lack of resources and insufficient curriculum in these communities demonstrate a system that not only creates economic inequality but also solidifies internalized racism as marginalized groups come to believe they are inherently inferior.

More than just highlighting the deep-rooted inequality in our society, Wise's talk is also very inspiring and productive in that he breaks down what a relationship that prioritizes and fosters solidarity looks like. Instead of a charity relationship, which assumes that the giver has the expertise, solidarity means recognizing that the community members know what's best for their own good and are an asset to building the agenda of a project. He describes solidarity as a multi-directional force that recognizes the strengths and resources of all parties. Out of this approach, communities can realize their power to solve problems and not have to rely on outsiders for support. Through advocacy and policy change, key issues are addressed. In contrast, a charity-driven approach would not fix the base of the problem itself but try to remedy the problems stemming from it.

Although I grew up in a rural, island community where many parents, including my own, are critical of the public education system, I was only vaguely aware of the prevalence of inequality within our society and the way it is reflected and reinforced by our schools. It is only

now that I live outside of the isolated bubble where I grew up that I can see just how unique and privileged my childhood and adolescence was. I was constantly supported, rewarded, creatively engaged, and unconsciously drenched in white privilege and cultural capital. There was no question about whether or not I could go to college, especially with grants and loans that landed me in an elite institution. We did the college visits, my mom helped me through each step of the way, and I had no problem adjusting to college life. Now I know just how much privilege it takes to make it through that whole process, though for years it never dawned on me because growing up I not only had a supportive family but was also institutionally conditioned to succeed.

Recognizing my white privilege, cultural capital, and inevitably western view of the world, I feel that I am constantly re-evaluating what it means to do service work within the United States and abroad. I am careful not to impose superiority, be perceived that I am in any place to offer great expertise, or feel like a hero for “saving” anyone from a situation that is purely a result of broken systems that brew inequality. Working with youth of all ages, socio-economic, and ethnic backgrounds has given me a lens from which I hope to launch as a teacher, mentor, learner, community member, and advocate for comprehensive change within the public school system. The common idea of public service is as a weekend activity or a one-time charity project, but I fail to accept this as a model as it is often a temporary solution to a much bigger problem.

Instead, to me public service is a multi-directional, multi-faceted, and ongoing process of learning and understanding. It is a way to build coalitions and advocacy within communities. I want to learn from the people who actually face such challenges as being a minority, living in poverty, being seen as culturally and linguistically deficient as compared to the dominant white culture, and so on. I do not believe I will be able to affect any change without their guidance, insight, collaboration, and solidarity. Keith Morton (1995) discusses the “service continuum” in his article “The Irony of Service: Charity, Project and Social Change in Service Learning.” He puts forward that “most commonly, a service continuum is presented from charity to advocacy, from the personal to the political, from individual acts of caring that transcend time and space to collective action on mutual concerns that are grounded in particular places and histories” (20).

Thus, in order for service to make lasting change, the initiative for a project has to come from within the community itself because the people who are living the reality of injustice are the ones who will know best how to address the issue and will be the most motivated to see real change. It is easy enough for an outside individual or group providing “service” to an underprivileged community to come, provide temporary assistance, and leave with a good conscience because they believe they have made a difference. However, this method of service is not sustainable because it is not community-led. Instead, lasting change comes from collaborating with community-led and community-based organizations. Although I am an outsider in marginalized communities, I want to be a long-term ally and advocate, not a short-term charity provider.

I believe in the power of education and the school as a site of social change. I think that schools and community organizations need to work together to address concerns voiced in the community. To be able to organize for change, I want to learn how to be an effective community organizer. For this reason, I interned last summer with the Statewide Poverty Action Network in Seattle. This non-profit, anti-poverty organization works to eliminate the root causes of racism and poverty by involving low-income people and people of color in advocacy efforts at the state and local levels. Through this experience, I gained confidence as a community organizer and learned about the importance of real stories told about and from people living in poverty in

affecting policy change that combats racism and poverty. Throughout my life, I want to continue to develop skills as a public leader, both as a teacher and as a community organizer, so that I can affect change on a community level and also on a larger scale.

Working with the Community-Based Learning program, I have learned to look deeper into my own beliefs and actions. It is important that we discuss these issues and continue developing meaningful partnerships. I think that as Mt. Holyoke students and alumni who call ourselves leaders, we need to evaluate what that means to us on a personal level and as an institution. To me, being a public leader means not shying away from the societal problems I see, reaching out to other people I consider leaders in public service, making connections in the community, and collectively making a change.

Within the education system, more public leaders are needed to speak out and organize to create a better system that gives equal opportunity for all students to succeed rather than just catering to the dominant culture's values and interests. As a graduating senior, I want to keep building on my leadership and communication skills to become an effective teacher, advocate, community member, ally, and agent of social change. On a community level as well as on statewide and national levels, I want to build coalitions that start at the grassroots organizing level to bring about justice in our education system. Together, we can hold a beacon for social change.

~

I would like to express my utmost gratitude to Alan Bloomgarden, coordinator of the Community-Based Learning program at Mount Holyoke, for all of his mentorship and encouragement that has helped me to act meaningfully and reflect deeply.

References

- Morton, Keith. 1995. "The Irony of Service: Charity, Project, and Social Change in Service Learning." *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning* 2 (1): 19-32.
- Wise, Tim. 2008. "Charity vs. Solidarity." Speech given in Milwaukee. Mp3.