

Supporting Embedded Public Workers: Avoiding the Discrepancy between Public Representations and Educational Realities

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Over the course of the last few decades, there has been a powerful movement among colleges and universities that advocates for the commitment to positive civic engagement with local and global communities. From helping students comprehend how their majors can be used to improve society, to creating an educated and civic-minded electorate, the benefits of integrating public service into higher education are unquantifiable (Butin and Saud 2013, 89-90). Also, in ideal situations, local and global communities are receiving an immense amount of support from students. Thus, most institutions of higher education have been supportive of this movement, recognizing that their faculty and students can play a critical role in social change. For example, various service-learning curriculums have been developed and implemented by faculty members around the country, and they have now incorporated service work into a variety of disciplines. Some other initiatives include the development of university centers fully devoted to establishing partnerships between students and local community organizations (Center for Civic Engagement and Public Service 2015). Among other methods, this is one way universities have focused on encouraging students to perform volunteer work. However, while many universities have successfully inspired students to take on a civically engaged role in their communities, some universities have not been able to fully adapt to the movement of civic engagement. The reason for this short-coming is that despite their accomplishments in committing students to public service, some of these universities, as entire institutions, have failed to recognize, understand, and embrace core engagement principles.

One of such universities is The George Washington University (GW). On the floor of GW's athletic arena, the Charles E. Smith center, sits a new court design depicting Washington, DC's most famous monuments (the White House, the Washington Monument, etc.). Director of Athletics and Recreation, Patrick Nero, commented that they want people around the world to "immediately recognize and understand the university's unique setting in the middle of the action in this world-class city" (George Washington University 2015a). Basically, the design is there to remind visiting teams, television viewers, and prospective students alike that GW has a "monumental home court advantage" (pun intended). The university takes pride in its ability to help students build connections with the myriad of government agencies, non-profit organizations, and community organizations who find their headquarters in the nation's capital. Thus, the hope is that GW's "monumental home court advantage" serves not only GW's men and women basketball teams, but also students hoping to enter the spheres of politics and public work. At GW, these students are supported by the university's Center for Civic Engagement and Public Service (CCEPS)¹. CCEPS was created in an effort to "integrate civic engagement into George Washington University's educational work, meet community needs beyond the campus, promote active citizenship in a diverse democracy, and enhance teaching, learning and scholarship at GW" (Center for Civic Engagement and Public Service 2015). Hence, through

¹ In Fall 2015, The George Washington University's Center for Civic Engagement and Public Service changed its name to The Honey W. Nashman Center for Civic Engagement and Public Service.

CCEPS, GW has successfully provided a place where students are given the opportunity to partner with local organizations and engage in service. GW boasts about this success on its main website in a section titled “Serving Communities in Need,” citing that “the Princeton Review counts GW among the nation’s top socially aware schools in ‘Colleges with a Conscience: 81 Great Schools with Outstanding Community Involvement’” (George Washington University 2015b).

However, despite those figures, and despite CCEPS’ work, there remains a tremendous fault in GW’s civic engagement, and that is that GW, as an entire institution, does not recognize, understand, and embrace core engagement principles. This is problematic because to value core engagement principles is to engage with communities in a way that provides actual sustainable benefits to both students and community partners. Various educators and service-learning scholars have outlined these core engagement principles, their importance, and ways to follow them. The principles play themselves out in two arenas. First, how do students *act* before, during, and after their service? For example, do they build relationships with their partners in a way where both parties learn and grow from the relationship? In other words, are they exercising *reciprocity*? In “Preparing for Outreach: Respect and Reciprocity,” scholar Thomas Deans (2003) illustrates this concept by discussing the difference between “horizontal” and “vertical” relationships (254). Horizontal relationships are relationships in which students are *partnering* with community members and *working with* them to find a solution. The opposite is “vertical relationships in which servers give from the top and recipients accept from below” (Deans 2003, 254). Next, how do students *communicate* with others during and about their service? Are they mindful about the words they use to communicate with their community partners? For example, do they talk to them in ways that still encourage them to have a sense of agency? Do students pay close attention to their rhetoric when writing/speaking about their service? For example, are they saying they *partner* with people (demonstrating a side-by-side relationship), or are they saying that they *help* people (in a top-down relationship)? The risks of engaging in service without a fundamental understanding of core engagement principles like *mutuality* and *reciprocity* are tremendous. Under ideal conditions, a student who recognizes, understands, and embraces core engagement principles can go on to become an embedded public worker once he/she joins the public sector. This worker knows how to engage with members of the community in a respectful, collaborative, and sustainable fashion. Standing in sharp contrast is the professionalized public worker. Presumably, with no fundamental understanding of core engagement principles, a professional public worker has very little capacity to engage with his/her community in a positive and constructive manner.

Moreover, GW’s CCEPS does a magnificent job supporting embedded public workers by serving as an educational access point for communities in DC to seek partnerships with GW students and faculty. Through a variety of civic engagement programs, CCEPS says it wishes to “develop strong reciprocal, respectful, active democratic community partnerships” and to “ensure that projects have demonstrable outcome for community” (Center for Civic Engagement and Public Service 2015). The desire to have “reciprocal” and “respectful” community partnerships certainly reflects the fact that CCEPS wants GW students to give value to core engagement principles. CCEPS’ executive director, Amy Cohen, speaks about this mission in a *GW Today* article by raising a critical question: “[Is] service primarily about the development of a student or about the community’s development? We’re an educational institution, so it may be about the student, but we’re not doing our job as an educational institution if our volunteers are not going out and doing the absolute best work they can for the community... then we are not

teaching... it's a reciprocal relationship" (Irwin 2014). Cohen's reflection should suggest that, thanks both to CCEPS and to its "monumental home court advantage," GW is capable of supporting exceptionally embedded public workers.

However, GW still suffers from an inability to fully accomplish this goal. To understand why, we will focus on one of the center's signature programs, "Alternative Breaks." The program consists of student-led volunteer trips during either winter or spring break for the purpose of performing service work at a predetermined partner site. In the 2015 trips alone, over 400 students and faculty participated in the program. Alternative Breaks' mission is "to empower students, staff and faculty to understand their role in local and global communities through service-learning trips across many issue areas. Our goal is to foster personal reflection, social awareness and active citizenship among the GW community" (GW Alternative Breaks Program 2014). Thus, the program essentially claims to teach its participants how to understand that their role in local and global communities should be *mutual* and *reciprocal*, among other basic engagement values. Assuming that these goals are achieved through completion of the program, then it is not the program that lacks the ability to support potential embedded public workers. Thus, we will use a textual analysis of the communications issued by GW for Alternative Breaks in an effort to discover the source of the lack of support.

Method

Scholars Christy Kayser Arrazattee, Marybeth Lima, and Lisa Lundy went on a similar quest to trace out such a discrepancy in the article "Do University Communications About Campus-Community Partnerships Reflect Core Engagement Principles?" (2013). This study compared "institutional rhetoric" with "actual performance in civic engagement initiatives" in universities that had previously received honors for their community action. However, looking through website content for each of these universities, they discovered a discrepancy between the methods of communication used by these universities and core engagement principles. The authors worried that this discrepancy could be an indicator of a fault in the education given to students hoping to engage in public service. They write that "if analysis [reveals] a lack of reciprocity and community partner valuing indicators in communications, it would be revealing as to the growth needed in this area by even the most exemplary community-engaged universities," (44) a title which GW believes it holds. In other words, if the analysis of GW's communications shows that GW's presentation of a program that aims to support future embedded public workers doesn't reflect core engagement principles, it could speak volumes about the emphasis GW places on making core engagement principles a part of the civic engagement curriculum. It could also suggest that relying on its location to provide its students with the experience to support their local and global communities is ill fated.

This analysis will almost completely mirror the framework established by Arrazattee, Lima, and Lundy. For one, website content will be used to analyze GW's communications. Nine testimonials by Alternative Breaks' participants in 2014 were published on "Making History: The Campaign for GW," GW's website for its one billion dollar philanthropic campaign. As a website hoping to encourage donations to GW, it is expected that the language of the website will be aimed at presenting GW and its students in an exemplary light. It should (logically) want to show that GW students have a deep understanding of core engagement principles as they practice civic engagement. Thus, these testimonials were analyzed for indicators of three different core engagement standards: (1) evidence of *mutuality and reciprocity*, (2) *evidence of a*

“*transformational relationship*” (Morton and Enos, as cited in Arrazattee, Lima, and Lundy 2013, 43), and (3) “*evidence of collaborative language*” (Arrazattee, Lima, and Lundy 2013, 43-45).

For a testimonial to contain indicators of (1) *mutuality and reciprocity*, it needed to describe how both the student and the partner site were benefitting from the relationship. To contain evidence of (2) a “*transformational relationship*,” it needed to fit the criteria outlined by Morton and Enos in “Developing a theory and practice of campus-community partnerships” (2003). Here, Morton and Enos described a “transformational relationship” as one where both partners see evolution, both partners repeatedly assess their own identities and vision, and both work together to facilitate the partnership. These were conceptualized into three terms: *closeness*, *equity*, and *integrity*. *Closeness* requires a representation of “diverse projects or project evolution, *equity* is represented by descriptions of collaborative decision-making or interdependency, and *integrity* is indicated by description of a shared vision” (Arrazattee, Lima, and Lundy 2013, 43). Lastly, (3) “*evidence of collaborative language*” required no use of the word “helping,” making it the most difficult qualification to achieve.

Results

Testimonial	Evidence of mutuality & reciprocity	"Transformational Relationships"			"Evidence of collaborative language"
		Closeness	Equity	Integrity	
Appalachia	No	No	No	No	N/a
Cherokee	No	No	No	No	N/a
Detroit	No	No	No	No	No
Ecuador	No	No	No	No	N/a
Guatemala	No	No	No	No	N/a
Joplin	No	No	No	No	N/a
Los Angeles	No	No	No	No	N/a
New Orleans	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
NYC	Yes	No	No	No	N/a

Available from: <http://giving.gwu.edu/alternative-spring-break-2014>

(1) Evidence of Mutuality and Reciprocity

As previously mentioned, a campus and a community are not truly engaged with one another unless the relationship is *reciprocal* and *mutual*. They are not “sustainable, successful, [or] ethical” if they do not meet this basic engagement criteria (Arrazattee, Lima, and Lundy 2013). The investigation suggested that no testimonial provided by GW showed any proof that the students were introduced to any such engagement principle. The testimonial for the trip to Appalachia is an example of a non-reciprocal relationship.

Alt Breaks has been the cornerstone of my GW experience. I have gone on an Alternative Break every spring since arriving at GW, and every spring I return to campus energized by the experience. The Alternative Breaks Program has taught me how to be a leader, how to be flexible and how to reflect on my actions in order to deepen the experience of serving. I can say without reservation that without the Alternative Breaks Program I would not be the person I am today. It is by far my favorite part of this university and the organization I am most proud of being involved with. (George Washington University 2014)

In this testimonial, the student's focus is primarily about what he/she learned from the experience, with no focus on how he/she served the community in Appalachia. However it is important to keep in mind that if the student was asked, "What did you learn from the experience?" instead of "In what ways were you able to both give and receive?" the answers are expected to be different. In either case, this shows that the person responsible for portraying Alternative Breaks in a positive light is not aware of the importance of reflecting positive community-campus relationships.

On the other hand, only the testimonial for New York City showed signs of a positive relationship between the students and the community members.

Leaders of the organizations we were working with consistently commented that we are among the best volunteers they have and that GW groups are thoughtful, open-minded, and genuine. They said that the effect we have on clients is more than we can imagine and that many clients will remember the week for the rest of their lives. Throughout the week, we grappled with the idea of "service" (discovery and learning of gender, sexuality, the cycle of homelessness, social services, socioeconomic issues, and self are more obvious components of the trip). These comments laid to rest any concerns I/we had. (George Washington University 2014)

This participant makes a reference to *mutual* and *reciprocal* growth as a result of the relationship. The participant mentions how both sides are impacted by the experience. The participant also makes it a point to mention how her team worked on reflecting on its action, which is also pivotal when performing service work.

(2) Indication of a "Transformational Relationship"

The "transformational relationships" for which Morton and Enos (2003) advocate is unarguably not present during any of these testimonials. There was little to no reference of the project's development itself (*closeness*), there was absolutely no sign of interdependency (*equity*) between the students and the community members, and no regard for discussing the vision of the program (*integrity*) within these testimonials. The only testimonial that displayed *closeness* was the one for the trip to New Orleans where the student mentions how quickly the project was progressing.

Thursday brought extreme change to the work site. People walking by at 5 p.m. would have thought they'd been teleported to a different lot from the barren structure at the start of the day. It is an inspiring act to bear witness to how a couple of floor planks and some studs can transform walls, windows, and roof trusses over the span of 36 hours. (George Washington University 2014)

This reference to the project's development demonstrates a conscious effort to ensure that tangible impact is taking place at the site. Given that the service trips are only about a week long, it's important to see that the volunteers and the site leaders are focused on the progression of the project.

(3) “Evidence of Collaborative Language”

For most of the testimonials, looking for collaborative language (partner, working with, etc.) was not possible. These are the testimonials where “N/A” is shown under this category. At the same time, if they were asked to mention these things, it is on the student to respond with sensitivity to core engagement principles. Using the same standards outlined by Arrazattee, Lima, and Lundy (2013), if the testimonials included the word “help” or any version of it, the testimonial automatically received a “no” in the “evidence of collaborative language” category. This is the case for the Detroit and New Orleans testimonials classified as “no,” or not having collaborative language.

During the week, we worked with AmeriCorps Urban Safety Project. We had a blast helping them, and even though we got very tired and sore from shoveling snow all three days working with this service site, I personally learned how to use a table saw and a drill and how to board up houses, etc. It was amazing and I didn’t know I liked the physical aspect of service work so much (I thought I liked working with people more). It was great to see my participants encourage each other with the work and work together, helping each other cut the boards and board up the houses. (George Washington University 2014)

Despite originally using the word “worked” to present the relationship between the partner site and the students, the participant then used the word “helped.” Under Arrazattee, Lima, and Lundy’s standards, this means there was no regard for collaborative language. In addition, you can see here how the student transitions from being focused on “helping them” (the community partners), to “helping each other,” possibly implying that the community partner has faded into the back of her mind.

While the results could suggest that the program fails in its mission to educate its participants on the value of core engagement principles, it could also point a finger at GW’s public communications, and the fact that it does not properly portray the efforts of faculty and students to reflect the principles in their work. The answers given by the students could have been influenced by the soliciting and selection process on the part of GW’s team responsible for putting together the testimonials for the website. Perhaps the way students were prompted to share a part of their experience did not leave room for them to show *reciprocity* or *mutuality*. For example, the students could have wanted to discuss their partnerships, but they weren’t asked a question that allowed them to do so. If no context is given for collaborative language to be used, it is not the student’s (or CCEPS’) fault.

The Implications

As a large university, it is almost impossible to ensure that every department, office, faculty member, and staff worker adopt core engagement principles. The tension arises almost always between professors and service-learning scholars who want to be mindful to these principles, and public communication offices whose main role is to focus on increasing enrollment or fundraising. Dangerously, the embedded-public-worker-to-be is left in the middle of these two camps. In Dan W. Butin and Daniyal Saud’s (2013) review essay, “Pushing Back the Rhetoric: A Review of What Community Engagement Can Do,” they criticize the University

of Pennsylvania for claiming to have a partnership with its community, when in fact the university is the only one to gain from the relationship in the form of real estate. UPenn should not be calling this type of relationship a partnership, but perhaps the office responsible for the portrayal of this partnership is not aware of core engagement principles, and therefore not aware that it is presenting a false belief. Butin and Saud seem to imply this when they say that “there is a fundamental dilemma at the heart of the civic engagement enterprise within higher education... that for all of our good will and good acts, we must always be wary of being co-opted in an enterprise not of our making, our choosing, or our intentions” (91). In other words, while certain professors, faculty members, and students in a university may be attempting to perform civic work that is modeled after basic engagement principles, their efforts may be obscured by the university’s inability to portray this in its public communications. The embedded-public-worker-to-be is “co-opted” by the university’s larger power into a person that is not of his/her “making,” “choosing,” or “intention”: the professional public worker (91).

In addition, the lack of proper representation of core engagement principles in GW’s communications can raise the troubling question of whether or not this means that GW as a whole isn’t educating its students about them. This may suggest that GW’s “monumental home court advantage” is neither monumental nor an advantage. Students are left gasping for air in an ocean of bad public representation that drowns out their opportunity to learn what it means to become an embedded public worker.

We must also consider the implications for community partners. Arrazattee, Lima, and Lundy (2013) argue that universities that do not properly represent their campus–community relationships may “alienate community partners serving an important role in the educational process, can perpetuate the idea of ‘helpless’ communities needing assistance from the outside to be successful, and can reinforce the very notions that engagement activities such as service-learning aim to dispel” (41). If GW continues to ignore the community partners that Alternative Breaks works with in its communications, these partners may not want to be a part of the program anymore. In this case, not only would community members stop receiving support from GW students, but also GW students would be robbed of this educational experience. For the partners that host participants overseas, it can be damaging to feel a loss of agency and a dependency on help from the outside. Thus, it would undermine all of the efforts by service-learning scholars to educate students on how to appropriately engage with their surrounding communities.

Conclusion

Universities need to be held accountable for their inability to accurately portray service work because “the ways in which universities speak about the work of campus-community engagement can convey the reciprocal nature of partnerships and whether intentionally or not, indicate how the university views its relationships with the community” and just as importantly, with its students (Arrazattee, Lima, and Lundy 2013, 48). Notwithstanding the fact that this is dangerous for the university as it continues seeking community partners, it may also indicate that the university is not focusing on its prime role: educating its students in a way that truly enables them to be a positive input to society. Hence, universities need to undergo a top-down reformation through which all members of the university are taught to respect core engagement principles, and therefore act less like a business and more like a respectable institution of higher

education. This will then allow students to grow in an environment where becoming an embedded public worker really is possible.

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