

The ABCDs of Service-Learning: Who Is Serving Whom?

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Abstract

The concept of and approach to service-learning across higher education has changed dramatically over the last two and a half decades. Historically, one of the primary goals of service-learning was to prepare undergraduate students to become engaged citizens and to introduce them to the challenges experienced by individuals from marginalized or disenfranchised communities (Dunlap, 1998; Shaddock-Hernandez, 2005). Now, 25 years after the implementation of the National and Community Service Act of 1990, many universities are shifting this focus to include meeting community needs, accomplishing graduate and undergraduate student learning outcomes, and establishing reciprocity of respect.

Introduction

John Kretzmann and John McKnight (1993) developed the asset-based community development (ABCD) model and, in 1995, founded the Asset-Based Community Development Institute. The ABCD model altered the focus from highlighting only the needs and/or deficiencies of neighborhoods to, instead, bringing forth a community's assets—the key building blocks for achieving sustainable urban and rural community revitalization. Today, an increasing number of higher education service-learning programs have adopted this approach in ways that reflect the influence of swiftly changing demographics of college enrollment.

From 1990 to 2012, the percentage of Hispanic/Latino students attending college has increased by 58%. In the same period, African American student enrollment increased by 30%, and White student enrollment increased by 16% (*National Center for Education Statistics, 2013, Table 306.20*). Though Hispanics/Latinos constituted less than one quarter of all 18-to-24-year-old students enrolled nationally, their percentages are growing steadily while the percentage of White students within the same age demographic is declining (*Krogstad & Fry, 2014*). Additionally, approximately two fifths of first-generation students in colleges or universities are from under-represented populations (*Strand, 2013*). Higher education student populations are predicted to continue becoming even more diverse, ethnically and socioeconomically. In light of these shifting demo-

graphics, a critical question then emerges when examining the traditional service-learning model: Who is serving whom?

As student population demographics indicate, current service-learning initiatives (e.g., community engagement, civic engagement, or community-based learning) occur within the very neighborhoods where our students were raised. These ever-changing communities may include multiple ethnicities, socioeconomic strata, cultures, nationalities, religions, and languages. These students attending college and participating in service-learning initiatives may not view their home communities as “broken” or as having deficits; instead, they see the richness, beauty, and assets related to their families, friends, schools, hospitals, and places of worship. For diverse college campuses, the traditional approach to service-learning is inadequate because it is designed to separate those being served from those serving. Today, we have students who cannot relate to that divide because more often than not, the communities being served are their own home towns. It is becoming apparent that in order to create healthy, realistic, and sustainable service-learning experiences, the traditional approach to service-learning must change.

Community Engagement Through Partnership With the University of La Verne: Asking and Answering the Question “Who is Serving Whom?”

The University of La Verne was founded in 1891 and is located in the city of La Verne, California, 35 miles east of Los Angeles. The university is classified as a Carnegie doctoral/comprehensive institution and enrolls approximately 8,700 students across four colleges (business, education, arts and sciences, and law) at its central campus in the city of La Verne and at 10 regional sites throughout Central and Southern California. These four colleges offer graduate and undergraduate degrees in the liberal arts, education, business, family therapy, and public administration as well as doctoral programs in psychology, law, and public administration.

Since the university’s founding 123 years ago, the population of the neighboring inland Southern California region has become increasingly Hispanic. La Verne’s enrollment has reflected this shift, and Latino students currently comprise more than 40% of the student population. As a result, the U.S. Department of Education designated the University of La Verne a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI).

Additionally, more than 50% of La Verne's traditional undergraduate students (i.e., those 18–22 years old) are the first in their families to attend college, which is a far greater percentage of first-generation undergraduate students than the national average. In many ways, the evolving demographics of La Verne's student body reflect the changes occurring not just in Southern California and the southwestern United States but at urban and metropolitan universities throughout the country.

The University of La Verne is committed to offering educational experiences that ensure students graduate and continue as contributing citizens. The university realizes that the traditional model of students serving the community is not necessarily the one most appropriate for its students or its community partners. It has been more productive for faculty, staff, and students to engage the community in a discussion about the positive elements of the community rather than what is missing from it.

For that reason, the university has moved from the traditional service-learning model to strategically implementing place-based partnerships between the institution and its communities. The university's work during the last few years with the nearby city of Pomona is a poignant example. If we were to focus only on deficits related to city data, we would see that Pomona's violent crime rate is about 45% higher than the state average, the high school dropout rate was 16.5% in 2012, and nearly one third of its residents live below the federal poverty level. Instead, both the university and Pomona city leaders are systematically identifying Pomona's assets. These include, but are not limited to, its committed school district superintendent and administration; its willing community leaders who organize and hold monthly meetings to focus on city issues and partnerships; and the support of significant local organizations such as The Fairplex, home of the world's largest county fair with an annual economic impact of \$300 million.

These assets help create partnerships across government agencies, civic organizations, and other educational institutions, and generate opportunities for positive impact. Initiating community engagement used to be a siloed effort; La Verne now seeks long-term and mutually beneficial partnerships. An example of employing the ABCD model began when the university signed an agreement with the Pomona Unified School District (PUSD) to use federal work-study dollars to enhance the district's after-school tutoring program, the Learning Connection. The relationship is simple: Our students tutor theirs, and La Verne provides 75% of the funding for the tutors via work-study dollars.

La Verne's partnership with PUSD positions university students as partners in learning, while at the same time giving underserved elementary and middle school students the chance to have one-on-one tutoring with college students to whom they can relate more easily, perhaps, than to adults. Additionally, many of these tutors were raised in communities like Pomona and have pride in and an understanding of these communities. Through this process, not only will PUSD students improve their Common Core skills, they will also develop relationships with young role models with similar backgrounds. A sense of empowerment is generated on both ends, and aspirations for PUSD students to attend college are expected to increase dramatically.

The university and our students are adding value to assets PUSD already possessed rather than "fixing" something perceived as "broken." Such connections are powerful. The ABCD model does more than simply build bridges; it changes the lens of how we view service-learning. The communities become intellectual spaces and coeducators of La Verne students. This model allows the university to then proudly say, "You and your communities have something powerful to contribute; how can we be a part of that?"

Teresa's Story

The changing demographics of La Verne's enrollment suggest that a significant percentage of students will be returning to their neighborhoods to participate in community engagement activities. This creates an especially difficult set of psychological and sociological challenges for students if not handled in a culturally sensitive manner.

Teresa Marin, an alumna of the University of La Verne and a first-generation college student, remembers how just 15 years ago, her neighborhood in Compton, California, was negatively perceived in conversations with some of her peers. "I never thought about Compton as a bad place to live until someone in my class made a negative comment about Compton. I was surprised. I am proud of where I am from—my family lives there, my parents—it is our home." When asked how she would feel about her hometown being selected for a service-learning project, she added, "I would wonder what they were trying to fix . . . and probably feel as if there were other cities in more need."

These outmoded perceptions of "communities with only deficits" need to be countered with new narratives that celebrate the dignity and strengths of the communities with which our students

are engaged. As educators, we must encourage one another to see past our own preconceived notions or biases about the cities “on the other side of the tracks” and act as examples to our campus communities by demonstrating that we believe if we look for assets in any community, we will find them. If we only offer community engagement projects that “fix or mend broken neighborhoods,” we are failing millions of students like Teresa. If, in the classroom or in conversation, we flinch at the name of a particular city or make a negative comment about it and disconnect the student from us in that moment, we are not just failing them, but also ourselves as leaders in higher education. By implementing the ABCD model in our community engagement work and strengthening the mutually beneficial relationships between institution and community partner, we instill a sense of pride and respect in both university students and neighborhoods.

Tangible Evidence of Commitment to Community Engagement

Although “service to the community” is explicitly stated in our university mission and our 2020 Strategic Vision, responsibility for implementation had been diffused throughout the university. In order to be more intentional, we created a full-time position: director of civic and community engagement. This position facilitates the effort to further an institution-wide understanding of and commitment to the community engagement model that embraces our diverse student body and our diverse surrounding communities. The overarching vision for the institution and the Office of Civic and Community Engagement (OCCE) is to embody reciprocity through transformative community-based academic and cocurricular experiences by grounding our work in the ABCD model. This means not only further developing our understanding of community engagement, our philosophy, and our practice, but also creating the infrastructure to support its sustainability and its intentionality.

For our university, this means finding the balance of highlighting the work that faculty, staff, and students have been doing for decades while also creating a structure for support, development, and promotion. With community partners, this means communicating our philosophy of engagement and creating both the direct and indirect means for community partners to be coeducators of our students. We are internally focused on stressing and emphasizing the “primacy of local definition, investment, cre-

ativity, hope, and control” (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993, p. 6), as exemplified in our partnership with the City of Pomona.

Mutually Beneficial ABCD Civic and Community Engagement

Each of the following examples employs the ABCD model and answers the question “Who is serving whom?”

The La Verne Experience. In fall 2012, the university initiated the La Verne Experience (LVE) to provide all students—undergraduate, graduate, and nontraditional alike—with shared experiences that are unique to this institution. The LVE, threaded through all academic disciplines and programs, is anchored by four pillars: learning communities connecting courses from different disciplines, integrated learning, community engagement and experiential learning, and reflective practice. The community engagement elements of the LVE increase in depth and breadth as students progress toward graduation. Throughout their academic journeys and civic engagement experiences, the ABCD model is woven into every aspect of the service-learning projects they do. This connection to a community partner is relationship building at its best: Each student begins to identify a community partner’s assets as a freshman and builds upon those assets in their sophomore, junior, and senior years. Additionally, students reflect on their community engagement experiences in their ePortfolios and draw meaning from them as seniors when they write their capstone autobiographical essay, “My La Verne Experience.”

Community and Civic Engagement Day. The introduction of the La Verne Experience begins for first-year students at their orientation. This day sees approximately 600 entering students partnered with their FLEX (First-year La Verne Experience) faculty members with whom they will participate in community-based service-learning projects at sites throughout Southern California. These projects include working at homeless shelters, assisting at women’s shelters, volunteering at retirement communities, working with the San Gabriel Mountain Regional Conservancy, and participating in sustainability efforts across Southern California. Through the ABCD model, projects go beyond painting walls or picking up trash. Throughout the La Verne Experience, students apply theory from the course content to their ongoing, reciprocal work with their community partner.

Latino Education Access & Development (LEAD) Conference. Traditionally held during Hispanic Heritage Month,

the La Verne LEAD Conference has hosted nearly 2,000 middle and high school students and their families on the La Verne campus. In an effort to increase access to a college education for underserved populations and engage both prospective and current students, this day-long conference encourages current La Verne students to participate and/or volunteer during the event. These speaking opportunities let university students tell their personal stories, which position them as role models for all in attendance. Using the ABCD model, our campus created a parent workshop after learning that for Latino families, selection of a college is strongly family influenced. Making that connection and providing information to parents in this case made a difference in the assets that parents and families saw in themselves.

First-Generation Student Success Program (FGSSP). Established in 1995, this program addresses cultural conditions relevant to first-generation students attending college. For example, parents wanted personal assurances that college was a safe place for their children. FGSSP provides parents many touchstones at the university including an orientation, a forum to address parental issues, a picnic lunch, and an appreciation reception. In a similar vein, high school students who come from families with no tradition of higher education needed to feel that they could succeed. La Verne tutors these students on transitioning into college, applying for financial aid, and enhancing their learning skills. To ensure first-generation students have someone they trust on campus, a cadre of faculty, staff, and alumni serve as personal mentors. Since the program's inception, the completion rate for first-generation, full-time La Verne students has increased by nearly 15%. The first-generation students, through this process, came to understand that their life experiences, perspectives, and voices contributed to the university community. They learned that their success was in essence something they could share with their own families. This connection and sense of community among university, students, and student family, helps us retain these students through graduation.

Lessons Learned for Success

Successful community engagement must be driven by the mission of the university, clearly articulated as a priority in its strategic plan, and endorsed by its board of trustees. Creating and staffing our OCCE signaled its importance. As president of the University of La Verne, it is my responsibility to “walk the talk” for community engagement both on and off campus. In order for this to be effective, I need to be public and consistent in my efforts to demonstrate my

commitment. In many cases, this can be threaded easily throughout the work that I already do. Whenever I give a speech, I talk about my personal and professional commitment to civic engagement. I am visible at campus and community events as a supporter and/or participant. In addition, I work with campus stakeholders to connect our civic engagement curriculum to campuswide initiatives such as the La Verne Experience. I also continue to research and publish in the academic literature and public media, sharing my commitment to civic engagement and its lifelong impact on students. I find that the greatest impact, however, comes from the time I spend interacting with our students—for example, in the classroom, in the cafeteria, in the residence halls, and at their community partnership sites. Taking the time to know our students is critical. Without listening to them tell us their stories, how can we even begin to imagine their journeys or understand what it is that is needed for them to flourish?

It is also essential to empower the OCCE director, as well as faculty, students, and other administrators, to develop authentic, reciprocal, and mutually beneficial partnerships with community and civic leaders. It is they, after all, who will be creating and sustaining the community-engaged partnerships from conception to implementation.

As we enter into community-engaged partnerships, above all, it is essential that we listen to students, hearing and understanding their cares and concerns while respecting and reinforcing pride for their diversity, home communities, and life experiences. This is certain to make civic engagement an integral element of every student's college experience. The result of this work is measured in the number of engaged and successful citizens who graduate, the shift in attitudes and a commitment to lifelong community engagement, and in greater connection between the communities and the institutions of higher education. Alumni who continue to give back, who remain committed to improving educational access, and who have pride without judgment in their communities evolve through serving and being served through the ABCD model.

If someone were to ask the faculty or staff at the University of La Verne when “service-learning” first began at the university, I assume they would respond, “It has been a priority for us since our founding in 1891.” Although it has always been a part of who we are as an institution, our conscious decision to reframe our understanding of civic engagement through a new lens and to adapt and continue building our community–student partnerships is what makes me proud.

It is this type of work that connects the university with its surrounding communities, resulting in sustainable partnerships and offering a model of community–university engagement that meets the needs of the increasingly diverse student populations in higher education today and for generations to come.

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About the Author

Devorah Lieberman is the 18th president of the University of La Verne. She has broadly published books and articles in higher education literature on the topics of intercultural communication, faculty development, diversity, community and civic engagement, and institutional transformation. She earned her Ph.D. from the University of Florida.

