

PART I



Community Service, Volunteerism, and Engagement

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We may have all come on different ships, but we're in the same boat now.

—Martin Luther King Jr.

Many institutions of higher learning across the nation have begun responding to widespread criticism of higher education's disconnectedness to the needs of communities and recognizing a need to cultivate a student's civic capacity to fully engage in a democratic society. This attention to pragmatism is part of an ongoing cycle in higher education that dates back at least to the early nineteenth century. In rethinking their relationship to society, institutions of higher learning are reshaping their missions and implementing a variety of community outreach efforts. The need for such a relationship is particularly relevant today, as neighborhoods that are located adjacent to universities and colleges are struggling to deal with greater challenges, especially as the institution gains more prominence. The resources of a university, especially via community service, can help address urban decay, growing economic inequality, environmental hazards, and housing, health care, crime, and juvenile justice issues.¹

Notions of community service vary across culture and socioeconomic status and vary from individual to individual and family to family. In mainstream American culture, community service is somewhat compartmentalized as distinct from everyday events of life. Under this model, we “do” community service. In

many other cultures, this notion of community service is nonexistent, or at least not compartmentalized; it is subsumed within every aspect of individual and communal life. Under this alternate model, we “are” community service. Here, community service may take the form, for example, of ushering at church, rearing extended blood and nonblood kin, looking after neighborhood children before or after school, sitting in shifts at the hospital when friends and neighbors are sick, cooking food to bring to funerals and community events, and organizing the community for participation and activism in the municipal governing processes. To call such activities community service may seem awkward, unfitting, and even strange to those who find service and the giving of their time and energy to others to be a natural part of their cultural or familial legacy and survival. Having said that, we appreciate the value of examining examples of how community service looks or manifests in African American communities and/or when conducted by African Americans, even (or shall we say especially, given the purpose of this book) in more formalized educational contexts.

Experiential Education values individual and collective learning that is gained by lived experience. In “Foundations of Experiential Education,” a groundbreaking article published by the National Society for Experiential Education, the practice is described as follows:

... captured by the philosopher John Dewey, who argued that “Events are present and operative anyway; what concerns us is their meaning.” . . . In its purest forms, Experiential Education is indicative, beginning with “raw” experience that is processed through an intentional learning format and transformed into working, usable knowledge.²

We argue that African American scholars—and non-Black scholars who acknowledge the centrality of race—can deepen the understanding of what it means to serve, work, experience, and educate. A racialized understanding of education (with perspectives of gender, class, and cultural identity) can broaden contemporary debates of how public service is defined and practiced.

Unlike some historic Black women educators who have written on community-based service and learning (most notably Anna Cooper and Mary McLeod Bethune), we do not argue that Black scholars in general (or Black women in particular) have a greater capacity or responsibility for social empowerment than does anyone else. However, if we are to improve service and learning, we must look to alternative models and acknowledge each service-learning partner’s complex cultural identity.³

A theory is an explanation that helps provide a framework for understanding how, why, and under what limits and boundaries a concept, process, or phenomenon occurs. Explanations generated from academic course materials are often valued over explanations offered by local community members simply because the

power differential dictates one knowledge source (faculty and students) as more credible than another (community agencies and local residents). Although many practitioners engage community partners as vital sources of knowledge, not enough community expertise gets incorporated into community service initiatives.

Reflection and reciprocity are important concepts in the field of service-learning; they are also useful in thinking about service relationships. Reflection on knowledge produced by “other” educational philosophers is essential in order to transcend ineffective homogeneous approaches to scholarship, teaching, or service. Reciprocity involves integrating values, norms, and expectations from disparate perspectives. Both reflection and reciprocity must allow all partners the creative power to define program or project goals, implementation, and evaluation.

As African Americans in our community life as well as in our life as civic engagement professionals, we use the phrase “giving back to the community” to express efforts at strengthening and sustaining civic life in Black communities. People have always assumed an understanding of what “giving back to the community” meant through the context of their conversations. By challenging the conventional idea of “giving back” or community service, especially as it applies to the needs of communities of color and other marginalized groups, campus partners can realize the opportunity to learn valuable intellectual and moral lessons from those with whom they engage in service. This work does not seek to romanticize the role of community agencies or residents, but rather underscores an asset-based community approach, the collaborative nature of learning, and the interconnectedness of human rights issues.

Part 1 draws on a long tradition of community service, volunteerism, and civic engagement in the African American community to address a variety of social ills. In chapter 1, “The Community Folk Art Center: A University and Community Creative Collaboration,” Kheli Willetts discusses a collaboration that works with fourth- and fifth-grade students in developing photography skills. The chapter is an important contribution to this book because it discusses the role of an absence of community input, namely, parents; it also addresses how the project was established to overwhelming benefit to the university rather than the community. Moreover, it discusses the impact of implementing a program in an African American community without addressing the cultural, racial, and ethnic issues that shape the lifeworlds in which the participants live. As a result of reflection on experience, the chapter provides a series of lessons learned and ways to appear an overbearing community, which is imposed to true community collaboration. The author’s guiding principles draw from a legacy of the Community Folk Arts Center’s ability to be a “listening ear.”

Next, in chapter 2, “An African American Health Care Experience: An Academic Medical Center and Its Interdisciplinary Practice,” Kendall Campbell reviews the role of different mission components of institutions of higher learning and how those mission components impact the community services for medical care for underserved communities. The chapter’s primary focus centers on the

need to involve more diversity in medical education and ways to infuse service for underserved communities in the first two years of medical education. Campbell also raises issues of race in medical school faculty populations, which is an essential element in diagnosing community relations.

In chapter 3, "African American College Students and Volunteerism: Attitudes toward Mentoring at a Title I School," Joi Nathan focuses on Title I—the right for all children to have access to a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and have a chance to achieve on standardized tests. Because the hip-hop generation, as Nathan contends, does not have the experiences of the Civil Rights era, it is the duty of educators to instill the importance of "going back" among African American students by dispelling myths concerning volunteering in low-income neighborhoods through education. Through a mentoring opportunity at Florida State University, students were able to reflect on their ability to make a difference while experiencing the tangible benefits from the children they mentor and were empowered to get engaged in positive activities conducive to future life goals.

Finally, in chapter 4, "Prejudice, Pitfalls, and Promise: Experiences in Community Service in a Historically Black University," Jeff Brooks uses an ethnographic approach to focus on the importance of building relationships in order to prevent individual departments or individual faculty members from repeatedly "reinventing the wheel." Brooks argues that there is also a need for diversity sensitivity among historically black colleges and universities' students who enter the community to help empower the community stakeholders. In essence, there should be no assumption that African American students entering the field are aware of the intricacies of diversity. This ethnographic assessment found little evidence that our students directly experience prejudice and discrimination. The research identifies two major areas of improvement, including training and closer ties with the agencies that give the community a voice as interns enter their communities.

This section addressing community service offers a series of engaging chapters that provide practical suggestions to parishioners, administrators, faculty, and students as they launch and sustain community service, volunteer, and involve themselves in civic engagement projects in African American communities to address a variety of social ills.

Each community in which we work has a unique culture and history; taking time to learn about these variables is essential. For those interested in partnering with disenfranchised populations, work in communities of color that does not build on the rich history of African American scholar-activists will inevitably fall short of the goal of sustained community relations and town/gown transformation. In each case, as Martin Luther King Jr. declared, we are all in the same boat because, in service relationships, "gown" needs as much transformation as "town."

Notes

1. Kerry Strand et al., *Community-Based Research and Higher Education: Principles and Practice* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2003).
2. "Foundations of Experiential Education," *National Society for Experiential Education*, 1997, <http://www.nsee.org/found.htm> (accessed March 1, 2004).
3. Charles Lemert and Esme Bhan, eds., *The Voice of Anna Julia Cooper* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998), 52, 62, 75–77; Audrey McCluskey and Elaine Smith, eds., *Mary McLeod Bethune: Building a Better World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 52, 85.