

Experiential Education Working Paper

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Introduction

Civic engagement underlies Amherst's sense of the value and purposes of the liberal arts. The question we consider in this working paper is what it might mean for Amherst to take seriously the aspiration "Terras Irradiant." We believe that forms of learning which press Amherst students to interact with the "world" carry many benefits for our students, for the College, and for the surrounding community.

The concept of "Experiential Education" embraces a wide array of educational practices, and it may be helpful to survey this terrain and clarify the terms we use in this working paper. Many experiential practices such as field trips, or class presentations by speakers with relevant non-academic knowledge, are already a significant part of many Amherst classes, and the College uses its resources generously to support such activities. Courses that integrate work in the community with academic explorations are far rarer at the College, and more resources and an institutional structure of support will be needed for this arena to expand. Such courses might be centered on what has come to be called "community research," where students use their academic skills to carry out research projects that fulfill specific community needs. "Community-based learning" courses place students in the community as one aspect of their studies. In this pedagogy, students' experiences working with particular local agencies, schools, hospitals, etc. are in structured dialogue with the reading and writing requirements of an Amherst class or a rigorous Special Topics course of independent study. Furthermore, we recognize that there is much educational value to community experiences that are not explicitly linked to academic study. Both the Career Center and the Community Outreach Office already do much to help our students find valuable work with community organizations, and to ensure that this work is undertaken in a reflective and responsible manner. This proposal builds on the fellowships, internships and alumni mentoring fostered by the Career Center and all the community programs already underway through the Community Outreach Office. In arguing to strengthen these programs we emphasize their educational role, and many of the proposals in this report are geared towards building clearer and better connections between academic and co-curricular learning. Indeed in using the term "co-curricular" to describe the work of community outreach, we mean to stress the potential for collaboration between these activities and academic classes rather than positing them as competitive with or tangential to academic study as discussions of "extracurricular" activities tend to do.

Community-based learning has grown increasingly popular as a pedagogical model both because it motivates and enriches student learning and because it articulates the ties between academic inquiry and the responsibilities of civic engagement. Courses and projects that ask students to engage with community needs enhance academic learning. Student commitment rises when the results of research matter to other people, and this sense of purpose can yield better, more rigorous, work. Thus the press of immediate needs serves to heighten and energize students' intellectual efforts. Indeed in themselves the tensions between theory and practice inspire critical thinking. Many studies have demonstrated that providing a community purpose or

audience for academic work is particularly effective in improving the retention and performance of the students least well served by traditional courses.¹ Activities that send our students off campus broaden their awareness, often entailing pointed encounters with difference. Stepping out of the familiar offers lessons in self-examination and raises questions of social responsibility. Institutional commitment to such activities models and teaches civic engagement, producing good thinkers and good citizens.

For all of these reasons, over the past two decades many American colleges and universities have turned to experiential education and community engagement as means of deepening and invigorating student learning and fostering civic responsibility. The charge to the Experiential Education Working Group to explore the potential for such initiatives at Amherst recognizes that the College has been slow to adopt such practices and that to the extent that opportunities for such learning exist at the College, they are *ad hoc* in nature and occur with little institutional support. Our research into the growth of these initiatives at other institutions suggests, perhaps ironically, that these programs almost always develop out of strong top-down interventions: large targeted donations and/or presidential initiatives characterize the origins of the best programs.² They do not, by and large, grow out of an already committed faculty. Thus we are confident that if Amherst were to endorse this as a priority, participation by students and faculty would increase swiftly. Meanwhile, the experiences of other institutions have produced a depth of knowledge of best practices that grounds our suggestions for how to develop such a program at Amherst.³

In this working paper we advocate expanding opportunities for experiential education both within and outside the formal curriculum of the College. In so doing we want to stress that Amherst's educational responsibilities do not rest solely within our courses and that much important learning happens in co-curricular activities; we need to heed the educational potential of these sites and work to ensure their educational value. Consequently, while we propose a two-pronged approach to developing experiential education at Amherst, we believe that the curricular

¹ See for example the Campus Compact studies of women and minorities in community-based learning math and science courses, *The Campus Compact Reader* and *Service Statistics, 2003*.

² See the founding of the Swearer Center at Brown University in 1986, the Haas Center for Public Service at Stanford University in 1983, or the Lang Center for Civic and Social Responsibility at Swarthmore in 1994.

³ In preparing this working paper we met with our Five College colleagues involved in these curricular initiatives at Hampshire, Mount Holyoke, and UMass, and with the Massachusetts project director for Campus Compact. We visited Brown University and Trinity College, and Dolores Root conducted phone interviews with the directors of the programs at Bates, Bryn Mawr, Princeton, Macalaster, Middlebury, and Swarthmore.

and co-curricular are both necessary, and indeed support each other. Responsible curricular efforts to design courses that interact with the local community depend upon a well-developed and respected Community Outreach Program to build and sustain connections to local resources and community needs. Finding ways to integrate students' volunteer and internship experiences in the community with their academic learning does much to augment the intellectual value of these experiences. In the discussion that follows we describe our sense of what is needed to ensure the continued growth of the Community Outreach Program and the expansion of community service and internship opportunities for our students. We also propose an array of initiatives that would support the development of regular courses in our curriculum involving community research or community-based learning, as well as structures that would help students to link their experiences working in the community to their academic studies.

Community Outreach Initiatives

The Community Outreach Program at Amherst has grown slowly but consistently over the last fifteen years. It presently is staffed by a Director and Assistant Director and a part-time Administrative Assistant. Only in the last year did the office begin systematically tracking student participation, in this process 400 different students, or approximately a quarter of the student body, reported that they had participated in Outreach activities. Many students find community projects independently, and the office estimates that student engagement in internships and community service is actually significantly higher and probably exceeds a third of all Amherst students, although the depth of commitment and the quality of that experience vary widely. In addition, the Career Center offers significant support for students seeking paid and unpaid internships during the summer, and the January inter-term. We note too that Amherst is a leader in the use of work-study funds for work in community organizations. Our proposals focus on the Community Outreach Program, because this appears to us as the most appropriate site for creating clear curricular links, but we are confident that these academic connections and the resources for reflection and analysis we describe here will also serve students whose off-campus engagement is largely organized through the Career Center, and falls outside the academic calendar, as well as those who enter community agencies as work-study employees.

The Community Outreach Program will continue to support students in short-term projects such as the annual Day-of-Service, which are valuable both for their utility in performing particular "many-hands" tasks of use to local community organizations and for their attractiveness to students not yet interested in more demanding and sustained community commitments. But the program's focus in recent years has been on the development of community partnerships, long-standing relations with specific community organizations that have the potential to develop more elaborate and meaningful collaborations. Such partnerships have been widely recognized as the most productive model for college/community interactions, since the mutual accountability necessary to sustain a partnership is much more likely to foster projects that are meaningful to students and truly useful to the community.

The College has resources, skills, knowledge, and student energy that can be of use in solving local problems. But this is not a one-sided exchange; the community too has local knowledge and experience that can do much to deepen an Amherst education. Good partnerships recognize that reciprocity, and maintaining such mutually respectful relations requires a great deal of staff time and care. Community organizations need to know and trust the College and that trust needs to be earned: partnerships are put at risk by students who don't follow through, researchers who study a community but don't share their findings with it, and staff who don't have the time to get to know community leaders. At Amherst students carry much of the work of maintaining partnerships. In its present practice of developing student "Program Coordinators" who serve as the main liaisons to local organizations, the Community Outreach Office fosters student leadership. But this too requires staff time spent in preparing students for their work in the community and in the oversight of student projects. If we want a Community Outreach Office that enables our students to do valuable work, and to do it in a thoughtful and reflective way that can be integrated with other aspects of their education, then it is essential that the Community Outreach Office support student volunteer activities both with proper training and with structured opportunities for analysis and reflection.

Thus, in many real ways the strength of the Community Outreach Program is dependent on highly qualified staff who have strong credibility both with students and with the community. For experiential education to grow as we envision in this report, the staff of the Community Outreach Office will need to grow too. ***We propose at least two more full-time staff positions, as well as increased funding for student coordinators and for paying stipends to community partners who put significant time into mentoring our students.*** In particular we would recommend hiring a staff member with strong community connections whose central responsibility would be fostering community partnerships; this person would work closely with community organizations to determine how curricular and co-curricular engagement with the college could best meet their needs as well as the needs of our students, ensuring reciprocity. We recommend as well hiring new staff with experience in group facilitation and mentoring responsible for designing and implementing student training—since so many of our students work in after-school programs and tutoring settings, experience in this area would be especially useful.

Growth in the Community Outreach Office requires an expansion of physical resources as well. Presently the Community Outreach Office is housed in two rooms in the basement of the Campus Center. There are advantages to this central location for ease of student access, but the space is not adequate to the program's present needs and could not sustain expansion. Kitchen facilities and comfortable hang-out space seem from the experiences of other campuses to be useful in making such offices into hubs of student energy and activity. Ideally the Community Outreach Office should be a place where College and community meet, and space in ***a College house outside the campus*** would ease such interactions. Because many organizations with which we work are located in other towns, including those not served by PVTA such as Holyoke, Springfield, and Greenfield, transportation remains crucial for any significant expansion of the Community Outreach Program. ***It will be necessary to increase the number of College vans available for such projects.*** Furthermore, College advocacy for

expanding the PVT A line into Holyoke may be the most productive way to solve this program need, since it would simultaneously make it easier for Holyoke residents to travel up the valley.

We believe that the best incentive for student involvement with the Community Outreach Program lies in the quality and excitement of the program itself. Skilled staff who collaborate with the community in developing projects, who recognize this as an educational endeavor, and who help students to think critically about the work they do, are our best investment for expanding and deepening student engagement with the community. Other campuses have experimented with a range of incentives that have helped to draw in students, and we believe that ***targeted incentives can be useful for raising the profile of the Community Outreach Program and attracting more students to it.*** We want to be clear, however, that such incentives can only enhance, not replace, a strong program infrastructure. Fellowships for summer or January internships with non-profit agencies are excellent examples, as are named prizes. We wholeheartedly endorse President Marx's proposal of tying summer fellowship money to hours of student volunteer activity during the semester as an exciting example of incentives that explicitly work to build links between experiences, serving to deepen their impact. UMass and Trinity College both offer housing for students involved with community projects or enrolled in community-based learning courses; we suggest that ***a Community Outreach Theme House might be a good way to raise the visibility of community work and foster commitment.*** Student responses to a survey on Community Outreach activities and interest in linking such work to intellectual inquiry suggest that most students believe community engagement is important and that they would appreciate more opportunities to connect it with their academic studies.⁴ Indeed, as many pointed out, community work is now a strong component of many high school curriculum, and excellence in this area is one of the criteria that Amherst uses for choosing amongst its applicants; still, students with excellent records of community service often find upon coming to Amherst that these activities receive less support and are less integrated with their academic studies than was the case in their high schools.

Curricular Initiatives

Community research and community-based learning curricula at peer institutions take a wide variety of forms. We were struck in our research by the many different kinds of courses and the diversity of fields involved in this pedagogy. Just within the Five Colleges we encountered a science course that tested for soil toxicity in community gardens, a language course that provided translators at hospitals and courts, a philosophy course that brought philosophical thinking to local elementary schools, a psychology course that helped staff multicultural afterschool programs, a sociology course that surveyed housing and banking resources and needs, a history course that developed exhibit materials for a local museum, and many more.

⁴ We surveyed students about their experiences and interests in this area and unsurprisingly found clear correlations between student engagement in outreach activities and their desire for more curricular development in this area. But we also found that over two-thirds of the students who responded viewed this curricular growth as a positive addition to the College.

As this pedagogy grows at the College we expect both that Amherst faculty will develop more courses in which community research or community-based learning are integral to the course design, and that faculty will become more flexible about inviting such projects as an option in more traditionally structured courses.

The Special Topics rubric has often been used by faculty and students at Amherst to pair community projects with academic analysis. *We propose making this possibility more visible in our curriculum by specifically describing “Experiential Special Topics” in the course catalog and designating such courses with a distinctive number.* Such independent courses could be used by students who desired academic study in anticipation of or subsequent to summer internships, as well as by students who wanted to undertake such study in conjunction with community work during the semester. Experiential Special Topics would provide a clear mechanism for deepening the intellectual and educational impact of community work.

We believe that the First-Year Seminar structure offers another already available route for expanding the audience for such courses, and making them more central to the Amherst curriculum. As a result of discussions prompted by this Working Group, a number of us have begun thinking about possible community-based learning First-Year Seminars and hope that we will be able to offer such a course or courses by fall 2006, or maybe even next year.

Faculty Development Initiatives

The growth in a community-based curriculum described above requires leadership and institutional support for faculty development. Mount Holyoke College has a Director of Community-Based Learning faculty position, and we believe that at Amherst too a fellow faculty member is likely to be most effective at helping colleagues experiment with this form of pedagogy. Although there are a handful of Amherst faculty already teaching community-based learning courses, we do not believe that we presently have deep and varied enough experience with this pedagogy to adequately fill this role in-house. Instead *we propose hiring a sequence of distinguished Visiting Professors in standard academic fields, who have long experience and a high profile in community-based learning. These Visiting Professors would both offer community research or community-based learning courses to our students and serve as a resource to our faculty.* Using visitors in this way would allow us to vary disciplinary expertise and to rotate this position between departments, thus substantially increasing faculty exposure to this pedagogy. We expect that after three to five years of such visitors we would have developed enough expertise within the College for regular faculty members to take on this role. Obviously such Visiting Directors of Community-Based Learning would not be knowledgeable about the local community. It would be their role to assist Amherst faculty in course design and to sponsor events that would raise faculty and student awareness about these pedagogical initiatives. The Community Outreach Office would provide the connections to community partners and facilitate interactions with local agencies and organizations. This is another way that the curricular and co-curricular intertwine, and another reason for increasing the staff of the Community Outreach Office.

Institutions with well-developed community-based learning and community research curricula have also found that this pedagogy has a measurable effect on faculty research. Often faculty who become involved with local agencies and community needs begin to incorporate these questions into their own scholarship and research. Here too, we hope that these Visiting Professors will prove useful resources in thinking through mutually beneficial ways of building on these connections.

Incentives can be a valuable tool in sparking faculty involvement as well. Every institution we have spoken with has provided some *small grants for course development* (all in the \$2000-\$5000 range). *Faculty lunches* to share ideas also have been found to be a useful strategy for increasing faculty involvement. The panel on community-based learning that the Working Group held this fall, and faculty responses to an e-mail questionnaire about present teaching, suggest that many members of the faculty are curious about such pedagogical possibilities, but that they need significant support before they can imagine offering such courses themselves. Existing incentives such as the Presidential Initiatives Fund may also support curricular development in community-based learning, for example the present proposal on “Education and Social Justice” might well be used to develop courses that engage with local educational needs. Institutions with long experience with community-based learning and community research have found that a very important and complex aspect of faculty incentives rests with how this work is viewed when it comes to *tenure and promotion*. Places where the administration has actively encouraged community projects, and where such work is recognized in evaluations of teaching and scholarship, have far greater likelihood of attracting junior faculty to this work than do places where it is merely thought of as “service” or not considered at all.

Oversight

Because the proposals we have outlined here address both curricular and co-curricular aspects of an Amherst education, they do not fit neatly into a single existing governance structure. Issues of courses and faculty are clearly under the jurisdiction of the Dean of Faculty, while the Community Outreach Office presently reports to the Director of the Career Center and the Dean of Students. While this split accountability may well continue to be appropriate, it is obviously important that the two prongs of this initiative prove richly collaborative, and we think it is necessary to develop an institutional structure that would insure good communication between these programs. The 2002 College Council review of the Community Outreach Program advised the creation of a regular standing College committee composed of faculty, staff, and students with responsibility for overseeing issues of policy and vision for Amherst’s Community Outreach Program as well as issues of civic engagement at the College more generally. This proposal was not acted upon then, but we believe that such a committee would do much to integrate Community Outreach into campus and academic life. In light of our proposals to expand institutional support for community research and community-based learning, the creation of a *Committee on Community Outreach and Community-Based Learning* becomes even more urgently needed. This Committee, composed of faculty, staff, students and community partners, would provide advice and direction for both co-curricular and curricular programs, and its deliberations would ensure the links between the two.

Summary

We believe that Amherst is doing far less than it could and should do to support experiential education and that fostering such initiatives both within and outside the formal curriculum will have significant educational and ethical advantages. In order to begin this process we propose undertaking the following changes.

As a first step to oversee and integrate both co-curricular and curricular initiatives, we propose:

- Creating a regular standing Committee on Community Outreach and Community-Based Learning

Next, to expand the capacity of the Community Outreach Office, we propose:

- Adding two highly qualified full-time staff to the Community Outreach Office
- Improving the physical resources of the Community Outreach Office, including more and better space and increased transportation resources
- Creating incentives for student involvement including prizes, fellowships, and a possible theme house

Finally, to create a stronger and more consistent presence of community research and community-based learning courses within our academic curriculum, we propose:

- Creating distinctive numbering and clear catalog descriptions for “Experiential Special Topics”
- Initiating a community-based learning First Year Seminar
- Hiring Visiting Faculty to serve as Director of Community-Based Learning and subsequently maintaining such a position through rotating faculty appointments
- Creating incentives for faculty development including course development grants, faculty lunches, relevant PIF projects, and consideration in tenure and promotion

We recognize that such programs entail a significant commitment and cost for the College, but we are confident that they will yield even more in intellectual excitement and social responsibility.