

Service Learning and Community Service:

An Essential Part of True Education

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Sociologist Rodney Stark, in his book, *The Rise of Christianity*, argued that the triumph of Christianity in the Roman Empire was the result of how Christians lived and served in their communities. He notes that Christ's example of how to treat the sick and the poor resulted in Christians assisting the victims of the many epidemics that swept the empire as well as providing aid to the poor. Christians cared for the sick by providing shelter, food, and water while pagans fled the community. As Stark noted, "Christian values of love and charity had from the beginning been translated into norms of social service and community solidarity."¹ Over the decades, Stark argues, this example changed the very culture of the empire and affects our views to this day on how to treat the sick and aid the poor.

These early Christians were likely inspired by Christ's example and His words recorded in Matthew 25:31-46. In this chapter, Jesus pronounces judgment in favor of those who made a difference in the lives of others: Those who visited the sick, provided clothes to the needy, and fed the poor are invited into the kingdom.

In many ways, the educational system in the United States, both public schools and church schools, was founded on an integration between what was called a classical education and practical experience that made a difference in the lives of students and the communities in which they lived. The noted educational philosopher John Dewey argued that real education ensured that the student did not just learn from a traditional

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curriculum but also from experience in the community. Further, he argued that it was through the interaction between traditional curriculum and experience in working in and for the community that a real educational experience emerged.² Ellen White, laying the groundwork for Adventist education, agreed that education must go beyond traditional learning so that it would prepare students to make a difference in their communities and in the world: "True Education . . . prepares the student for the joy of service in this world and the higher world to come."³ The concept of integrating work and formal study in school curricula was for decades reflected in the

requirements of Adventist schools. As Ellen White noted, "An education derived chiefly from books leads to superficial thinking. Practical work encourages close observation and independent thought. Rightly performed, it tends to develop that practical wisdom which we call common sense. It develops ability to plan and execute, strengthens courage and perseverance, and calls for the exercise of tact and skill."⁴

However, much has happened in the American (and to some extent in the Adventist) educational system in the past century that has removed us from this founding vision. After an extensive review in 2000 of a wide variety of studies, Robert Putnam⁵ concluded that every American generation since the 1940s became less engaged in their communities. He called his book reporting these findings, *Bowling Alone*. Dr. Putnam believed that a significant source of this disengagement was the educational system of the 1980s and 1990s with its focus on individual achievement rather than community involvement. He



Andrews University freshmen are introduced to the concept of service during Orientation Week, when they spend part of a day in the community performing service activities.

felt that this era of extreme individualism and disengagement from the community had become a national crisis. One of Putnam's recommendations for the revival of community engagement was to reform the educational system to ensure that it developed in students a lifetime commitment to civic engagement and community service.

The Concept of Service Learning

To a significant extent, schools at every level and especially colleges have responded to this challenge. As the Carnegie Foundation notes, "A good college affirms that service to others is a central part of education."⁶ We could expand on this statement by saying that a good academic institution affirms that *service to others and engagement in the community* are central components of a *quality* education.

Service learning includes a philosophy of education, and for Christian schools, a theological base as well as specific program types. From the work of the educational philosopher John Dewey, one can argue that service learning reflects the assumption that education must be linked to societal and civic engagement, and that the most effective means of understanding the need for engagement is active community service during formal education. For Adventist education, a theological basis of service learning can be found in a recent publication from the Ellen G. White Estate, the July-September 2008 issue of *Ellen White Visionary for Kids*, which noted that "When we accept Him as our Savior, we will do the things He did, such as caring for the needy and homeless and being compassionate to those who are poor. Jesus says that in the end He will separate the sheep from the goats (the saved from the unsaved) based on what they did for others."⁷

In practice, service learning focuses on the many types of activities in which students can engage that make a difference in their communities. By engaging in these activities, they learn to apply what they are learning in their classes and even modify their knowledge based on the experiences. Service Contact, a national coalition of nearly 1,200 college and university presidents dedicated to promoting community service, correctly asserts that to be service "learning," an activity must contain this key element: an explicit formal connection to academic coursework.⁸ Thus, Bringle and Hatcher's definition of service learning is "a course-based, credit-bearing educational experience in which students (a) participate in an organized service activ-



The Andrews University Urban Design class in the School of Architecture provides students with the opportunity to design environmentally sound building plans for low-income neighborhoods.

ity that meets identified community needs and (b) reflect on the service activity as a means of gaining a deeper understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility."⁹ In essence, service learning involves the learning of concepts, skills, and dispositions through the act of service that have the potential to enhance teaching, enrich student learning, and positively affect communities.¹⁰

As a teaching/learning method, service learning has become an important part of the curriculum in many primary schools, high schools, and colleges across the United States. Accord-

Students' Reactions

Quotes from Philosophy of Service students at Andrews University, 2006-2008, tell why the class (which included academic material as well as community service) was important to them:

- "Because now I know the world is about more than me."
- "Because I see so many people in need, I cannot turn away anymore."
- "My motivation is that through serving people I am actually serving the Father and it makes me feel as though I am closer to Him. . . ."
- "I am so glad that I was required to take this class; this class makes everyone a better person, simply because they are doing what God wants us to do and that is serve."
- "God taught me that I needed to change my mind frame. Service has become for me a lifestyle in EVERYTHING I DO. My words to build and encourage others, my hands to help other physically, and my finances. All of me I surrender to God for service."
- "I want to make service part of my life because I saw what a difference it makes to other people as well as the difference it could make in mine."
- "When I go home. . . I look forward to holding seminars in my home church emphasizing the importance of service."



Andrews University students often devote their time to Neighbor to Neighbor, a community-service agency in Berrien Springs, Michigan.

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ing to D. Elmer, during the 1999-2000 academic year, 7,000 undergraduate-level courses and more than 700 graduate-level courses that incorporated experiential or service learning were offered by 82 percent of a sample of 324 major universities and colleges across the U.S.¹¹ Campus Compact reported that 70 percent of responding member educational institutions in 2005 provided discipline-based service-learning courses.¹² At the high school level, community-service programs have been popular since the 1980s, and many private and public schools offer them in various forms.

The remainder of this article will highlight examples of service-learning activities and programs that have been conducted by educational institutions and will explore their effects upon students. It will reveal that service-learning programs and activities are as varied as the institutions that provide them and show how schools may incorporate service learning into their curriculum.

University Models of Service Learning

At Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan, the philosophy and practical application of service have been widely supported by faculty and students. Service learning has been formally integrated into the university Mission Statement (<http://www.andrews.edu/about/mission.html>) as well as the school's 2007-2012 Strategic Plan. Service learning is operationalized through general-education requirements and civic engagement/service opportunities in specific classes.

The general-education curriculum at Andrews University requires students to take a one-semester, two-hour course called "Philosophy of Service" (offered through the Behavioral Sciences Department). Students enrolled in this class choose from dozens of service options that benefit non-profit organizations and their clients, including specific activities such as tutoring



Every year, students, alumni, and faculty from Andrews University's School of Architecture travel to Bolivia to participate in the expansion of an orphanage for children at risk for drug addiction and social problems.

and mentoring at-risk children, housing construction for Habitat for Humanity, and tax assistance for older adults and low-income individuals.

A number of academic departments have incorporated service learning into class-specific contexts. For example, architecture students designed an addition to and developed a renovation plan for a local government building. In Design for Visual Communications, art students are matched with non-profit community organizations that need flyers, brochures, business cards, and other marketing materials. The art students thus obtain valuable career experience, help an organization meet a need, and learn about the mission, objectives, and activities of a local non-profit. In Group Dynamics and Leadership, communications students organized a fashion show fundraiser for a family devastated and displaced by Hurricane Katrina. Retailers loaned clothes, male and female models were recruited, and promotion materials were developed. Students developed leadership skills, learned about the dynamics of working as a group, and aided a grateful father and his three children. All of

Definition of Service Learning

Service learning is a methodology in which service opportunities are integrated into a school's academic curriculum. Its goals are to ensure that young people learn and develop through active participation in thoughtfully organized service experiences. . . .

- that meet actual community needs
- that are coordinated through collaboration between the school and service organization
- that provide structured time for participants to think, talk, and/or write about what they did and saw during the service activity
- that provide young people with opportunities to use newly acquired academic skills and knowledge in real-life situations in their local communities and beyond
- that enhance what is taught in school by extending student learning beyond the classroom
- that help foster in students a lifelong commitment to helping others.¹³



“Change the World,” part of Andrews University’s mission statement, becomes a reality as students help with relief efforts in areas devastated by hurricanes and tornadoes.



As part of service learning for various classes, Andrews University students provide tutoring to at-risk children at several local schools.

Service learning creates a win-win situation for the partners: the community, the student, and the educational institution.

these examples are consistent with the practices advocated by a founder of Adventist education, Ellen White, and the educational philosopher John Dewey. These classes integrate the formal classroom curriculum with practical experience to benefit the community.

Other Adventist colleges and universities have also incorporated service learning into the curriculum. Students who graduate from La Sierra University in California are required to complete service-learning courses such as Humans and the Environment. During the course, students study environmental ethics from a variety of perspectives and select from service projects such as park clean up, trail maintenance, and city beautification. “The service learning experience helps students both (a) link content in a practical/applied way to course work, and (b) gain and/or strengthen their values and sense of community connection and civic responsibility,” says course co-teacher Leslie Martin, former Psychology Department chair.¹⁴

Service learning has also been integrated in many other colleges’ curricula. For example, another faith-based institution, Mount St. Mary’s College (MSMC) in California, incorporates service learning into environmental, nutrition, and psychology courses. Students in Psychology of Learning are required to provide 10 hours of tutoring in an after-school program at a local elementary school. Over the course of the semester, participating students may tutor a dozen students from a variety of backgrounds and abilities. At the same time, in the college classroom, the professor introduces alternative theories on how individuals learn and asks the students to use their tutoring experiences to reflect on the relationship between theory and practice.

MSMC’s Human Nutrition students organized and conducted a workshop for a community health center on an array of health-related topics. The lessons learned in the classroom came vividly alive for not only the students but also their audience of community members.

Students taking MSMC’s Environmental Studies class are required to participate in a “Heal the Bay” beach clean-up day. The teacher prepares them for the experience by discussing

threats to marine life by non-biodegradable materials. Although the students learn about maritime pollution from the textbook and the teacher’s lectures, the harsh reality of environmental pollution is driven dramatically home as they spend a Saturday picking up large quantities of plastic material, cigarette butts, disposable diapers, and even medical waste such as syringes and used bandages. Back in the classroom, students develop solutions to the refuse problem they observed in the field.¹⁵

K-12 Examples of Service Learning

Primary and secondary schools are also incorporating service learning into their curricula. At Spring Valley High School in Columbia, South Carolina, more than 1,200 students have engaged in service-learning projects. Students studying Spanish, for example, launched a project to benefit the area’s fast-growing Hispanic population, distributing more than 20 tons of food, clothing, medicine, and household products to needy new immigrants.¹⁶

Students at Crook County High School in Prineville, Oregon, play a key role in improving their community’s health. For example, health-occupation classes conducted a public-awareness campaign on the importance of child immunization, which helped to dramatically raise community vaccination levels. These students also organized a community health fair that provided free blood-pressure checks, updates on health issues facing the community, and an assembly where local hospital officials warned about trauma injuries related to the misuse of alcohol.¹⁷

Integrating classroom experience with community service also occurs at the elementary level. In Maryland, kindergarten students partnered with a senior center to share a variety of school activities with the residents of a senior center. This included reading poetry and building gingerbread houses. Second graders learned organizational skills by planning and carrying out a canned food drive for the homeless, then packed the donations and delivered them to a local food bank. As a part of an art class, students from this school created cards and friendship bracelets for pediatric patients receiving treatment at

the National Institutes of Health. “Caring acts create caring people,” says teacher Mary Jane Janniello. “All of these little things are caring acts. If we do them over and over enough, we hope that by the time [the students] are adults, they’ll get it.” By 5th grade, the integration of service projects and classroom curriculum is more focused. For example, a social studies class established a relationship with an impoverished Nicaraguan village through a partnership with Gettysburg College, which has a sister-city relationship with the village of Leon.¹⁸

Seventh-day Adventist elementary schools are also involved in service learning. Seventh- and 8th-graders at Ruth Murdoch Seventh-day Adventist Elementary School in Michigan assist the local community service center as part of a mini-course called “Outreach.” They prepare clothing and other items for sale in a thrift shop or for distribution locally and overseas in time of crisis.

The Impact of Service Learning

Effective service learning takes thought and effort. Educators who utilize it as an enhancement to coursework must plan and organize experiences in order to connect them to the course objectives. It takes extra time and effort to work with students, connect with community partners, implement actions, and to follow-up on and evaluate results. So why do it? Why would an already busy educator want to take on more work? The answer is that education comes alive when theory is paired with practical applications. And service learning creates a win-win situation for the partners: the community, the student, and the educational institution.

Service learning provides many benefits for students at all



Adventist administrators and teachers must themselves model engagement in service. Above, Delbert Baker, president of Oakwood University in Huntsville, Alabama, and his wife, Susan, share information about health and nutrition with 4th graders at a local elementary school during a recent Junior Achievement in a Day program.

levels: making the curriculum relevant to students’ lives, clarifying values, promoting community and civic responsibility, encouraging multicultural awareness, developing critical thinking and problem-solving skills, fostering social and personal development, and building community within the classroom. These experiences transform students from individualistic isolation to community engagement.

Researchers have shown that student involvement in community service produces a number of very positive outcomes not only because of the impact on the community, but also the effect on the lives of the students involved. O’Donnell and colleagues evaluated the Reach for Health Community Youth Service program, in which students spent approximately three hours per week in the community performing tasks such as reading to elders, assisting physicians or dentists during medical or dental examinations, answering phones, scheduling appointments, and filing. Reflection sessions reinforced skills in decision making, communication, information seeking, health advocacy, and other areas. Student participating in this program engaged in fewer high-risk behaviors, including delayed initiation of and reduction in the frequency of sexual intercourse. In addition, researchers found that students with suicidal thoughts were more likely to talk to an adult than those not involved in this service program.¹⁹

Research by Bernard suggests that participation in service learning is a major factor in fostering resiliency. Youth who make a difference in their communities are more resistant to substance use and other high-risk behaviors.²⁰ That means that even if the students resided in higher-risk communities and had individual risk factors, they were less likely to use substances or engage in sexual activities. After service learning was incorporated into the curriculum, a Springfield, Massachusetts, high school found that the dropout rate plunged from 12 percent to one percent. Further, the number of students going on to college increased by 22 percent, and those achieving a grade-point average of 3.0 or higher jumped from 12 percent to 40 percent.²¹ Research conducted at Andrews University in 2005 showed a significant relationship between the number of hours students engaged in community service and lower rates of a variety of risk behaviors, including the use of alcohol.²²

These data suggest that service learning may be an important component of an overall effort to help students internalize Christian values and lifestyle.

The Alliance for Service Learning in Educational Reform summarizes the benefits of this approach to learning: “Service-learning involves students in community activities that complement their classroom studies. Every service-learning program is unique, but all aim to help increase their academic skills through understanding how what they learn in school can be

Resources

If you would like to learn more, there are journals, list serves, Websites, and a variety of additional resources to help you. Here are a few suggestions to get you started:

- National Campus Compact (<http://www.compact.org>)
- Learn and Serve America (<http://www.learnandserve.org>)
- National Service Learning Clearinghouse (<http://www.servicelearning.org>)
- National Service Learning Partnership (<http://www.service-learningpartnership.org>)
- National Youth Leadership Council (<http://www.nylc.org>)
- Michigan Campus Compact (<http://www.micampuscompact.org>)

applied to the real world. Service-learning programs help students become interested in their communities and to learn how they can affect the quality of life in them.”²³

Modern Christian institutions should serve as beacons of light, much like the early believers did, to showcase to the larger higher education community the Christian ethos of generous service as exemplified by both our students and faculty. When, in 1985, the presidents of Stanford, Brown, and Georgetown universities founded Campus Compact, the most influential national service-learning organization in the academy today, their objective was to combat the myth that college and university students in the 1980s were consumed by materialism, careerism, and self-interest to the exclusion of more altruistic endeavors. Surely, if any students should serve as a contradiction to this still-prevailing myth, it should be those who are experiencing a distinctive brand of cognitive, ethical, and spiritual development at Christian schools and colleges. To succeed in the complex 21st-century global environment, our students must become citizen-leaders who are committed to the arts of civic discourse and creative problem solving as they “seek knowledge, affirm faith and change the world” (quoted from the Andrews University Mission Statement).



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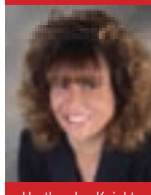
Duane McBride



Ella Simmons



Donn P. Gaede



Heather Joy Knight

Similarly, Adventist administrators and teachers, who are tasked with the privilege of educating and mentoring young people for both earthly and heavenly citizenship, must themselves model engagement in both academics and service, thereby embodying John Dewey’s injunction to blend theory and praxis.

Service is one of the integral moral values of Adventist education. Matthew 25 makes it very clear that a characteristic of those whom Christ welcomes into His kingdom is that they have made a difference in the lives of others. Thus, our schools should incorporate this admonition into their curriculum and practice, seeking to inspire students to devote themselves to both selfless service and lifelong learning. Only then can the Christian community fulfill its commission to serve as both salt and light in the world. On an Adventist campus, theology without service learning and service opportunities is powerless. ☞

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