going academic

move your program into service-learning

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A FRIEND OF MINE recently had the experience of hammering out a proposal for a university-wide community service-based learning program. The man with whom she conferred was the dean of undergraduate instruction. Behind them were weeks of meetings, rough drafts, and long hours. The proposal was beginning to take form. "I envy you," the dean said, "you are just getting started in your career and you're on the crest of a wave of the future in higher education. We can provide a relevant education to students and at the same time serve the needs of the community."

In the next few years, higher education will adjust itself to serve the new demands for learning. This is precisely why volunteer service groups can play a model role in college academic programs. The kinds of expertise that are routine in a student volunteer program will help guarantee that program an important place in the experiential education movement.

To participate fully you need to know who you are, what you have to offer, and what you will be able to accomplish if you are thinking about expanding your services to include accredited field options.

The administrators with whom you will be consulting will not need to be sold on the benefits of your program. They will have to be sold on your ability to demonstrate that you know your own direction and have a clear grasp of what services you can perform.

First, take a careful look at the local demand for a volunteer/experiential learning office. A campus interest in experiential learning can be gauged by noting who is offering field study courses, which instructors and departments are involved, what committees are examining the question, and how many courses are emerging across campus. You can get the answers through the faculty-staff grapevine, by examining the student newspaper, poking around department or division offices to

see if there are any proposals in the wind, or observing the activities of the faculty senate. The most readily available information can come from the volunteers in your program. Ask them if they know of any courses that involve credit for volunteer work.

Friendly Natives, Denizens, and Deans

The results of your informal research should be prepared as a concisely-written list of friendly natives, denizens, deans, and current field experience options. Your list should look something like this:

• Needs that an office of experiential learning will meet on your campus. Include ways in which you can meet these needs.

• Asking the right questions should give you an idea of which deans, department chairmen, faculty, and others support experiential education. Rank them on a scale of active support.

• At all levels of the university, what local attempts have been made to generate more experience-based learning options (grants, proposed curriculum changes, campus recruitment efforts)?

• Locate existing programs, such as offices of student teaching placement, cooperative education, or graduate internships. Familiarize yourself with people and departments that have resisted experience-based learning options. Note their arguments.

• Take a look at the assets and liabilities of your own office. What skills, expertise, and services do you have to offer? What resources could you bring to an academic program (trained staff, office space, existing budget, referral system, reputation, community contacts) and what liabilities (differences in life styles, conflict of goals, managerial sophistication, or missing academic credentials)?

You should find a strong vocational interest on the part of the students; a growing proliferation of field study options; at least some kind of cooperative education field study proposal being considered; several curriculum proposals in the works; and a few deans, vice-presidents, and department heads who are taking more than a passing interest in experience-based community service learning. The compilation of interests will tell a lot about the options open to you and the choices you can make in going academic. It is important that you assess your immediate academic environment accurately. Poor timing and an imprecise understanding of conditions mean that you might walk into territorial infighting at even the lower levels. These can sabotage good plans at an early stage.

Your eventual strategy will be to cultivate the friendliest man with the most clout whose program your office can do the most for. On many campuses this man will be the dean of undergraduate instruction or dean of student affairs. You will find that he strongly shares your interest in the affairs of undergraduates and sees his role as striving to improve their college experiences

as much as his resources will allow him.

The next step in your move toward an academic program is to develop some organizational objectives and to adopt an organizational format that will fit comfortably into the pattern of demands, supports, and institutional barriers that you have already uncovered. This information should be prepared in the form of a brief proposal—one that is written for an academic audience. This does not mean that your style will be impregnated with a profusion of polysyllabic agglomerations but rather that it be clear and specific. Safeguard the traditions and interests of friendly offices that have the ability to accept and implement your program. The proposal should demonstrate that you are aware of existing contributions made by the various departments and indicate a role of support by your office.

Do not write an organizational plan for assisting an academic department that will eliminate 35 percent of the existing faculty.

Do develop a plan in which your office will free faculty from placement chores and follow-up paper work while increasing their opportunities for traditional research and individual contact with students.

This makes sense because it supports existing priorities while expanding them. The strongest and most compelling arguments that can be made in the proposal are those demonstrating that educational services will be improved while costs are reduced. Your office can make available to the college the vast resources of the community while making no increased demands on the faculty. You will extend the physical facilities of the college, thus making possible an increase in credit production potential of some departments by as much as a third. Point out that all this good is going directly to the community.

Selecting an Organizational Format

There are no good or bad methods of organization; there are only variations in the types, number, and the quality of services your office provides. Some procedures and methods work for some people and some do not. Big is not necessarily best.

If you encounter resistance, it does not necessarily mean that you are doing things wrong. It may mean that you are doing things right but in the wrong place with the wrong people. It does not make sense to try implementing programs that are incompatible with existing policies, habits, and vested interests. Try making your concepts attractive by using the right bait.

As this movement gains momentum, its expression is becoming more diverse. The result is that experiential education currently is serving a variety of community organizations and college offices. This places your volunteer office in a position of demand by many of your college's offices. Your eventual affiliation must be made in the light of organizational realities. That is, to

be a practicable academic concern, your office must contribute to the production of credit hours. But faculty are usually the only group vested with the right to grant credit. You will, therefore, need some attractive reason for faculty and departments to use your services. The more important you are to the production of credit, the more secure will be your future.

There are three basic organizational options. They are ordered from the least to the most academically oriented:

• Providing sideline academic services through the traditional volunteer office.

• Joining with a specific service office of the college.

• Becoming an umbrella office to integration and coordination of campus-wide services.

The Traditional Volunteer Office

As an organization integrated into the academic structure, the traditional volunteer office would operate much as it usually has except that it would handle requests from students for placements that satisfy the requirements of their courses. These requests would be dealt with as if they were typical for a volunteer. Your contact with the academic spheres of the college would be informal and on a friendly, consultative basis, usually with interested faculty looking for leads for class projects. Occasionally they would be involved in volunteer projects as advisers.

Student volunteer program offices are generally housed under the administrative roof of an office of student government or the office of the dean of student affairs. Depending upon the size of the school, the age of the program, and the interest in volunteering on your campus, you may or may not have your own budget, professional staff, transportation, sophisticated training program, applicant screening process, and a reliable record keeping system. These have a considerable effect on the options that will be available to you.

There are numerous reasons why an established office of student volunteers would be called upon to go academic. The more established the program, the more desirable it is. Your office is probably one of the most productive public relations organs on campus; it probably is most experienced in the development of placements; and few offices have quite the contact with the community that yours does. As long as you do your job, expand your program, and extend your service to other parts of the campus, your organization can live a long and happy life doing its thing: serving the community.

The trends, however, may be against an organization that specializes in pure volunteerism. Funds are being cut from offices of student affairs, while essential services are being shouldered by offices with longer histories and more academic credentials.

Also, the student is changing. The college student of the 1970's is a job-oriented creature. His needs may be met through the growing numbers of accredited field options. Demand shifts like this can reduce your office's volunteer core to numbers too small to justify the staff and budget. In a very informal survey on the University of Maryland campus, I found it difficult to find a volunteer who did not want credit for his volunteer work. A survey of 1972-73 freshmen indicates that 70 percent thought credit should be given.

If academic departments can use field options to attract a larger share of the 25 to 30 percent of the freshmen who have undeclared majors, they will. Students are attracted to progressive programs like these, so it is a good bet that departments will develop their own placement systems. Perhaps the believed dicotomy between the pure volunteer and the accredited field worker does not exist. Ellen Moore, former Coordinator of Volunteer Services at Penn State, found that many of her pure volunteers got started because they were originally required to do volunteer work for their courses.

The pressure is on for new markets, and the only real, long-term option open to offices of volunteerism will be to go formally academic or to adopt one of the credit-producing techniques of the other offices. This allows the college to retain the benefits of a volunteer program while extending your expertise to other areas. An excellent compromise is the one at Penn State where the coordinator of volunteer services has a joint appointment with student affairs and the College of Human Development. On the one hand her office independently serves the needs of the pure volunteer. On the other, her academic credentials give her the necessary link with credit production.

Specific Service Program

A specific service program has one major output or service such as career development, career placement, counseling services, or academic advisement. With this type of strategy, an office of experience-based learning takes on the functions of specific volunteer service. As part of this sort of office, you must expect to adopt its policies, to focus your energies on its goals, and to operate under its leadership. This is not necessarily a disadvantage.

The greatest advantage of incorporating into a specific service office is its budgeting and organizational ties to programs with more permanence. These programs often have pre-established connections with credit-producing departments. Frequently they are staffed by persons who also hold academic rank. The department placement office closely resembles the traditional student teaching placement service.

Your office becomes part of an academic department in the most specialized form of this affiliation strategy. The other non-academic specific service types can associate only indirectly with student demand and credit production. As part of these other offices, your performance would be evaluated by different criteria, such as

the numbers of students advised, referrals made, and faculty contacts generated.

These other specific offices have the advantage of being broader-based than the departmental placement offices. If it looks as if the off-campus learning option will be consolidated into a single office, it may be wiser to go with some of the campus-wide offices such as career development. Ties across departments and colleges leave you in a position to develop relationships that are more attractive to a broader faculty base.

A Counterpart to Other Services

There are several other facets of specific service programs. These specialists tend to view volunteerism or experiential learning as a counterpart of their existing service. For example, the counselor thinks of it as therapy, the career adviser sees it as developing job skills, and the academic adviser sees it as a way to re-motivate students to the relevance of their courses. Each of these purposes are legitimate in their sphere. Each operates in an office tuned to perceive a limited, specialized group of student needs. From a broader perspective, however, many of these purposes can be satisfied through a uniform experience-based learning office. When they all operate placement services concurrently and independently, however, the result is redundancy, inefficiency, and confusion. If continued for long, such a medley of efforts may destroy the positive public relations that your office has built over the years.

You may find that incorporating your volunteer program with one of these agencies is comfortable in the short run, but this could put you at a disadvantage in meeting your campus needs for a broader program. You will have little control over the actual experiences of the students you send into the field or the kind of treatment that your community agencies receive from students or faculty volunteers. Furthermore, if you become subordinate to specific service units, your campus contacts may be confined to pre-existing channels, your procedures limited to those established in-house, and your office services redesigned to address themselves to the new program perspective. There is nothing inherently wrong with this. However, it does have the potential of restricting the future visibility of your program.

Campus-Wide Offices

The campus-wide office deals with the superordinate purposes of the campus as a whole and integrates its services with the needs of the specific service offices. You may find campus-wide offices under a variety of names, but whether the program is called the Office of Experiential Learning, as is the one at the University of Kentucky, or the Career Education Program, as is the one at the University of Maryland, the names matter little.

The services of campus-wide programs actively encompass all the ways in which experiential education

can be applied. Needs such as career and academic planning, job experience, course relevance, positive community relations, individual counseling, and therapeutic experiences are all functions that are within the program's area of interest. To develop such a broad-based volunteer academic program, your office must affiliate with a level above the specific service offices. This might mean the dean of undergraduate instruction or the academic vice-president of the college. Such an arrangement lowers the barriers associated with the other office types, such as inter-office territorial rights over specialization, program redundancy, clerical inefficiency, confusion in community relations, and indirect association with credit production.

Centralized coordinating offices that operate as staff units from upper administrative levels are in the position to develop uniform field service policies and efficiency measures to aid in the process of experiential education. Examples of this could be pre-field instruction modules, more personalized advisement and placement, and development of faculty workshops on experience-education teaching techniques.

Harmonizing Your Program

As enticing as this organizational approach may seem, there may be substantial barriers. A bid to develop a campus-wide office of experiential education means that your office, your manpower, your records system, your systems of correspondence, and even your office decorum should reflect that of the dean or vice-president who is interested in your program. A central office of volunteer experiential-based learning may be expected to be staffed with a director holding advanced degrees or a person with formal administrative talents. These requirements are rarely a problem for the larger volunteer programs, but they may pose a problem for smaller, newer programs. The smaller program may choose to reorganize under an appointed administrator, incorporated as an arm of specific service office, or recruit the needed managerial talent if the money is available.

Implementing a Plan

The plan that makes most sense on your campus will become obvious as you assemble the data you need. Once you have a clear-cut notion of your office's resources, know what you want to accomplish, and determine the climate for off-campus experiential learning, your implementation strategies will become apparent.

I have suggested that you study your demand for a field experience study program, examine your resources, develop a concisely written proposal to meet those needs, and finally initiate your plans at the highest administrative levels from which a decision to change must come. After that the implementation of your program is probably the most comfortable thing you will do in going academic.