New Times, New Alternatives

As the college population changes and experiential education expands, service-learning educators must take aggressive action or see their programs overshadowed.

By Robert Sexton

The world around service-learning has changed dramatically in the last few years, raising to new importance the relationships between service-learning and so-called alternative approaches to post-secondary education.

When I began my career in experiential education and service-learning eight years ago, the landscape was dotted with burgeoning state and local internship programs that seemed the shape of the future. NSVP had transferred to ACTION from the Office of Economic Opportunity, and the agency had just announced the University Year for ACTION (a program granting funds to colleges to operate service-learning programs) with a mood of community activism that today is hard to reconstruct. As the only federal initiative of its type (except for the very different cooperative education and the college work-study programs) UYA seemed to forecast a new way for educational institutions and their students to assist their communities.

At the time there was minimal interest in experiential learning of the nonsponsored type, assessing and granting credit for a person's experience prior to enrollment in higher education. We had no National Society for Internships and Experiential Education (NSIEE, the recently merged Society for Field Experience Education and National Center for Public Service Internship Programs), no Council for the Advancement of Experiential Learning (CAEL), no Association for Experiential Education (AEE). We had almost no career education. We had no Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) or Youth Employment and Demonstration Projects Act (YEDPA).

The Picture Today

Today the picture is different. UYA now is testing new approaches, and its future appears uncertain. Experiential education has grown rapidly; national organizations, such as CAEL, NSIEE, and AEE, play an increasingly prominent part in organizing activities and initiating action for this special interest group.

Enthusiasm for serving the society and changing the community clearly has waned as undergraduates' concern with their economic futures has waxed.

The increasing number of adults—nontraditional learners—returning to higher education has required new approaches, particularly experiential education programs. These programs have been encouraged by another potent force that didn't exist in 1971—the Fund for Improvement in Postsecondary Education (FIPSE). With the exception of the U.S. Office of Cooperative Education and the college work-study program, FIPSE is the major federal source of funding for experiential education.

General reform and pressures from nontraditional students have led higher education to a raft of new activities: educational brokering services to help the individual use a variety of community educational opportunities; external degree programs granting credit for prior experience; independent study and internships for nontraditional students; community-based educational programs, such as free universities; universities without walls; campus free colleges; newspaper and television courses; credited military and business training programs.

On a different scale is career education. Little more than an idea a decade ago, it is now a potent factor in secondary education and a growing element in post-secondary education.

Perhaps the most important change in terms of potential impact on experiential education and service-learning is the increasing national attention on youth employment and work experience. Through CETA and YEDPA the federal government is spending billions of dollars on work experience for young and old.

The changes affecting experiential education in general and service-learning in particular are reflected by changing

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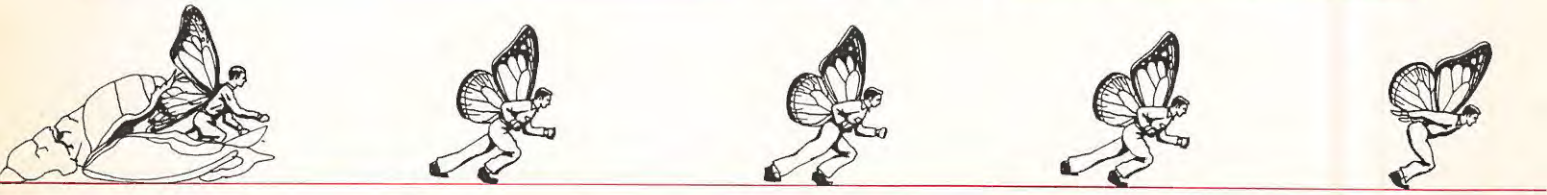

vocabulary. Some years ago ACTION's Donald Eberly articulated the basic definition of service-learning as combining "the concepts of teaching and learning through activity and a style of life geared to contributing to the welfare of others." By contributing service the student learns, and learning incorporates the giving of service. This interdependence distinguishes service-learning from other forms of experiential education.

The service-learning concept dominated the thinking of ACTION as it formulated UYA and of institutions that marshaled the talents and resources of young people in campus-based programs. Educators today are less likely to limit their focus to service-learning and are more likely to quote CAEL director Morris Keeton's definition of experiential education: "learning in which the learner is directly in touch with realities being studied."

New Alternatives

Alternative approaches in post-secondary education have changed the environment for service-learning. One group of these alternatives comes from what many call a student-centered curriculum. Examples are flexible competency-based programs in such liberal arts colleges as Alverno and Mars Hill, where the curriculum has been restructured and a variety of instructional approaches used. Modular instruction, individualized instruction, and additional independent study also have gained wide acceptance.

A second general emphasis involves more direct preparation for careers and for career and life planning. Prompted in part by federal interest in career education, institutions across the country have become increasingly concerned with the applicability of degrees to work, especially for students in traditional liberal arts programs, and have redirected institutional resources into career guidance services, placement services, and life/work planning. In many cases institutions have put career services and experiential education under the same administrative roof.

A third alternative group grows out of renewed emphasis on special services for nontraditional students, especially those over 25 who have returned to education after some other kind of activity, such as raising families, and want to become wage earners or to change careers. Higher education has not yet dealt fully with this population's force—soon nontraditional students will be in the majority.

So far institutions' responses have been imaginative and varied. They have included external degree programs (such as at Empire State College), granting credit for prior experience, and community-based educational brokering and counseling services. The trend also has resulted in another change in the lexicon—use of the term lifelong learning.

A fourth set springs from the new concern with youth's "transition from school to work" and the federal response to unemployment, particularly through CETA. This is more than a change in language, although the semantic emphasis on "the transition from school to work" is symbolically important.

This development also grows out of concern for the quality of work and emphasizes preparation for many rather than for particular jobs as well as for leisure time, family relationships, and citizen participation. Such organizations as the National Manpower Institute have raised the visibility of the issue and advocated novel solutions, such as community education-work councils.

The federal government has pumped millions of dollars into CETA programs under the assumption that training and education are critical to moving the unemployed into productive employment. This has had, and will continue to have, an effect on experiential education. The Youth Employment and Demonstration Projects Act, for example, asks that arrangements be made for academic credit for youth employment programs, but thus far specific arrangements for granting this credit are in infancy.

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The Department of Labor has funded Youthwork, a nonprofit organization, to administer pilot programs linking academic credit to jobs. Youthwork's budget for investigating academic credit is almost equal to the entire budget of FIPSE, yet it is still less than one percent of the total budget for Youth Employment and Demonstration Projects. Obviously the implications for service-learning and experiential education are many, but the basic message is that educators will have to deal with these new alternatives creatively and aggressively.

The Role of Service-Learning

What role will service-learning play as the script changes?

The answer is not certain.

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College students continue to have a basic interest in community service, but economic and social pressure may shove aside this interest. We must deliver the message that community service and contribution are not incompatible with career aspirations.

At least in the short term, service-learning programs need to focus more precisely on young people's current needs. This is not simply adaptation for expediency. The basic purposes of service-learning need not change. If we assume that education needs to prepare all individuals not only to earn a livelihood but also to find satisfaction in all aspects of

their lives, programs must continue to show young people the lasting importance of service to society. The need for service-learning experiences is increasingly important when the society's inclination is to move in the opposite direction. That life is not all work, that work is not just a job, and that a substantial part of life is doing for others are lessons of growing importance at a time when the focus is on self.

A more difficult problem is to relate service-learning, as opposed to broadly defined experiential education, to the needs of the nontraditional learner. For example, older women returning to or beginning college often feel they already have served their volunteer time—for their families or communities—and focus on new, remunerative career preparation. Service-learning can appeal to them, however, if it meets their need for responsible, productive, and often financially rewarding work incorporated into their educational programs.

Service-learning also may find a future in facilitating youth's difficult transition from school to work, particularly by working with the many local education-work councils. Many communities have begun to test local solutions. Some councils work closely with schools to promote programs such as career education, while others work closely with CETA.

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Both approaches offer vast potential for involving young people in community service as part of their education. The work-related problems of youth are not solely the result of inadequate education, or inadequate home environments, or inadequate information; the nation simply does not have enough jobs, especially good jobs. This scarcity means that certain groups, especially young people, are left out.

One solution would be a community-based program of service-learning. A community could start by asking, "What needs to be done in our community but is not now being done?" We might anticipate the answer: educational services, assistance for the elderly and disabled, parks and renovation projects, health care. "Who can perform these services?" Young people can—with our help. Such service enables them to make real contributions to others and to learn something about themselves and their potential.

A proposed national solution is a national youth service program. This has been discussed for about 40 years but has gained new interest through the Committee for the Study of National Service's recent report, *Youth and the Needs of the Nation*. Unfortunately the Committee's proposal lacks specific recommendations on the relationships between the program and education and contains no mention of service-learning.

A Service-Learning Scenario

Higher education is in a serious state of change; some would say turmoil. The community has less confidence in it. Frustrated employers particularly are reacting against liberal education. The resulting new vocationalism could run counter to the basic goals of service-learning programs. Some feel that the alternatives discussed above face a direct counterrevolution via a return to stricter general education requirements, symbolized by Harvard's recent tightening of its undergraduate curriculum. Others think that alternative approaches are here to stay, that pressure from students, especially older students, and enlightened educators have resulted in permanent changes. Similar divided opinions can be found on service-learning.

A few things, however, seem to be clear. The notion that experience (both prior to enrollment and institutionally supervised) is an important part of post-secondary education is probably here to stay. If service is to be a substantial component of these programs, however, educators and others must advocate service-learning more forcefully than they have so far. Advocates of service-learning have been less than aggressive in promoting service as integral to experiential education. They also may take action on local, institutional, and national levels. These measures might include the following:

- Using service-learning as one way of strengthening the education to work transition through modified experience-based career education and college work-study (It seems inevitable that the federal government will undertake additional steps, and service-learning should be visible enough to be considered a component of these activities.);
- Promoting experiential education and service-learning as a desirable activity for local education-work initiatives (such as the education-work councils) on the grounds that community service projects, statewide youth service programs, and other volunteer programs help young people move more easily into the adult world;
- Urging cooperative education and federal college work-study programs to recognize service-learning as an important educational approach;
- Persuading opinion leaders to remind citizens that service is an integral part of the American ideology;
- Devising service-learning programs suitable for older and nontraditional learners;
- Encouraging the Department of Labor to consider service as equal to employment in various public service employment programs and to examine the potential contribution of service-learning to attaining full employment.

Unless service-learning educators take measures to move their programs into the mainstream of change, they may find service-learning overshadowed—possibly overwhelmed—by more assertive alternative programs. □