

## **The University of Social Justice: Beyond community service, colleges educate for social change.**

*by Melissa Snarr*

To borrow a term from social movement theory, universities can be "movement halfway houses" that educate leaders for social justice. Higher education institutions have trained and nurtured numerous social movements and activists that have changed our world. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, which played a key role in the civil rights movement, came from a coalition of college students. Northern college students infused Freedom Summer's voter registration drives. More recently, student networks have rapidly expanded protests of corporate globalization and the U.S. Army's School of the Americas. Anti-sweatshop and living wage movements also are building momentum because of students.

These movements emerge, in part, because university faculty and staff are part of the conscientizing process of young people. Universities emphasize systemic analysis of social problems. They prize critical thinking skills. They encourage creative use of language and symbols. Combine these skills with higher education's focus on developing leaders, and we can see the potential of the universities to produce multiple generations of justice seekers.

We find the summons in our institutions' mission statements, the statements that no student, faculty, or staff ever really reads. But it's there, the call to moral learning and social justice. At some schools, the commitment is explicit: "Loyola Marymount understands and declares its purpose to be: the encouragement of learning, the education of the whole person, the service of faith, and the promotion of justice." At others, the call is embedded in an understanding of the proper use of knowledge: "Emory's mission lies in two essential, interwoven purposes: through teaching, to help men and women fully develop their intellectual, aesthetic, and moral capacities; and, through the quest for new knowledge and public service, to improve human well-being."

Universities experience enormous pressure to deliver a marketable product. But higher education is called to be more than a conduit for career-making. Our students are more than clients. Classically, education was meant for the whole person—for "full human flourishing." As University of Chicago professor Martha Nussbaum notes, U.S. higher education has been devoted particularly to the "cultivation of the whole human being for the functions of citizenship and life generally." At the core, universities are more than service providers with privileged clients. We are moral actors shaping the character and justice of society.

BUT EDUCATING change agents for social justice is not the same as encouraging increased volunteerism on campus, which is embraced much more easily by institutions and a broad political spectrum. As community service hours are required by many high schools for graduation, students arrive at college open to giving time to "those less fortunate." In fact, the Higher Education Research Center's most recent freshmen survey reported that 84 percent of students had volunteered in the last year.

At the same time, only 4 percent of college students have ever given time or money to a political organization. Less than 15 percent of voters under the age of 25 voted in the last election. The civic engagement of many young adults today is decidedly local, short-term, and apolitical (although the recent burst of anti-war organizing seems an important exception).

These statistics introduce a contrast between the approaches to "service" and "moral learning" that are embedded in our universities. As Keith Morton, director of the Feinstein Institute for Public Service at Providence College has noted, most of the service programs in our universities focus on "understanding the 'other' and, in so doing, reshaping one's self identity." In order to sensitize students to difference and the need for social cooperation, short-term service programs often focus on what service means for the student and their character formation. Volunteer activities thus center on charitable activities and/or temporary relationships that ameliorate immediate needs. The goal for student development is to realize the necessity and richness of a character based on giving and caring for the other.

While this "personal development" approach to service is worthwhile, the model also misses things. Big things. Absent are historical, economic, and political analyses that help students understand how social issues are structured in a specific community, in a specific place, at a specific time. Absent are social justice lenses that challenge students to understand social arrangements and how social change occurs. Absent is an emphasis on political engagement as key activity for those who care about people and communities.

Making the connection between personal development and social justice models is not easy for many universities and students. College students are in a developmental stage that focuses on interpersonal relationships and learning. Thus tracking how bank loans affect economic development in southwest Atlanta is not always seen as meaningful service. Students flock in droves to reading and tutoring programs in local elementary schools. But few of those students can articulate how property taxes impact school resources—and even fewer will ever vote in a local school board election.

NEGOTIATING THE threshold from interpersonal learning to structural analysis is one of the core challenges for moral learning in the university. The "service learning" movement within higher education has offered several avenues for making these connections.

First, the teaching process of many courses is shifting in higher education. Service learning models encourage many professors to pair in-class time with hands-on field work. A student might work in a local addiction clinic while she studies, in class, the social and economic influences on drug use. Deep reflection on the practice in the clinic helps both student and professor change the way classes are taught and texts are read.

Second, service learning approaches to education also change the content of academic courses. Several universities are now creating programs focused on community building and social change. Here the focus is on reading across multiple disciplines to understand the strengths and needs of communities. Community development literature is read next to economic and social theory, ethics, and environmental studies. The collaborative nature of intellectual development in the classroom, matched with the hands-on nature of group projects, forces students beyond individualized models of social change.

Universities that nurture change agents are those that bring together the personal and the political. They break through cycles of remedial charity and systematically address preventative justice. Or as my college mentor often bellowed, they call us to be "poverty warriors," not just poverty companions.

*Melissa Snarr is director of the Ethics and Servant Leadership program of the Center for Ethics at Emory University in Atlanta and a lecturer in religion at Emory College.*

*The University of Social Justice.* by Melissa Snarr. Sojourners Magazine, May-June 2003 (Vol. 32, No. 3, pp. 28-30, 32). Features.