

Chapter 15

HISTORY OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF ACADEMICALLY BASED SERVICE-LEARNING AT CALVIN COLLEGE

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Introduction

THE STORY OF ACADEMICALLY BASED SERVICE-LEARNING (ABSL) at Calvin College is a story of how an idea made its way from the outer edges of the academy into the mainstream. The idea that bubbled up from within the Student Volunteer Service¹ was that educating Calvin students for the service of Christ in society could somehow be more effective if students could discuss their service with their professors in the context of their academic work. If students could integrate reading and classroom discussion with service experiences, they could perhaps become more thoughtful, humble, and helpful in their service. In the early 1990s, these thoughts began as small springs of discussion and experimentation, became a trickle, then a stream, and now a recognized tributary to education at Calvin College.

The unique aspect of this story is that the primary development of the ABSL program did not take place through political maneuvering, demonstration programs, grant funding, and the like. Rather, a small group of people, with

¹ The Student Volunteer Service was a small program within the Student Life Division of Calvin College. It began as a student initiative called the “KIDS” program (Kindling Intellectual Development in Students) in 1964. In the late 1980s and early 1990s 400-500 students each semester were involved in a wide array of volunteerism in educational and social service organizations in the Grand Rapids community.

sanction from the college administration, developed and shaped the concept of service-learning for Calvin College. It was a process that was communal and collegial, with the emphasis up working within the existing framework of the mission, goals, and culture of Calvin College as a Christian liberal arts institution. This chapter will trace the discussion and the issues that this group of people dealt with to provide a rationale and to build a foundation for the ABSL efforts at Calvin College.

Chronology of Academically Based Service-Learning Development

In the early 1990s, the concept of service-learning began making its way into the consciousness of Calvin College. Participants in the new organization, Campus Compact,² were discussing the connections between service and education, and there were some grant opportunities for developing service-learning programs. However, although the academic administration saw some potential in service-learning, it did not see any practice or models for its use that seemed to resonate within Calvin's particular mission and culture. From several discussions, questions began to emerge: Could Calvin College define and shape service-learning in a way that fit with our task of preparing students for lives of service to Christ in the world? What would happen if a group of people wrestled with this concept in light of Calvin's educational philosophy and goals?

Calvin's president and provost took up the challenge of these questions and appointed an ad-hoc committee on service-learning chaired by a tenured and respected faculty member. The committee's mandate was to define the term *service-learning* for Calvin College and to recommend its place within the curriculum. The committee did a good deal of its work at the 1992 Campus Compact Summer Institute on Integrating Service with Academic Study at Brown University. During this week-long institute, members observed and participated in what was then the foremost thinking and practice of service-learning.

By February of 1993, the committee had completed its work and presented a document to the Educational Policy Committee. The report defined "academically based service" as "service activities that are related to and

² Campus Compact is a national coalition of college and university presidents committed to the civic purpose of higher education.

integrated with the conceptual content of a college course, and which serve as a pedagogical resource to meet the academic goals of the course as well as to meet community or individual needs.” The key recommendation of the report was to “encourage the faculty to incorporate academically based service, where appropriate, in courses in the Calvin College curriculum.” The report also set forth criteria for academically based service and guidelines for integrating it in courses. The Calvin faculty unanimously approved the report, and the Student Volunteer Service was renamed the Service-Learning Center, signaling a shift from an emphasis on service not intentionally connected to learning (volunteerism) to service-learning in which learning is an integral component of service.

Calvin College initially supported the effort through redirecting the resources of the Student Volunteer Service toward supporting course and community-partnership development and through giving a faculty member release time to promote the program. After two years, Calvin added another staff person through the Student Life Division whose primary job responsibilities focused on developing what is now called academically based service-learning. Under a combined effort of both Academic Affairs and Student Life, participation in ABSL has grown to more than eighty faculty members, with at least forty courses each semester. With this brief chronology of the development of the academically based service-learning program, we turn now to the discussion of the issues involved in developing service-learning in a Christian liberal arts institution.

Defining Service-Learning for Calvin College

The concept of service-learning was just beginning to make its way into the broader consciousness of higher education in the United States in the 1990s. It emerged from the fringes of the academy, having been practiced in experiential educational and volunteer programs, without a clear definition of its meaning and context. Thus, “it” became something that “everyone” thought was a good idea, though for many and varied reasons. One of the Calvin participants in the Campus Compact Institute quipped, “I never met a group of people who could spend so much time talking about something without defining it.” In fact, the term *service-learning* was essentially unusable in any broad discussion. Motivations for individual and institutional interest ranged widely. The concept

of service-learning was bringing together people with a conservative agenda that included educating young people in traditional values as well as people who saw participation in service-learning as a way to challenge traditional cultural values and assumptions. The combination of these banners with those carrying the more pragmatic and institutional concerns of community relations, student recruitment, and retention created almost a surreal atmosphere in some of the discussions.

Earlier, in 1989, a gathering of the current leading practitioners in the field had developed “Principles of Good Practice for Combining Service and Learning” (The Wingspread Report 1989). The term *service-learning* actually comes out of a southern regional education board program in the late 1960s and was defined as the “integration of the accomplishment of a needed task with educational growth” (Sigmon 1994). The Calvin College Institute team and the ad-hoc committee stayed fairly close to the definition, defining it as “activities which are designed both to contribute to the meeting of community or individual needs, and to aid in the development of the knowledge and understanding of the service giver.” They claimed service-learning first of all as a concept or strategy, not as a particular program or structure. This definition also kept service-learning broad enough to embrace its use in cocurricular programs in the institution. However, that still left the problem of talking more precisely about curricular service-learning. For this, the committee alighted upon academically based service introduced to them in a speech by Ira Harkavy of the University of Pennsylvania at the Campus Compact Institute. Academically Based Service, which was later changed to Academically Based Service-Learning, designates service-learning that is integrated with course content.

Thus, the Calvin definition is, on the one hand, a concept or strategy with potentially broad application; yet, on the other hand it remains simply a pedagogical tool. As the committee reported, “It serves curricular goals rather than shapes them.” This distinguishes the Calvin definition. The National and Community Service Act of 1990, which provided the basis for K-12 service-learning, reserves the term *service-learning* only for service that is integrated into the students academic curriculum. According to this definition the words *service*, *community service*, or *volunteerism* would describe all service activities that take place outside of the curricular structure. However, at Calvin College, service-learning is not defined programmatically but as a broad spectrum of activities that meet the definition. The term *academically based service-learning*

is a subset of service-learning used to describe the integration of service-learning in the curriculum.

Credit for Service vs. Credit for Learning

At Calvin College, those advocating for service-learning were not advocating its simple inclusion, but rather its integration. At that time several educational institutions were opting for the inclusion of service-learning. Those arguing for inclusion usually said something like, “If we value service as much as our mission statement says we do, then service should at least take up space in the allocation of credits.” Furthermore, the argument usually continued, “If service is so important, then every student who graduates from this institution should be involved in service.” These arguments for inclusion often raised the ire of people who countered with concerns about “*requiring* volunteerism” (an oxymoron), “watering down the curriculum,” and the negative impact on the quality of service that would be performed by those who had been “forced” into it.

Granting credit simply for performing service was of little interest at Calvin College. Rather, the ad-hoc committee held the view that credit ought to be given for learning specific material as set forth in curricula and specific course goals. The committee members did not argue for the inclusion of service for its own sake but for the integration of service as a *means* of education. Thus, in Calvin ABSL courses, credit is not given simply for participating in a service experience. The service is viewed as an assignment or a learning task that will enable the students to understand and apply the course material. In order to receive credit for their ABSL course, students must demonstrate their understanding and competencies through “academic” work (i.e., tests, journals, papers, demonstrations). Thus, there was little interest in mandating that students fulfill service requirements outside the curriculum as a graduation requirement or for giving credit for stand-alone service experiences. Credit, per se, is given for students’ documented learning, not merely for service. Weaving service-learning into the content of the course was the primary goal of academically based service-learning.

Bringing Together Ends and Means

The committee was careful in its recommendation of ABSL, defining it as a strategy rather than as a goal. It recommended that its use be voluntary, with faculty members evaluating its “potential in terms of the goals and content of their courses as well as their own ability to be effective with it.” Indeed the committee was careful not to present any kind of transformational vision for education through service-learning. Perhaps it was this aspect of the report that caused one service-learning advocate from outside the institution to remark that the report was “right of center.”

Rather than advocating a new vision for education, the committee pointed to the transformational vision already held by the college. This vision for education, flowing from the Reformed confessions, lays special emphasis on the sovereignty of God over every dimension of reality and on the vocation of believers, in covenant with their Redeemer, to live in gratitude as agents of renewal in the world. The report cites three major educational principles that flow from this vision:

1. Since God claims all of our communal and individual lives, both in its purpose and practice, Calvin cannot separate obedience to service from its goals or practice of education.
2. Christian education addresses the whole person—not just the mind, but the heart and the will.
3. Christian education is a communal mission directed toward a needy world, not an individualistic focus on the fulfillment of the self.

It was commitment to this vision that brought the committee to advocate for academically based service-learning as a potential strategy for Calvin. It was the result of honestly probing Calvin’s effectiveness in transmitting to students the vision of education as preparation for service. Were our students catching the vision that drives the institution and its faculty? Was a Calvin education really challenging the 1990s cultural value of individual fulfillment without considering its impact on others? Had the life and educational experiences of our students prepared them adequately to understand, and then apply independently, the vision of Christian education? The honest answer was: “No, not enough.”

Thus, the committee concluded that, if academically based service-learning could be integrated into courses in such a way as to engage the student more actively in the content *AND* to develop a communal vision for practical obedient service, it was a strategy that certainly ought to be promoted.

In coming to the conclusion that the end goals of a Calvin College education should have a greater influence in shaping means and methods of teaching, the committee stepped out with the thinking that philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff expressed in a 1983 speech at Wheaton College. Wolterstorff, in his early days at Calvin College, had been one of the principal contributors to the guiding document for Calvin's core curriculum, Christian Liberal Arts Education (CLAE). In more recent years, Wolterstorff (now at Yale University) had become critical of CLAE's approach of relying on the teaching of the academic disciplines to prepare students for service to the world (Wolterstorff 1983). Central to CLAE was the concept of *disinterested study*—a study that did not seek application at every turn but sought to develop broad-based understanding and knowledge in an environment that would encourage objectivity and openness. Supposedly, from a solid basis of knowledge and understanding, students would then be equipped to apply this understanding in service to the world. However, by the early 1990s, the difficulties in this approach were becoming more evident. CLAE assumed that students would have strong motivations both for the pure study of the disciplines for their own sake and for making their own applications to service. However, as one committee member pointed out, *disinterested study* could easily become *uninterested study*. Furthermore, the notion of *disinterested study* does not take into account the student's motivation to actually apply learning in grateful service. Many a student's motivation had much more to do with applying their education in pursuit of individual achievement and wealth than in becoming more thoughtful and insightful servants.

Service-Learning as a Subset of Experiential Education

Could academically based service-learning really be an effective enhancement to the lecture-discussion method of teaching? Would not its use lead to uninformed and ill-considered activism that would replace effective education rather than enhance it? Would not its use lead to substituting important disciplinary content for touchy-feely discussions that were devoid of critical

inquiry? These were among the critical questions faced by the committee. The lecture-discussion methods of teaching were familiar and comfortable for the majority of faculty members. The pedagogy of experiential education (of which service-learning is a subset) was not widely employed at Calvin College. The faculty members on the committee were “traditional academics” and enjoyed teaching through the lecture-discussion model. For the most part, they did not utilize experiential-education pedagogy in their own teaching.

In this discussion, the committee was also limited by the lack of research and evidence for the claims for service-learning as pedagogy. Although it cited David Kolb’s 1984 work on experiential learning, and the 1989 Wingspread Report, it primarily relied on two more intuitive arguments: (1) respected professors at respected institutions are doing this with good results, and, (2) “Why not us?”

The Campus Compact Institute for Integrating Service and Academic Study was tremendously helpful in shoring up the first argument. The Institute, held at Brown University, had seminar leaders from Antioch, Cornell, and Stanford. The participants had in-depth discussions with several professors who were utilizing service-learning in connection with coursework, even in disciplines such as philosophy and English. Furthermore, several of the Institute participants were from Christian colleges and universities: Azusa, Baylor, Messiah, Loyola in Baltimore, and Gettysburg. Thus, participating in the Institute in the early 1990s gave Calvin the opportunity to see that becoming involved in service-learning was more than simply “jumping on a bandwagon.” It was an opportunity to enter into a national discussion and to contribute to the development of a promising strategy for education.

Second, the committee took the why not us? stand for service-learning. It recognized that the lecture-discussion methods carried the weight of tradition rather than research. Thus, it sidestepped any debate between traditional academics and experiential educators. It cited the more recent emphasis within the college on pedagogical pluralism and greater recognition of the diverse levels, gifts, and styles of learning among students, and it put the decision to utilize academically based service-learning squarely in the hands of the individual professor. The closing statements of the report summarize the two arguments thus: “We do not believe that academically based service is appropriate for every course or every professor. But we are persuaded, that if done well, academically based service is a teaching strategy which is not only

consistent with Calvin's educational philosophy and mission, but also promotes the college's overarching aim in new and powerful ways."

Building on Strengths

Although the movement to establish ABSL is having profound effects upon teaching and learning at Calvin College, the effort never took an oppositional or crusader-like approach. Given the lack of clarity about service-learning and its potential within the liberal arts, it would have been quite easy for the academic administration to polarize discussion rather than to seek consensus and understanding. Instead, the movement to establish ABSL built upon the strengths of the institution, one of which was a supportive academic administration, that without pushing or advocating kept the doors open for dialogue and discussion within the Calvin community. In addition, Calvin has not followed the route of other institutions to independently set up a new program or initiative that could have created resentment and resistance rather than support among faculty—ABSL comes from within the faculty.

The ABSL movement also builds upon the Calvin faculty's respect for critical inquiry and its commitment to the mission of Calvin College to prepare its students for lives of service. Among the faculty on the ad-hoc committee, there were several who did not enter the process with any expressed interest in promoting service-learning. Nonetheless they entered into an investigation and consideration of the concept with openness and careful analysis. They exemplified the ideal of being able to stand apart from a problem or issue—a necessary skill in *disinterested study*—to develop a sound foundation for a pedagogy that would promote engagement and involvement. The careful thinking and objectivity with which professors at Calvin have approached their ABSL courses has led to some very creative and thoughtful applications of the pedagogy.

Finally, rather than seek outside grant funding to begin a new initiative, the college has utilized the resources already allocated to the Service-Learning Center. academically based service-learning is built on the foundation of community relationships built over many years by the student volunteer programs that preceded the Service-Learning Center. Calvin already had good ties with area schools and nonprofit organizations. Community organizations trusted its stability and professionalism, and there were many personal

relationships developed over years of working together. The community had good experience with Calvin students in their organizations; thus creating a base of organizations willing to work with faculty to provide service-learning experiences for their students. Academically based service-learning has at its disposal an entire office with a director, office coordinator and twelve to fifteen paid student coordinators, and a transportation program. Faculty members desiring to utilize ABSL do not have to worry much about the logistical factors involved for them. These resources are financed out of the general budget of the college, giving a secure base of funding.

Conclusion

No one involved in the ad-hoc committee on service-learning in the early 1990s could have predicted the growth and development of the program. Certainly our understanding and approach has matured and developed as we have gained more experience. Yet, the thoughtful approaches to service-learning and the collaboration and collegiality that still characterize the program have their roots in the way in which the program developed in those early years.

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