Building Partnerships for Service-Learning

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Barbara Jacoby and Associates

A Review Essay by Jeffrey P. Bouman, Ph.D.

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In publishing their 2003 *Building Partnerships for Service-Learning*, Barbara Jacoby and Associates have produced a fitting follow up work to her 1996 *Service-Learning in Higher Education: Concepts and Practices*. In order for the pedagogy and philosophy of a meaningful service-learning program to work, a campus must carefully attend to its partnership connections, both internal and external. Building on her earlier case that service-learning as experiential education effectively promotes student learning and development by addressing human and community needs in a context of reflection and reciprocity, Jacoby adds to the formula the necessity of meaningful partnerships.

Borrowing from the health professions' 2001 statement on partnership, Jacoby defines a partnership as "a close mutual cooperation between parties having common interests, responsibilities, privileges and power" (p. 7). More than simply an exchange of resources, a true partnership builds on a 'partnership synergy' to create something new that is beyond simply the sum of its parts. Staff and faculty on Christian college and university campuses would do well to ponder this notion of synergy, and ask how the Biblical imagery of a body with many parts might inform a less egocentric view of the world for institutions with a purportedly Christian bent. As in much of what is labeled "Christian" in contemporary American society, Christian higher education must continue to ask what defines an institution as such, and how the counter-cultural values of Christianity can inform a bureaucracy such as a college or university.

Practitioners and researchers at Christian colleges and universities have been surprisingly slow to engage in the rapidly expanding service-learning movement for a variety of reasons, not least of which are dominant perceptions regarding the limited good service-learning programs provide students and community. By containing the value of excellent service-learning pedagogy to student learning, student development, and civic renewal, Jacoby has left aside the larger benefits of enabling students to connect their intellectual passions, the skill of their hands, and their more comprehensive faith commitments in a unified loving God with heart, soul, mind and strength. What sets Christian colleges apart ought to be their insistence that their core mission amounts to nothing less than a total pursuit of biblical Shalom. Lest this high standard be misunderstood, I'll quickly point out that Christian colleges and universities have a long way to go toward even adopting many available sound principles of service-learning and civic engagement from the larger higher education community, much less becoming leaders as institutions and individuals. While there is clearly much room for improvement, what better ground to stand on in approaching

both internal or external partnerships than a solid theological understanding of human dignity as a reflection of *imago Dei*, and of God's common grace in enabling all varieties of communities to reflect that image?

Refreshingly, Jacoby and associates go far beyond what one might expect in a book on service-learning partnerships. The partnerships forged between a campus and its local community partners, be they schools, non-profit or government agencies, or clinics, are only one type of many necessary partnerships. Helpful chapters on partnerships within colleges between student- and academic-affairs units, on inter- and intra-campus partnerships, on partnerships with students, on colleges partnering with K-12 educators and school systems, on specific neighborhood partnerships, corporate partners, and international partnerships all enhance a broad discussion of what real partnerships might look like to the campus taking its institutional civic commitments seriously.

The many contributors delve deeply into current literature and highlight existing programs related to the social, intellectual, and fiduciary benefits of thoughtful and effective partnerships available to institutions of higher education. Within institutions, Cathy McHugh Engstrom advises a careful collaboration between student- and academic-affairs departments. Her analysis unfortunately omits the external relations perspective. While student- and academic affairs departments are often the primary campus locations of offices of service-learning, without a strong communication link to the public relations and external relations department, many opportunities for community collaboration can be missed. Development offices, often central in grant-writing efforts, must also be included in the collaborative link. Engstrom wisely advises the formation of an advisory board with representation from a variety of internal and external stakeholders. On a related theme, for campuses seeking to begin a program in service-learning, or self-audit existing programs, Maryland's Jennifer Pigza and Marie Troppe present three models of potential campus infrastructure for service-learning: concentrated, fragmented, or integrated (110-11). For a campus's greatest success, they recommend an integrated model with multiple engaged departments linked to multiple connections to the external community.

Irene Fisher and Shannon Huff Wilson from the University of Utah recommend that partnerships between campus administrators and students mirror the benchmarks for campus/community partnerships: reciprocity, integrity, and equal voices. They also advocate long-term relationships between students and institutional leaders, service-learning program administrators, faculty, alumni, local community leaders and residents, and state and national service organizations. Three Campus Compact administrators suggest that effective partnerships between and among institutions of higher education will better enable the academy to fulfill its civic commitments. Campus Compact benchmarks (2000), and Judith Ramaley's lessons (2000) serve as the ground on which they argue that, "an ideal partnership among several institutions synchronizes the partners' multiple academic strengths and goals with multiple facets of community interests" (133). Challenges to this kind of effective inter-institutional collaboration include: the complexity of higher education, the autonomous nature of colleges and universities, poor planning and design, a failure to maintain communication and relationships, weak, divided, or inconsistent program leadership, a clash of different cultures, and a lack of clarity about goals (137).

Factors to consider for effective relationships with local community partners include the time available to spend on partnership activities, inter-institutional fit, attention to power dynamics between partner organizations, effective communication, acknowledging the expertise of each partner, and an effective plan for evaluation and assessment.

Especially relevant and often ignored in conversations about partnership are corporate partners. Stacey Reimer and Joshua McKeown provide a helpful reminder that corporations as well as universities and colleges are waking up to the social realities that there is a cost to the lack of action regarding social injustice and inequity. Taking account of the vast differences between higher education and industry, this shared responsibility can be leveraged for the gain of both if each is considered within the context of learning organization literature.

While Jacoby's anthology provides tremendous breadth to the discussion, three additional sources should be considered by Christian colleges considering strengthening their efforts in service-learning partnerships. Regan Schaffer's article connecting institutional mission to service-learning in *Christian Higher Education*, (Spring, 2004), alongside Todd Ream's recent "Tales from Two Cities" article in *Growth* (Spring 2004) provide a very helpful backdrop to evaluating the potential of service-learning partnerships in Christian higher education. And Nicholas Wolterstorff's prescient speech, given at Wheaton College in 1982 and reprinted in Joldersma's *Educating for Shalom* (2004, pp. 27-35), supplies a portrait of the historical landscape for Christian colleges that is the best theoretical and historical impetus available for skeptical faculty members or administrators. When service-learning partnerships are viewed as avenues for more effectively realizing the mission of the Christian college, situated as a contributing institution to the larger mission of the "holy catholic Church," then paying closer attention to the plethora of available partnerships becomes a much more urgent and relevant enterprise.