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## Service-Learning Code of Ethics

Jeffrey P. Bouman  
*Calvin College*

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## Service-Learning Code of Ethics

A. Chapdelaine, A. Ruiz, J. Warchal, & C. Wells

*Reviewed by Jeffrey P. Bouman, Ph.D.*

A member of ACSD since 1989, Jeffrey P. Bouman received his B.A. in Sociology from Calvin College, his M.A. in Student Personnel from Slippery Rock University, and his Ph.D. in Higher Education from the University of Michigan's Center for the Study of Higher and Postsecondary Education. He is currently the Director of the Service-Learning Center at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

One big lacuna in the contemporary service-learning landscape is a thorough discussion of the field's ethical dilemmas. Four scholars at three Eastern Pennsylvania universities have attempted to fill this gap. Their work is overdue for faculty, administrators and students who have been utilizing service-learning as pedagogy, program, or philosophy for any period of time, but timely or just ahead of the curve for most institutions still working to join the service-learning movement.

Reflective by definition, the field of service-learning quite naturally wrestles with issues of right and wrong behavior and approach in the interactions that occur between students, faculty members, and community members. This work reflects a commitment to the continuous improvement of the growing movement (characterized by) *of* service-learning practice.

The authors have rightly determined that a great deal of the activity that occurs in service-learning falls on uncertain ethical terrain. For example, when an older-than-average student who is a board member with a non-profit service provider is asked to participate in a service-learning project with a similar non-profit in the same city, she feels uncertain how her work with a "rival" agency will be received by either agency, how should she respond? What guidelines exist for her to consult in her response? Or, when a college student learns through a pen pal relationship with a third grade child that the child's mother occasionally engages in questionable parenting practices that may endanger the child, how should she decide if it is appropriate to break the implied confidentiality with the child in order to provide adequate protection to the child? Or, as happened earlier this year at my own institution, imagine a thoughtful Christian student who has reasonable commitments to a pro-choice political position in the interest of overall women's health, and the reduction of the number of abortions nationally. How should this student respond when his first-year orientation group is assigned to a service-learning project at a local pregnancy resource agency and he is subjected to a half-hour politically-charged tirade against the neighbor agency, Planned Parenthood?

The authors have answered these questions with three general themes. First, they provide an overview of the field of ethics and its philosophical foundations. Second, they offer examples of ethical dilemmas faced by students, faculty members and

community members. And third, they present a model, the *Service-Learning Code of Ethics*, as a preliminary attempt to establish a codified set of guides for service-learning ethical practice.

The book is outlined in five parts, by population. After an overview of their proposed code of ethics, they offer three sections as the main body of their work, applying the code to students, faculty, and administrators. They then conclude with suggested practices relative to assessment of ethical practice in service-learning, as well as resources for faculty and administrators related to risk management for institutions engaged in service-learning activities. Their intentional omission of community practitioners in the application section indicates a flawed understanding of the nature of service-learning partnership. The authors argue that “the code does not include guidelines for community agency personnel, because they will be guided by agency policies and the code of ethics of their professional disciplines” (p. 17). While perhaps true, this could also be said of faculty and administrators, each of whom could be guided by professional guidelines established by the AAUP, or CAS standards for student development practitioners. Students, also, could be guided by university policies in their ethical decision-making while service-learning. By leaving community partners out of the proposed code of ethics, the authors allow the spirit of partnership to exist in an uneven fashion, and forget about the need to go beyond traditional relationships when working in true partnership.

The code of ethics presented by the authors is based on five ethical principles: beneficence, non-maleficence, justice/fairness/equity, fidelity/responsibility, autonomy and respect for people’s rights, and integrity. In their explanation of ethics, the authors present the history and philosophy of ethics in as neutral a fashion as possible: “Morality is not necessarily tied to religion, but is about the values a society holds dear. A moral dilemma occurs when there is a conflict between values and ideas about what is moral.” Huh? This classically benign statement regarding ethics and its independence from religion might be more believable if it did not arise in this particular country with this particular history between organized religion and ethical principles. Unfortunately, this level of overt anti-intellectualism colors the remainder of the book’s argument for thoughtful Christians aware of the complex relationship between ethics and religion, and the authors do their work an ironic disservice in an attempt to be religiously objective and distant. A better approach would have been a more honest assessment of the mutual philosophical roots shared by religious and non-religious people in contemporary society.

Still, despite its limitations, the book comes at a significant time in the development of an important movement in American higher education. It is time that the partners involved in service-learning at the university level begin a serious discussion of the ethical standards that will guide service-learning, as pedagogy, program, and philosophy. On the heels of important works such as Barbara Jacoby’s *Building Partnerships for Service-Learning* (2003) and Anne Colby, et al’s *Educating Citizens: Preparing America’s Undergraduates for Lives of Moral and Civic Responsibility* (2003), the authors have made an important first step to prompting a broad discussion of ethics in service-learning practice. Christian scholars and practitioners that feel left out of the discussion bear the responsibility of offering alternatives to the general scholarly community, and indeed, should do so.