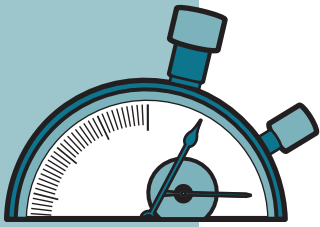# Present Tense

A Journal of Rhetoric in Society

Program Review:
The Land-Grant Way – Connected
Knowing and the Call of Service

James M. Dubinsky
Virginia Tech

Program Review: The Land-Grant Way – Connected Knowing and the Call of Service
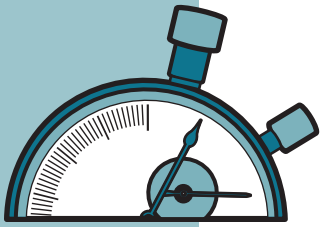
James M. Dubinsky

In *Academic Duty*, former Stanford president Donald Kennedy explains that the "terms *responsibility* and *ethics* are often used interchangeably in speaking of the professions, and it is tempting to elide them and let it go at that. But there is a distinction between two different kinds of obligation, one worth making. . . . Responsibility suggests the duty one owes to the institution—and, first and foremost, to one's students" (19). My intention is to discuss this sense of responsibility, which I believe is civic and communal in nature. To do so, I will offer some background about a center I direct, the Virginia Tech (VT) Center for Student Engagement and Community Partnerships (CSECP), and then offer some thoughts about the role of higher education to prepare students to be rhetoricians in society.

History and Rationale for CSECP

In 2006, VT implemented a revised strategic plan that reaffirmed its "commitment to achieving excellence as a comprehensive land-grant university that makes innovative contributions in learning, discovery, and engagement to the Commonwealth of Virginia, the nation, and the world" (Steger). In February

2007, to determine how best to create a more explicit focus on engagement as a means to educate citizens of the world, the university commissioned a Task Force on Student Engagement that I was asked to co-chair. The task force's members were well-respected members of the VT staff and faculty selected by Dr. John Dooley, the Vice President for Outreach and International Affairs. One of my first acts was to request that Dr. Dooley add several community leaders to the task force. He agreed; we began work in February 2007.

Two months into our work, external events added a secondary mission—to integrate our work into a community-wide response to the shooting tragedy of April 16, 2007. The first program to emerge from our work was VT-ENGAGE, which kicked-off on October 16, 2007 with a goal of encouraging 10 hours of service from everyone in the community and a larger goal of reaching 300,000 hours of service. VT-ENGAGE became a hands-on enactment of our university's motto (*Ut Prosim*, That I May Serve) and an appropriate response to Nikki Giovanni's "We are Virginia Tech" speech. Our motto and mission became one; VT's identity became inextricably

linked to a strong emphasis on extra-curricular or volunteer service. And VT-ENGAGE's motto of *Remember, Serve, Learn* reinforced the healing power of service, not only in directing those experiencing grief from the tragedy but also in focusing energy during difficult and stressful times caused by natural disasters, economic turmoil, and other natural and human tragedies.

While the task force's work became very challenging after the April 16 shooting, it also was challenging at the beginning. The task force's members came from many different communities: faculty, staff, administrators, students, and local community organizations, bringing with them different conceptions of engagement, its relevance to higher education, and its connection to our strategic plan. After an initial discussion that was more like a WWE free-for-all, we realized that our first task would be to define ground rules, or in this case, essential terms. Before any change could occur, individuals needed to come to agreement by finding a way to "state in common words the needs and hopes of common people" (Brigance qtd. in Timmerman xi). Our common words seemed to be "engagement," "student engagement," "civic engagement," and "service-learning." Until we could agree upon these terms, we could not proceed to "reason together, in public . . . for the common good" (Ober 140).

The most debated of our terms was "service-learning." In our discussions, we encountered the difficulty inherent in integrating these "two complex concepts: community action, the 'service,' and efforts to learn from that action and connect what is learned to existing knowledge, the 'learning'" (Stanton 2). Eventually, we realized that the difficulty and the solution for this challenge exist most explicitly at the place of the hyphen, a symbol of the reciprocity or "symbiotic relationship" between the two concepts (Migliore qtd. in Jacoby 5).

Ultimately, the issue was even larger than service-learning; the issue became the purpose of teaching. After much discussion, we came to a conclusion similar to the one Marshall Gregory advocates: the "real aim of teaching is helping students acquire such capacities of mind and heart as will assist them in living lives that are autonomous, personally enriched, socially responsible, intellectually perspicuous, and morally defensible" (129). We learned, as have many others, that the most direct route to that end is the engagement road.

Our case for engagement was neither naïve nor novel. We relied on the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and the Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities ("Engaged Institution") for support.
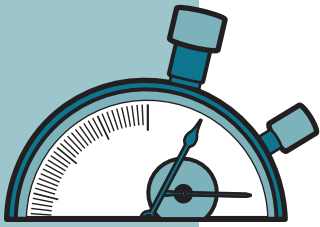
The Kellogg Commission brought university presidents (past and present) together to study how institutions of higher learning could best meet the needs of society. One of the Commission's recommendations was a recommitment to society through a more productive involvement with communities associated with the universities' missions ("Executive Summaries"). A key point of their (and our) argument is that engagement cuts across and is embedded in all university missions.[1]

A critical part of our mission was to envision a *VT Model for Student Engagement*, connected directly to the University's strategic plan, and focused on educating the whole student by expanding, supporting, and designing:

* holistic, transformative educational experiences
* reciprocal community partnerships
* cross-cultural, international experiences
* ethical leadership opportunities inside and outside the classroom

In our report, we offered a five-year implementation plan that we believed would lead to a successful achievement of this model. One consensus recommendation was the need to connect students and community partners to current research initiatives, such as 1) energy, materials, and the environment, 2) health, food, and nutrition, 3) social and individual transformation, and 4) innovative technologies and complex systems that address pressing problems of today— locally and globally.

Mission of the CSECP

The foundational element in our plan was to recommend the creation of a Center for Student Engagement and Community Partnerships (CSECP). This center would be charged with 1) ongoing needs identification, 2) capacity building, and 3) assessment activities related to engaged scholarship and student engagement (curricular, co-curricular, and extracurricular).

CSECP acts as a locus for coordination of assets, education and dissemination of knowledge, and assessment; plays a coordinating role between campus and community; and collects and disseminates partnership opportunities. Founded on a core belief that student-community interaction is essential to transforming students into global citizens, CSECP also works to establish competencies related to service: leadership; multiculturalism and internationalism; and personal, moral, and ethical development. We focus on the critical connection between our land-grant university and the many communities it serves.
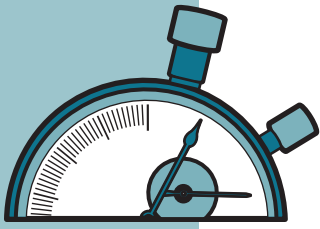
Accomplishments of the CSECP: SERVE and Service

In our first two years, we have combined the volunteer emphasis of VT-ENGAGE and the curricular focus on service-learning into a unit that is larger and more comprehensive than either. We report our accomplishments in quantitative ways, but we also believe that narrative feedback, such as the quotation below from Andy Morikawa, director of the Community Foundation of the New River Valley (CFNRV), is critical, especially given our mission of community building. Andy says

> What I find most important about CSECP's achievements, significant in and of themselves, is the pattern they define of a next generation of service that is emerging defined by its ambition to more fully enact the university's commitment to ut prosim. We might call it Service 2.0. Where Service 1.0 separated the provider and recipient, deepening an already great divide, Service 2.0 searches to affiliate, to span the divides of race, class, place, and religion, blurring the lines of who serves and who is served. This is servant leadership.

Andy's comment points to our ability to create a VT Model for Student Engagement. One element of that model is to present what we call strategic initiatives, each linked to the strategic plan. In the fall of 2009, for example, we launched a living and learning initiative, SERVE (Students Engaging and Responding through Volunteer Experiences), to foster the rich student-community interaction described in the center's mission. SERVE students live with their peers and work with local non-profit organizations so that they can learn to "be present in" and "have an impact on" their new surroundings. We pair "in-the-field" ventures with in-class discussions, reflection sessions, and speaker seminars. The fundamental objective of the program is to meld theory, service, and reflection, using ePortfolios, as a catalyst for personal growth, leadership development, and active citizenship.

Rhetoric and Engagement

As rhetoric and engagement are historically linked,[2] contemporary rhetoricians have a direct stake in fostering active citizenship. Many faculty and administrators at land-grant universities share in this sense of responsibility. In a survey that colleagues and I conducted regarding the land-grant mission, nearly 84 percent of faculty and administrators at VT and other land-grant institutions believed that a "special charge exists to educate students for citizenship." Yet, despite this, fewer than 20 percent were actively working to address that issue or had a plan in place to address it (Dubinsky, James-Deramo, and Eaton, "Educating").
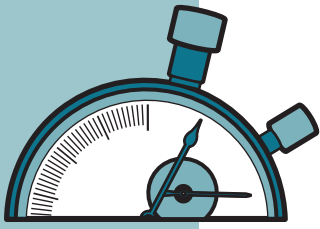
One reason some faculty may be less than motivated to act as "agents of democracy" may be the belief that such work isn't possible or plausible due to the incompatibility of it with curricular responsibilities or due to the perception that students would resist or would be apathetic. Yes, it is true that students might seem unconnected. A 2003 survey of VT's incoming freshman showed that while over 36.5 percent of incoming freshman believe it is important to be a community leader, less than 17 percent volunteer or planned to volunteer for community work. Many performed public service in high school because they were required to do so or because they felt it was in their best interest to do so.

While these statistics about students may be accurate, I believe that students want to be engaged; they just need direction, opportunity, and a way to connect service to their classroom experiences. And data exist to support this position: in a number of studies, service-learning has shown to be a potent civic educator.[3] In my own study, I found that if the benefits of service were explicit and service became a text in the class, a significant majority (over 85 percent) come away with a positive attitude toward service (Dubinsky, "Service Learning").

Thus, I have learned to be explicit in providing direction, offering opportunities, and outlining a way, a *land-grant way*, for learning and serving. I explain that the idea of public service as part of the higher education mission is, essentially, an outgrowth of the land-grant status of universities. I explain that the purpose of land-grant institutions was to satisfy the need for higher education in newly settled states and to carry out basic and applied research and disseminate that knowledge to the public.[4]

As a result, students discover that service-learning projects extend the walls of the classroom beyond the university. Service-learning projects provide them with settings in which to think about and apply the abstract concepts they learn in the classroom. As they learn course material, students come to understand that they are moving closer to becoming professionals by serving others. Students begin to appreciate the opportunities to listen to and walk with others. But that appreciation takes time and effort; students need time for reflection about community and self.

With reflection, students bridge knowledge and experience, and in so doing achieve what some scholars have called "connected knowing." The implications of this type of knowing seem clear. Students develop a concern for others; they learn that they have valuable skills and talents, that what they know can be put to use for far more than just earning a living.
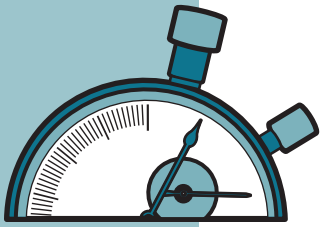
Stephen Schultz talks about the relationship between feminist notions of "connected knowing" and community service as an educational enterprise. He speaks about the "values of the heart—a concern for the common good, a sense of compassion, the courage to seek justice, a devotion to one's community—which require a sense of connection to others that an abstracted education cannot provide" (214).[5] Integrating real-world assignments (e.g., writing grants) into one's courses offers students opportunities to develop their skills as professional writers while simultaneously cultivating a connected sense of civic idealism.

Building linkages between traditional classroom learning and lived experience has been one of the primary tenets of my teaching. However, that work asks students to bridge knowledge and experience, which also asks them to examine their beliefs about and perspectives on the individual's role in society. That kind of inquiry takes time and a willingness to reflect. It also requires that I, as a teacher, learn about my students and try to see their world and our classrooms through their eyes, for what I believe about them lies at the heart of my implicit theories and beliefs about teaching.
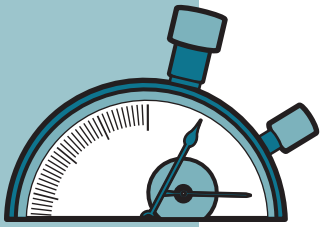
In essence, so much of what I do is linked not just to service-learning but also to a larger concept of service to society. For me, that kind of service is not an avocation or even an action that might earn any great immediate or long-term reward. Rather, it is closer to what Robert Coles calls "rationale for a life" (6). By viewing service in this way, we begin to see who we might be in addition to teachers and students of writing and rhetoric. We might become a *community* of volunteers and leaders who practice servant leadership.

Taking time to reflect upon this "picture" has helped me better understand and articulate my "discursive realities," one in which everyone's contributions are valued. With this knowledge, I have a means of understanding who my students and I are and what we are capable of doing with language. We connect our "knowing" and our "doing" in a more complete kind of education, one that focuses on the true ends – people. Such an education involves conviction and commitment and is hopeful. By engaging campus and community through our work, I believe we help provide what Harry Boyte calls a "citizen solution."

Endnotes

1. We also drew upon the *Wingspread Statement* (2004), which outlines a rationale for engagement, linking "discovery and learning to the

real needs of local or worldwide community" and in so doing "invigorat[ing] the work of both faculty and students and reconnect[ing] colleges and universities to expertise and resources outside the campus gates" (Brukardt 1). A result will be an engaged institution in the sense that Ernest Boyer outlines in two of his seminal works on the idea of reconceiving scholarship.

2. As I have argued elsewhere, many scholars and educators in our field "see professional communication as a direct descendent of classical rhetoric and . . . our mission as practical in what Richard Bernstein calls the 'high' sense: we see it tied to the Aristotelian notion of praxis, which involves human conduct" (62).

3. See Markus et al. and Mendel-Reyes.

4. I also quote John F. Kennedy who said that "so many . . . universities across our country owe their birth to the most extraordinary piece of legislation this country has ever adopted, and that is the Morrill Act, signed by President Abraham Lincoln in the darkest and most uncertain days of the Civil War . . ." (62).

5. Like Shultz, I believe that community service as an educational endeavor generates a more caring sense of self through the concern for others in one's life. Twelve years of participation in community service projects

with college students has provided empirical evidence for this conclusion.
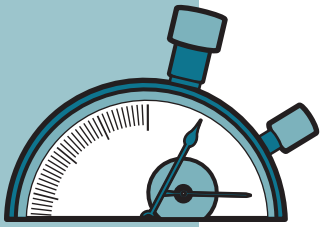
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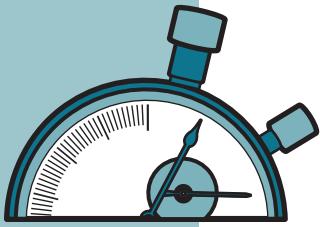
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