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Commentary

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Vermont schools are creating a new generation of civic leaders

October 17, 2007

By Amy Gibans McGlashan

When students of all ages came back to campus this fall, Vermont colleges and universities were gearing up to educate them for more than just satisfying careers. The health of our democracy depends on an active, informed citizenry, requiring the development of a set of knowledge, skills and attitudes — skills that are also important in the workplace and global society.

"The need to resolve complex problems intelligently places an ever greater demand on higher education – a demand for graduates who have a profound understanding of what it means to be a citizen; graduates capable of an interest larger than self-interest; graduates capable of helping this country to be not simply a strong competitor but a responsible and effective leader in a complicated world," said Frank Newman, former president of the Education Commission of the States.

Vermont higher education presidents are committed to the civic purposes of their institutions. In 1999, 23 Vermont college and university presidents banded together to create Vermont Campus Compact (VCC). VCC presidents believe that through sustained and creative student, faculty and institutional engagement with communities, higher education can help prepare tomorrow's civic and social leaders while strengthening communities and improving lives.

Vermont Campus Compact has a unique approach; it isn't about partisan politics and it's more than studying government. Instead, students in all academic disciplines can be engaged in a learning method called "service-learning." Service-learning incorporates community problem-solving into the curriculum, giving students real-world experience in their field while meeting the needs of their communities.

Colleges and universities across the state are increasingly adopting service-learning as an integral component of the education experience, including those in north-central Vermont. Service projects such as these provide real value to communities while being tied to concrete academic goals. In an "applied studies in consultation" class, NECI students developed a brochure on healthy eating and a training guide for members of the Vermont Fresh Network, and partnered often with the Vermont Food Bank and Meals on Wheels.

Students in a soil science course at Sterling College completed a stream-bank restoration and evaluated the human impact on Green River Reservoir campsites. Sterling students in a "nutrition and small group dynamics" class worked with a nearby school cafeteria to prepare healthy menu choices as part of an anti-obesity program. Woodbury College's Prevention and Community Development students in Montpelier work with the Central Vermont Community Partnership on several topics, including supporting youth in making

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healthy choices, promoting diverse civic participation, providing substance abuse services and supports and helping incarcerated women make restitution.

Why this focus on service-learning? In addition to providing much-needed services, service-learning bolsters academic achievement and contributes to college retention. It has also been shown to increase voting and other forms of civic participation, develop problem-solving skills, increase workforce readiness and ability to work well with others and improve social/civic skills and behaviors. In other words, it helps prepare students to become responsible leaders — both in their professions and in their communities.

Service-learning is one facet of a broader movement to advance higher education's role in serving the public good. Vermont Campus Compact has seen campus support for this work rise steeply in recent years. Students are now spending more time on service than they have in decades. In a study released in April, the Corporation for National and Community Service reported that 43.6 percent of Vermont's college and university students regularly volunteer, compared to a national rate of 29.6 percent, ranking Vermont fifth among the 50 states, and representing a 12.9 percent increase since 1986. Last year alone, students at campus compact member schools nationally contributed \$7.1 billion worth of service through campus-organized programs.

VCC has just ended six years of funding from Learn and Serve, a federal program that supports service-learning at all levels of education. One hundred percent of VCC member institutions now offer service-learning courses. The number of faculty integrating community-based teaching has increased five-fold; 97 percent of those faculty report service-learning has improved learning outcomes. More importantly, 75 percent of the more than 670 community agencies with whom VCC members partnered reported more community needs being met as a result of their higher education partnership.

VCC campuses recognize the inextricable link between research, teaching and outreach, and the well-being of individuals and communities in Vermont. Higher education in Vermont is prepared to do its part to prepare 21st century global citizens and problem solvers while strengthening Vermont.

Amy Gibans McGlashan is executive director of Vermont Campus Compact, which is based in Middlebury.



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