

CHAPTER 25

PUTTING PASSION IN ACTION: SERVICE LEARNING AT WHEELOCK COLLEGE

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INTRODUCTION

Lucy Wheelock, the founder of Wheelock College, saw service as the essence of her individual calling to work with children. She said, upon entering a kindergarten, reminiscent of her early biblical training, “I have found my kingdom.” The mission of Wheelock College, to improve the quality of life for children and families, continues to express service in the academic work of Wheelock students. The field work that students undertake in their professional study, and often in their liberal arts preparation as well, will be described elsewhere in this chapter.

Adding a service learning component to the already existing, multiple experiences that students had with children was not an easy decision to make at Wheelock – and may still remain not always a popular one. When I became President of Wheelock College in 1993, I initiated a community service learning project. This project was named Connections by popular choice of the first students in the program, and was an attempt at creating non-curriculum related service experiences that resonated with the Wheelock mission. A young woman who had done many hours of community service herself and was eager to work with students was hired to be the coordinator of the program. At the end of the first year – in intensive evaluation sessions — the students and the coordinator wondered if it would be possible to expand the opportunities for students beyond working with children. The students wanted to work across the life span in a greater variety of settings.

The field work that students undertake is focussed on the professional areas, increasingly, as the student completes the four years, in the student’s chosen professional career area. Why did students want additional field work experiences as volunteers?

- Before students come to Wheelock, they have what some people think of as a gift for or a calling to work with people. Wheelock students are not cynical about their ability to change the lives of other people.

They have often had multiple experiences working in recreation centers, homeless shelter, camps, hospitals – a wide range of settings and a vast array of experiences.

- In their field work, students work in settings where they had to respond to a supervisor or did not have the authority to set the parameters of the experience. In the volunteer setting, they were able to determine their level of involvement and take things at their own pace, without external expectations. Students focussed on the relationship with the individual with whom they were working. For example, one of the most popular Connections programs was “Best Buddies,” a program in which students developed relationships with handicapped adults. Wheelock students relished this particular experience.
- Although students understood that their work would eventually be in classrooms or in hospital settings, students wanted to experiment with a range of activities in which they might never have a professional career. They wanted to experiment, stretching their skills and their inclinations to work with people.

After the second year of Connections, faculty members came to me explaining that Connections was too intensive and too difficult for students to manage in their already full academic and work lives. Many students are scholarship students and, in addition to their academic and field experiences, spend up to 35 hours each week at work. The students who were devoted to their Connections projects did not reflect the faculty sentiments. If they could not handle the demands of their current Connections projects, they chose other projects that were less intense and without long-term commitments. For example, they would engage in special projects to prepare holiday events for hospital patients or make bookmarks, work on food drives, or participate in other projects that did not involve their personal time so intensively.

The students won us over with their desire to serve and their skill at managing their own lives. Generally, the students in Connections stay in Connections and, a year ago, participated in a five-year celebration of their work.

I speak from a presidential perspective. In this chapter, a current student, two alumni (Class of '99), a faculty member, advisors to the Connections program, and a member of the Student Development department at Wheelock College will give their perspectives on service learning at Wheelock.

ADVISOR PERSPECTIVE: PROGRAM STRUCTURE AND EVALUATION

The advisor's role in a student organization is influenced by the strengths and needs of its members. An effective advisor provides guidance for organi-