Chapter 11
“How Do We Know What They Need?”
An Analysis of How ConnectRichmond Changed Service-Learning at the University of Richmond

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ABSTRACT

The University of Richmond, a mid-size liberal arts institution, had a longstanding institutional commitment to civic engagement. Campus location and curricular issues once made the popular model of service-learning, direct service to fellow citizens in need, too restrictive, and not a good fit for many of the university’s courses. Campus leaders wanted to create community partnerships that would accommodate the wide range of pedagogical needs on campus, connect to every discipline, and still maintain healthy and sustainable partnerships in the community. This case study describes their collaboration with community leaders to launch ConnectRichmond, a network hub with many Web 2.0 features. This innovation has created a large online community that facilitates a variety of course models and has helped to support the development of a major program for community-based learning. ConnectRichmond allows UR to move beyond talking about meeting community needs to working in true reciprocity with fellow Richmonders.

INTRODUCTION

“When public intellectuals not only reach outside the university, but actually interact with the public beyond its walls, they overcome the ivory tower isolation that marks so much current intellectual work. They create knowledge with those whom the knowledge serves.” (Cushman, 1999)

While an essential element of service-learning as it is generally understood in the U.S. is that the work done by students should respond to a community-identified need, often “finding the right fit between student, agency and institution is like a huge, 3-D jigsaw puzzle. When it works, luck is as important as planning” (Stoeker and Tryon, 2009). This case study describes how the creation of a network hub helped streamline the process of identifying opportunities for community-university collaboration.

At the University of Richmond (UR), the path to learning about those community-identified needs was not obvious before the year 2000. In some ways our campus embodied the proverbial ivory tower Ellen Cushman describes in the epigraph above. As a residential, suburban campus, UR is physically separated from much of metropolitan Richmond, Virginia, and surrounded instead by affluent suburbs where needs are not always apparent. Cushman (1999) envisions academics as “public intellectuals” who “combine their research, teaching and service efforts in order to address social issues important to community members in under-served neighborhoods” (329). If geography is destiny, then our faculty and students seemed destined to be removed from many of the city’s under-served communities. At the primarily undergraduate, liberal arts university, the work of most faculty did not have obvious service-learning implications, at least as service-learning is popularly conceived in the U.S., as direct service by university students on behalf of citizens in their communities. Prior to the launch of the project described in this case study, only a few classes at UR included this model of service-learning. Two programs at UR, The Jepson School of Leadership Studies and the Bonner Scholars program, provided the impetus for the university to seek broader community connections.

In 2000, several faculty members who recognized this campus-community disconnection sponsored a meeting with leaders of about 50 local nonprofit agencies to learn more about their needs and to facilitate communication among them and campus offices. During that meeting, the nonprofits expressed a need for a tool to facilitate local communication. These nonprofit agencies identified the “fragmentation” of resources and communication among nonprofits, public agencies, and citizens as a problem for groups working to address community needs in the Greater Richmond area (Stutts, 2003). Faculty members Nancy Stutts, then a professor in the Jepson School, and Richard Couto, a UR professor and a designer of the Jepson School curriculum, worked with UR technology staff to create a simple e-mail listserv and Web site. By November of 2002, the ConnectRichmond site was on the Web, providing a repository for materials useful to nonprofit organizations and a link to join the listserv. The concept succeeded. Stutts, now at Virginia Commonwealth University, heads ConnectNetwork which is funded by The Community Foundation Serving Richmond and Central Virginia and the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, and includes ConnectRichmond, ConnectRappahannock and ConnectSouthside.

ConnectRichmond was created as a network hub and a resource “designed for citizens who want to strengthen our community. We provide information, resources and instant access to nonprofits, civic leaders, volunteers and others interested in improving metro Richmond - the rest is up to you” (ConnectRichmond, 2007). Many citizens have answered the call to engage through this network hub. As of January 2010, the site’s main listserv reached 4,000 e-mail addresses. As