Community-Based Learning at Columbia: Uniting Study with Service

Timothy P Cross
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When Columbia played host to a historic meeting between presidential candidates Barack Obama CC’83 and John McCain P’07 in September 2008, the theme wasn’t politics as usual, but national service. The nationally televised ServiceNation events in New York City served to highlight not simply the University, but Columbia’s leadership in creating real opportunities for community service for our students. In fact, Columbia has become a national model for the ways in which it integrates service into teaching and co-curricular programming across the University.

For Columbia College and Engineering School (SEAS) students, the Center for Technology, Innovation and Community Engagement, or CTICE, has become a unique conduit into the world of community service. Established in 2006 by the Engineering School, CTICE (pronounced “SEE-tice”) currently supports community-based learning courses and programs that engage students from across the University in community service projects.

The underlying theme for all CTICE activities is community-based learning, often called service learning, which integrates real-world experience into students’ educations. So, instead of studying engineering principles abstractly or working on the design of a hypothetical widget, Columbia first-year engineers work on real projects for real clients in the community: a new greenhouse for a local public school, a playground swing for children confined to wheelchairs, or an innovative walker for residents of a nearby assisted living facility.

SEAS students were the first to take community-based learning courses, but demand for this form of community service has been growing across the University. “Community-based learning has been tremendously successful in our first-year design course for engineers,” says Jack McGourty, SEAS associate dean and CTICE executive director. “So we established CTICE as a way to respond to the demand for nontechnical community-based learning courses, develop new interschool co-curricular programs, and spread the community-based learning ethos across the University and to the local community.”

“CTICE is one of few civic-driven institutions on campus that have been able to build meaningful partnerships within Harlem,” says Carolyne Kama CC’10, who has participated in several CTICE-sponsored programs. “It trains students to become astute community collaborators.”

Today Columbia undergraduates—both College and SEAS—can take as many as 30 credits of community-based learning courses at Columbia. The goal is to align academics with service, giving students the opportunity to engage in meaningful community service while receiving course credit. Students can now take community-based learning courses in urban studies and American studies. And
as the number and variety of courses has grown, so have the opportunities for service.

“As a part of CTICE, I have been encouraged to reach out to the community in ways that reflect my own skills and interests,” says Hilary Schneidmiller SEAS ’10, another student who has participated in several CTICE programs.

Teams of students have created climate-change education programs for the New York City Mayor’s Office of Long Term Planning and Sustainability, written proposals to fund green roofs on local buildings, and developed environmental audits for local businesses and community-based organizations, among many others.

“By putting studying and serving together, we not only help students learn but also help the community. When we undertake a project, it has to be something the community wants, not something that we think is easy or we want to teach,” says McGourty. “Our measure of success is whether our community client gets tangible results.”

For students who want to engage in community service outside of a course structure, CTICE also sponsors numerous paid internships, including summer internships. Student interns—from both the College and SEAS—are active members in one of CTICE’s major initiatives, the Harlem Robotics League, which teaches engineering and science using Lego® Robotics kits. They work with public school teachers and Columbia graduate students to mentor local middle-school students who are competing in the League.

“As a CTICE robotics mentor in Harlem, I developed community-building skills while teaching in the classroom and collaborating with teachers to form cohesive curricula,” says Kama.

The interns have helped a local community-based organization research and write a proposal to create a New York State historic district in Harlem. A CTICE intern organized “Living Peace,” a June 2008 workshop series that brought practitioners from different faiths together for interfaith dialogue. CTICE also works with the Columbia Undergraduate Scholars Program to provide service opportunities for Kluge, John Jay, and C.P. Davis Scholars at the College and SEAS.

CTICE has become one of the nation’s largest community-based learning programs. Now, more than 700 students work on more than 100 CTICE-sponsored community projects each year. Most of the clients are local community-based organizations, not-for-profit groups, public schools, or government agencies.

“As a student, I think it is important to recognize that every person has the capacity to serve,” says Schneidmiller.

To learn more, please visit www.ctice.columbia.edu.

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