Learning Service at Princeton University: Why it Matters

At its heart, service is the act of helping others. When we think of service, we often think of lending a hand, giving of one’s self and time. Meaningful service goes beyond that. It’s a learning experience that leads to personal development and positive community impact. Meaningful service calls on us to be open to shifting our own perspectives; to understand the context of the situation, the underlying issues, our role in the community, and the people and places involved. It asks us to dig deeper, to learn more about ourselves and our own intentions. Learning is a fundamental part of meaningful service.

As we serve, how does learning take place? We envision learning service as a nonlinear progression, where it’s not about rising to the top or achieving a specific end-point, but instead about being conscious of where you are in the journey. Here are four ways we see learning occurring during service.

**Immersion**: As allies and advocates we stand with communities. With open minds we can learn from the knowledge shared with us. Community immersion opens up new connections and pushes us to recognize new perspectives. It expands our understanding of the root causes of societal issues and helps us develop a more purposeful sense of responsibility to the larger good. Through programs like Community Action, students living and working in the community experience a week-long immersion with a specific social issue. Students aren’t just helping out at a soup kitchen and returning to campus - they’re discovering the multifaceted nature of hunger in our region by being a part of what’s happening on the frontlines.

**Reflection**: Active engagement enhances civic and societal knowledge, the understanding of public issues, and fosters a greater awareness of the complexity of issues. To be meaningful, service must include reflection which encompasses interactive dialogue and questioning. Why is this happening? What is my role? Why am I involved? During Breakout Princeton alternative break trips, students talk purposefully about the day’s experience to distill how it affects them and use blogging as a tool to reflect on what the experience means to them. Such reflection sparks passionate discussions and enriches the learning experience.

**Collaboration**: Working with others exposes us to new ideas and challenges us to stretch beyond our own vantage point. Collaboration is transformative. It gives us the chance to take action, show initiative, be creative and resourceful, achieve a deepened sense of empathy and grow confidence. Through Princeton’s many service projects and student organizations, students are actively collaborating with their peers, partners in the community, and beyond. Whether tutoring youth in Trenton, or advocating for prison education reform, collaboration yields powerful results.

**Purposeful Action**: When we discover what moves us we can find a life path that values service and enables us to grow. Acting with intention, integrity and purpose, leads to caring and taking action now and later in life. Through purposeful action, we learn how and when we can test our limits,
where our priorities lie and what it means to see something through to completion. Our students and alumni found nonprofits, tackle global issues and change the course of business, policy and law with both small steps and broad strokes.

At Princeton, it matters that students are given opportunities to encounter a spectrum of service experiences. A diverse range of meaningful service experiences means student learning has both institutional and societal impact. Meaningful service inspires students to learn the following:

**Personal Discovery:** Through service, students learn about themselves. They discover their strengths and weaknesses, what they are passionate about, and why service is meaningful to them. They learn how to grow and develop as individuals. This personal discovery is foundational. It often serves as a leaping off point, bridging coursework and extracurricular pursuits, career planning and academic focus. It means that we as an institution are thinking about students not just as students but as people - and we’re responsible for not just their academic development, but their personal development as well.

**Community Building & Leadership:** By engaging in service, students learn how to listen to others, address community needs and utilize community resources. They learn how to understand the community context of service and how it relates to the common good. They are challenged to develop mutually beneficial partnerships and serve as positive mentors and role models. As community builders and community leaders, students are not only shaping and bolstering campus community, but are also the University’s ambassadors to the surrounding region. Through service, our students become better listeners, better allies, better advocates, better coworkers, better teammates, better leaders, which has a lasting impact in communities large and small both here and around the world.

**Active Citizenship:** Learning service isn’t all about the here and now. It’s also about the future. Through service, students learn how to move ideas into action, how to make community and service a priority in their values and choices, and how to contribute to sustainable and meaningful change. There’s no question that Princeton students go on to do great things when they leave through FitzRandolph Gate. Learning meaningful service equips our students with the ability to drive change, to problem-solve, and inspires them to get involved and stay involved in whatever capacity they choose. Active citizens shape society, address challenges, and tackle societal problems at both the micro and macro scale.

Service is central to Princeton’s mission. As President Eisgruber has said “There’s is something about the human condition that causes us, even when we are happy, to question whether we are living the lives that we are meant to live, to wonder whether there are better uses for our time on this earth.” (Opening Exercises: Meaning in Life - and at Princeton, Princeton Alumni Weekly, Oct. 8, 2014) Learning service gives every Princeton student the opportunity to ask tough questions, to explore possible answers, and become inspired to keep asking and exploring long after they graduate.

*Draft: January 5, 2015 by Gwen McNamara, Communications Coordinator*