

The word “service” has its origins in feudal and religious relationships of allegiance to a higher authority. In modern times, the concept acquired economic meaning with respect to manners of exchange to customers. In today’s post-denominational world, the ideal of offering secular service to another person of less fortunate circumstances is a logical democratic extension of these traditions. As this concept started being applied to interactions with the poor of other countries, supposedly “superior” and “wealthier” benefactors began to unintentionally threaten the dignity of their foreign subjects while simultaneously missing the opportunity to enhance their perspectives and relationships in the process. Most importantly, the benefactors endangered the possibility of establishing genuine friendships on the rocks of mistaken identity.

In the aftermath of the end of the military draft and the winning of the Cold War against the Soviet Union, American and Canadian educational and political leaders began to yearn for the implementation of national service to instill social conscience and personal virtue in increasingly self-centered youth. Advocates encouraged the creation of new academic programs and activities modeled along the lines of Depression-era relief agencies or domestic Peace Corps.

Within a short period of time, the federal government began paying for the service work of part-time social workers. In other arrangements, university graduates received offers to eliminate their student loans by teaching in Title I schools. As time passed, most universities and schools implemented community service hours to their graduation requirements. What had begun as a call for noble civic engagement gradually became an academic obligation and financial transaction with noble trappings.

## FROM SERVICE TO LEARNING TO FRIENDSHIPS

The dawn of “service learning” can be traced to grants from the United States Corporation for National Service to 500 universities in the late 90s. Service learning is portrayed as a combination of social analysis and experiential learning. Proponents argue that participants can be transformed into model citizens in the act of transforming underserved communities. Given the potential for dramatically disparate circumstances between donor and beneficiary, service learning purportedly offers the potential to cause profound personal conversions. Many projects have involved construction and the education of younger students.

For five summers beginning in 1987, the founders of the North American Educational Initiatives Foundation brought American university students to Mexico City to help two communities recover following a devastating earthquake. I arrived weeks ahead of time and felt like I was walking in the dark putting the details together in a land that time forgot. I had no experience in project management. All of our Mexican friends associated with *Opus Dei* wanted to help in whatever way possible. Many of them were astonished to learn of our plans and undertaking.

For the first two summers, remarkably, the students paid to come. Students hailed from Boston College, Columbia University, Harvard University, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Northwestern University, Princeton University, and West Point, among other institutions of higher learning. They were greatly impressed to see how our humble hosts heroically and oftentimes cheerfully withstood living with few possessions and many hardships. With all of the men gone for work during the day, we did our construction projects with the women and youth. Since many of the volunteers could not speak Spanish, most of our interactions were basic in nature.

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It was a very intense experience, and we were working feverishly in our American “bubble” to meet construction deadlines. Regrettably, the material took priority to the cultural and spiritual. Nevertheless, the students were overwhelmed by the wholehearted outpourings of gratitude that we received during our visit and especially during the going-away parties. What was concerning to we organizers was the sight of some of our American volunteers not being able to or not being interested in learning more about the people themselves beyond the resolution of their immediate problems. We eventually added some evening classes about Mexico in the evenings, but the participants were too exhausted to pay attention. In hindsight, our expectations were very idealistic.

Our observations coincided with the rise of many “volun-tourism” programs from the highly developed “North” to the less developed “South”. As the years passed, these nobly intended efforts began to receive growing criticisms at home and abroad. Critics claimed that the sponsoring organizations were “using” underserved foreigners as instruments for self-gratification and emotional imperialism. Religious groups in the United States began being questioned for setting impressionable youth up for conversion crises far from home while using the poor and slums for props.

While motivating young Americans and Canadians to help foreigners improve their physical environment is a worthwhile endeavor *per se*, the process creates an unhealthy relationship of dependence wherein the prospect of mutual understanding may be inherently compromised. No one likes to be owned, especially Mexicans. How might the impoverished foreigner compensate for our generosity? In other words, how might the beneficiary be liberated from our charity? Conversely, how much does the foreign donor need to recognize her or his need to descend from Mount Olympus?

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Throughout the 90s, the founders of the North American Educational Initiatives Foundation wrestled with these philanthropic dilemmas and how to bridge the cultural indifference so common among so many Americans and Canadians towards Mexico and Mexicans, even when in direct contact. Continuing to this day, Americans overwhelmingly tend to concentrate their attention towards the West and East and ignore the North and South.

*Perhaps a key roadblock to dealing with our southern neighbors was in our focus on their problems instead of on their personhood, or, better put, on the dirt on their faces compared to the smiles underneath. By instinctively addressing what offended our sensibilities most, we mistakenly ignored what divided us least: the fact of our equal human nature and potential spiritual union. Once we paid close attention to the opportunities offered by developing relationships, the path was opened to mutual growth in knowledge and respect and what Aristotle termed “authentic friendship” (“Two souls living in one body”).*

**Therefore, after much analysis, we realized that the critical flaw in the potential encounter between these different societies in miniature lay in the emphasis on serving rather than learning... and befriending.** We therefore chose to shift our attention from transactions of good deeds to a transformational process of good insights and inner vibrations. We chose to work from a level playing field of equals dealing with equals irrespective of material conditions and location. We put down our shovels and picked up our notebooks and respective songbooks.

Following our founding in 2000, the North American Educational Initiatives Foundation launched a truly innovative cross-cultural program. In the summers of 2005 and 2007, we launched the North American Leadership Institute in Mexico for students from 30 universities throughout the continent. Our curriculum included comparative colonial history and the philosophy of human dignity and friendship, leadership theory and practice,

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and the language and culture of the Mazahua community. The course included a week-long visit embedded with the community and their daily activities. Almost all of the faculty members were Mexicans, and two professors were from the Mazahua community.

The philosophy curriculum about human dignity and the nature of friendship consists of a 300-page packet of readings compiled and edited by Aristotle expert Professor Michael Pakaluk who received his doctorate at Harvard University and who currently teaches at The Catholic University of America. More information on the Institute may be found on this website. The Provost of DeSales University made a site visit and found that the course was worthy of 3 course credits. The participants wrote a series of glowing testimonials about the courses and their wealth of new intra-cultural relationships that continue to this day.

Beyond resolving other people's social problems, we believe that students ought to be challenged to engage with and learn from other people (particularly their peers) at home and especially abroad as a fundamental part of their education, especially when technology, travel, and universal English practice have made direct communication so easily accessible. The opportunities for students to explore these intra-continental and international conversations with people of every point of view and social class are as abundant as their imaginations and keyboards. Equally imaginable and realizable are the innumerable cross-cultural lifelong friendships that might be forged in such positive encounters.

It is for these reasons that the North American Educational Initiatives Foundation recommends that universities and schools move their "service learning" programs from campus ministry, experiential learning, and graduation requirements to better suited departments like global learning or leadership development.

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Imagine an Asian American sophomore archeology student at Pepperdine University independently establishing communication with a fifth-year sociology student at *Universidad Anahuac Merida* to begin an ongoing discussion about the strength of the Reverend Martin Luther King's arguments about segregation and slavery. Together they might decide to prepare a term paper in application for a respected prize. Or, just as well, consider a third-year Otomi student of international marketing at the *Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Mexico* in Mexico City who is debating the topic of reciprocal tariffs with a senior business major at The University of Toronto and a first-year honors student at The University of South Florida.

What an even more profound and transformative experience for students from Canada and the United States would be learning about the culture, language, and living conditions of the pre-Hispanic, "First Peoples" of North America from indigenous professors at their respective universities. Ideally, this knowledge would represent a point of departure for these foreign students to recognize and appreciate the value of these endangered cultures and the importance of helping to preserve them.

There should be no limiting classroom walls in our modern halls of learning. Higher education and secondary education ought to increasingly foster such profound opportunities for mutual growth and interaction. Society needs to appreciate such relationships as great achievements. The fullest realization of the promise of globalization would be found in ever-strengthening bonds of knowledge and friendship across the artificial borders of a divided world. In conclusion, the North American Educational Initiatives Foundation recommends that learning institutions promote learning that leads to friendship rather than serving that leads to alienation, that cultural and intellectual discovery be ever more expansive in depth and reach, and that students be encouraged to productively commune with other people... with their future friends... rather than to come up with solutions for them.