

An Individualized Approach to University-Community Partnerships

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Introduction

Through Academically Based Community Service (ABCS) courses, educational initiatives, and other community programs, Penn has a history of being involved with schools in Philadelphia in various ways, which contributes billions of dollars to the city. At the same time, Penn faces criticism from student groups for the choice to not pay PILOTS, or payments in lieu of taxes, due to the tax exemption given to universities with nonprofit status.¹ As a senior at Penn, I have been lucky enough to become involved with several community partnership initiatives, particularly the club Moelis Access Science (MAS) and an ABCS Course called High School Ethics Bowl.

Through MAS, I assisted a ninth grade algebra teacher at Robeson High School, a low-income public school in West Philadelphia. This school did not have air conditioning, scores far below the state of Pennsylvania on standardized tests, and sent their first student to an Ivy League school this past fall.² While taking my High School Ethics Bowl course, I went to Masterman High School, the top ranked high school in Pennsylvania and one that was previously a top ten high school in America. While I found both experiences thoroughly enjoyable and rewarding, I could not help but think about the vast differences in impact Penn makes when engaging in partnerships with schools of such disparate levels of need. I started to think about what the purpose of these partnerships is and how community partnerships should be structured in the best way for all stakeholders involved.

Community partnerships between Penn and surrounding high schools benefit students at the high schools, reward students at Penn, and have the capability to combat vast educational

¹ Laracy, "The Other Side of Penn's \$14 Billion Impact Study."

² Holley and Drayton, "West Philadelphia High School Student Credits Family, School for Acceptance into Harvard University."

inequities in the city. It seems that all three of these goals are valuable and deserve focus. A model for service-learning endorsed by Aurora Santiago-Ortiz is that these partnerships should focus on social justice and structural inequality of the district, as opposed to just thinking about individual needs of students.³ While I agree that a social justice approach to service-learning is necessary, I do not think it is reasonable or most effective for the whole district inequities to be the sole focus for college students visiting high schools. In fact, too much focus on the community service aspect in many of the individual initiatives could exacerbate the problems of colonialism or saviorism of wealthy Ivy League students volunteering in these schools. It is best to focus on the goal of supporting individual students, while simultaneously learning about the education system's structural inequalities. It might seem unnecessary to make a distinction between supporting a community and supporting individuals in the community, but it will make for better and more effective partnerships if the focus for the college students in the initiatives is on the individual high school students.

My argument is that while the underlying goal of Penn having a stake in the community should be to combat education inequity and improve the system, the execution of the initiatives should focus on benefiting individual high school students, with benefit to Penn students being an almost accidental result. In this paper, I use my experiences at two different Philadelphia high schools to motivate an interrogation of the purpose of these university-community partnerships. I will start by describing my experiences in MAS and in my ABCS course, specifically the differences between them. Then I will discuss these three different rewards of university-community partnership: benefit to the education system, benefit to high school students, and benefit to college students. For each of these, I will motivate why they are

³ Santiago-Ortiz, "From Critical to Decolonizing Service- Learning: Limits and Possibilities of Social Justice-Based Approaches to Community Service- Learning."

important and how a university-community partnership should best work toward these rewards. This will support my argument that Penn should focus their initiatives on how to best benefit high school students, with the underlying large-scale goal of improving the Philadelphia education system.

Background

Via Zoom my freshman year and in person my sophomore year, I visited Robeson High School in West Philadelphia and helped in an algebra class. I was given the group of students who were falling behind in the curriculum, and asked to catch them up on specific worksheets or lessons. I went for one class period once a week, and each time was given pretty much the same group of students. Robeson High School is 99% low-income and 94% Black, and has visible inequities from the wealthier, whiter high schools in Philadelphia such as the lack of air conditioning and lead contamination in the water fountains.⁴ The teacher of the class I went to had trouble controlling the students; most of them showed up late and did not listen to her at all. My group of students was often disengaged and felt hopeless in math, saying they did not think they could go to college. It took the whole year for a couple of them to become comfortable with me and be willing to really try the problem sets, while some never did. I felt my impact limited by the little time I was there, and the hopelessness in a high school with more needs than I could fix. Regardless, the connections I made with the couple of interested students did make it worth it, and I did feel like they were truly benefited by my involvement. While students like me are able, with some work, to make an immense, and necessary impact on schools like Robeson,

⁴ “Paul Robeson High School for Human Services.”

volunteering at this school made it clear how much monetary donations from Penn could actually help.

Senior year, I coached the Masterman High School Ethics Bowl Team in my ABCS course. I went once a week for an hour, and worked with students on their discussion of ethical cases as well as helping with preparation for their competition. The students at Masterman know they are going to go to exceptional colleges, take many AP classes, and get to participate in clubs that other schools lack, like Ethics Bowl. The fact that I attended a voluntary club as opposed to a mandatory math class further skewed the set of students I worked with, but I could still tell that the high school environment was so different. These students were extremely academically interested and motivated, likely because they know they have the resources for higher education and further academic success. They revered me for attending an Ivy League, asking me what my SAT score was and about Penn life all the time. It was quite easy to have an impact, since these students listened to the advice I gave on their case presentations and respected my commentary on their ethical dialogues. The students in the club did not necessarily need me as much, but they definitely appreciated my presence and I loved the time I spent coaching. A school like Masterman does not need a partnership from Penn, but the students are benefited, and it is still a positive experience for parties involved.

Benefit to the District

It is obvious that many public schools in Philadelphia struggle financially and could benefit from support from Penn. A district-centric approach to the purpose of community partnerships makes it clear that some districts should be prioritized more than others, and this is

reasonable. It makes sense to focus monetary and service efforts on the schools most in need, simply because that is where there is the most current financial struggle. This means that schools like Robeson should be the utmost priority of Penn's initiatives, over more privileged schools like Masterman.

The immense need from many city schools is the reason for criticism of Penn's decision to not pay PILOTs. Penn claims they use the money elsewhere, including programs and other forms of impact that are reported to bring billions of dollars to the city of Philadelphia. If the purpose of community partnerships is to benefit the district and the education system overall, it seems that monetary donations are the most effective form of help. While programs of college students and high school students often can foster community and much benefit in the classroom, the great financial need of schools and the money Penn has, including their \$30 million tax exemption, suggests that pure monetary contributions would be the most impactful way to support the Philadelphia school district.⁵

Yet our intuitions suggest otherwise. Maybe it is for Penn's reputation or wanting to actually foster a more personal relationship with the high schools, but regardless, it seems that there are reasons other than pure improvement to the district that motivates community partnerships. It seems that a goal of community partnerships is to not only to improve the school district in Philadelphia, but to develop a relationship with the district. Developing a closer relationship requires frequent interpersonal interactions and diversity of activities, without the relationship being simply transactional.⁶ To exemplify this relational goal of university-community partnerships, it is necessary to focus on the benefit to individual high school students as well.

⁵ Laracy, "The Other Side of Penn's \$14 Billion Impact Study."

⁶ Bringle, Clayton, and Price, "Partnerships in Service Learning and Civic Engagement."

Benefit to Students

I argue that benefit to high school students should be the focus within Penn programs in the community. While the motive for the creation of the programs and their existence is to benefit the district overall, the programs will be more effective and personal if the priority of execution is benefitting the high school students. When college students enter high schools, it is usually for not much time, and they are interacting with only a few students. They often are not there to be a force for change in district or school policies, but instead to support a specific academic goal, whether it is a club or a specific math class.

The worry about “colonizing” the high schools in Philadelphia is a legitimate worry, as students from elite institutions entering high schools as “saviors” could come with a problematic attitude.⁷ It would be harmful to the esteem of the high school students, especially the low-income and racial minority students, to feel like “charity projects” for privileged Ivy League students to fix. This is why hyperfixation on the social justice aspect in the execution of these projects could be counterproductive. It would be better for college students to be constantly learning about the city’s education inequities, especially those that impact low-income and Black students, but with a focus on their specific goals of how to best help the individual students. Instead of focusing on how to combat large scale issues in the system, college students should focus on how they can best help their math class, support their club, or foster discussion of their reading material.

⁷ Santiago-Ortiz, “From Critical to Decolonizing Service- Learning: Limits and Possibilities of Social Justice–Based Approaches to Community Service- Learning.”

This individual-centric approach to community partnerships does not mean ignoring the background systems. The reason any structural inequality is a problem is because of how it impacts the individuals in the structure, so focusing on the specific students gives them dignity and allows for more positive change to be made overall. This approach allows college students to assist high schoolers and view them as people with goals they are helping them achieve, as opposed to mere pawns in a flawed education system. In the classroom, college students must learn about the underlying systemic issues in order to better understand the students' struggles, but they should not expect their influence to be more than supporting the individuals through the goals of their specific program. I never came back from Robeson High School describing how I helped address structural racism in the city; I would tell stories about the students I helped, how they improved in algebra, and the funny things they said. If this is where the benefit of each of these partnerships can and will be made, it is logical to prioritize individual high school students.

Another benefit of focusing on the individual is a better understanding of how different types of high schools can be benefited. With just a focus on larger-scale problems, it is hard to justify volunteering in a school like Masterman, with plentiful support and resources. However, a focus on individual high school students instead allows a better conception of how, while the schools in need should be prioritized, it is not only permissible but beneficial to become involved in the wealthier high schools as well. Contexts are vastly different, but all high school students have challenges and community partnerships can be useful to more privileged students also.

Benefit to the University

Now I will briefly address the benefits that universities derive from these partnerships, including a positive reputation and benefits to the college students as well. I consider these benefits as somewhat side effects of fostering a relationship with the community, because a relationship is inherently two-sided. However, I do not think benefit to the university should be a priority of why community partnerships exist, in the same way that it seems wrong to consider self-satisfaction a main goal of volunteering. It is usually an inevitable, amazing plus if someone does feel fulfilled after partaking in a good deed, but it should not be the main focus or goal. Due to the immense amount of money and resources Penn has, their benefit from the existence of these partnerships is not important, or at least does not begin to compare to the benefit to the Philadelphia high schools. However, any benefit to anyone is good as long as it does not take away from the core mission. Students engaging in community service clubs or ABCS courses should reflect on their experiences, and find value and fulfillment through their engagement as long as it does not take away from focus on who they are helping, which would be unlikely. It is feasible for students to understand their self-gained benefit from engaging in a community partnership program without it taking away from the mission of the program, so when this could be done, it should.

Another worry of the partnerships is that Penn is doing it for the benefit of their reputation or image. This argument is difficult to justify, but I argue it is not significant. Even if it is true, many of the programs are run by passionate professors, involve passionate administrators and students, and are effective because of these people involved. It would be most

ideal if the university had philanthropic goals, because that would mean the university will act selflessly in other ways as well.

Is This Giving Up?

I will now engage with the counter argument that the approach I have argued is giving up on a social justice approach to service or ignores the underlying issues in a problematic way. I want to emphasize that focusing on the student does not take away from education on the underlying issues, including the groups affected and how to best address the issues. An individual student-centered approach means constructing curriculum and execution of the programs in a way that focuses on having the most impact on the students and the individual goals of the program. It means equipping the participating college students with reasonable goals and a scope of what they are doing and who they are helping. College students should enter a low-income high school knowing the struggles students face so that they can be empathetic and understanding, but they should not view them as helpless victims to a system and instead as individuals with achievable goals. This fits in with a large-scale social justice approach to community partnerships, but this should not be the main focus of the college students upon entering the high school classrooms.

Another possible counter argument is that it is illogical to have a large-scale goal with separate, underlying goals. The idea is that if the goal of the existence of the partnership is to address problems with the education system, the goals within the execution of each initiative should reflect this. A simple parallel to motivate that this consistency is unnecessary is how individual personal goals focus. Whatever people are motivated by in life and want to achieve,

most advice-givers will suggest having smaller, reasonable goals that fit into this larger goal. It is more reasonable to have achievable goals to not only feel more rewarded by the progress but to most effectively reach this large scale goal. This same idea works with community partnerships, because the underlying goal of solving educational problems is best fulfilled if each initiative and involvement focuses on how they are particularly helping individual students.

Conclusion

Through this paper, I discussed different benefits that could come from university-community partnerships, specifically motivated by my personal experience engaging in these partnerships. I do understand that I was only in two of the hundreds of clubs and classes Penn offers in the community, so it is possible I would have a different perspective and opinion if my experiences had been different. My argument is that while it is important for college students to have a comprehensive understanding of the structural inequalities in education, particularly those in Philadelphia, they should have their goals be focused on individual students and the difference they can make within this scope. To best prevent a colonized relationship and to carry out the most effective initiatives, it is necessary for students to focus on how the high school students can achieve the goals of the initiative. At the same time, Penn should absolutely be donating more money to low-income high schools in Philadelphia because they have the money to do so and the schools really need it. With all its benefits, being a part of university-community partnerships at Penn has allowed me to engage with the city of Philadelphia, given me a better understanding of its education system, and most importantly, hopefully made an impact on some high school students.

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