Calvin College Service-Learning Center Earns National Recognition

What do Alverno College (WI), Berea College (KY), Brown University (RI), California State University–Monterey Bay, Calvin College (MI), DePaul University (IL), Earlham College (IN), Elon University (NC), Indiana U.-Purdue U.–Indianapolis, Marquette University (WI), Portland State University (OR), Stanford University (CA), Trinity College (CT), University of Michigan–Ann Arbor, University of Notre Dame (IN), University of Pennsylvania, University of Utah, Vanderbilt University (TN), and Warren Wilson College (NC) have in common?

Each of these institutions earned the distinction of being named one of the top nineteen service-learning programs in 2005 by *US News and World Report* magazine. Unlike most *US News* rankings, which take into account an institution’s size and Carnegie Classification (doctoral, master’s, baccalaureate etc), the rankings listed under the “programs to look for” are selected from all 3,500+ institutions of higher education in America. Selections were made based on the opinions of a panel of experts from the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U). *US News* identified and ranked eight program types, ranging from internships and cooperative experiences, senior capstones, first-year experiences, study abroad programs, writing in the disciplines, undergraduate research/creative projects (Calvin is also mentioned here), and learning communities, in addition to the service-learning category. College presidents, chief academic officers, and deans of admissions were then invited to nominate up to 10 institutions with stellar examples of each kind of program.

The distinction is fitting at Calvin, especially given the college’s four decades of thoughtful engagement with the question “How can justice and mercy be woven together in the context of a rigorous academic curriculum?” The response to this question over the years has included a creative and expansive blend of hard work on both the theoretical and practical ends of the question. While the college’s students and faculty have engaged contemporary and ancient literature and relevant research examining areas of justice and mercy, the college’s program has expanded to include opportunities to put faith into action in a spirit of partnership. Partnerships have developed between the college and its community partners, between faculty and community members, between students and their local neighbors, between faculty members from different departments and disciplines, and between various divisions (academic and student affairs, for example) within the college.

Calvin College has always been interested in high quality teaching of the liberal arts from a thoughtfully engaged Christian perspective. The contribution of the Service-Learning Center to this central component of the college’s mission has expanded our understanding of how students learn, how effective teaching engages the local community and addresses actual social issues, and how our local community can participate in this process of teaching and learning in meaningful and mutually beneficial ways. Recent recognition from peers in American higher education and the *US News* rankings confirm that these new directions are worth continuing.
Faith in Action: The Civil Rights Movement and Vocation
Brittney Stelpstra, along with a number of other Calvin students as well as 25 local high school students attended a Faith in Action Conference in Birmingham, Alabama this past January.

When I was presented with the opportunity to visit Alabama and partake in the conference on Faith in Action, I hesitated. Although I recognized the importance of the topic, I wasn’t sure that I wanted to travel in a crowded bus for 12 hours to have a discussion that happens around here all the time. The Service-Learning Center is a hotbed of conversations aimed at articulating the vocational implications of our Christianity. And quite frankly, there are times when I can get tired of it. Must I go to Alabama? Can’t I just reread the chapter on vocation in Plantinga’s Engaging God’s World?

Last minute, I decided to go. Reflecting on the experience 2 months later, I am incredibly thankful I did. Despite my initial hesitations about the trip, I was richly blessed. By the time the conference was over, the shrugging shoulders and low expectations that I had stepping onto the bus were converted to heartfelt gratitude. Not only did I learn a lot, but Alabama helped to reconnect me to the grace, beauty, and power of what it means to live a life of faith in action.

The purpose of the conference was to examine the relationship between faith and social movements, using the Civil Rights movement as an example. Alabama was the perfect venue! The chance to sit in Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, walk through Kelly Ingram Park, and explore the Civil Rights Institute exposed me to the stories of people and places that I had never heard of before. However, despite delving into impressive photography, artful documentaries, and statues of calculated design, the experience that had the greatest impact on me was a visit to a little museum in Selma.

Compared to the other museums scheduled into the conference, the Voting Rights Museum in Selma seemed unprofessional at first glance -- the pictures were faded, the brochures were hand-folded, and the paint was chipping away. But, as the tour began, it didn’t matter a bit. I remember the man who gave the tour; the excitement evident in his tone of voice gave a kind of sacred significance to each of the trinkets in that building, even in the absence of fancy protective cases. While the tour-guide had inspired me to take my time and look through it all, I didn’t make it out of the front lobby.

Along the back wall, a sign hung: “The ‘I was there’ Wall”. At the center of the wall was a picture capturing a moment preceding the clash on Bloody Sunday. The photo displayed a large group of African Americans marching en route to Selma, soon to be met by a brigade of armed guards. Surrounding the picture were hundreds and hundreds of sticky notes, plastered on the wall from ceiling to floor. The small, square slips of paper had handwritten signatures on them, along with a few sentences of a memory. I remember the elegant penmanship of one that read, “I was there. My mother, grandmother, and I...we all marched together.” Then, just beneath it, a note written in block print said “I was there on that day. I was one of the guards.”

The sticky notes represented two people, two signatures, and two very different memories of what Bloody Sunday was like. Yet, both were there in Selma that day, and both played a part in the story that has become foundational in the process of bringing forth shalom in the world.

Undeniably, I have come to appreciate Plantinga’s articulation of faith and action throughout my time at Calvin. The words I read about vocation during my first weeks on campus have become more and more real as I have continued to grow. But, no words have been imprinted on me like those 2 handwritten notes. Somehow, although in a much different way, my visit to that little museum in Alabama allowed me to be a part of the story too. I was there with them as I ran my fingers over their handwriting. I was there with them as I remembered the struggle for voting rights in Selma. And I will be there with them as I seek to struggle for justice in the days and years to come.

Brittney Stelpstra is a Senior Social Work Major and will be graduating in May. While at the conference, Brittney participated in a panel discussion about Service-Learning and her work with the Streetfest Program.
Service-Learning at Calvin Celebrates 40 Years

Service-Learning at Calvin College is not a new idea. In 1964, the KIDS organization formed to provide tutoring opportunities for children at inner-city schools. In the late 1970s, KIDS became the Student Volunteer Service, with programs in local schools, Big Brother, Big Sister opportunities, blood drives, spring break trips, and a local emergency moving service.

In 1993, the Student Volunteer Service changed its name to the Service-Learning Center. With strong support from the faculty, a movement arose to better incorporate relevant service opportunities and reflection into a variety of courses across the college. Using the model of experiential education, faculty began to place students into service opportunities where they were exposed to real life situations within which to test some of the theories of their courses.

In 2001, Calvin unveiled its new Core Curriculum, emphasizing the development in students of skills, knowledge, and virtue, and encouraging a general engagement with God’s world. The mission of the Service-Learning Center, Serving to Learn, Learning to Serve, fits neatly into this new curriculum, particularly the emphasis on a cross-cultural engagement experience for all students.

On March 9, 2006, many of those involved in Service-Learning throughout the past 40 years gathered to celebrate the organization’s beginnings and look forward to continued growth. Past staffs, alumni and the organization’s founders, Janice Veenstra and Sharon Slager, were able to attend and enjoy an evening of praising God for faithfulness throughout the years.

Service-Learning and the Classroom: An Interview with Professor Jennifer Hardy Williams

Ryan Kruis, student staff member at the S-LC, met with Professor Jennifer Hardy Williams, a recent addition to the English faculty, to discuss her incorporation of service-learning into her English 101 class, an introductory class on written rhetoric.

Ryan: You named your English 101 class “Writing as Action.” What exactly does that mean and how does that concept play into your teaching of written rhetoric?

Dr. Hardy Williams: What I really hope students will leave my class thinking about is the way in which writing does not have to be merely the tool that gets them through college, but writing in and of itself can be a tool for social justice. In fact, writing, whether that be emails, letters, or contacting the government—is probably one of the greatest ways that we as Christians can help shape and change our society.

Ryan: How does using Service-Learning in your classroom pedagogically reinforce these ideas?

Dr. Hardy Williams: Well, my interest in social justice goes back to when I was in graduate school at the University of California Irvine and was involved in a program called Humanities Out There that sent graduate students and professors out into the surrounding Hispanic community to teach the Western canon with the goal that after 6-8 years we would start seeing increased enrollment from those school districts into UCI.

I have seen the way that writing and the liberal arts can effect a major change in social justice and would like to give my students a taste of that. So, in addition to having them write with an eye toward social justice issues, I wanted them to participate in a world where the students they are tutoring think differently than they do and wanted them to think through that difference. The students in my class go to Homework House because I wanted their service-learning to be educationally based so that they could think through that difference in terms of education.

One of the things I am most excited about this class is my final assignment. National Public Radio has a program called “This I Believe,” which has different people send in a 300-word piece about what they believe. My final assignment is that each of the students will write a 300-500 word essay about his or her experience at Homework House and will submit it to NPR. I am excited because it’s going to give them an opportunity not only to reflect on the service-learning that they have done but also to write to a broader audience so that their writing could in fact produce change and be action.

Ryan: In a brief statement, besides the skills of written rhetoric, what do you hope your students will take from this class?

Dr. Hardy Williams: I guess definitely that writing is action and that no matter what field they end up in, whether they decide to be a stay-at-home mom or dad or whatever, that the way that they write is a way in which they can interact with our world. God needs us to be good writers. There is a perception out there, because of certain political assumptions about Christians, that Christians are not intelligent people. And so, one of the best things we can do is to be as smart, articulate, passionate, and interested in justice as we can be. That is what I believe true religion is: to care for the widows and the orphans. If my students can catch a little bit of that enthusiasm, I would be really happy and thrilled. I hope that for a couple of them it will be life changing.
Spring Break 2006 “Road Trip with a Purpose”

This Year 80 Calvin Students participated in Service-Learning Trips. This year’s locations were Gallup, New Mexico; Boston, Massachusetts; Knoxville, Tennessee; Houma, Louisiana; Moss Point, Mississippi; and Kansas City, Kansas. For the sake of space, we can only include a couple of the many reflections here.

Boston, Massachusetts

For my Spring Break this year I decided to go on one of the Service Learning Spring Break Trips. I chose to go to Boston because of how focused the Boston Project seemed to be on serving people in the inner city. Because I grew up on a farm in a small town I always feared the city. I thought that better understanding God’s call for Christians to serve in the city would be a good learning experience for me.

When we first arrived in Boston, I was exhausted from the drive and very anxious since big cities always scared me. But I knew that if I was going to learn and allow God to use me on this trip, I had to break down my stereotypes and see God’s beauty in Boston. Of course, this did not take long. While I was in Boston I served in homeless shelters, churches, food banks, schools and had discussions with the group. There was never a moment when I doubted God’s presence or couldn’t see Him at work. I learned that God has a great calling for Christians to live and serve in cities. I know that God is at work everywhere, but this was a way that God opened my eyes to recognize how important it is that some Christians serve in the cities.

Another thing I began to grasp and am still working on receiving a better understanding of is God’s justice. We learned a lot of the history of Boston and the political, racial and cultural problems the city faces each day. It was unsettling. Being unsettled about these issues made me question what God actually desires and how much I, as His servant, need to align myself with desiring the same things. I recognized more fully how God is a just God, how He doesn’t like His people to suffer under circumstances such as poverty and homelessness and how He calls us to passionately take a stand against the injustice in the world.

While serving in Boston I also had the chance to learn more about myself and the different attributes I was able to contribute to my group. I became aware of the traits I have that slowed me down when trying to serve at different sites. Learning these things about myself helps me understand who God created me to be, and this makes me excited to start using my gifts to serve Him. I can now say that God is good and well at work in my life. My faith was challenged a lot and I was able to truly feel God’s presence as I served in Boston.

Ali Reenders is a Sophomore at Calvin College in the Nursing program.

Ali Reenders, Eric Tans and Carrie Kennedy work with the Boston Center.

Houma, Louisiana

This March I went on a Spring Break trip through the Service-Learning Center. With 18 others I went to Houma, Louisiana, a city southwest of New Orleans. Simply stated, the trip changed me.

What we did is familiar—putting on a new blue roof was an experience that was so good because it was a rest from the stresses of homework, planning, and living my self-focused college life. More importantly, though, it was so good for me because of the way it reminded me to reorder my priorities—love is the necessary grounding for all good things. Love is something we are called to that can not be measured, assessed, or planned. It is not something that school can focus on, yet it is something that any life needs in order to be true and full. They loved us and we loved them and it was good. They let us into their lives. They fed us mounds of crawfish and showed us how to peel them. They cared about us. We spent time listening to their stories, telling our own, painting walls, building roofs, removing moldy walls. After a few days the us/Them distinction faded as we learned how to see each other and love each other as neighbors.

It was not just another service-learning trip or mission trip because it was me and Justin and Dan, Junior, Howie and Pam. It was different because it was individuals, loved by God and doing our best to love each other as neighbors and as friends.

I went into this thinking that I already knew what I’d get out of it what I’d learn. I’m already aware of the concept of service-learning: what more do I have to learn? I got there and it all changed.

Maria Reversluis is a Senior, English major from Grand Rapids. She is the Church Liaison.

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New Program to Assist in ACT Preparation at Ottawa Hills High School

A major reason why many Colleges now actively recruit minorities is the fact that pre-college education in minority-dominant high schools is almost non-existent. While most students in private schools go through rigorous preparation for taking standardized exams like the SAT and ACT, most predominantly minority high schools cannot afford this luxury. I was especially surprised to learn that such ACT or SAT training was non-existent at Ottawa Hills High School, just two miles down Burton Street from Calvin College. I had just become the Service-Learning Center Coordinator for the Natural Sciences at that time, and I thought that an ACT program at Ottawa Hills High school would be a great way to engage natural science students in Service-Learning and at the same time, meet an immense need in the community.

With tutors from the Math, Biology, Chemistry, Physics, and English departments, about 20 students from Ottawa Hills High school were able to meet with a tutor from Calvin one-on-one twice a week starting February 13th 2006 to work on the specific areas of the ACT test that they needed help with in preparation for the April 8th ACT test.

The program came to a successful end on April 8th and will be continued next semester. Many of the tutors wrote about how much opportunity they had in high school in comparison to what the students at Ottawa Hills had. My prayer is that this realization will turn into a strong desire to do something about this social injustice. The help rendered to these young students will make a huge difference in their future and I am thankful to the almighty God through whose grace this program was conceived and implemented.

Book Review

Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as Christian Tradition
by Christin Pohl

When Jesus said in Matthew 25 that “I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me”, he was speaking to our calling to practice hospitality to those around us. But the way that we practice such hospitality and the frequency of such hospitality has declined over the years since Jesus’ original command to love our neighbor. In Making Room, Christine Pohl tracks this decline and discusses the importance of recovering the practices of hospitality seen in the historic church.

During the first 17 centuries of the Church, hospitality was seen as an act of discipleship, where caring for the poor, sick, homeless, orphaned, or disabled was a basic action stemming from one’s faith. But during the 18th century, the moral obligation of hospitality began to disappear from religious texts as institutions of care began to replace the in-home hospitality of the past. It is this in-home, face-to-face interaction that Pohl argues needs to be resurrected in Christian practice. It is this close interaction that breaks down socio-economic barriers by removing the distance we put between the poor and suffering and ourselves and brings them into our embrace. It is this close interaction that also removes the blindfolds from our eyes to recognize the poor and suffering as fellow image bearers of God. Through hospitality, the beliefs we have about human worth and love of our neighbor comes into our actions as we live out the lives we believe are godly.

“As a way of life, an act of love, an expression of faith, our hospitality reflects and anticipates God’s welcome.”

- Christine Pohl

Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition is an essential read for everyone. Through the combination of her many experiences with communities of hospitality and the history of hospitality in the church, Pohl speaks to the necessity of hospitality, both in the lives of the host and the guest and gives valuable insight and suggestions into an important practice needed in each of our daily lives.

Paul Vliem is a Senior, Social Work major from South Dakota. He has been on staff for about one year. He is the Social Sciences -Academically Based Service-Learning Coordinator.
Meet Our New Staff

Carolina Martinez
Spanish Academically Based Service-Learning Coordinator

Katy Chadwick
Education Academically Based Service-Learning Coordinator

Lina Medeiros-Ward
Spring Break Trip Coordinator

Jocelyn Jones
Federal Work Study Coordinator

Carolina came on staff this Spring. She is a Freshman from Grand Rapids. She is a Pre-Med, Psychology major and will remain on staff in the Fall of 2006.

Katy came on staff this Spring and is a Freshman from Livonia, Michigan. Her major is still undecided, but she is considering Psychology or Social Work. She will remain on staff in the Fall.

Lina came on staff in January, but she was a driver for the Service-Learning Transportation last Fall. She is a senior from Clinton, Mississippi and will be graduating in May with a Nursing degree.

Jocelyn came on Staff in the Spring and she is a Sophomore from Detroit. Her major is Theatre and she will remain here in the Fall.