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N E W S

Professor speaks on the importance of service learning

By Thad Komorowski Contributing Writer | February 15th, 2010

Michael Smith, assistant professor of history, has been an advocate of the incorporation of service learning in not only history courses, but in college in general. His article "What History Is Good For: Service Learning and Studying the Past," was published in the Winter 2009 issue of Learning and Teaching: The International Journal of Higher Education in the Social Sciences.

Contributing Writer Thad Komorowski spoke with Smith to discuss integrating service learning into his work as a teacher, the importance of it to history and his hopes for making it part of the Ithaca College experience.

Thad Komorowski: What intrigued you about service learning?

Michael Smith: I got into service learning when I was in graduate school at Indiana University and had an opportunity to actually teach a course as a graduate student after going through a seminar on how to design service learning courses. And then when I got to Ithaca College about eight and a half years ago, it was at the top of my list to try to do some courses that had a service learning component in them. And so the [course] that I wrote about in this article was probably the third or fourth different course at the college that I had incorporated the service learning element into.

TK: What can service learning in history lead to and how important is it?

MS: I find when the service learning experience is well designed, it integrates academic investigation of a subject. In my case it's history of some kind. It integrates investigation of a subject with experience related to that subject in some way. The article is about the learning experiences of my students in an honors seminar called Wealth and Poverty in American History. In addition to reading a whole variety [of text] and screening films, related to the history of inequality, they each had a placement with the community partner where they served the needs of that partner in some way, and those needs were always defined by the community partner.

TK: Which community partners did they have?

MS: The Red Cross Homeless Shelter, the Samaritan Center, the Tompkins County Workers Center, so a whole variety of different agencies worked with the students.

TK: In general, what sort of reflections do you get from the students, and how do you assess them?

MS: The key to service learning is that you're never grading the student or really evaluating them in the usual sense for what they're doing with the community partner. The only thing you do in that regard is make sure they're not blowing it off or becoming a burden for the agency. What I evaluate the students on is the writing that they do about the experience and the conversations that we have and discussions about the experiences, and how they integrate with what we've been reading about, like hunger or homelessness. Those students who were placed in organizations that are dealing with those in contemporary Ithaca society have a very concrete way of thinking about, "OK so 100 years ago, if you were hungry, if you were homeless, here's what it's like: here's the social structures that helped produce this. Here's what I'm learning about how this is happening today, here's a human face, both who [are] trying to help and the people themselves." And they can put that to the more abstract historical material.

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TK: Have you found other faculty members to be receptive to using service-learning?

MS: There are a number of faculty members who do this, I think the college is beginning to try to put together some infrastructure to support it. The challenge is that it's a significant added investment on the part of the faculty member in terms of time and oversight, so, understandably, people are reluctant to take on that extra burden, even if the learning experience is pretty tremendous. Pat Spencer in the Writing Program, Jeff Claus in the Teacher Education Program, Elan Shapiro with Environmental Studies [use service learning]. It's something that I hope the college really continues to develop because I think we're in a unique position given the community, given the relatively small size of our classes.

TK: What goals would you like to see achieved from service learning at the college?

MS: [Throughout the school] there's been a really clear goal of having students have more experiential learning, of students being more connected with the community, and service learning is a great way to do that. I think the first goal of the institution is to establish an office of service learning which schools have really well-developed programs in this regard, which has a full time staff members who help cultivate these contacts in the community with staff, sometimes work study students, sometimes with other employees who can help do some of the legwork, going and meeting with the community partners and figuring out what their needs are and how different courses at the college could help with those. We're not there yet, if we want to promote service learning as part of an Ithaca College education, we won't get anywhere until that happens.

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