

An Interview with Cheryl Keen

As an educator and administrator, you have had a long history of involvement and commitment to service-learning for students. Can you share with us what you see as the value of such an experience for students?

My hope is that students get the opportunity through their service-learning experiences to engage deeply with people they perceive to be different from themselves. This means crossing the boundaries of race, class, physical ability, sexuality, and so on. From the research that I, along with my co-authors, conducted in support of the book, "Common Fire: Leading Lives of Commitment in a Complex World" I learned that service-learning can operate as the primary formative experience in cultivating a life-long commitment to working on behalf of others.

I've also been humbled in my championing of service-learning. Through our research, we found that these forms of engaging deeply with the other happen in a whole variety of settings and that service was not necessarily the primary one. In interviews conducted with these students, my co-authors and I also found that travel and work were just as likely, or more often, to be mentioned as formative experiences. Certainly, higher education has a challenge in providing adequate opportunities for students to travel or study abroad. Most colleges are lucky if they are able to get twenty percent of their students to be involved in major travel abroad study programs. Likewise, very few colleges are able to offer cooperative work programs that provide an active service environment and that challenge students to engage more readily in service-related projects.

I think higher education has a much better chance of committing itself to getting the majority or all of its students in service-learning opportunities than travel. In many ways, I think higher education has an obligation to do just this. Most of our institutional missions stipulate that we're supposed to be developing citizens for the next century. One way to do this is to draw students into dialogue with people that are different from the people they grew up with in order to help them see other people's needs and understand other people's stories. It also helps to expand and shape their sense of what their larger function is within the world.

Aside from these primary findings in our "Common Fire" study, I've found that there are a lot of other reasons for students to engage in service-learning that

parallel many of the larger goals we have for students in college. I'm currently involved with the Bonner Foundation which provides service scholarships to students on twenty-five college campuses. I work quite a bit with the data collected from these scholars that focuses upon students' perceptions of the value to their service work. These students do ten hours of service per week through their whole four years, plus they get funded to do two summers of intensive service. And when they report about what they value from these service experiences, the primary thing they report again fits with our "Common Fire" findings. Namely, these students value engaging with diversity, they value dialoging with people from backgrounds different than their own, and they value the reflective process that generates from the discussions they have with program staff supervisors at the service sites. In rank descending order, they also indicate valuing opportunities to work for social justice, developing international perspectives, maintaining a sense of civic engagement through their service, and furthering their faith development. Each of these items we consistently see in our Bonner work and it is something that the HERI Spirituality Project has certainly elaborated upon as well.

There is a whole list of other developmental goals that come from service that anybody in student services would also recognize. Skill development is a really important thing students can get out of service. Ninety-eight percent of the Bonner participants identified certain skills that they gained from their specific service project. We've found that these skills, in turn, have a lot of carry-over to other areas of their lives. Most particularly, one of the wonderfully valuable skill sets that they report improvement in is listening carefully to others and understanding people from different backgrounds. They also report gaining skills that help them to mediate difference between people in groups. These kinds of skills have so much transferability. We've also found that not everyone goes into service to find a career or to work on their interests within their academic major, but more than half of them do. Service has become another opportunity for many students to figure out what their gifts are and what they wish to do for the rest of their lives.

You have also been involved with the national collaborative on spirituality in higher education (CSHE). As an active participant in the on-going dialogue on spirituality within higher education, what are the most salient connections you see between service-learning and spirituality?

Well, one is just what we were talking about before. It is this sense of calling. In the realm of faith and spirituality the word that is most often used is "vocation". When I read the reflections from the journals of students involved in service-learning, it is clear that many of them have this sense of calling. They are in the process of finding something worthwhile for them to devote their life and time to. Even people who do engage in service-learning for scholarship dollars or for credit usually talk about how the tension shifts over time from a sense of obligation to perform the service, to the great personal satisfaction and life

direction they get from it. I think the life of the spirit is so much about trying to become attuned to our deepest values and purposes. If service can help us do that, what a wonderful gift colleges can give to students.

Another thing I've been a big champion of is the reflective process found within service-learning. Those familiar with service-learning pedagogy know that reflection is a critical piece of the service process in that it provides participants with opportunities to deepen the lesson gains from their experiences. In my own reflections on this process, I've been very curious about the kinds of thinking students value most and the gains they get from these introspections. This is where service group leaders within service-learning courses and projects have such great influence over the quality of student experiences. If the leader has some anxiety about the appropriateness of talking about faith or religion, I believe they are limiting the students' opportunities to integrate the lessons gained from their service with their spiritual thinking on the service work they do. It's an incredible opportunity to engage in this way and one that shouldn't be short-changed just because the leader is not so sure how to handle spirituality in group dialogue.

Group dialogue appears to be the reflective activity that the Bonner scholars value most. This kind of dialogue is the deepest kind of discourse about how students make sense of the world, what keeps people going, how students process the suffering that they witness and work to alleviate, and the incredible lessons they talk about taking away as a result of the work they do. It seems to me that spirituality and service-learning are integral to each other, assuming project leaders try to foster this kind of growth.

I'm wondering if you would comment more on the ways in college personnel, who find themselves somewhat reluctant to introduce faith-based or spirituality-related issues into group dialogue, can negotiate these boundaries in order to enhance the reflective process for students.

I think that there are more causes of this fear besides the religious context. There is individual anxiety to bring up the subject of spirituality. If faculty aren't feeling comfortable understanding the relevance of the spiritual journey within a higher education context, they are going to have a really hard time facilitating that journey for students. And what opportunities do we provide in higher education in which people can talk openly about their spiritual development? Some people do participate in institutionalized denominational discussions, but even that is sometimes too narrow a context in which to be reflective about faith and spirituality.

At present, we simply don't offer enough by way of interfaith or open-framed spiritual discussions. Also, in higher education many faculty and administrators are not encouraged to talk about spirituality between themselves which makes it more difficult to introduce the subject into student settings. There is also the

tension you've mentioned, a fear of introducing religious questions within the context of a discussion that could ultimately create conflict. This reluctance may also be related to the fact that so many of us are uncomfortable with any kind of conflict. This is such a shame because one of the things that good service-learning experiences do is help people understand and be comfortable with conflict instead of running away from it. The Bonner Scholars, when asked in their senior year what recommendations they have for the incoming freshman, often say that these incoming students should try and push themselves beyond their comfort level. Don't just repeat what you're comfortable and familiar with, because it's that area of discomfort that serves as a site for real learning in the end.

Service-learning as a pedagogy within higher education has had a considerable history. What are your thoughts about spirituality becoming more central to higher education in terms of curricular efforts? How should we (faculty, administrators, etc.) go about promoting the idea that the spiritual concerns and interests of students need to be addressed?

It's interesting. Embedded in this question, I think, is a concern over the point at which spirituality will have a considerable history as a pedagogy in higher education. It makes me think about Parker Palmer's writing. His writing is one of the tools that opened up discussion about spirituality in higher education. He gave a speech at a higher education conference about fifteen years ago that raised questions about faith, loving your students, loving what you teach, and not running away from tackling these big questions in the classroom. And thousands of people rose to their feet because they were so hungry for someone to bring up these issues within a higher education context. Since then, his book, "The Courage to Teach", has become a best seller for Jossey-Bass.

Parker Palmer writes about how civil rights and women's movement were both "true" movements. In a very real sense, they brought attention to social issues and changed the political and social nature of our interactions. Some have claimed that in the higher education context, service-learning has evolved into a movement that over the last twenty years has really captured people's attention. You see it everywhere. It's all of a sudden so legitimate and colleges feel like they are obliged to be doing something about it. You can point to a number of historical dynamics within higher education that have made this movement possible. In a similar vein, I feel that the formations of a movement are beginning to take shape with regards to spirituality in higher education.

So the question is how are we going to do that? How are we going to promote the idea that students' spiritual needs should be addressed? I very much like the work that the UCLA HERI project is doing which is, in part, staking the claim that they (students) have these needs. It's equally important to acknowledge that faculty members also have these needs. Higher education faculty and administrators may be anxious about how to safely bring up the issues of

spirituality without fear of being attacked for not being objective. So I think raising the need and then finding forms in which to offer these conversations is incredibly important.

There is wonderful work currently being done in the Education and Transformation project and the Consortium on Spirituality in Higher Education that involves advertising forms of discussions in order to bring students and faculty together around these issues. Many campuses have found that they simply need to open the door and these wonderful interfaith efforts evolve, providing fantastic opportunities for spiritual dialogue. I see more and more of this happening, where people are promoting spiritual reflection on their campuses.

As a college administrator, how do you perceive your role in encouraging faculty and the institution to attend to the spiritual needs of students? Have you been able to do so at Antioch?

Service-learning has become an established pedagogy in higher education because it has been ritualized on college campuses. There are service-learning classes, it's spoken by presidents on podiums, lifted up as a value, and tied to the importance of community involvement. So where in higher education are the inspirational statements or ritualized behaviors that help students to determine who they are and what their purpose is in life? Where can students find out what they need for spiritual growth?

I've been reflecting on these questions a lot of late because of an event that occurred on our campus last spring. After the end of classes, a student committed suicide. Since everyone had already left for summer break, we only marked the loss by emails. When everyone returned to school four months later, we didn't have a ritual to commemorate her life. We are a small college that is not religiously oriented. In fact, our students are probably some of the most outspoken in their insistence that they are spiritual, but not denominationally affiliated. So, there were no obvious forms in which we could come together as a campus in order to mourn her loss. Months have now gone by and some of the students are starting to feel the pain and loneliness of their grief. In response, we're now creating a ritual.

What this incident has taught us is that we, as an institution, don't yet know how to come together in order to foster a nourishing spiritual environment around which we can experience life's important moments and transitions. So one of the things that I'm aware of as an administrator is that I need to create those rituals so that when that crisis happens, or there is a moment of loss or opportunity, we don't have to invent them. We need to be able to build that into our culture with more liveliness. Just because we're not a religious institution doesn't mean that we can't create opportunities for meaningful spiritual reflection. It took some lonely pleas of help for us to get something organized. The spontaneity of the

moment that might have been six months ago wasn't there because, as an institution, we lacked ways to express ourselves spiritually.

For us, the question is, as an institution without chaplains, who takes responsibility for these kinds of situations? As humans, we used to live in small communities and we would know what to do. There was always someone who knew how to handle these kinds of situations. Many of our small schools tend to operate as small communities but we're not clear about who should step in to take on a role like this. As a society, we tend to professionalize these types of roles. Yet, we ought to have a rich enough culture so that the community knows how to move together at moments like these.

How can service-learning become a vehicle for initiating meaningful dialogue among and with students on spiritual matters?

Service-learning provides particularly valuable moments for spiritual reflection and growth. On a given day, one student may look into a child's eyes during a tutoring session and know that in a very deep way he or she is helping that child to build faith. Another student may be the first person to discover that a child's poor educational progress is the result of a unique learning style and helps to address the problem. And yet another student may find him or herself blessed by being present when an elderly person they've kept company with at the local nursing home passes away. Who can these students share these moments of clarity with? Who will help these students to process the meanings these experiences have for their future? Do we, as faculty and administrators, have a chance to be inspired and challenged by our students' struggles and epiphanies? I hope we all work to find more ways for students to have opportunities for these kinds of dialogues.

Thanks so much for speaking with me this morning Dr. Keen.

Thank you.

Cheryl Keen currently serves as Professor and Dean of Community Learning at Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio. In addition, she is co-author of the book, *Common Fire: Leading Lives of Commitment in a Complex World* (1997). Dr. Keen can be reached at ckeen@antioch-college.edu.