



Integrating Community Service and Classroom Instruction Enhances Learning: Results From an Experiment

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To help inform discussion of the educational value of community service, we report results of an experiment in integrating service-learning into a large undergraduate political science course. Students in service-learning sections of the course were significantly more likely than those in the traditional discussion sections to report that they had performed up to their potential in the course, had learned to apply principles from the course to new situations, and had developed a greater awareness of societal problems. Classroom learning and course grades also increased significantly as a result of students' participation in course-relevant community service. Finally, pre- and postsurvey data revealed significant effects of participation in community service upon students' personal values and orientations. The experiential learning acquired through service appears to compensate for some pedagogical weaknesses of classroom instruction.

Interest in integrating community service into high school and collegiate education has mushroomed since the publication in 1980 of the report of the National Commission on Youth, entitled *The Transition of Youth to Adulthood*. The commission, chaired by James Coleman and sponsored by the Kettering Foundation, recommended that service to one's community and nation be utilized as a means to "bridge the gap" between youth and adulthood. Two reports sponsored by the Carnegie Foundation, one written by Frank Newman in 1985 and a second authored by Ernest Boyer 2 years later made the case even more forcefully. Newman wrote:

If there is a crisis in education in the United States today, it is less that test scores have declined than it is that we have failed to provide the education for citizenship that is

still the most important responsibility of the nation's schools and colleges. (p. 31)

Responding to the call, a group of college and university presidents established Campus Compact as a vehicle for encouraging volunteer service among undergraduates. Within a few years, over 250 campuses had joined the compact, and to date 11 states have established their own compacts of institutions of higher education within their boundaries. As collegiate administrators were working from their end, Wayne Meisel, a recent Harvard graduate, was engaged at the grassroots level with undergraduates in the northeast to form the Campus Outreach Opportunity League (COOL) to promote and support student involvement in community service. By 1992, COOL was working with thousands of undergraduates at more than 600 colleges and uni-

versities and 250 nonprofit voluntary organizations nationally. The boom in interest in community service was further fueled by President George Bush's signing of the National and Community Service Act of 1990, which provided funding for programs encouraging community service by students in schools and colleges. On March 1, 1993, President Bill Clinton proposed a new national program, modeled after the G.I. Bill, through which individuals could offset the costs of higher education and job training through voluntary service. Six months later, the president signed into law the National and Community Service Act of 1993, a somewhat scaled-down version of his original proposal.

Volunteer and "service-learning" centers that pair undergraduates with local agencies are currently active on hundreds of campuses. In many instances, academic credit may be earned for community service. Less frequently, service is directly coupled with more traditional academic courses and classroom learning. One of the most ambitious of such service-learning projects is located at Rutgers University, where the Civic Education and Community Service Program was established in 1989 (Barber, 1992; Barber & Battistoni, 1993).

Secondary education has also joined the movement. The Detroit school system recently passed a high school graduation requirement of 200 hours of community service. Atlanta enacted a similar rule, as have many smaller public school systems. In 1992, Maryland became the first state to enact a community service graduation requirement for all high school students, a development that received front page coverage in the *New York Times* (DeWitt, 1992). Beginning with the 1993 school year, all Maryland students must complete 75 hours of volunteer service between the eighth grade and the end of their senior year in high school in order to receive a diploma.

Charles Moskos's book *A Call to Civic Service* (1988) surveys this movement and promotes legislation calling for a national service program for all young adults. U.S. senators and members of Congress from both major parties have endorsed the idea. Whether or not anything as far-reaching as mandatory

national service becomes a reality any time soon (if ever), there is no denying that voluntary service is fast becoming an integral part of the secondary and collegiate educational experience.

Outright opposition to the idea of community service as a component of education is rare. Proposals to *require* such service as a condition of high school or college graduation—or even to devote significant shares of tight education budgets to promoting service among students—are *very* controversial, however (see Evers, 1990). In Maryland, the state teachers' union, many school principals and teachers, and perhaps a majority of students opposed the service requirement. Some—particularly school administrators—questioned the costs and the increased administrative burdens for staff and teachers. Others balked at the seemingly contradictory notion of mandatory voluntarism. Many argued that incorporating community service into schools ran the risk of diverting the institutions from their basic academic mission. In the *Times* article, Maryland school board vice president Jack Sprague was quoted as characterizing student service as "fluffy, feel-good stuff." He continued:

I can't, in the reading I've done, find one iota of scientific research that says that this has made a difference in a student's education, . . . and I'd rather concentrate on making sure our students are getting a good grounding in the basics.

Mr. Sprague had a point. A sympathetic review of research on the educational value of community service concluded recently that while qualitative evidence of positive effects of service-learning is plentiful, "only rarely does participation result in higher scores on tests of general knowledge, with the clear exception of academic achievement scores for students in the role of teacher or tutor" (Conrad & Hedin, 1991, p. 747).

The present study is for Mr. Sprague. We report here on the results of an experiment in complementing classroom learning in a large undergraduate political science course with learning gained through students' experiences working with community service agencies.

Methods

Participants

Participants in the study were 89 University of Michigan undergraduates, predominantly sophomores and juniors, enrolled in "Contemporary Political Issues" at the University of Michigan in winter semester 1992. Participants included 53 males (60%) and 36 females (40%).

Measures

Effects of the service-learning experiment were assessed in a variety of ways. At the beginning and end of the course, students completed a brief self-administered questionnaire inquiring about their social and political beliefs and values through a set of Likert-scale items.¹ These surveys contained student identification numbers so as to permit individual-level comparisons of pre- and postcourse responses. The postcourse version of the survey also included nine Likert-type items by which students indicated the extent to which they perceived that the course had influenced their personal orientations toward service and their community. At the end of the semester, students also provided their assessments of the course via a standard evaluation questionnaire developed by the university's Center for Research on Learning and Teaching (CRLT). That questionnaire included a battery of items with 5-point Likert-type response options as well as space for written comments. The CRLT course evaluation questionnaires were anonymous, identifying students only as being in either treatment or control groups. Finally, we have course grades and some information on class attendance.

Procedures

"Contemporary Political Issues" is offered in a lecture/section format. The course is aimed at a broad audience of undergraduates regardless of major and focuses upon their roles as citizens in a representative democracy, the conduct of political campaigns, and important policy controversies of the day, such as the federal budget deficit, welfare reform, racism, and the environment. The class meets twice weekly as a group in 50-minute lecture sessions. In addition, students

meet twice weekly (50 minutes per session) in small discussion sections of fewer than 25 students each. The discussion sections are taught by political science doctoral students.

Prior to class registration for winter term 1992, two of eight discussion sections were randomly designated as "community service" sections, in which students would be assigned to engage in 20 hours of service with their choice of one of a number of designated community agencies over the 13-week semester. The service opportunities included working at a homeless shelter, a women's crisis center, or the Ecology Center, and tutoring at-risk primary or high school students. Time in section meetings was regularly devoted to discussions about what students were learning from their service experiences and how their experiences related to course readings and lectures. Near the end of the semester, students in the service sections also wrote short papers and presented brief oral reports based on their experiences.

The six "control group" sections used a traditional format, in which section meetings were devoted largely to discussions of the readings and lectures. Students in the control sections were required to write longer term papers based on library research intended to take an amount of time and effort equivalent to that expended by students in the service sections.

To minimize potential self-selection biases, students had no knowledge during course registration about the intended experiment or about which sections were to be treatment or control groups. Postregistration comparisons of sections in terms of demographic factors (sex, race, and year in school) and student responses to a questionnaire about personal attitudes and values that was distributed early in the semester revealed no significant differences between treatment and control groups.² Nor did the groups differ in terms of mean student self-ratings of the strength of their "desire to take this course" ($t = 0.33, ns$). Four graduate teaching assistants were assigned to the course, one of whom led the service discussion sections while the other three led the traditional discussion sections. The four graduate assistants were all doctoral students with comparable levels of teaching experience.

At the first lecture meeting of the course, students were informed in general terms that we would be experimenting with different types of teaching methods in the course and about the differing requirements associated with the two kinds of discussion sections. They were also informed that in order to prevent possible biases in the study, transfers between community service and traditional sections were not permitted. A total of 52 students had enrolled in discussion sections using the traditional format, and 37 students had enrolled in the service sections. During the first 2 weeks of the semester, the university's Office of Community Service Learning assisted in placing treatment group students with local agencies. The graduate teaching assistant for the treatment groups visited each agency over the course of the semester and contacted the agencies periodically to ensure that students were fulfilling their time commitments and that the work to which students were assigned was consistent with the goals of the course.

Results

Regardless of assignment to treatment or control sections, all students attended the same lectures, were assigned the same course readings, and took the same midterm and final examinations, graded according to a common set of standards. Hence students' evaluations of those aspects of the course should not have exhibited any significant between-group differences, and they did not on any of the 10 relevant CRLT evaluation questionnaire items.³ That is, the course evaluations revealed absolutely no evidence that students in the treatment groups felt that they were being treated "specially" in terms of lectures, readings, or examinations. In addition, all four graduate assistants received comparably high student evaluations in terms of fairness and conscientiousness. These results reinforce our confidence that uncontrolled potential sources of bias in the study were minimal and that any systematic differences observed in criterion measures of students in treatment versus control sections are attributable to the presence or absence of the community service requirement.

On many measures of course impact, students in the community service sections differed markedly from their counterparts in the traditional sections. For students in the traditional sections, paired *t* tests comparing pre- and postcourse scores on a battery of beliefs and values items showed significant individual-level change on only 3 of the 15 items, as shown in Table 1. Among students in the service-learning sections, in contrast, 8 of the 15 items exhibited significant individual-level pre- to postcourse change. For example, students in the service-learning sections displayed significant increases in their ratings of the personal importance they attached to "working toward equal opportunity for all U.S. citizens," "volunteering my time helping people in need," and "finding a career that provides the opportunity to be helpful to others or useful to society."

As compared with their counterparts in the traditional sections, students in the service-learning sections also provided higher mean ratings of the degree to which they thought that participation in the course had increased or strengthened their "intention to serve others in need," "intention to give to charity," "orientation toward others and away from yourself," "belief that helping those in need is one's social responsibility," "belief that one can make a difference in the world," and "tolerance and appreciation of others" (see Table 2).

Most people would probably agree that increasing college students' tolerance of others or enhancing their desire to find socially useful careers is worthwhile. However, some (though not we) might question whether changing student orientations in these ways is central to the academic mission of an educational institution.⁴ Indeed, attitudinal changes such as these could be regarded as examples of just the sort of "fluffy, feel-good stuff" some skeptics have in mind when they deride service learning. Are there indicators of other, more "academic" effects of integrating community service with classroom learning?

There are. As Table 3 illustrates, data from the CRLT course evaluations showed that students in service-learning sections were

TABLE 1

Statistical Significance of Student Pre- to Postcourse Change in Beliefs and Values, by Type of Discussion Section

Belief or value	Traditional	Service-learning
Indicate the importance to you personally of the following:		
a. working toward equal opportunity for all U.S. citizens.	<i>ns</i>	.04
b. developing a meaningful philosophy of life.	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>
c. becoming involved in a program to improve my community.	.01	.03
d. being very well off financially. ^a	<i>ns</i>	.01
e. volunteering my time helping people in need.	<i>ns</i>	.04
f. giving 3% or more of my income to help those in need.	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>
g. finding a career that provides the opportunity to be helpful to others or useful to society.	<i>ns</i>	.05
To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?		
h. Adults should give some time for the good of their community or country.	<i>ns</i>	.01
i. Having an impact on the world is within the reach of most individuals.	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>
j. Most misfortunes that occur to people are frequently the result of circumstances beyond their control.	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>
k. If I could change one thing about society, it would be to achieve greater social justice.	.01	<i>ns</i>
l. I make quick judgments about homeless people. ^a	<i>ns</i>	.03
m. People, regardless of whether they have been successful or not, ought to help those in need.	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>
n. People ought to help those in need as a "payback" for their own opportunities, fortunes, and successes.	.02	.04
o. I feel that I can make a difference in the world.	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>

Note. Response options for items a–g consisted of a 4-point scale ranging from "not important" (1) to "essential" (4). Response options for items h–o consisted of a 5-point scale ranging from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (5). One-tailed prob-values of paired *t* test values are reported.

^aFor these items, reported *t* test prob-values refer to hypothesized decreases in mean scores rather than increases.

more likely than students in traditional sections to agree that they performed up to their potential in the course. Students in service-learning sections were also significantly more likely than those in the control group to report that they "learned to apply principles from this course to new situations" and "developed a set of overall values in this field," to mention two illustrative items. A multivariate analysis of variance revealed a statistically significant difference between the profiles of means on the eight items in Table 3 for students in the traditional versus service-learning sections, $F(8, 45) = 2.19, p < .05$. We also took attendance on two occasions at random toward the end of the semester, once in discussion sections and once at the lecture meeting. In discussion sections, attendance rates were 78% for traditional sections versus 85% in service-learning sections. At lecture,

the comparable rates were 58% and 65% for traditional and service-learning students, respectively. (Lecture meetings were held at 9 a.m., an unthinkable early hour for some undergraduates.) Although the differences in attendance rates do not approach statistical significance, they are in the expected direction.

Finally, consider what some may regard as the ultimate "bottom line"—course grades. Recall that all students took the same midterm and final examinations and that the examinations were graded according to a common set of standards. On a grade scale of 9 = A, 8 = A–, 7 = B+, and so forth, students in the traditional sections had a mean course grade of 6.42 (between a B and a B+), while students in the service-learning sections averaged 7.47 (between a B+ and an A–), a statistically and substantively significant difference ($t = 2.66, p < .01$).

TABLE 2

Mean Postcourse Ratings of Students in Traditional and Service-Learning Sections to Items Referring to Changes in Attitudes and Values

Attitude or value	Traditional	Service-learning	"Effects" coefficient
Indicate the degree to which participation in this course has increased or strengthened your:			
intention to serve others in need.	1.91	2.86*	.97
intention to give to charity to help those in need.	1.59	2.64*	1.09
sense of purpose or direction in life.	2.19	2.18	.00
orientation toward others and away from yourself.	1.91	2.21*	.40
intention to work on behalf of social justice.	2.21	2.46	.26
belief that helping those in need is one's social responsibility.	2.14	2.71*	.70
belief that one can make a difference in the world.	2.00	2.68*	.66
understanding of the role of external forces as shapers of the individual.	2.77	2.89	.12
tolerance and appreciation of others.	2.39	2.82*	.52

Note. Response options consisted of a 4-point scale ranging from "not at all" (1) to "a great deal" (4). The "effects" coefficient in the last column is the difference between the two means divided by the (pooled) standard deviation (see, e.g., Wolf, 1986, pp. 23-28). Cohen (1977) suggests this rule of thumb for effects coefficient values: .2 = small effect, .5 = medium effect, .8 or larger = large effect.

* $p < .05$.

Expanding the Service-Learning Component Coursewide

In light of the positive results achieved in the pilot experiment, the service-learning component of Contemporary Political Issues was expanded the following semester (fall 1992). As in the previous term, the service commitment was for 20 hours over the course of the semester. This time, however, all 150 enrolled students were assigned to work with an off-campus agency or organization in the

public sector. Another important change in the course was that the range of service-learning options was expanded to include assignments of an overtly political nature, including work with local party organizations, voter registration drives, and issue advocacy groups (e.g., abortion rights) during the fall election campaigns. Approximately half the class selected one of these new options, while the other half chose from among the service agencies that had been utilized the previous semester.

TABLE 3

Mean Ratings of Students in Traditional and Service-Learning Sections to Items in the CRLT Course Evaluation Battery

Item	Traditional	Service-learning	"Effects" coefficient
I learned to apply principles from this course to new situations.	3.87	4.42*	.66
I developed a set of overall values in this field.	3.67	4.08*	.43
I developed a greater awareness of societal problems.	4.13	4.42*	.40
I reconsidered many of my former attitudes.	3.20	4.04*	.84
I developed a greater sense of personal responsibility.	3.57	4.00*	.56
I feel that I am performing up to my potential in this course.	3.30	3.75*	.48
I deepened my interest in the subject matter of this course.	4.10	4.21	.13
I learned a great deal from this course.	3.93	4.08	.16

Note. Response options consisted of a 5-point scale ranging from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (5). One-tailed prob-values for the differences between means are reported. The "effects" coefficient in the last column is the difference between the two means divided by the (pooled) standard deviation.

* $p < .05$.

Some might question whether work on behalf of a political party, candidate, or issue is "service." Our response is that service-learning should not be viewed solely as "an exercise in altruism," to use Barber and Battistoni's phrase (1993, p. 237). Instead, the purpose of service-learning (particularly in a political science course) is to educate students about their public responsibilities and their roles as citizens—to have them come to understand that in a democracy, politics is the work of the citizen. Thus, when students are active in political party organizations and issue advocacy groups, they are indeed performing worthwhile public-oriented "service," an appellation that should not be bestowed solely upon work with "needy" groups.

As in the previous semester, section meetings provided an occasion to link students' experiences outside of the classroom to the subject matter of course readings and lectures. The graduate teaching assistants and the instructor met weekly to share information about what students were accomplishing in the community and how well the service experiences were meshing with other aspects of the course. One side-benefit of integrating service-learning into the course was that the graduate assistants found the discussion sections more interesting to lead and they gained experience with new approaches to teaching.

As for the students, their assessments of the course through the postcourse evaluation questionnaire, their written and oral comments about their experiences in the community, and, especially, their performance in the classroom and on examinations all indicated that service-learning can be successfully introduced into even fairly large courses. For example, in their responses to the postcourse evaluation questionnaire, 45% of the students "strongly agreed" with the statement, "Overall, this is an excellent course," and another 45% "agreed." Fully 51% strongly agreed with the statement, "I learned a great deal from this course," and another 40% agreed.

Discussion

Our experiment in integrating service-learning and classroom instruction within a

large undergraduate political science course demonstrated, as have other studies, that students' participation in community service can have a significant effect upon their personal values and orientations toward their community. If preparing students to assume responsibilities of citizenship is part of the mission of higher education, and it assuredly is, then such effects are important and ought not be disparaged. We also found that students' *academic* learning was significantly enhanced by participation in course-relevant community service: As compared with students taught by traditional methods, students in service-learning sections got higher course grades, were more emphatic in their judgments that they were performing up to their potential in the course, and were more likely to affirm that they had learned to apply principles from the course to new situations. How did that happen?

From a pedagogical standpoint, service-learning is one form of experiential learning, in contrast to the "information-assimilation model" that typifies classroom instruction (Coleman, 1977; Dewey, 1938). Both methods have their advantages and disadvantages. The information-assimilation model emphasizes a "top-down" approach to learning, in which principles and facts are presented symbolically (e.g., through books, lectures, or videotapes), and specific applications of principles are learned primarily through deductive reasoning or "thought experiments" rather than through direct experience with real world situations. The advantages of the information-assimilation method are that it can transmit large volumes of information within a short time span and that it emphasizes logical, coherent cognitive organization of that information. The method's weakness is that students' actual acquisition and long-term retention of information are problematical.

Experiential learning is more of a "bottom-up" method, in which general lessons and principles are drawn inductively from direct personal experiences and observations. This approach is less efficient than readings and lectures in transmitting information, and general principles can be slow to emerge. On the other hand, experiential learning counters the abstractness of much

classroom instruction and motivates lasting learning by providing concrete examples of facts and theories, thereby "providing connections between academic content and the problems of real life" (Conrad & Hedin, 1991, p. 745).

Thus, when community service is combined with classroom instruction, the pedagogical advantages of each compensates for the shortcomings of the other. Or as President Clinton put it in his speech at Rutgers University (March 1, 1993), "community service enriches education" because students "not only take the lessons they learn in class out into the community, but bring the lessons they learn in the community back into the classroom."

Students' written comments on their course evaluation forms support these conclusions:

The community service project was the most valuable part of the course. It made the issues discussed in class so much more real to me. It made me realize that there are social problems—but that they are not unsolvable. The community service gave me first-hand knowledge of the issues discussed in class. I also think my experience will make me a better citizen.

The community service project was a very good idea. I'm even working [at the shelter association] again this week. It provided me with a better understanding of the homeless problem.

I really enjoyed the community service aspect of this course, even though I didn't expect to like it. I actually saw the concepts we had discussed in lecture come to life. I think it should be continued.

Conclusion

Community service has many laudable purposes and outcomes—fulfilling civic responsibilities to one's community, helping persons in need, gaining an insight into one's values and prejudices, developing career interests and job skills, and so on, all of which are important. From the standpoint of an educational institution, however, community service will be valued primarily to the degree that it can be demonstrated to be of direct *academic* benefit to students. We found that

the academic payoffs of having students engage in community service are substantial when the service activity is integrated with traditional classroom instruction. The key word here is *integrated*. The kinds of service activities in which students participate should be selected so that they will illustrate, affirm, extend, and challenge material presented in readings and lectures. Time in class meetings should be set aside regularly for students to reflect upon and discuss what they are learning in the community. These recommendations are consistent with conclusions of others who have studied service-learning (e.g., Barber, 1992; Hedin, 1989; Stanton 1990).

Because ours was a course in politics, we particularly encouraged students to reflect upon the *political* implications of what they observed and experienced in their service activities rather than get caught up entirely in the person-to-person aspects of their work. This is an important point. Well-intentioned community service programs often invoke hortatory references to enhancing students' understanding of their "civic obligations" and the "responsibilities of citizenship," but it is not uncommon for such programs to be apolitical or even antipolitical in practice. For example, Serow (1991) found in his study of four public universities that the norms surrounding community service encourage students "to become directly engaged with the problems of vulnerable individuals rather than viewing them in terms of broader, abstract social or political phenomena" (p. 553). He concluded:

Applied specifically to community service, the message from the campuses is that students can combat their own alienation by bypassing official channels and finding one person or program that needs their help. Thus in the words of a national volunteer organizer, students "would rather teach English in a Spanish speaking neighborhood than work for a political action group. They would rather visit a senior citizen than get involved in city politics." (pp. 555–556)

Harry Boyte of the University of Minnesota's Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs concurs. Boyte (1991a, p. 766) has found that

students in community service programs "usually disavow concern with larger policy questions, seeing service as an *alternative* to politics." In a related article he argued:

Most service programs include little learning or discussion about the policy dimensions of the "issues" (such as poverty, homelessness, drug use, illiteracy) that students wrestle with through person-to-person effort. Volunteers—usually middle-class and generally white—rarely have occasion to reflect on the complex dynamics of power, race and class that are created when young people go out to "serve" in low-income areas. (Boyte, 1991b, p. 627).

It is doubtful that such programs do much to advance students' understanding of, experience in, and commitment to participation in the political work of citizens. There is, however, no good reason why community service programs must inevitably be apolitical or antipolitical in practice. If students are working at a homeless shelter, for example, they should be encouraged to consider the broader social and political dimensions of the issue of homelessness: Why do substantial numbers of Americans go without adequate food and shelter within the world's richest nation? Is this matter a proper responsibility of government, or is it better left to charities, religious institutions, and private individuals? Why? How are such questions decided in the United States? What power do citizens have in helping shape such decisions? Such questions can be discussed both in the classroom and in the community setting.

We hope that others will replicate this study, and in many different disciplines. We are aware of instances in which course-relevant community service has been incorporated into college courses in engineering, natural resources, English, history, and psychology, to name just a few disciplines. Integrating service-learning into a traditional classroom-oriented curriculum requires a nontrivial investment of time and resources, especially the first time around. The investment is one worth making, however, because as this study has shown, classroom instruction and community service combine synergistically to enhance learning.

Notes

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¹The items in this "Social Responsibility Inventory" were developed by Jeffrey Howard and Wilbert McKeachie.

²See Table 1 for the text of the beliefs and values items.

³The course evaluation items that, as expected, exhibited no significant differences ($p > .20$) in mean postcourse ratings of students in treatment versus control groups are listed below. Response options consisted of a 5-point scale ranging from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (5).

Overall, the instructor is an excellent teacher.

The instructor delivered clear, organized explanations.

The instructor made class interesting.

The instructor showed a genuine concern for students.

The instructor motivates me to do my best work.

This course required more work than others of equal credit.

The grading system was clearly defined.

Grading was a fair assessment of my performance in this class.

Reading assignments are interesting and stimulating.

Examinations cover the important aspects of the course.

⁴See Hedin (1989) for a cogent response to those who question whether such attitudinal and value changes are relevant to the academic mission.

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