Building Community Symposium: Community-Based Service Learning

I want to thank Professor O'Donnell and the committee who created this forum for inviting me to share a few thoughts with you today.

And I want to congratulate our guests, our faculty and our students who shared their rich experiences with us in such a thoughtful and generative way earlier this afternoon.

I have a mentor who

- Never greets me with the words “how are you”

- No matter how long it has been since we have seen one another he will, instead, always greet me by asking

  What are you thinking?

  I admit, it took me awhile to get used to this.

And as improbable as it is that Sid will ever ask me – how are you?

It is even more unlikely that he will ever ask me
What are you doing?

I feel an increasing tension between the pressure to act, and our propensity to act, and the need to think, and our increasing inclination, collectively, not to.

We seem to live increasing in the world of “what are you doing?”

Or more literally, I suppose, Wt-r-u-doing?

I offer the following as a totally non-rigorous, non-scientific evidence of this tension.

Whenever I need a dose of reality, or at least a reality check on what seems to be preoccupying our collective attention, I search for something on Google.

I searched Google for the exact phrase “what are you thinking”

The result: 2.2M hits

Then I searched Google for the exact phrase “What are you doing.”

72M hits.

Rather staggering....

And I don’t want to make too much of twitter when we have bigger concerns, such as the fact that quality education has been largely off the national agenda for the last forty years.....

But, in a world where the idea of “what are you doing”

Is clearly more prominent than “What are you thinking”

I feel the rather urgent need to develop a construct that allows me to bring doing – meaningful doing – and thinking – meaningful thinking – together.

This is important to me because I describe myself as a scholar-practitioner
Someone who, as a person with academic training and experience, brings the power of rigorous, theory based inquiry to the grounded, relevant, present needs of the spaces in which I work.

Some people who study scholar-practitioner ship describe scholar-practitioners as a “hybrid” professional who works in the “in between spaces” that exist in organizations.

(Bridges 1991; Golden 1992; Turner, 1967)

Two scholars who have done this work, and with whom I have studied, Paul Salipante and John Aram, who were both at one time associated with the Weatherhead School of Business at CWRU, have posited that scholar-practitioners create new possibilities for professional activity (Salipante and Aram 2003)

Rather than a practitioner who simply uses knowledge, scholar-practitioners generate knowledge as they apply theory in new contexts, and as they bring their experiences of issues, context, and opportunity into the frame of research design, methodologies and theories. If you are going to build knowledge in a practice based setting, and thus advance those settings, you can see how scholar-practitioners help to create organizational cultures that foster the use of research and rigorous inquiry in decision-making.

In other words, scholar-practitioners believe that you can build a better mousetrap. But not just by doing it. You have to think about it as well. Search for the crossroads of understanding and contextual meaning. A form of grounded sense-making that leads to action, I suppose.

This sounds so simple, and yet so much of academic life and community life is structured to break these processes into pieces rather than push them together.

What does this have to do with CBSL? Everything.

I believe that my ability – and your ability – to do this – to bring thinking and doing together in a meaningful way is the cornerstone to the advancement of our community and society.
It is our responsibility to care for the life of the mind (even if we don’t seem too concerned about this on a societal level)

I believe that the responsibility to bring the life of the mind and the life of the community together rests largely in our hands, the hands of the education community.

Not in the hands of the government
Not in the hands of large social services agencies.

Rather, with us.

It is critical for us in higher education to be outward reaching rather than focused inward.

I believe that CBSL is the ideal pathway for intellectual pursuit and community needs to merge. We are the petrie dish with the medium to grow scholar practitioners who can wade into community spaces and partner to fill voids.

I was at a meeting recently where I heard a president express a concern that we are on the verge of a new wave of anti-intellectualism in the U.S. (where we focus on what are you doing? Where we try to predict and measure every outcome, rather than create the unexpected)

Personally, I believe that mass media and easy access to information have made a return to the environment that Hofstadter described in his 1963 book entitled *Anti-intellectualism in American Life*, in which he pointed to religion, politics, and public schools of fostering a resentment and suspicion of the life of the mind and of those who devoted their lives to it, as impossible.

Instead today we have a continued rise in volunteerism among those who have had easy access to an unfettered world of information and are increasingly educated.

27 percent of US adult population has a bachelor’s degree or higher, and 17.5 million were pursuing post-secondary study in 2007. (Not that we rank first in the world...)
This is actually good news in the world of volunteerism.

As reported VOLUNTEERING IN THE UNITED STATES, 2008, issued by the Bureau of labor statistics

- About 61.8 million people, or 26.4 percent of the US population, volunteered through or for an organization at least once between September 2007 and September 2008,

- Individuals with higher levels of educational attainment volunteered at higher rates than did those with less education. Among persons age 25 and over, 42.2 percent of college graduates volunteered, compared with 18.1 percent of high school graduates and 9.4 percent of those with less than a high school diploma.

Our ability to assume our role in encouraging the expansion of volunteerism among educated youth will have a significant impact on the future of our communities, locally and across the world.

Now, scholar-practitioner ship is much more than simple volunteerism. And I want to make the argument that CBSL is more than simple volunteerism.

Let me make this real.

Let me tell you about Hartwick Freshman Josh Morey.

By the end of the term he will have logged more than 100 hours of service to Headstart this semester.

A sociology and education major, he told me that he carefully built his schedule to allow for blocks of time to spend at the program.

His face lit up when he described to me a technique that he created to help his kids master their word of the week.
And that the nickname given to him by the kids – Joshy – was up on the wall with all of theirs.

I asked him why he did this.

He said that he had watched his mother’s work with young children. That he knows that males tend to be the ones that abuse when abuse happens, and that he felt that he could be a positive male role model.

He said that it would be a waste to let all of that human potential that these children hold just slip away.

He said that he wanted to give the children in the program hope.

Hope.

Not yet a tested scholar, Josh will be the first college graduate in his family. He has already taken what he has learned from his family and what he has taken from his early studies at Hartwick to create a framework of influence during his time at Headstart. Armed with both a good heart and a developing intellect, he is able to identify the social problems he sees, understand the context within which these problems occur and grow, and develop solutions and a deeper understanding that are born not only of his experience but also of his growing intellect.

This can happen when you meld theory and practice, thinking with doing.

Josh will make a great teacher, program director, congressman, education secretary or international educator. Maybe even a great president, if we are able to elevate education to a position of prominence on our national agenda.

Hartwick is a great fit for Josh and for me because we are both committed to the ideal and practical necessity of community service.

Moreover, even though the term scholar-practitioner may not roll off the tongue for Josh, it is the melding of theory and practice that allows us each to wade into these experiential spaces and, arms outstretched, reach for and connect the worlds of research and theory building with the practice world that informs theory and research.
Hartwick’s Liberal Arts and Practice curriculum, which melds liberal arts education with experiential learning, gives us the perfect pallet upon which to paint the novel ways of thinking about societal challenge that naturally emerge when you bring rigor of thought, research and theory to the practice setting.

And you can see that our students are ready for this rich experience.

A college president has many jobs, and certainly one important responsibility is discerning what we as a College are uniquely prepared to contribute to the greater community of learners.

Late last fall I received A Proposal for the Isaac Newton Arnold Center for Community and Social Justice, a proposal authored by students Braeden Lentz and Melissa Mueller-Douglas and Professor Kate O’Donnell.

In this proposal they rightfully point to mission value 3 and mission value 5 of our Mission Values Linked to Curricular Learning Outcomes, from our General Education at Hartwick College:

- Acknowledging the significance of individual and collective actions and thus seek to foster the capacity for critical thinking, ethical action and reflection
- Value the transformative power of experience, and thus seek to integrate learning and doing, both inside and outside of the classroom.

Learning and doing. Thinking and doing.

They propose that the center could provide “the intellectual framework for the theory and practice of community based work, helping to facilitate the link between civic learning and disciplinary learning objectives.”

This is a meaningful statement, and worth allowing to stand on its own ---- and yet I would suggest a small revision – more than a link, we need the lifeline between civic learning and discipline based learning that we have been providing for decades.

I have not moved forward on the proposal, but this really has more to do with the uncertain times we are in than the merits of the proposal itself.
It is time to give Hartwick’s longstanding action in this area a true home where it can grow and influence others.

In a conference call with our board leadership just this morning we secured their pledge of support for Hartwick to move ahead with a bid for participation in Project Pericles, which as most of you know, is a not-for-profit organization that encourages and facilitates commitments by colleges and universities to include education for social responsibility and participatory citizenship as an essential part of their educational programs, in the classroom, on the campus, and in the community.

The Hartwick College Work Camp Program, founded in 1947, reached down from Oyaron Hill into the neighborhoods and homes of those in need in the city of Oneonta

Recognizing this legacy and reaffirming this institutional value, today’s trustees reach across their professional spaces and into the academic space of Hartwick to assure that service learning remains a strong and influential force in the lives of our students.

And Josh Morey reaches out today from his personal and intellectual world and into the hearts and intellects of young children who look up to him and who might, otherwise, lose hope.

Thinking and doing. Well.

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Thank you.