



Academically Based Community Service and the University Curriculum

Francis E. Johnston
Professor of Anthropology
University of Pennsylvania

In 1966 I began a long-term research program in Guatemala, one that has continued to the present day. As a biological anthropologist interested in the impact environmental factors — especially nutrition — on the physical growth and mental development of children, Guatemala seemed an ideal place to work. It provided the stark contrasts of poverty and affluence, of urban and rural residence, and of indigenous and Latin American/European culture so essential to designing non-laboratory research. In fact, Guatemala has become for me a kind of “natural laboratory,” where contrasts may be found that permit hypotheses to be tested in a real-world setting. And I was able to carry out comparative research elsewhere — Mexico, Peru, Cuba, South Africa, and Papua

New Guinea — using Guatemala as a base.

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At the same time, I had always been interested in children and youth from the United States, and over the years had been part of a range of research projects at national and local levels. As with my work in lesser-developed countries, I focused on the growth of children, especially in a biomedical context — more

specifically, the increasing problem of juvenile obesity. But my heart was, and probably still is in the masses of children who live in conditions of poverty, malnutrition, and social disadvantage in Guatemala, Latin America, and the developing countries.

My professional career has always been carried out at large, research universities, primarily the University of Pennsylvania. While teaching has been important in such settings, and while its importance has increased dramatically over the years, it is well known that the engine that drives such institutions is research in general, particularly externally funded research. Faculty expectations and incentives leading to promotion, salary increase,

and tenure are based heavily on the quality and the quantity of research output.

I carried out these expectations well enough that I received academic tenure and moved up the professorial scale in due course. What, then, prompted my involvement in academically based community service? Without giving up my work in Guatemala, why

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have I moved increasingly toward an integration of my teaching and research with an emphasis on West Philadelphia, the community of which Penn is part? Why have I refocused my scholarship so as to be increasingly concerned with using it to improve community welfare? Why have my research designs become those of action research that utilizes a participatory model? And why has my own thinking moved from a narrow, disciplinary perspective to one that sees that narrowness as all-too-often standing in the way of bringing out the best both in our students and our scholarship?

Answering these questions has taken more than a little of my time over the past ten years and simple answers have not always emerged. But the process has provided some personal insights for me, as well as some ideas that I have shared with my colleagues. I hope they can shed some light on the problem of how to increase faculty involvement in community service and service learning at large and complex research universities.

My outreach activities fall within what is called academically based community service (or ABCS). ABCS is the integration the three missions of the large American research university: research, teaching, and service. Faculty and students learn about problem solving by focusing on helping to solve the problems that confront the residents of the communities that typically surround our large, urban universities. And they do so within the theoretical and methodological contexts of their own courses of study.

Another element of ABCS is the participatory process, in which all individuals involved — faculty, students, community members — work collaboratively to define the problem, generate and interpret data, and apply and disseminate the results as appropriate.

More specifically, my major outreach activity at the University of Pennsylvania is the Turner Nutritional Awareness Project (TNAP). TNAP began in 1990 with an undergraduate course — Anthropology and Biomedical Science — that dealt with the components of an urban nutritional ecosystem. The fourteen students who took the course worked in the John B. Turner Middle

School, an inner-city school located near Penn in an area characterized by a seriously degraded physical environment and high rates of poverty and crime. At the Turner School, students taught nutrition to sixth-grade students and assessed their nutritional status and dietary intakes. Subsequently a school fruit and vegetable store was established, managed jointly by Turner and Penn students.

Since that time TNAP has grown significantly (see its web page at <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/~fjohnsto/tnap/tnap.htm>). The course — now renamed “Nutrition, Health, and Community Schools” — continues, and the enrollment has increased to thirty-five (a cap made necessary by the course structure). The range of activities has broadened considerably, now including such items as ongoing needs assessment and public-health campaigns. The school store has expanded into its own externally funded project. School students grow much of the produce that is sold; at least one local merchant and a restaurant buy what is grown. TNAP also expanded into other elementary and secondary schools in the West Philadelphia area, which inspired the coining of a new name: Urban Nutrition Initiative (UNI).

Nonetheless, the purpose remains the same:

- To describe and analyze the nutritional ecosystem of the local community.
- To enhance the ability of school students and their families to make informed decisions regarding their food intake and habits.
- To help improve the quality of the diet and the nutritional status of the local community.
- To establish community-directed, sustainable structures to maintain an awareness of the relationship between diet and health.
- To monitor and evaluate dietary quality and nutritional status of the community over time.
- To disseminate the results to public policy and scholarly communities.
- To enhance the educational experiences for Penn students through development of a curriculum that emphasizes problem-solving and academically based community service.

The Turner Nutritional Awareness Project/Urban Nutrition Initiative fits well within the mission of the University of Pennsylvania. Penn’s formal involvement, as an institution, with the local community harkens back to the formation of WEPIC (the West Philadelphia Improvement Corps). WEPIC is a year-round program which involves approximately 4,500 children, their parents, and community members in educational and cultural programs, recreation, job training, community improvement, and service activities. (See its web page at <http://www.upenn.edu/ccp/WEPIC/WEPIC.html>.) It seeks to create comprehensive, university-assisted community schools that are the social, service-delivery, and educational hubs for the entire community. The program is coordinated by the West Philadelphia Partnership — a mediating, non-profit community-based organization composed of institutions

(including Penn), neighborhood organizations, and community leaders.

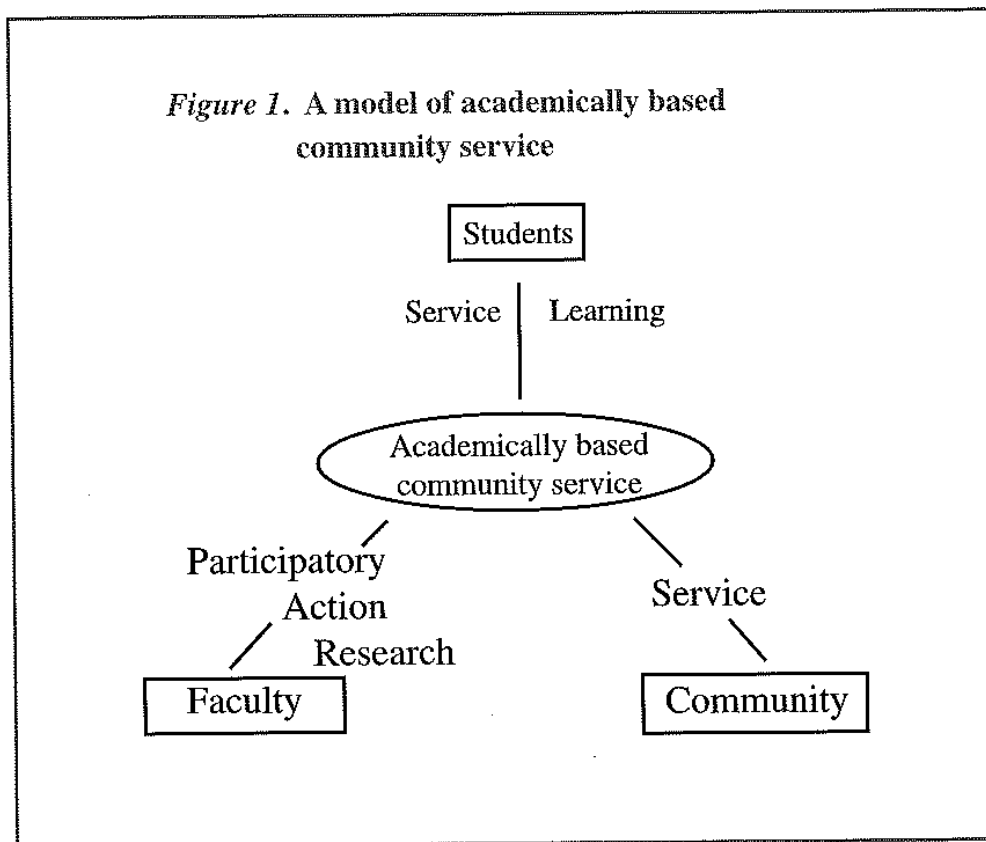
TNAP and UNI are located administratively within the Center for Community Partnerships, <http://www.upenn.edu/ccp>, a university-wide center founded in 1992 to achieve the following objectives:

- improve the internal coordination and collaboration of all university-wide community-service programs
- create and encourage development of new, creative, and effective university-community partnerships and initiatives
- strengthen a national network of institutions of higher education committed to engagement with their local communities.

Support for the university's outreach activities comes from the central administration — the president, provost, and the deans of the schools — through their public pronouncements and roles in program development. In addition, the Center for Community Partnerships, which reports directly to the provost, provides the primary focus for community, especially as linked to local school. This is carried out through:

- small grants that are available to help faculty to prepare SBCS courses
- fund-raising activities
- campus conferences

Figure 1. A model of academically based community service



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- Delaware Valley activities
 - liaisons with schools and departments.

Participation in Penn's service activities, especially through academically based community-service activities, has benefits for the institution, for its faculty, and for the students they serve. For the faculty, the major benefit is in linking research to teaching. While faculty from science departments have a tradition of working in their laboratories with students, such has not been the case in social sciences and humanities, particularly in the latter. The opportunity to integrate teaching and scholarship, along with the challenge it presents, can be enriching to both activities, especially when carried out in the context of problem-based learning and when applied to the problems of the local community. The lessons learned may be generalized to the broader world of knowledge in fruitful ways. Speaking for myself, I can say without qualification that this integration has rejuvenated my teaching, my scholarship, and my involvement with the university.

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For the institution, the benefits are obvious. ABCS provides a more effective way to integrate the components of the university's mission. At Penn it has created a new excitement among involved faculty and students. ABCS, as expressed in the notion of community schools, has provided an opportunity to help the surrounding community and foster a better, collaborative relationship with it. Further, it has been demonstrated

that alumni credit their involvement with ABCS as one of their most positive experiences at Penn. In particular, students are drawn to:

- interaction that leads to more active, problem-based learning, rather than the passive, repetitive type that occurs with traditional lecture formats.
- chance to apply theory to practice
- opportunity to develop skills in problem formulation and research design and analysis, while providing a meaningful service to the local community.

However it is structured, academically based community service, service learning, or community outreach can be enormously enriching professionally, serving as a base around which a university is structured. At the same time, since it challenges the traditional ways that higher education conducts business, it is not without its problems. These problems are greatest for the faculty.

At the risk of over-simplification, it seems that two major obstacles stand in the way of the involvement in service learning of a research-oriented faculty. The first is the inability of faculty to see

that their own scholarship can become enriched by community-oriented research. Research is seen as pure, an activity to be pursued in settings that are uncontaminated by the world. This is especially the case among those disciplines that are grouped under the arts and sciences, the traditional core of higher education.

The second problem is an institutional one: the failure of a university's central administration to make activities such as ABCS part of the reward structure. Decisions about new appointments, new programs, and new directions for existing departments are all-too-often based on narrow, discipline-centered rationales. While such rationales may be forward-looking, they are more likely to reflect the way the academic world used to be, rather than where it ought to be heading. Such thinking deprives a university of the greatest source of new ideas and of intellectual excitement: its junior faculty. Even when assistant professors are interested in service learning, they tend to keep such interests hidden, masked by a cloak of presumed disciplinary respectability for an obvious reason: they won't get tenure for combining service, teaching, and research. While senior faculty can do a lot to shape a university, the central administration much provide clear, unambiguous, and proactive support.

The result is that most faculty members do not see the relevance to their own professional interests of community-based studies and academically based community service. Those who are engaged in service learning usually do so as an "add-on." That is, they see such a course as an opportunity for students to carry out a

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service project within the context of a class that becomes a vehicle for reflection. Individuals and groups are helped, and the student learning experience is enhanced by an active engagement with the community. While this type of learning is an improvement over the traditional passive-learner experience, it is not likely to become incorporated into the instructor's own

research agenda. The course is often referred to as "my service-learning course," rather than as one in which students learn a systematic body of theory and method within the context of providing a community service.

The integration of service, teaching, and research into one's university activities is not just an issue for individual faculty and their deans, but involves academic departments as well. Service-learning courses need to become a part of the major course of study

and not just electives. If such courses are academically rigorous—as they must be—they will be appropriate for the major.

One example is the University of Pennsylvania's Department of Anthropology, a department which is one of the oldest in the United States, and which has ranked among the top five nationally since such rankings have been available. The development of ABCS at Penn has been particularly rich within anthropology, due largely to a group of faculty drawn to it. More than ten courses are classed as service-learning courses, and all satisfy some part of the undergraduate major. The result is a departmental program in Public Interest Anthropology, which crosses the sub-disciplines of the field, <http://www.sas.upenn.edu/anthro/CPIA/index.html>. This has spilled over into the graduate program, where more than seven doctoral students are shaping their individual programs to reflect their career interests in programs to enhance the community.

What cautions are there with the expansion of service learning/ABCS in a university curriculum? In my experience the first rests with the curriculum. The addition of a service component may be difficult for some courses. The task is a more straightforward one for the social sciences, where courses routinely deal with the social problems of disadvantaged segments of a society. However, in the case of the laboratory sciences and the humanities, creative thinking often will be required. The availability of resources that can help individuals to make the step from traditional teaching styles to service learning is a major asset.

At the University of Pennsylvania, the Center for Community partnerships serves as a key, proactive resource in stimulating academically based community-service courses. The degree of success can be seen in the range of courses rooted in the theory of a particular discipline but involving university students working collaboratively with elementary, middle, and secondary students from the local community in their own schools. Courses are taught in such diverse departments and schools as biology, engineering, landscape architecture, classics, city planning, and fine arts. The key is in a supportive administration and the availability of planning and pedagogic resources.

The other caution rests with our students, who have been conditioned to adopt a passive learning style: taking notes as they listen to a lecture, assimilating the notes, and returning the material at the time of their examinations. Many students experience shock when encountering the difference in a classroom where the course is built around service learning. The students must make the connections — albeit with the guidance of the instructor — among the various threads they encounter. This of course can be a powerful, and a longer-lasting, experience than many of the teaching devices we now employ.

Academically based community service is a powerful approach to the problems faced by universities. It is a promising way to enable students to learn, while helping them to develop a stronger sense of civic and moral awareness. And it is an effective way for

faculty to enrich their teaching, give greater meaning to their scholarship, and develop a sense of wholeness in their professional lives. ■

About the Author

Francis E. Johnston (Ph.D., University of Pennsylvania) is a biological anthropologist and professor of Anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia. He received bachelor's and master of science degrees in anthropology from the University of Kentucky. He was assistant professor of anthropology at Penn from 1962-68, associate professor at the University of Texas at Austin from 1968-71, and professor at Temple University from 1971-73. Since then he has been at the University of Pennsylvania, where he served as chairman of the Department of Anthropology from 1982-1994.

Johnston has been an overseas fellow of Churchill College, University of Cambridge. He has also been a postdoctoral fellow at the Institute of Child Health, University of London (1966-67, 1988-89) and the Institute of Cancer Research, Philadelphia (1967-68); visiting fellow of the Department of Anthropology, University of College, London (1988-89); and visiting professor of human biology at the University of Cape Town (1989).

Johnston's research specialization is in the growth and development of children, especially in relation to nutritional status and health. He has worked extensively throughout Latin America, especially Guatemala, but also in Mexico, Peru, Ecuador, and Cuba. He is also involved in projects in Papua New Guinea on the biosocial effects of modernization. He is a distinguished fellow of Penn's Center for Community Partnerships and co-chairman of its Faculty Advisory Committee. In 1982 he was the Gallagher Lecturer of Society for Adolescent Medicine and in 1986 he received the award as author of the best article appearing that year in the *Journal of Adolescent Medicine*.

Johnston is a past-president of the *American Association of Physical Anthropologists* (1983-85) and has been editor-in-chief of the *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* (1977-83), *Human Biology* (1987-88), and founding editor of the *American Journal of Human Biology* (1988-90). As editor of AJPA, he received in 1982 the award of the American Society of Scientific Publishers for editing the best issue of a scientific journal published that year in the United States. He has served as consultant to the National Academy of Sciences, the National Science Foundation, the National Institutes for Health, the World Health Organization, and the Pan American Health Organization.

Johnston has taught extensively in both undergraduate and graduate curricula. He has written or edited twelve books and more than 160 articles and chapters.