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Untangling the Ivy:
Discovering Vincentian Service Learning at DePaul University

By
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Vincent was not content to organize fund drives and the distribution of aid. He wanted to be on the spot in order to take part in projects and evaluate their usefulness.¹

This article examines the concept of service learning as it has been implemented in practice during the past decade at DePaul University in Chicago. Rather than offering an article on pedagogy, I outline a set of key approaches that continue to guide the integration of community-based practice into the university’s curriculum.

A unique university in that it is the largest Catholic institution of higher learning in the United States, DePaul is comprised of diverse students, faculty, and staff of all faiths, ethnic, and racial backgrounds. The university’s student body frequently ranks among the most diverse in the country.² Students are strongly encouraged to engage in service through multiple curricular and co-curricular programs that have resulted in thriving relationships between DePaul and community organizations throughout Chicago and internationally. The goal of integrating service learning into the curriculum enhances learning in a manner consistent with the university’s mission of serving the underserved.

DePaul identifies as Catholic, Vincentian, and urban and strives to model its curricular and co-curricular programs and university policies after the work of the seventeenth-century priest Vincent de Paul. Its senior administrators support the promotion of service-learning as an effort to integrate Vincentian values of service directly into the curriculum throughout all disciplines, departments, schools, and colleges. The intent of this article is to offer a guiding framework within which the university has implemented service

¹ Bernard Pujo, Vincent de Paul: The Trailblazer (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003), 196.
learning during the past decade. In this regard, I propose that DePaul’s service-learning model is relevant to the structure and organization of a faith-based, mission-driven university highly dependent on annual tuition revenues, to the present-day social, political and economic context of U.S. cities like Chicago, and to the rigorous academic goals embedded in the learning objectives of courses throughout the academy. Most importantly, the practice of service learning at DePaul reflects the values exemplified by the life of Vincent de Paul — an observation that explains why the pedagogy has been widely supported by DePaul administrators and faculty. Though it may be fruitless to make a direct comparison between present-day academic-based service learning — a twentieth-century movement in higher education — and the life’s work of Vincent de Paul, my hope is that some of the ideals expressed in this article shed light on how service learning has become an emerging practice of Vincentian values in higher education.

The article is divided into four sections, each exploring a guiding approach to the implementation of service learning at DePaul. Section one briefly describes the Steans Center, the unit at DePaul that is charged with supporting faculty, students, and community organizations in carrying out service learning in the classroom and community. This section outlines a self-reflexive and self-critical managerial and operational philosophy that calls upon the Center’s staff to engage periodically in open discussion about potential contradictions within hierarchical institutions like DePaul that also proclaim a mission of respect for the human dignity of all. I argue that staff of service and justice-oriented programs at such institutions have a particular responsibility to reflect upon their own capacity to produce the same forms of inequity that they seek to resolve. The second section describes the Steans Center’s effort to develop a model approach of external collaboration with community-based organizations. I address the Center’s concern with the historical tendency of higher education institutions to treat low-income, exploited, oppressed, and/or underserved communities and groups as laboratories for personal scholarship and ultimately institutional prestige, rather than as collaborators in responding to underlying social, economic, and political injustice. The third section describes DePaul’s Community Service Studies Minor program and outlines how the use of critical pedagogy in the classroom and the application of concepts derived from critical race theory provide an underlying approach to the foundation course in the minor. The concluding section summarizes reasons why the above-mentioned approaches to integrating service learning into the university’s curriculum are highly compatible with DePaul’s Vincentian mission.
“Walking Embodiments of the Mission”

Large American universities, like corporations, preserve certain elements of the socially, economically, and politically stratified society that existed for western Europeans during the time of Vincent de Paul. Like Vincent himself, mid-level administrators at DePaul University are in the position of negotiating resources within an institutional hierarchy to support structured community service activities which impact those in surrounding communities who have less wherewithal. The university has been very supportive in this regard; hundreds of thousands of dollars are put forth each year in the name of co-curricular and curriculum-based service activities. The Steans Center emerged as a product of such funding in 1998. Initially opened as the Office for Community-based Service Learning, the program set forth on a mission of integrating service learning into the university’s curriculum. DePaul has a more than one-hundred-year history of educating those who have been historically excluded from higher education. Though its mission explicitly encourages service and social justice, it operates as any hierarchical institution whose personnel structures reflect the rigid system of labor stratification predominant throughout the U.S. economy. Like all institutions driven partially by an interest in social equity, DePaul must negotiate ways to maintain the human dignity of all its employees in an economic system that lends itself well to neglecting such values. This section addresses how the Steans Center seeks to make respect for human dignity a central part of the everyday working relationships of its staff. I will argue that in order for the Center to create experiential learning opportunities that instill in students service and leadership values exemplified by the life’s work of Vincent de Paul, in order for the Center to create genuine and mutually beneficial community partnerships that show respect for underserved communities as intellectual spaces, center staff must seek to overcome the inherent tensions of institutional hierarchy and emphasize the equal worth and dignity of all those involved — regardless of their academic degree or administrative rank — in supporting service learning practice.

The Office for Community-based Service Learning (CbSL) initially offered a handful of courses that fulfilled an experiential learning requirement within the university’s Liberal Studies Program. The Office was renamed the Steans Center for Community-based Service Learning in 2001 after receiving a generous endowment from the Steans Family. The endowment led the university to allocate considerable resources towards the goal of promoting and supporting service learning within the curriculum. The majority of these resources go to pay salaries of staff and students who build relationships with

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3 This notion is explicitly stated in DePaul’s mission: “the DePaul community is above all characterized by ennobling the God-given dignity of each person.” Available online at: www.depaul.edu/about/mission/index.asp.
faculty and community partners. As a liaison connecting the curriculum of the university with community organizations, the Center has a responsibility to use its resources accordingly to serve both students and those who struggle at the community level to resolve social inequality. During the 2007-2008 academic year, the Center supported more than 3,400 students working with over 130 community organizations.

The Steans Center’s mission reflects that of the university’s in that it supports social equality both in terms of supporting access to educational resources for underserved groups and in addressing the interests of low-income communities surrounding the university. Also, as a unit of the larger university, the Center operates as a values-driven hierarchical institution with internal political and ideological tensions and contradictions. As the message of social justice has become institutionalized in the workplace, daily office discourses, and the general social fabric of the Center, these tensions and contradictions have become more evident. The organizational structure of the Center mirrors that of the broader institution in that it employs specific titles linked to levels of accountability that include allocation of budgets and supervision of staff. Service learning, like any other initiative at DePaul, is supported by a system of resource allocation that is linked to material interests competing for portions of a budget primarily fueled by student tuition dollars. This is a system that yields positions of power and authority over hiring, staffing, and funding of programs. Given this structure, the Center must continuously be aware that it contains the same tendency to produce social inequality and challenges to human dignity as exists in the local and global political economy.

Though the Center is structured in a hierarchical model, it is by name “community-based” and is driven by faculty who develop and implement curriculum that incorporates service learning. The faculty determine whether or not to integrate service learning into their courses and, in essence, they determine the success of the Center. DePaul has no university-wide requirement for departments to teach with service learning as pedagogy. The Center’s course development staff communicate with faculty members about their particular teaching and scholarly interests and about the issues and communities they are interested in supporting. Faculty members have to believe that service projects can add value to their courses and lead students toward meeting specific learning objectives. Therefore, the challenge of the Center’s community development staff is to link these learning objectives to student

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4 The mission of the Steans Center is to provide educational opportunities grounded in Vincentian community values to DePaul students. The Center seeks to develop mutually beneficial, reciprocal relationships with community organizations in order to develop a sense of social agency in our students through enrollment in Community-based service learning courses, community internships and placements, and community-based student employment.
projects and service defined by community partners, and then support students as they engage in the work. The preparatory and logistical tasks needed to support service learning at the level reached by DePaul require multiple full-time and part-time professional staff members and numerous student workers. Much of the staff works on building relationships with community organizations to assist the latter in determining service tasks and projects so that they can work with students. This support ensures that students can be successful, and thus that the faculty remain supportive of the pedagogy.

The success of the Steans Center has largely resulted from the ability of staff to work cooperatively as a team within the hierarchical organizational structure of both the Center and university. Over the years this has not been a straightforward, uncomplicated process. The same tensions stemming from systems of accountability that exist within the institution at large — largely the result of differences in power to manage budgets, conduct performance appraisals, and influence salary levels — also exist at the Center. Achieving a team-oriented working environment that resolves some of these tensions for the larger goal of student learning and support of community organizations is a continuous work in progress. Given the highly detailed nature of administering a large service-learning program, an organizational culture that empowers staff to share ideas about programs, procedures, processes, and policies is essential to the Center’s success. In particular, the complex social relations amongst the course development staff of the Center, coupled with highly attentive and supportive administrative staff and responsible student workers, permits the Center to successfully administer more than seventy-five courses per term and coordinate as many as 1,200 students per quarter. In essence, the way staff members relate to one another, regardless of their relationship to the institutional hierarchy, must reflect the values prescribed by the university’s mission. Staff must respect one another and each other’s roles in day-to-day operations if the Center is to instill such values in students through service-learning projects.

These positive internal working relations require that all Center staff are supported in their responsibilities. That is, they must be given the freedom to do their work in a way that is meaningful to them and, most importantly, sensitive to the workload of others. They need to realize that errors in their work have consequences for other staff members and eventually for students at service sites and faculty in the classroom. Respect for fellow workers and an understanding that all roles are equally and inextricably linked to one another are vital to the work, but have not always been fully practiced. The Center strives for these ideals and reflects upon them at staff meetings and retreats.

The Center’s method incorporates critique of elite institutional structures that have led to many of the problems faced by those the Center seeks to
support in the community. Such a critique does not simply serve a utilitarian purpose of creating a successful service-learning center that supports a positive public image of the university as non-elitist, civically engaged, and community-oriented. Vincentian priest, professor, and scholar of education Anthony Dosen, C.M., notes that there is something unique about a Vincentian university among faith-based higher education institutions: “Vincentian administrators must challenge their collaborators not merely to be good at their respective tasks.” In modeling their practice after Vincent de Paul, he argues, “the task of Vincentian administrators is not merely to provide professional development to their colleagues, but the possibility for personal transformation.” This type of transformation, I argue, requires acknowledgement of the tendency for higher education institutions to recreate elitism and paternalism within and between departments and divisions as faculty and staff seek promotion and prestige. According to Dosen, Vincent de Paul addressed such challenges in his time as he attempted not only to serve the poor, but to transform his fellow clergy who he viewed as straying from their “sacred responsibilities.”

As a group, the French clergy of the 17th century were an unimpressive lot. Scandalous might prove a better word to describe their behavior. They were interested in holding places of honor in court and collecting their benefices, but not performing their sacred responsibilities.

Support of staff and respect for their individual skills and talents by those in leadership positions is therefore essential, but at a Vincentian institution it is clearly not enough. To address the apparent contradiction between a tendency toward academic elitism — court honor and benefits — within higher education and a mission that more or less calls for all students, staff, and faculty to actively participate in efforts to create social justice in the world, requires that units such as the Steans Center reflect on their own potential to create the oppression that, in theory, service learning pedagogy seeks to expose to students.

In Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Paulo Freire developed a similar form of self-reflection in the notion of “conscientisation” (conscientizacao), a concept involving development of critical consciousness through the practice of reflection and action (praxis) that leads people to work for social change.

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6 Ibid.
7 Ibid., 49.
People, as beings “in a situation,” find themselves rooted in
temporal-spatial conditions which mark them and which
they also mark. They will tend to reflect on their own “situ-
tationality” to the extent that they are challenged by it to act
upon it. Human beings are because they are in a situation.
And they will be more the more they not only critically reflect
upon their existence but critically act upon it. Reflection
upon situationality is reflection about the very condition of
existence: critical thinking by means of which people dis-
cover each other to be “in a situation.” Only as this situ-
tation ceases to present itself as a dense, enveloping reality or a
tormenting blind alley, and they can come to perceive it as an
objective-problematic situation — only then can commitment
exist. Humankind emerge from their submersion and acquire
the ability to intervene in reality as it is unveiled. Intervention
in reality — historical awareness itself — thus represents a
step forward from emergence, and results from the conscientizacao of the situation. Conscientizacao is the deepening of the
attitude of awareness characteristic of all emergence.8

“Conscientisation” emerges from an educational practice that illum-
nates social, economic and political conditions “in a situation.” The result
is deeper awareness of the nature of inequality and oppression in a given
context, including within institutions like DePaul that hold to a mission that
calls for a direct response to inequality. This deeper awareness, according
to Freire, is the basis for active intervention — an intervention, I would add,
that begins at home. As DePaul staff who are fully aware of, and passion-
ate about, the institution’s mission to promote social justice, Steans Center
employees remain highly aware of the Center’s capacity to create oppressive
policies and behaviors from within, while simultaneously purporting to con-
front such practices through service-learning in the community.

The danger of hierarchical institutions, however necessary they may be, is
that they produce power relations that can challenge human dignity. DePaul
is increasingly aware of this danger and has created multiple programs and
policies that seek to address internally produced social inequality. For exam-
ple, the university maintains a well-supported Office of Institutional Diversity,
an ombudsman’s office, and an Office of Mission and Values. Furthermore, a
human dignity website provides a direct resource for those who seek help in

8 Paulo Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Continuum
responding to biased and hateful acts on campus. Nonetheless, there are also the everyday social and power relations in departments and classrooms that are not overtly meant to direct harm toward someone, but end up doing so regardless. This level of interaction necessitates an everyday consciousness of how intradepartmental and interpersonal relations impact people. It requires recognition that the Vincentian principle of respect for human dignity is not situational or reserved for serving the underserved, but continuously at play in all our daily interactions regardless of our level of authority.

In the 2005 *Vincentian Heritage* journal, the president of DePaul University noted:

> The Presidents, VP’s, deans, department chairs and others must know, but more importantly, must embody the institution’s values. This is quite serious. If they are not walking embodiments of the mission, they should be replaced.9

Being a “walking embodiment of the mission” and respecting the dignity of others takes commitment to continuous reflection on organizational structures, daily interactions, and interpersonal relations within the workplace. In developing a service-learning practice that reflects Vincentian values, the Steans Center’s initial task is to reflect regularly on how internal relations can produce the same oppressive forces that we seek to teach students to oppose as they discover the value of learning through service.

**“Community as an Intellectual Space”**

Internal cooperation, respect for how one’s work impacts others, and team building are essential for development of a service-learning practice that remains consistent with DePaul’s mission. This includes awareness of the paradox of working within a hierarchical structure while respecting the interconnectedness and equality of each staff member’s responsibilities. In this section, I suggest that understanding this paradox is essential as we engage in partnerships with understaffed and financially insecure community-based organizations. Implementing service learning as a central component of the university’s mission rides not only on the ability to transform how staff relate to one another, but also on how they engage with external communities in a respectful and reciprocal manner.

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DePaul University is located in the urban core of Chicago with campuses on the near-north side and downtown. Universities in the city have a long history of treating their surrounding neighborhoods as laboratories for community research. Arguably, the origin of this practice lies at the University of Chicago where the sociology department established a model for urban research that remains in use throughout the world. In 1929, the University of Chicago Press published *Chicago: An Experiment in Social Science Research*, an assessment of the emergence of a model approach to studying urban poverty.\(^{10}\) Contributors referred to the city as “a laboratory,” giving the impression that the people under investigation where there to be experimented upon.\(^{11}\) In a 1931 review of the book, Wilson Gee notes that the president of the University of Chicago responded to the question “What is matter with Chicago?” by asserting: “Why, it is simply an experiment in social science research.”\(^{12}\)

Ironically, service learning as a pedagogy also had its modern conceptual beginnings at the University of Chicago in the work of John Dewey.\(^{13}\)

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Dewey’s student Robert Park developed a foundation for the study of society that became the theoretical basis of the Chicago School of Sociology. Dewey was also a friend and colleague of Jane Addams, who founded Hull House on Chicago’s southwest side. Hull House, which is widely considered to be the most successful settlement house in the U.S., provided an inlet for University of Chicago researchers to conduct urban and community studies on poverty and immigrants, among other issues. The survey and mapping methods and, more importantly, the way communities and groups were conceptualized and framed as objects of study were indeed groundbreaking for the field of sociology. Nevertheless, over time the paradigm left a pessimistic social residue in the community that continues to be articulated to this day as skepticism from community leaders about being studied.

Given its ancestral roots, service learning can, perhaps erroneously, be conceived by community groups as simply another tool for universities to “use” their communities for building academic careers and prestige. One could make a fairly strong argument that such an agenda — even if accomplished indirectly — is not very representative of Vincentian values. Indeed, according to Dosen, rather than seeking material gain or status through engagement with underserved communities, the modern-day “Vincentian School” calls on practitioners to draw upon the model of Vincent de Paul’s penchant for collaboration and cooperation with the poor as a means for personally transforming students, teachers, and administrators to recognize their own spiritual poverty through service. Developing empathy among students through service learning is not enough in this regard. As I shall argue in more detail, given past engagements between Chicago universities (including DePaul) and their low-income and marginalized neighbors, Vincentian service learning demands a healthy dose of humility.

The Vincentian model of service learning that the Steans Center seeks to develop is not the norm for university/community relations in Chicago. Low-income and other marginalized groups in the city have seen community researchers — sometimes disguised as people doing service or participatory research projects — come and go almost in parallel to the coming and going of government assistance programs (this, of course, is not a coincidence). The experience at the Steans Center is that the privilege and egoism that are often built into the community studies model of urban research have produced unresolved discontent with universities on the part of community leaders and organizations. That is not to say that such groups do not want the assistance of universities. In fact, the Center has found a strong interest among

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organizations in collaborating with DePaul students, faculty, and staff. This is largely because many of the site contacts were derived from well-developed relationships by DePaul’s Egan Urban Center (a community-oriented research center) and University Ministry, and through relationships accrued by the Steans Center’s community development staff who were active at the community level. Nonetheless, the organizations have little patience for academic egoism on the part of students or faculty. This is exemplified by the occasional need to remove students from sites because of a presumption that the site was there to serve their course requirement rather than to collaborate in an educational process resulting in positive social change and self-transformation.

A need for a critical perspective on university-led service-learning initiatives in Chicago was clear to Steans Center staff early on in the Center’s development. In 2002, the Center organized a meeting of community partners in the university library. The purpose of the meeting was to listen to community leaders’ interests and to establish more concrete partnerships for service-learning courses. During the opening conversation, a community leader from the Humboldt Park neighborhood, a largely Puerto Rican community, reminded DePaul staff and faculty that the university was once situated in a predominantly Puerto Rican and working-class neighborhood. He recalled how DePaul purchased property around the university, thereby contributing to the impending gentrification that eventually displaced the community west into the West town and Humboldt Park neighborhoods. He then stated that his community was not asking for help from DePaul, but rather that it was “imperative” that the university find ways to collaboratively assist organizations in his neighborhood. DePaul was reminded of the privileged quality that universities carry into communities they strive to serve — a quality that often carries the presumption that knowledge comes from the academy and is only later introduced to the community through public policy.

Universities have a very well-known history of being considered, or considering themselves, as the most important producers of knowledge — knowledge which is then purveyed to students who implant their learning in the world through practice. This perspective is perhaps why integrating service as a means to learn from communities often receives pushback from traditional academic administrators who perceive the professor as the sole expert who teaches students to bank knowledge and develop methods of analysis for assessment later on an exam. In other words, the classroom is viewed as a sacred space that should not be contaminated by lightweight

“political” ideas that students can learn from engaging with those in the community who are perceived as less educated. For those who adhere to this viewpoint, it is even more problematic that service learning requires a portion of learning to take place off campus in communities where students are told they can play an active role in supporting positive social change. This is viewed as a precarious break from the revered belief that learning must take place through a purely objective lens, one that separates students from the bias of ideological and political persuasion. Community organizations, at least in Chicago, have a long animated history of grounding their work in political and ideological beliefs about social justice. Though university researchers have historically ventured out to study urban communities and groups, the knowledge they produced often remains within the academy as an artifact of a professed scientific process.

Staff of the Steans Center have learned that developing partnerships with community organizations for service learning involves recognizing the value of local knowledge and respecting community partners as purveyors of that knowledge. That is, community organizations are understood as being equal to or, in some cases, more important than texts as part of the learning process. This idea is shocking to some faculty, students, and administrators who are not fully convinced that the community is a space overflowing with knowledge. Instead, the low-income neighborhoods where students have historically studied the causes of poverty are to be understood academically with standards that limit community engagement to the structures of rigid social-scientific inquiry. Service learning, at least at DePaul, does not lend itself well to such structures. As a pedagogy, it breaks from traditional models since the instructor acknowledges that there may be local knowledge brought into the classroom which contradicts his or her understanding of the literature and/or perspective of well-respected scholars. The seasoned service-learning instructor knows that such challenges are valuable teaching tools because they prompt students to think critically about the diverse ways in which knowledge is produced.

Each June a conference in the Humboldt Park neighborhood sponsored by the Puerto Rican Cultural Center recognizes the importance of community-derived knowledge. The title of the conference, Community as an Intellectual Space, acknowledges that the academy is not necessarily the center of knowledge production and that there are intellectual discourses that emerge from the experiences of oppressed and exploited groups. Moreover, such groups apply this knowledge to the formation and maintenance of community organizations (e.g., alternative schools, business development networks, community health programs, political groups) that become assets in neighborhoods that are typically viewed by outsiders as “blighted” and in need of “urban renewal.”
There is nothing new about the idea that communities are a space for knowledge production. Anthropologists have long recognized the importance of intellectual communities that exist outside the Western academic canon. The conference moves beyond this notion by asserting that community-based knowledge is not only important in itself, but can also lead to active responses to social inequity. Whereas in the past the academy appropriated community-produced knowledge — though not acknowledging it as such — for its own benefit, the notion of “community as an intellectual space” supports a Freirian conscientisation process wherein people employ their own knowledge in the community to become active and engage in efforts to promote social justice.

As the Steans Center developed partnerships for service learning over the past decade, it increasingly learned of the importance of how its partners use their knowledge base to educate DePaul students. In response, the Center has funded the training of staff and faculty in the Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) model developed by Kretzmann and McKnight at Northwestern University. These authors challenge the way low-income neighborhoods have been traditionally portrayed by policy makers, urban planners, and service providers as “deficient neighborhoods populated by needy and problematic and deficient people.” This is a perception that neighborhood residents are waiting for universities to arrive with resources

17 Thanks to both Dr. Jody Kretzmann at Northwestern University and Dr. Michael Bennett of DePaul’s Egan Urban Center for facilitating these workshops.
to mend their social wounds. From the privileged vantage point of the university, it is easy for some to accept this perception — especially students, faculty, and staff who have never experienced material poverty, social stigmatization, or political oppression in their lives. The goal in these trainings has been to help staff and faculty educate service-learning students to think differently about the neighborhoods and organizations they visit for their courses. As students begin to see assets in these spaces rather than blight, it becomes easier to see how community-derived knowledge lies at the base of such assets. This compels service-learning students not only to challenge stereotypes about groups they serve, but to learn to more fully respect the individual dignity of each member of the group. This idea seems quintessentially Vincentian in that there is the potential for students and their instructors to be personally transformed by the realization that they can learn from those often falsely perceived as lacking knowledge.

Unlearning Service

As I initiated a two-year research project in the Dominican Republic in 1999, a fellow anthropologist offered a suggestion on how to engage potential research participants. He said the first step toward successful community-based research was to “check your ego at the door to the community.” The advice was more than simply a tip on how to gain entry into an exploited and oppressed group in order to extract data. It was a caution to respect such communities as knowledge-producing entities.

Upon returning to the academy to teach the history of community service at DePaul, I was dissatisfied with the existing literature on the topic. Most scholarship on community service presumed that its origins lay in the benevolent acts of Euro-American historical figures who inspired a culture of service in the U.S. and elsewhere. I assigned these articles to students to have them critically analyze the presumption that the history of service was of outsiders going into communities to serve the less fortunate “others” of society. This struck me as a continuance of the Western colonial approach to development: that is, contrasting the saviors with those in need of being saved, the civilized with the primitive, the First World from the Third World, the developed with the less developed, the social worker with the client, and ultimately the volunteer with the recipient of charity. In all cases it is presumed that the former has the knowledge to solve the latter’s problems. Moreover, this dichotomous view of the world presumes that the structural roots of a group’s problems are somehow inherent to the group rather than derived from the colonial process itself. The volunteer in this approach enters the community with his or her ego intact (e.g., “I have

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19 Morton and Saltmarsh, “Addams, Day, and Dewey.”
arrived to do these tasks to help you; what you already know is irrelevant.”).

As the Steans Center developed the Community Service Studies minor, a core component of the curriculum was critical analysis of community service and volunteerism. As the primary instructor for the foundation course in this program since 2001, I have had the responsibility of establishing this approach in the curriculum. The course — CSS 201, Perspectives on Community Service — is one of three foundation courses of a six-course minor (remaining courses are electives). Each fall and spring term, this course is offered to community service studies minors and to students seeking to fulfill their experiential learning requirement in the Liberal Studies program. The course addresses a number of topics including early twentieth-century social reform movements, conceptualizing “the poor,” paternalism in community service, the origins of community service in the United States, critiques of charity and volunteerism, community service in the context of urban gentrification, privilege and community service, the nonprofit sector and the structure of nonprofit organizations, international community service/activism, and faith and community service. As a service-learning course, students work at community organizations dealing with issues such as education, homelessness, literacy, and community health. In the syllabus and repeatedly throughout the term, students are told that their grade will be significantly higher if they integrate their experiences at the organizations with concepts and theories from readings, films, and class discussions. Students are also told that the primary question they will need to answer is whether their service is contributing to resolving the social issues focused on by their organization. I ask them to think critically about the role of community service in efforts to produce systemic social change.

On the first day of class, I explain that I will argue throughout the quarter that community service will have little impact on solving the broader issues (e.g., homelessness and education access) that their organizations are working on; that at maximum their service may help people for the eight to nine weeks required to serve for the course. This argument is developed in subsequent class sessions and in reading assignments that show a rise in social inequalities, decline of the social welfare state, and a parallel increase in volunteerism. We then proceed through much of the first half of the quarter developing a critique of community service and volunteerism within the context of reduced government spending on social programs and increased rhetoric on the importance of service and civic engagement.20 Students are asked to explore the challenge of engaging in service alone without an un-

derstanding of the structural and historical origins of the social problems
that their service organizations seek to resolve.

At mid-quarter, the course builds off previous topics and delves into a
deeper critical analysis of the social organization of community service in
practice. Students read literature that introduces the concept of unearned
privilege, derived from scholarship on critical race theory. This concept gen-
erally refers to the unearned advantages of having white skin or, for example,
being male that are not enjoyed by people of color or women. Furthermore,
recipients of such privilege are not generally aware of its presence and typi-
cally do not consider themselves to be racist or sexist. In the classroom and
in a writing assignment, I pose questions about how race, class, and gender
impact the role of the volunteer and whether everyone served by their organ-
izations has an equal chance to reach, at minimum, financial stability in the
economy. I ask students to try and come to a consensus on whether certain
people have a default advantage in society because of their physical appear-
ance or gender. They almost always come to consensus agreement with this
premise, but one or two students usually argue that their immigrant grand-
parents came to the U.S. and “they made it; why couldn’t others [code for
people of color]?” The in-class debate invariably begins and the diversity
of DePaul’s student body emerges from the unspoken depths of students’
thoughts. Slavery, Jim Crow laws, ghettoization, racial profiling, racial dis-
parities in incarceration rates, employment and housing discrimination, and
lower expectations placed upon students of color by school teachers are all
topics that frequently seep into the discussion. We engage in a debate about
why most low-income neighborhoods in Chicago, where students primarily
do their service, are largely inhabited by people of color.

In my reading of the life of Vincent de Paul, the above issues had mini-
mal relevance within the impoverished parishes of seventeenth-century
France. They are highly relevant, however, for twenty-first-century stu-
dents at an urban university in Chicago. In CSS 201, students are placed in
an unavoidably uncomfortable position to debate the practice of community
service as it intersects with unearned privilege — a concept the majority of
the class eventually accepts. Before the end of the debate, one or two remain
troubled by this idea and respond aggressively to their interlocutors with ar-

21 For example, see the compilation of writings titled Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings That
Formed the Movement, Kimberle Crenshaw, Neil Gotanda, Garry Peller, and Kendall Thomas,
22 Peggy McIntosh, “White Privilege, Color and Crime: A Personal Account,” in Images of
Color, Images of Crime, Coramae Richey Mann and Marjorie S. Zatz, eds. (Los Angeles: Roxbury
23 Pujo, Vincent de Paul.
arguments that reflect a belief in supporting a meritocracy and the capacity of all people in the U.S. to succeed independently. The notion of equal opportunity for all, regardless of the historical barriers placed on certain groups, is held out by these students as intrinsic to U.S. society. In contrast, a few students, and especially those from low-income neighborhoods in Chicago, are visibly troubled by these comments. Unearned privilege in the context of community service becomes self-evident to them though, like all students in the class, they generally began the term with the idea that service was an act of “giving back.” The volunteer’s background and relative accessibility to resources were detached from the origins of the challenges faced by those being served.

CSS 201 seeks to unravel the traditional dualism between volunteers and less privileged “others” through challenging students to acknowledge that there is a historical material relationship between the former and the latter. Those students who are able to critically reflect on the privilege of service begin to rethink their own role in society and acknowledge their own complicity in the making of challenges faced by those they seek to serve. For those students who face such challenges themselves at home, this framework typically sheds new light on their responsibility to work in their own community and demand changes in policies that perpetuate poverty and hinder the community’s ability to determine its future. At minimum, a healthy critique of the twenty-first-century practice of community service has the potential to encourage humility in students as they begin to see that they have little chance of impacting the broader issues of poverty unless they use their own privilege to take a larger leadership role — as in the case of Vincent de Paul — in promoting social change.

Discovering Vincentian Service Learning at DePaul University

This article seeks to examine the development of service learning by outlining a set of key approaches that guide the integration of the pedagogy into the curriculum at DePaul University. As a mission-driven effort dating back to the late 1990s, the introduction of service learning has brought to light new ways of thinking about the university’s role in educating students and engaging with surrounding communities. Service learning is understood as a central component in the university’s strategic plan to enhance the institution’s academic reputation and graduate socially responsible, ethically-minded students who think of service and civic engagement as important parts of their lives. In contributing to the achievement of these goals, the Steans Center must incessantly reflect on its own internal structures and behaviors. Does it reproduce the same oppressive forces that it seeks to eliminate? This is a question it continuously addresses by remaining cognizant of its capacity
to challenge human dignity. I have suggested that participating in this process of self-reflection and conscientisation is an initial step toward discovering the meaning or purpose of service learning at a Vincentian university.

How Center staff relate to one another has a direct practical impact on their potential to develop successful relationships with community organizations that serve both their interests and the interests of faculty and students in DePaul courses. Successful service learning emerges from the Center’s efforts to engage with these organizations in a way that recognizes the damaging effect of past academic approaches to community engagement and the role of the community in educating DePaul students. This means acknowledging that these organizations are assets in their communities, and repeatedly reminding them that the university’s effort is not to appropriate their knowledge for the sole sake of teaching or research. Rather, the goal is to develop collaborative partnerships in which students learn and community organizations benefit from projects that the organizations themselves define. The Center sees this goal as both an important “best practice” in service-learning course development and, as I have argued, one that is highly compatible with the university’s mission.

The Vincentian Family has a long history of transforming higher education through creating schools and universities to educate those historically excluded from such institutions and also through engaging its students in direct service and advocacy with underserved and oppressed groups. During the early nineteenth century French scholar and founder of the Saint Vincent de Paul Society, Frederick Ozanam, provided an early Vincentian model of linking college students to service and making it meaningful to their academic pursuits.24 At the beginning of the twenty-first century DePaul has taken up service learning at a critical time in its history. The university’s timely and serious institutionalization of the pedagogy has contributed to development of a national and perhaps global movement to integrate civic engagement initiatives more deeply into higher education curricula.

If this movement among universities and colleges continues to be taken seriously, service learning can be a shot of humility into the core of an academic world that is increasingly oriented toward commodification of education.25 The cure is hopefully to untangle the ivy that has historically

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separated the academy from directly addressing — as opposed to simply objectifying — critical social issues at the community level. This separation, one might contend, has a role in legitimizing the unearned privilege associated with myths of meritocracy and equal opportunity for all in the United States. Done well, service learning exposes structural barriers — racism, classism, sexism — to increased social equality. A positive side effect of the pedagogy is that students begin to think more critically about the origins of these barriers as they exist in their academic disciplines, workplaces, and personal lives. Most importantly, they begin to understand the limitations of community service in resolving systemic social issues, and that structural change requires deeper involvement in politics and policy making. As this message is repeated throughout the curriculum and thus seeps into the educational fabric of the institution, the pedagogy has the tremendous potential to transform the university into a more effective producer of social change rather than simply a credential-bestowing educator of those who can afford it. I would argue that DePaul’s rapidly growing service learning initiative is already very much in sync with this ideal.