

“Feature Interviewee” Ms. Amy Cohen

- 1. Ms. Cohen, as director of Learn and Serve America, you have been instrumental in growing the field of service learning and civic engagement throughout higher education – how do you see your efforts expanding to ensure the field continues to grow?**

As the federal program responsible for service learning in elementary, secondary and postsecondary education, Learn and Serve America’s (www.learnandserve.gov) role is to be a catalyst for growth and innovation in service learning and civic engagement.

In higher education, we accomplish this goal in several ways. We are probably best known as a source of funding. Learn and Serve America provides grants to individual higher education institutions and to consortia of higher education institutions to develop and anchor service learning programs within the curriculum and the structure of colleges. For the last decade, the Congress appropriated about \$43 million each year, about \$10.75 million of which was available for higher education programs. (By statute 25% of the Learn and Serve funds go to higher education.) This funding allowed us to provide grants to approximately 15 consortia programs and 30 individual colleges and enabled us to reach over 250 colleges every year with support from Learn and Serve. Unfortunately, this past year, 2006, Learn and Serve’s funding was reduced to \$37.1 million, leaving only about \$9.25 million for higher education. While our funds have diminished, we believe that by promoting quality practices, sustainability, and the development of new partnerships among colleges, service learning and civic engagement will continue to grow.

Of particular importance in our drive to increase impact with diminished resources is our emphasis on funding consortia programs such as the Community College National Center for Community Engagement (CCNCCE), the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), and some of the state Campus Compacts. Each of these organizations provides subgrants and support to a group of colleges and community partners working to implement service learning locally. Consortia lead organizations champion service learning and civic engagement not only through subgrants, but also throughout their networks through training, publications, and events.

This has really been the strategy we have followed in Learn and Serve Higher Education since the inception of the program. Our goal has been to engage colleges, individuals and organizations in the effort to continually expand and improve service learning and civic engagement. Because the impetus for this deepening of higher education’s engagement comes from so many sources, we have built a strong and diverse movement. The mission that unites us is our effort to reinvigorate the civic mission and public purposes of higher education – to ensure that higher education fulfills its responsibility to educate for work, intellectual innovation and citizenship as well as for the betterment of the local community and the nation.

In addition to providing grant funding, Learn and Serve America funds the National Service Learning Clearinghouse (www.servicelearning.org). The Clearinghouse is the nation's primary resource for all things service learning: curriculum, research, evaluation and great stories. In addition to an online library, the Clearinghouse is home to a national list of service and service learning events, job postings, up-to-date funding sources, and a compilation of the recognition programs. A kind of national conversation about service learning takes place on the K12 and higher education listservs hosted by the Clearinghouse. The information gathered at the Clearinghouse has been provided by those in service learning and related fields. And it is provided to the public in order to speed the adoption of service learning, increase innovation, and improve practice.

This year we started a brand-new recognition program for colleges and universities, the President's Higher Education Community Service Honor Roll (<http://www.learnandserve.gov/>). The program is designed to highlight the contributions that colleges and their students make within their local communities and across the country through their service. The program also identifies and promotes effective service and service learning practices in higher education. This year, in addition to recognizing colleges for their overall service efforts, the Honor Roll emphasized the service activities performed in response to the Gulf Coast hurricanes of 2005. This program builds on the Universities Rebuilding America Partnership (URAP) announced by the Corporation for National and Community Service and the Department of Housing and Urban Development in Fall 2005. The program is administered by Learn and Serve America at the Corporation for National and Community Service and is also sponsored by the U.S. Departments of Education and Housing and Urban Development and USA Freedom Corps.

In this, its inaugural year, the program received over 500 applications. Of these, 96 were community colleges. We presented the Presidential Awards at Campus Compact's 20th Anniversary celebration in October 2006. It was a really terrific event that, with our concurrent release of a study on college students volunteering, generated a great deal of press for higher education service and the Honor Roll colleges. Information about next year's President's Higher Education Community Service Honor Roll competition, as well as this year's Presidential Award winners and all of the members of the Honor Roll are available on our website.

2. Ms. Cohen, how do you think that these particular efforts bring community colleges closer to meeting the needs of their communities?

Service learning and civic engagement are essential to the efforts of community colleges to meet the needs of their communities. And community colleges are adopting service learning in large numbers. More than half of all community colleges currently offer service learning courses and many colleges offer multiple courses and supports for service learning. The results of a 2003 study on service learning in community colleges written by Mary Prentice, Gail Robinson and Sara McPhee
http://www.aacc.nche.edu/Content/NavigationMenu/ResourceCenter/Projects_Partnerships/Current/

[HorizonsServiceLearningProject/Publications/2003_Survey_RB.pdf](#) indicates that service learning has been integrated across the curriculum, and that the number of courses on each campus is growing over time.

As institutions designed to meet the educational and workforce needs of their local communities, community colleges are ideally suited to offer service learning programs. Service learning is easily integrated into both liberal arts and career preparation courses and provides students with hands on practical experience while at the same time addressing needs in the community. In addition, adult students who live and work in the community make outstanding service providers. They are likely to be trusted neighbors and friends as well as students from the college.

The Community College National Center for Community Engagement provides models on its website of excellent service learning programs that have created or expanded community college efforts to meet local community needs while meeting the needs of students. Colleges work with community groups to identify community needs and, through service learning, set about meeting those needs. Regardless of the need identified by the community, disaster preparation, literacy, economic development, the college is likely to have some faculty and students who have the skills to begin to meet the need in concert with local organizations.

The resources of Learn and Serve America and the Corporation for National and Community Service are available to community colleges, and we strongly encourage colleges to seek them out.

3. Ms. Cohen, evaluation, assessment and research are critical to the development and sustainability of high quality service learning programs, in your opinion what data should institutions of higher education be collecting (whether they are receiving federal monies or not) and how can they share their findings with others?

Great question. If all colleges were to collect some common data points, it would be a boost to the field as we would be able to track the development and sustainability of service learning and civic engagement. For example, knowing the number and percentage of students engaged in service and service learning annually is really helpful to understand the prevalence of service, not only in one college, but statewide and nationally. Annual indicators of the institutionalization of service learning can include the number of core or required courses that incorporate service learning, and whether the college has at least one full-time service coordinator. These are not complicated to find purely “counting the beans” kinds of data, though they may be difficult to capture accurately and comprehensively.

Learn and Serve has a data collection system that we call LASSIE. All of the programs that we fund, about 1500 local programs, provide demographic information about who participated in their programs, what kinds of service learning they did, and the impact of the service they performed. The questionnaire and the last several years’ data are

available to the public on the LASSIE website, www.lsareports.org. The LASSIE information is fascinating! Even if your program was not funded by Learn and Serve, the LASSIE data can help you to place your program in context.

It is important that each institution capture the information about how their specific service learning and civic engagement efforts make a difference. In Learn and Serve, we think about the difference service learning makes along three dimensions: individuals, institutions, and community. For individuals, particularly youth, we believe that service learning can build academic skills, civic engagement and/or reduce risky behavior. Institutional change includes the development of the structures that support service and civic engagement and changes in policy, such as the inclusion of service learning in promotion and tenure decisions. And, importantly, what has changed in the community as a result of the service learning partnerships and activities. If the program was designed to improve children's literacy levels, did it do so and to what degree? We need to know whether or not our programs make a difference – and we really need to know whether they make the difference we intend.

Disseminating the results of your evaluation or research is key! There are many ways you can use this information. Describe the positive outcomes of your service learning programs in a press release – and a local news story - to let your city and county know what a terrific asset their community college is to the local community. Write up the results in your school newspaper and/or magazine. Make sure that those who make decisions that may have an effect on service learning at your school know when there are results to report. Make presentations about your research at academic conferences and submit journal articles. Alumni, faculty groups, trustees, students, and donors should all be informed. Make sure that local, state and federal policymakers are aware of the great things that they have helped to bring about on your campus.

And don't forget to share your research and evaluation reports with the field by sending them to the National Service Learning Clearinghouse (www.servicelearning.org).

4. Ms. Cohen, federal funding for service learning programs has been drastically reduced during this last funding cycle, what can institutions of higher education in particular community college do to assist Congress and the Administration in not only bringing back funding to its former level, but increase the allocation?

The most important thing that any Learn and Serve America program can do is to tell the story of your program well and clearly and often. Let the public and policymakers know about the wonderful programs that you have created, describe the service you provide, and explain the difference that you make in the community. Invite elected officials and their staff to visit your program, send them the press you receive, send them copies of your evaluation reports, visit them in their offices. Identify your program as part of Learn and Serve America.

5. Ms. Cohen, is there anything else that I haven't asked you that you would like to say about service learning and civic engagement and Learn and Serve, or in general about service learning or civic engagement?

All education institutions have the responsibility – and the historical mission – to educate citizens. Not citizens in the narrow sense, but individuals who have an understanding and a first hand knowledge of how to work together with others in their community in a productive way to accomplish tasks that are of public value. Service learning should help to develop more individuals who take their rights and responsibilities within a democracy seriously – to vote, to become informed about issues, to engage in public debate, and to serve with both public and nonprofit organizations. Community colleges, with their community-driven mission and focus on opening the doors to education for all, have an unprecedented opportunity to weave their knowledge and community missions together with the civic education of their students, building stronger colleges, communities and students.