Urban Revival and College Writing: Writing to Promote Communities
Miriam Chirico

Service-learning classes offer students an experience in professional formation, a practice that may prove anathema to the ethos of “service.” In order to counteract this individualist attitude, I have designed a service-learning class on the topic of urban revitalization that involves students in promotional and collaborative partnerships with non-profit organizations in town. Drawing upon my experiences with students in a Business and Professional Writing class, I discuss specific readings and writing assignments in this article. The discussion examines some of the theoretical implications behind reinforcing college students’ awareness of civic commitment while developing their written and rhetorical skills.

“This class taught me a completely different type of writing style that I have never done before. I have never written to an actual organization and try to promote them. That kind of writing seemed so professional to me and when I first heard that’s what we were going to do I was a little intimidated. . . . I didn’t think I would ever be the one to describe a part of Willimantic to someone, or be the one to promote an organization. . . . I now know how important writing is, not only to yourself as a way of expression, but also to anyone who is reading your writing so it can help them out as well.”

First-Year College Writing Student, Spring Semester 2006

The bifurcated nature of service-learning, as noted by the very hyphen in its name, leads to rich educational experiences as well as some confusion. Classes in service-learning offer opportunities for collaborative work among students and community groups and provide students with disciplinary knowledge and skills. Moreover, by dint of participating in a service-learning class, students grow cognizant of the fact that their education is not a private privilege, but a public provision intended to benefit them as well as the greater community. However, in service-learning classes where the creation of a value-driven product is emphasized, or in classes that incorporate client-based assignments, students begin to
prioritize their professional development at the expense of an ethos of service. Thus the class runs the risk of misaligned priorities. In other words, while the faculty encourage their students to consider themselves as advocates for social change, due to the contextualized nature of these “real world” projects, students consider their service more as professional development that can be noted on a resume. This attitude became apparent to me when I shifted the emphasis in my own writing classes from writing reflective pieces about providing service to offering writing and written pieces as the service itself.

One way I tried to mitigate this tension is by designing service-learning classes where the multiple service agencies for whom the students work are themselves working to promote the entire community; that is, the professional piece the students produce has community renewal as its objective. To this end, I chose the topic of urban revitalization and involved students in collaborative partnerships with non-profit organizations in town. By tapping into a national movement such as urban renewal that benefits multiple constituencies, I aimed to raise the students’ awareness of how they might become agents of change in promoting the city or town in which their university is located and how their particular skill set of writing could be of pragmatic service for the larger community. Equally, the model of urban revival, with its interconnection of diverse groups working to revitalize their shared town or city, provides an ideal metaphor of collaboration and partnership. This article both describes the incongruity between student and faculty objectives in service-learning courses, and explores how forming partnerships with agencies dedicated to urban revitalization may help reduce these differences.

**Service-Learning: Civic Engagement or Pre-Professionalism?**

As much as scholars and practitioners attempt to promote an activist ideology among the students in their service-learning classes, they acknowledge the difficulty in doing so. Virginia Crisco (2009) creates assignments to develop her students’ civic identities so that they possess a lifelong attitude toward serving their communities, such as assisting at a homeless shelter or at a literacy center. However, she admits the challenge in forming an “activist disposition” in her students:

> Though students took action on issues they cared about, changed their minds through social and cultural analysis, and learned that language and arguments are rhetorical, only a handful of students walked away understanding that activism is a stance and a commitment, a long term way of being in this world. (p. 47).

This stance is even more evident in classes that provide clients with a valuable end product or “deliverable” at the semester’s end. Mary Hutchinson (2005) reached a similar conclusion when she pursued a semester-long research project with her service-learning class. Paying close attention to the intersections between academic discourse and social action, Hutchinson placed her Business Writing students with eight different community-based agencies, and assessed their understanding of their civic and social responsibility at the beginning and end of the semester, using the Civic Values Survey created by Campus Compact (cited in Gelmon et.
The results of her research indicated that when the students reflected upon their semester’s experience, their “understanding [of the agency and its benefits to society] and their [social] awareness was not as important as negotiating their work on the project and dealing with peers within the group” (436). Finally, as noted by Elizabeth Hollander and Matthew Hartley in their article about civic renewal (2003), service-learning has not encouraged college students to take more interest in public affairs or policy. Working instead with service agencies where their efforts have more tangible results (p. 302), the students appear less interested in critiquing social inequities than engaging in direct action.

While these student responses are not anomalous, they are perhaps more prevalent among courses that are geared to providing agencies with pragmatic or marketable products. Repeatedly, service-learning practitioners who work with students on issues of social justice, while concurrently requiring that they create a viable product, find that students’ beliefs towards social injustice remain unchanged. For example, after his students completed much-needed writing projects for non-profit groups in town, James Dubinsky (2001) of Virginia Polytechnic Institute contemplated the attitudinal differences between his goals and that of the students. For him, the objectives behind his course were bipartite: to learn technical writing skills through real-world projects, but also to increase the students’ perceived investment in society. Dubinsky discovered that while his students understood their written projects as “good work,” they had no concept of “doing good” in the altruistic sense. Because he focused heavily on the professional nature of the writing products that students produced, his students acknowledged primarily their own skill development, not how “they were solving problems for others and making a difference in their communities” (p. 10). Robert Rhoads in Community Service and Higher Learning: Explorations of the Caring Self (1997) notes that students reported growth with respect to personal and interpersonal development, but that for the majority of the students, “connecting their participation in community service to larger social issues was not a primary concern” (p. 200). And J. Blake Scott (2012), who teaches technical communication, summarizes the problem by stating, “service-learning approaches can all too easily lose their critical, activist edge and civic scope. In some cases these approaches can be coopted by the very hyperpragmatism they seek to challenge. In other cases they can be limited by liberal foci on personal development and discovery that leads to shallow reflection” (p. 243). The conflicting goals apparent between students and faculty appear to be an inherent by-product of the professionally formative nature of a service-learning course.

The cause of this attitude may be due, in part, to the economic dynamic implicit in the college classroom, in that students pay tuition to gain skills that are assessed during the course of a semester and translated into grades that will reflect their intellectual and technical worth to prospective employers and graduate schools. This emphasis on being employable upon graduation influences how the undergraduate population envisions their education. A report conducted by the education-consulting firm Eduventures (2007), indicated that of 6,200 traditional-age college freshmen surveyed, 72% said “professional preparation” was important to them, rather than the strength of the academic curriculum. In fact, faculty often rely upon this priority to “sell” service-learning classes to students by touting the class as an opportunity
to build their resumes with “real world” experience (Dubinsky, 2001). Carol Geary Schneider and Debra Humphreys (2005) surveyed what college students expected from their four-year experience and discovered that the students value “their own preparation for professional success.” Students believe “that such things as maturity, work habits, self-discipline, and time management are what they need to achieve in college” (p. B20). Both authors expressed concern with the discrepancy between college mission statements and the students’ own objectives:

The most alarming finding has to do with what both current and prospective students consider the least important outcomes of a college education: values and ethics, an appreciation of cultural diversity, global awareness, and civic responsibility. . . . They do not expect college to enable them to better understand the wider world; they view college as a private rather than public good. (p. B20)

Thus while university campuses promulgate civic mission and good institutional citizenship through service-learning courses, the vocational attitude of their students comes from a very real imperative to translate their college expenses into a financially remunerative career. They incur substantial debt to attend college based on the premise that their salary over a lifetime will be 62 percent higher than the salary of a worker with only a high-school diploma (Baum & Ma, 2007). It is this imbalance, I believe, between university initiatives to foster habits of civic engagement and the students’ professional objectives, that results in misaligned priorities in service-learning classes.

While this article cannot fully resolve this incongruity, it does describe my attempt to inculcate civic engagement within two Business and Professional Writing classes by focusing on the field of urban renewal. The Business and Professional Writing class connected students to non-profit groups in town dedicated to urban revitalization, and in so doing reinforced the belief that their writing skills had market demand, while also reminding them of the importance of civic participation. With my course on urban revival, I put forth a model of community activism that introduced students to the multiple stakeholders who strive collaboratively to promote the revitalization of their town, demonstrating that economic and civic improvement requires the help of all citizens, not just administrative officials. In other words, the class stopped short of an activist critique that would have identified social inequities and instead promoted a client relationship with organizations. Consequently, the model of shared civic partnership is exemplified readily within the context of urban revitalization because it bypasses the “us” helping “them” dynamic that occurs in doing work for agencies such as homeless shelters or literacy programs. Betty Smith Franklin (2002) distinguishes the two poles prevalent in service-learning as “civic engagement” and “social action.” In the first category, the student practitioner respects the consensus-building and deliberative, democratic channels that foster

1 The oft-quoted citation is based on the earnings of a typical employee with a four-year college degree of $50,900, which is 62 percent higher than the figure of $31,500 earned by someone with a high-school diploma.
transformation, while the second category, “social action,” encourages students to identify socio-political inequality and dismantle the power structure inherent in society. I attempted to negotiate between career development that simply imitated public service and civic engagement that stopped short of activist critique, aligning the class with the emerging agenda of “civic renewal.”

Urban Revitalization in the Service-Learning Classroom

Urban revival is a significant national trend. Government agencies, grassroots groups, and civic organizations are increasingly investing in the economic and cultural opportunities of their cities. There is a growing sense that American cities cannot be allowed to fail, and thus more projects abound under the name of “smart growth,” such as riverfront development, urban infill or “retrofits,” the preservation of historic sites, and the creation of public art. Many formerly blighted industrial cities have been turned around because of such projects. North Adams, Mass., serves as a perfect example of a former 19th-century mill town that grew into a tourist destination after a series of factory buildings were transformed into MASS MoCA, the largest contemporary art collection in the country. An example to other cities, North Adams fashioned a new identity for itself as a cultural, recreational and educational hub, complete with new restaurants and living space for artists in former mills.

Reclaiming cities is imperative to maintaining America’s cultural identity. The report “Restoring Prosperity: The State Role in Revitalizing America’s Older Industrial Cities” published by The Brookings Institution Metropolitan Policy Program (2007) attributes the renewed interest in urban revival to the characteristic features of urban environments:

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\text{Older industrial cities possess a unique set of characteristics and resources that, if fully leveraged, could be converted into vital competitive assets. These include distinctive physical features} - \text{including waterfronts, walkable urban grids, public transit, and historic architecture; important economic attributes} - \text{such as dense employment centers, universities and medical facilities . . . Moreover, older industrial cities are still important centers of regional identity, inspiring a sense of pride and place, which, while often abstract, can be the first seed from which to nurture the momentum for change. (p. 4-5).}
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The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has been working with colleges and universities over the past 10 years to explore ways of promoting smart growth, providing research, partnerships and grants. Their work is predicated on the fact that cities are concentrated areas for the exchange of ideas and resources and provide the building blocks for strong regional growth. ²

² Their web site is worth examining for the innovative ideas that universities might incorporate into the classroom curricula to educate students on smart growth and sustainable living. Two reports in particular are worth mentioning: “Partnerships for Smart Growth: University-Community Collaboration for Better Public Places,”
More than half of the nation’s colleges and universities are located in cities, and almost all engage their students in volunteerism, field trips, or employment, making this kind of professional writing course practical to implement. One of the most prominent examples of a university investing financial support and academic expertise in revitalizing a blighted neighborhood is the West Philadelphia Initiative, undertaken by the University of Pennsylvania. The university worked with community organizations to make the neighborhoods safe, stimulate the housing market, encourage retail and economic development, and improve the public schools. Based on the premise that “the university’s identity and academic mission are deeply linked to the future of cities” (Rodin, 2007, p. 247), the University of Pennsylvania created the Institute for Urban Research which continues the initiative by sponsoring more than 130 academic service-learning classes for its undergraduates. Not all universities can partake in such large-scale initiatives, but what is essential about such projects is empowering students to view themselves as agents of change for urban revitalization. An article in Partnerships, “Urban Studies, Students, and Communities: An Ideal Partnership” (Cherrington 2011), details a series of student-led public awareness projects and marketing campaigns designed during the course of their Urban Studies degree. The projects provided citywide branding and marketing campaigns to invigorate five small towns surrounding Minnesota State University Mankato (MSU). Service-learning classes that emphasize the smart growth of a town or city can inculcate within students the value of livable, dynamic cities while simultaneously involving them in projects that promote urban revival.

In order to empower students to see themselves as agents for change, they must be invested in changing the status quo, which requires encouraging them to understand the inherent value of urban locales differently. J. Blake Scott (2012), critiquing the hyperpragmatism of his own technical communication class, supports the theoretical practices of cultural studies in order to create within students the ethical imperative for transformation. Like him, I relied upon cultural studies texts to highlight the ineffable pleasures we have lost due to suburban sprawl and the disintegration of city centers -- experiential knowledge often lacking in college students. For as James Howard Kunstler laments in The Geography of Nowhere (1994), “two generations have grown up and matured in America without experiencing what it is like to live in a human habitat of quality” (p. 245). He ascribes the loss of the “essential character” of American towns which includes 13 case studies of university-community collaborations on smart growth initiatives, ranging among urban, suburban, and rural projects. The report can be found on the EPA’s web site: http://www.epa.gov/smartgrowth/univ_collaboration.htm Their second report, “Leveraging Colleges and Universities for Urban Economic Revitalization: An Action Agenda,” is a joint report from CEOs for Cities Conversations and the Institute for a Competitive Inner City. It can be found at http://www.icic.org/ee_uploads/publications/UIFINAL.PDF. It discusses the importance of colleges and universities in urban redevelopment and revitalization, and how community leaders, elected officials, and college and university administrators have worked together to achieve common goals.

One possibility for faculty interested in smaller-scale projects might be to consider the Main Street movement, a nation-wide organization sponsored by the National Trust for Historic Preservation, whose local chapters work towards revitalizing traditional commercial districts.
to capitalist development projects that erode all sense of place. When I led a group of student travelers to London years ago, they marveled over how sidewalks and public transportation brought together a diversity of people they never would have encountered alone in their cars. In directing students towards appreciating the benefit of lively, downtown areas, I chose reading material such as Lewis Mumford’s “What is a City?” from *The Architectural Record* (1937), and Jane Jacob’s “The Uses of Sidewalks: Safety” from *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961). Moreover, the very subject matter of urban revitalization provides an apt model to illustrate the interconnectedness of all peoples within society; to exemplify, in other words, the social interconnectedness of “community.” As John Ackerman explains in “Teaching the Capital City” (2007), “Sustainability is most fundamentally based on the understanding that a people live in an ecological network that may be construed differently as a disciplinary milieu, a public sphere, and as the equilibrium in an ecology” (p. 125).

Ackerman’s classes in georhetoric serve to move the students towards an understanding of *querencia*, that is, a feeling of their own “placeness” within a community. He uses a Spanish word that means a safe, homelike space, from which one draws strength. Towards this end, he incorporates various instructional methods to create a sense of geographical reality, such as place-based literatures, site analysis, and documentation of landscape events in order to develop the students’ intellectual understanding of the city as an ideological landscape. His model of *querencia* can enable students to understand the affective connection people have for their town or city. As Cherrington (2011) writes about her Public Information & Involvement Class, students must learn to develop “strong and compelling image[s]” for a town in order to convey to others the sense of “pride of place” residents feel towards their community (p. 3). Any marketing campaign would lack that sense of enthusiasm without understanding *querencia*.

In my research, I have discovered three other college courses that emphasize the importance of cultivating this “sense of place” in service-learning courses, and illustrate the rationale behind this reflective attitude when deployed in the service of urban revitalization: 1) Rebuilding a Heritage Site: A cultural immersion course in New Orleans, La., balances educating the students on the city’s rich history with their efforts to help rebuild and clean up the environment. Wade J. Luquet (2009), the professor who designed the course, combines lessons in history, food, music, literature, and race to instill within students a vivid understanding of New Orleans’s identity as a cultural and historical treasure. Without this tangible knowledge, students might ignore the justification behind its revival. As he explains, “the experience of service without touring [the city] gives students a good feeling of helping, but does not provide them the context of the city they are trying to rebuild” (p. 86). The

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4 These excerpts, as well as more recent cultural studies scholarship on urban environments, can be found in *The City Reader* (LeGates & Stout, 2000), an anthology of readings on urban problems and the identity of cities.

5 Thomas Deans’ book on service-learning lists approximately 60 different service-learning programs at universities nationwide, with brief abstracts detailing the various configurations and objectives of each program.
students’ projects towards revitalization have to be reinforced with an education in the city’s history and influence; otherwise their labor has no larger contextual significance. Reading Tennessee Williams’ *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, learning to cook Creole and Cajun food, or hearing various jazz recordings encouraged *querencia* and provided some impetus behind historical preservation (p. 83-88).

2) **Eco-Tourism**: Students at Allegheny College in Meadville, Pa., designed ecotourism informational guides to encourage visitors to visit the northwest corner of the state. Taking a combination of environmental studies courses and nature-writing classes, the students designed a comprehensive web site that provides tourists with various itineraries as well as historical and ecological information. Three senior theses have been written based on research collected for the ecotourism project, creating a market analysis, an economic feasibility plan, and detailing ecological driving tours. Ecotourism, a practice of guiding visitors through natural areas in ways that respect and sustain the ecological landscape, gives the students the opportunity to teach environmental conservation to others while supporting the wellbeing of local people. Although the region surrounding Meadville had suffered from sprawl, environmental degradation and abandoned factories, these guided tours helped the local economy and heightened awareness of the environment.6

3) **Town Planning**: A class at Middlebury College in Vermont helped the residents of Starksboro (pop. 1900), determine their plans for future growth by interviewing the residents and compiling their responses. Led by Professor John Edler, who teaches nature writing and environmental studies, the students gathered research to assist the town planners in making decisions about the future growth of Starksboro. Through the process of collecting and transcribing 60 interviews, as well as recording digital video clips and creating an interactive website for the town residents, the students learned about the challenges that face a small New England town. While outsiders typically romanticize the idyllic nature of such towns, the students wrestled with issues such as zoning, urban sprawl, and sustainable agriculture. In the process of interviewing and compiling the data, they gained pragmatic, civic knowledge (Goodnough, 2008, p. 26).

**Willimantic, Connecticut and Urban Revival**

Eastern Connecticut State University, where I teach, is located in Willimantic, Conn., a city benefitting from the on-going improvement efforts of different civic organizations. An old mill town that flourished during the 19th century, Willimantic acted as an important trading post between Hartford and Providence, RI. Its former wealth and stature is evidenced today by the elegant Victorian houses overlooking the Main Street. However, the departure of the town’s largest employer, the American Thread Company, in the 1980s affected the area significantly, and it experienced a variety of problems attributed to a shifting manufacturing culture and a

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6 The web site for the project can be found at [http://naturetourism.allegheny.edu/essay_aboutproject.html](http://naturetourism.allegheny.edu/essay_aboutproject.html)
declining middle-class population. In October 2002, *The Hartford Courant* ran a series of articles about the high rate of drug abuse in the city, earning Willimantic the nickname “Heroin Town.” The television news program *60 Minutes* promulgated this destructive publicity a year later with its own exposé. Since this event, many citizens and non-profit groups in town have become active in revising the public image of Willimantic.

Over a four-year period, I taught three college writing classes where the service-learning projects were centered on urban revitalization in Willimantic. The three classes were College Writing (ENG 100), a required course for first-year students, and two sections of Business and Professional Writing (ENG 300), an upper-level class that handled writing assignments of greater complexity. My intention for the upper-division Business writing classes was to move beyond the kind of reflective assignments that ask students to write about the service they provide the community, to creating assignments that are the service (Bacon “Instruction” 14). Melody Bowdon and J. Blake Scott (2003) designate this second model as the “Stanford model” where “Students mainly wrote as their community service rather than about it” (p. 4). That is, asking students to complete “essential writing tasks for the nonprofit agencies in which they are placed” -- such as a volunteer recruitment pamphlet for a battered women’s shelter -- positions writing as a significant service or product, and, according to Paul Heilker is the “real deal” because of its value to another constituent (p. 74). While the students in all three classes rhetorically pragmatic assignments consisting of improving Willimantic’s public image, only the upper-division students had the added emphasis of providing a professional product at the semester’s end.

I connected the first-year students to four non-profit organizations in town: the Willimantic Renaissance; the Windham Area Arts Collaborative; the Willimantic Whitewater Partnership (WWP); and Covenant Soup Kitchen. With the upper-division Business Writing students, I focused on just one or two clients per semester: Willimantic Whitewater Partnership the first semester, and the Victorian Neighborhood Association and the Samuel Huntington Homestead (located in a neighboring town of Scotland) the second semester. These non-profit groups (except for the Covenant Soup Kitchen) represented a range of services and were all promotional organizations invested in the revitalization of Willimantic. One organization, the Willimantic Renaissance, sponsors a monthly Third Thursday Street Festival (which attracts 8,000 individuals from neighboring towns), showcasing its community spirit, ethnic restaurants, and historical architecture. As the students learned how the various non-profit organizations located in Willimantic all work cooperatively toward the same goal, they witnessed the cooperative model of “community advocacy” in which they themselves would participate.

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7 In the first model of service-learning, students do physical labor for nonprofit agencies and write reflective essays about their participation. In the second model, students study some kind of social theme like literacy, and perform a service related to the theme such as tutoring, and then write a paper tying their research in with their experience. The third, indicated above, “The Stanford Model,” asks that students write as their community service rather than about their service.
I discovered a disparity between the quality of civic engagement the students in the first-year College Writing class experienced and the students in my Business and Professional Writing class. At the semester’s end, the first-year students remarked on their improved opinions of Willimantic through the process of writing about it. One affective response suggested that this course stimulated within her a “sense of place” (querencia) as well as civic loyalty: “It is not the fact that I learned more about Willimantic as it is that I felt closer to it. Even though this is not my home town, I still learned and started to feel proud of it.” Another perceived the civic purpose behind her writing: “The goal I’m trying to reach with my pieces of writing is for people, mainly who go to school at ECSU, who are not used to seeing what Willimantic has to offer, to . . . . break out of their bubbles and take the initiative to become one as a community and see how they have the power to make a city become alive again.”

In contrast, the chief benefit the Business Writing students described from participating in their service-learning project was writing for a “real-world” audience and the concomitant alteration to their own writing. One student noted how she adjusted her rhetorical stance depending on the audience: “I learned how to address customers and Corporate Officials in writing. I also learned how to communicate with peers when it comes to difficult work.” Students described how this class prepared them for their professional futures, emphasizing how their own skills were strengthened for the benefit of the job market. They gained confidence about the practical value of their education, as evidenced by one comment: “Ultimately, I feel as though I came away with many tools that I will be able to use in the future as I venture off into the ‘real world.’ “ Another said, “I will definitely be taking the knowledge I learned from this class and will be able to apply it to the real world.” As positive as these responses are, the pattern of professional formation resembles what other practitioners discovered: no student in the professional writing course drew attention to his or her own civic responsibility.

**Writing Assignments for Community Agencies**

Writing for organizations in the community automatically ratchets up the professional emphasis of the experience. Creating community-based writing assignments, as Nora Bacon (1994) notes, is a complicated art because of the limited constraints of the students’ abilities. While there is little value in assigning projects that require minimal content knowledge such as applying a style sheet or editing a newsletter, one must likewise avoid “assignments that require a great deal of expert knowledge about genre or about the agency’s work,” such as writing grant proposals (p. 47) which will require a great deal of instructional assistance. Furthermore, the more expertise is needed in writing a document, the more the focus shifts to the professional nature of the course. Thus writing assignments must be sequenced in such a

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8 The assessment of this class consisted of an online, anonymous survey asking the students three questions:  
1) What changes have you noticed in your own writing as a result of this course?  
2) What activities did you find helpful or not helpful over the semester?  
3) What gains, other than writing skills, have you gotten from this course?
way as to introduce students to the organization’s identity and needs, as well as to launch
them into the written product.

I found that asking students to write an Organizational Profile offers the students one avenue
into the organization. The Organizational Profile, which Thomas Deans [2000] refers to as an
“Agency Profile” (see Appendix A), provides the students with valuable information about the
organization’s history and key players while simultaneously requiring them to do research and
synthesize their findings. The 10-page Organizational Profile I designed (see Appendix B) can
be written as a group project and broken into different sections, such as profiles of the
founders, a narrative history with important milestones, or challenges to the organization’s
growth. The non-profit groups provided their collection of newspaper clippings from the past
10 or more years; I made copies of these clippings, and students read through these articles
for their research, in essence learning the value of archival research while gaining knowledge
about the organization. Working through this material and witnessing the history gave the
students a greater understanding of the communal imperative behind the organization’s
development; they learned how the organization was founded, what obstacles it encountered,
and how the members articulated their own mission and goals. Students formulated “gap”
questions about the project based on where they needed more information from our client,
and oftentimes turned areas where further information was necessary into the basis of their
writing projects. For example, we discovered that the Samuel Huntington Homestead required
background information on historical wallpapers in order to apply for grant money, while the
Victorian Neighborhood Association needed a college scholarship application process for local
high school students interested in majoring in history.

In addition to writing projects such as promotional brochures, informational web sites, or
features articles, the one assignment I would recommend to encourage a disposition towards
civic engagement is the Advocacy Editorial. I did this exercise with the first-year writing
students and now realize I should have also assigned it to the Business Writing students.
Constructing an editorial, students learn how they can campaign on behalf of another by
presenting crucial and pressing reasons behind the organization’s function and mission. As a
rhetorical form, the Advocacy Editorial models community engagement to students by
teaching them a democratic means of fostering civic transformation, i.e. writing in order to
supply others with a voice. In this way, students learn “to write themselves into the world”
through producing “purpose-driven documents for audiences beyond the classroom” (Deans,
p. 8-9), or they perceive how “writing is a way of acting in the world,” as Ann M. Feldman

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9 Group work is problematic and often requires intervention on the part of the instructor. Even though
the students wrote the report collaboratively, they were each responsible for a different section, so grades were
assigned for individual work as well as for the entire paper. Our use of Blackboard (an on-line course
management system) allowed students to communicate with one another and enabled me to monitor their work. I
would encourage any instructor intent on getting good written results to spend time discussing management
procedures, such as communication policies, group roles, obligations of team members, and deadlines. See
Wikipedia’s overview to project management, “Project Management.”
(2003, p. 213) attested to after working with students in the Great Cities Initiative. service-learning assignments validate how

Preparation for writing the Advocacy Editorial involves interrogating the conceptual underpinnings of an organization to understand the essential need behind its existence. Rather than simply take the organization for granted, students had to question what the community would be like if this organization did not exist. For example, we asked of the Willimantic Whitewater Park: “What does it mean for the townspeople to ‘connect to the river?’” and “Who would benefit from a whitewater park along the river?” As they deduced answers to these questions, the students could argue more effectively for how the whitewater park’s initiatives could enhance the community. Moreover, arguing for the existence of an organization involves a greater level of commitment than writing about an organization, once again encouraging the students to think about the necessity for change agents in the community.

**Case Study: Writing for the Willimantic Whitewater Partnership**

A case study will illustrate how working in partnership with one non-profit group, the Willimantic Whitewater Partnership (WWP), yielded four different promotional research projects. The WWP is an organization creating a multi-use park in the downtown area of Willimantic in order to draw economic investment to the town. The park will consist of a whitewater rapids run, a bike path connecting to the East Coast Greenway, greater fishing access to the river, and boating facilities. The president of the organization, Dan Mullins, asked students to collect information that he could use to promote the project to the local citizens. The WWP’s many-pronged approach to revitalizing Willimantic provided numerous avenues of research for my students. For example, the organization needed data to prove that increasing tourism to Willimantic through the whitewater park would augment the economy, so one group of students found articles about other urban areas that initiated projects similar to the WWP’s plan. They reported the success of projects in towns that were similar to Willimantic in terms of weather and tourist population, such as Salida, Col., and Reno, Nev., and then used these reports as predictive indicators of the economic potential that the Whitewater Park might have on Willimantic. Another group wrote a research report entitled “The Effects on Fishing and Fish Ecology in the Willimantic River,” which consisted of research from the Department of Environmental Protection’s website, and news sources such as the *Washington Post* and *Field and Stream*. Mullins, the president, revealed to the students that the removal of the dams in order to build the park was a contentious issue; certain citizen groups opposed their removal for purposes of historical preservation or because they “perceived hydro-power as a ‘green’ energy source.”

The students used outside articles to confirm how the removal of dams in other major rivers, such as the Neponset River in Massachusetts or the Rappahannock

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10 East Coast Greenway is an extensive bike trail that extends from Maine to Florida. The WWP received a $114,800 DEP Recreational Trails Grant in order to create the bikeway.

River in eastern Virginia, enlarged the fish population after the rivers were restored to their natural ecology, and provided Mullins with direct and favorable evidence to address the concerns of his critics. Though the students in this class did not have the ability or the time to run their own surveys or handle statistical analyses, these research projects provided the students with a rigorous experience in analogical thinking, as well as synthesis and organization of data, while working in partnership with an organization advocating urban revival.

Writing Assignments and Identity Formation

While writing on behalf of a non-profit group can immediately engage the students in acts of civic advocacy, the over-emphasis on the finished product reduces their sense of civic responsibility. Thus a dual emphasis on the written product as well as on their selves as writers is needed. For a student to write on another’s behalf represents a significant shift in the awareness of self and Other, and could provide them the opportunity of switching from the personal “I” to an empathetic “you” – what John Ackerman refers to as “substitutability,” i.e. “finding oneself in the place of the neighbor” (p. 125). By exploring the idea that writing can stand in for the voice of another we can transform the students’ own self-concept as writers and subsequently as agents of change. Several of my first-year composition students understood how they could substitute their writer’s voice for another’s; as one student noted:

_Taking this class has helped me understand the concept that writing, like talking, is a tool of communication. . . Before I understood that writing could help you express yourself or learn new things, but now I realize that it has practical purposes too. Writing can help promote a business, bring a new vision to a town or convince people of an argument._

As previously stated, it was the students in the first-year College Writing class more than the Business and Professional Writing class who perceived themselves as advocates for the community. Even while we read about the importance of urban revitalization in key cultural texts, the hyper-pragmatic emphasis on the professional nature of the written product and the use of client-based writing assignments with the Business Writing Students prompted them to self-identify less as activists and more as business writers. I learned that this self-perception has to be carefully balanced between their roles as civic participants and their roles as pre-professionals, otherwise the professional role can easily overshadow the other. The instructor needs to guide students in their own self-identification regarding the roles they play, inviting them to consider not only how they might serve a client, but also how they could position themselves as “people who felt these issues mattered and needed to change” (Crisco p. 44).

In order to structure this kind of identity-formation in service-learning classes, one could incorporate sociological models of role theory. In this way, students could begin to perceive themselves in their multiple roles: as observers, as engaged citizens, and as professional writers. This idea comes in part from a theory Beverly Spears (1994) articulated about student writers. In order to learn to write for various audiences, students needed a clear sense of
themselves as writers, and that meant having a clear sense of the different roles they occupy, both public and private. Using the concept of “persona,” that is, a mask worn by an actor, Spears encourages the students to see themselves in various situations and to identify with their varying masks or roles: sibling, student, best friend, or athlete. Subsequently, by emphasizing to my Business Writing students their various roles, I invite them to become more aware of their pre-professional obligation as well as their responsibility to the community. The first role to emphasize in a class on urban revitalization would be that of the flâneur, the 19th-century designation for someone who partakes of the city’s abundance, yet looks upon it as a detached observer, with a critical eye. The next step towards creating a sense of civic agency would be to discuss more pointedly what it means to be a citizen who lives within the city or town, as well as requesting that the leaders of the various agencies discuss their own sense of civic pride. Finally, we can acknowledge the role these students seemed ready to play, that of a professional writer working for a client. Since role-playing is intrinsic to identity formation, a civic identity could begin to emerge through activities that stimulate the students’ imagination, such as a class tour of the city as a group of flâneurs, witnessing and describing the city through the perspective of a writer, and their work as citizens advocating for urban vitality.

Urban Revitalization as a means towards Civic Engagement

If service-learning has among its key goals collaborative and civic engagement, then projects concerning urban revival provide ideal opportunities to reinforce these practices by moving students from within their university boundaries and into the cityscape. The dissolution of artificial barriers between community agencies and university faculty is key to the kind of “collaborative action research” that Philip Nyden (2003) sees as imperative in civic engagement; such reciprocal research practices respect “the knowledge that resides in the academy and the knowledge that exists in the community” (p. 218). Focusing likewise on the partnership between different community agencies, Dan Mullins, the President of the Willimantic Whitewater Partnership, wrote in response to the student work:

Willimantic and ECSU, with their diverse populations, are prime candidates for a project that seeks to bring diverse communities together through transculturalism [a term coined by Mikhail Epstein]. . . . Transculturalism is a broad term used to describe a process by which groups that may have cultural differences, whatever they may be (e.g. the cultures of industry and the environment), come together ("blend" perhaps) in direct dialogue while respecting each other's differences and taking common action to improve their shared community.12

The co-existing of diverse constituencies that Mullins describes is key to urban revival; successful cities are hotbeds of heterogeneity with various industries, organizations, and grassroots groups working together. Moreover, participating in city or urban renewal provides

the ideal metaphor for civic engagement and partnership. The city exemplifies democratic participation with its centralized meeting place, diverse populations and activities; it provides opportunities of alienation and anonymity, as well as excitement and stimulation. Transculturalism is the model of any main street in an American town that still maintains its historical identity, where the post office, hair salon, grocery store, apartments, and restaurants all exist side by side. And, used as a field of inquiry, cultural studies underscores the shifting links between “various conditions, including identities, organizational practices, community needs, economic resources, and cultural values” (Scott, 2012, p. 255). Service-learning classes on urban revival can ultimately reveal to students this web of human interconnectedness, asking them to play multiple roles: the professional writer who understands the value of writing, a flâneur who enjoys the stimulation of the crowds and commercial enterprise, and an agent of change, responsible to the welfare and improvement of his or her own civic sphere.
References


APPENDIX A-1: Assignment Thomas Deans Writing Partnerships: Service-Learning in Composition

AGENCY PROFILE

We can’t work well with an organization until we get to know that organization. The purpose of the Agency Profile is to help you better understand the community partner organization with which you will work; it also will give you experience in collaborative and report writing.

The report should be a concise description and analysis of your community partner organization: Its mission? The nature of the organization? Its size? How old? Why founded? Government-related? All-volunteer? How funded? The nature of the audience for your future writing project? And so on. Much of the information for the profile will come from your initial interview. Still, you will want to gather written information from the agency (if possible), and do some library research.

You should also include some reference to the social context of this organization: What needs is the organization responding to? How does it relate to your findings in your research essay? Who defines those needs and how they should be met? What are the root social forces of the problems that the organization addresses? Are there alternative ways of addressing those problems?

Length: 3-4 double-spaced pages

Features: Title; subheadings, if appropriate; supplementary materials in an appendix, if appropriate.

Due Date:
APPENDIX B: Assignment Miriam Chirico ENG 300: Writing the Organizational Profile

Organizational Profile A research paper explaining the nature and identity of an organization (10 pages) [the rhetorical strategies or genres in brackets refer to the Norton Field Guide of Writing]

Identity [Definition] [Process]
What does the organization do? What purpose does it fill?
How would you describe this organization to ECSU students?
Examples of questions:
WAAC: what goes on in the gallery? Why do artists need a gallery space? What do they do in their studios?
How do people relate to one another in a soup kitchen? How are they fed? Who cooks?
Why a water park (Kayaking, canoeing) = what is kayaking? How do you do it?

Mission [Definition]
What are the organization’s goals?
How do these goals fit in with the town of Willimantic?
How does this project build community?
How does this organization support the history of Willimantic?

Description of People: Members [Profile]
Who are the people that founded the organization?

Description of People: Clientele [Profile]
What people does the organization serve? (Who are they, how many, what needs?)
Examples of people to interview:
Soup Kitchen: profile the people who use the services
WAAC interview the artists who use the studio spaces
Third Thursday: interview vendors, people who have gone to the festival

Description of physical space [description]
Where is the physical location of the organization? Where does it operate?
Examples of descriptive questions:
What does Third Thursday Street Festival look like? How many people? What kinds of vendors?
What kind of food? Smells? Sounds (music, but what else?) What kinds of entertainers?

History of organization [Reporting]
When did the organization come into existence? What were some defining moments?
Chronology is important
Facts, numbers, dates, people “movers and shakers”, grants, awards, etc.
Example: Soup Kitchen is celebrating its 25th year
The Waterpark has a time line that it is projecting forward

**Special projects: What kinds of special projects is organization planning? [proposal]**
Examples of projects to consider:
Whitewater park involves the East Coast Bike path
Soup Kitchen has UCONN medical students coming to give health exams
Third Thursday Street Festival is expanding the kinds of music it provides

**Issues/ Problems [Analysis]**
What problems or obstacles does the organization encounter?

**Plan of Action for Organizational Profile**
As a group, determine and agree upon the activities you will perform and the deadline by which you will get these activities accomplished. For each step of the project, you should include the task, the people responsible for getting it done, the completion date.

Here are some basic elements that should be part of your “game plan.” You may certainly add others.

1. Determine the audience for the profile.
2. Determine the purpose (informational, marketing, description, etc.)
3. Choose the sections to include (identity, profiles, history, description of site, etc.) and assign who is responsible
4. Create an outline of the profile
5. Read articles and collect necessary research; take notes
6. Report back to group findings from the research
7. Schedule interviews and/or site visits
8. Go interview individuals; visit sites
9. Draft sections of the profile
10. Peer review sections of profile
11. Proofread the final draft, edit, revise