



# Re-engaging a Pioneer: Robert L. Sigmon & Service-learning Roots

## Robert L. Sigmon and Lisa K. Keyne

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### **Abstract**

Robert L. Sigmon invested a career in building quality experiential education and service-learning. Upon contributing his "library" to Elon University, *Partnerships* engaged him in conversation about his work, and rich legacy to the field. In this article, we re-introduce this pioneer, review his work, and hear his ongoing challenge to the field. *Partnerships* encourages researchers today to access the archives at Elon to expand service-learning research.

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### **Introduction**

Robert Sigmon was born in Lincoln County, North Carolina, grew up in Charlotte, graduated from Harding High School and received a B.A. degree (1957) from Duke University. Following college, he served in West Pakistan as a lay missionary with the Methodist Church where he managed a hostel for 130 Christian boys. Bob oversaw the care, feeding, studying – all of the non-classroom life of these youngsters (ages 11-16) who came from the lowest caste families in the Punjab region of Pakistan.

After three years in Pakistan, he studied at United Theological College in Bangalore, in southern India. He returned to the USA, became reacquainted with Marian, whom he had met in Pakistan when she visited her missionary parents. They were married in 1962 and moved to New York City. Bob completed a Master of Divinity degree in 1964 at Union Theological Seminary, holding a field assignment as a convener of a young adult ministry program at The Riverside Church in New York. During the Civil Rights era (1964-1966) Bob and his wife co-directed a Peace Corps type program in the southeast with the American Friends Service Committee.

Given his work in Pakistan, New York and with economically and racially oppressed communities in the southeast, he became intrigued with the kinds of learning that

occur when young people and adults engage in direct service activities with oppressed and marginalized people. For the next 40 years he worked in positions centered on promoting public service based experiential learning, primarily in the southeastern region of America. He helped create the North Carolina Internship Office, a joint project of the Governor's Office and the Board of Higher Education (which later became the consolidated UNC system) which promoted service based experiential learning throughout the state.

During this time, he was part of a group that formed what is now the National Society for Experiential Education. He designed and managed a student initiated community based practicum for the new School of Public Health at the University of South Carolina (1975-1978) and managed clinical training and continuing education programs for health care practitioners from 1978-1991 in Raleigh.

Since 1991 he has consulted with national, state, and local programs supporting community-based public service based experiential learning. In the early 1990s, he designed and presented workshops promoting servant-leadership through the Robert K. Greenleaf Center. For ten years he served as Senior Associate with the Engaged Community and Campus Initiative of the Council of Independent Colleges (CIC) in Washington, DC.

For the Synergist magazine in 1979, he wrote an article, "Service-Learning: Three Principles," that has been widely quoted over the years. With the CIC, he edited a book, Journey to Service Learning, which highlights the experiences of small private liberal arts colleges in America, promoting engaged community and campus service based learning programs.

The Sigmons "retired" to Buncombe County in 1999, although Marian continued to work from her home for the N.C. Division of Aging until 2001 and Bob continues his consulting business and aspires to become a competent gardener. The family bought a small farm in Northeast Buncombe County that has become something of a commune, since both of their daughters and their families have homes on the farm.

## Laying a foundation

**Partnerships:** Bob, you have been intimately connected to foundation-laying for service-learning. What are some of the roots of your thinking and work?

**Sigmon:** My early roots helped me appreciate direct experience as a primary way for me to learn – on my grandfather’s farm, in a village setting in Pakistan, and working with Quaker young people in challenging situations in the southeastern United States during the height of the Civil Rights movement. My formal educational experiences were not well-suited for coping with and working with the people and institutions connected to the poor.

My understandings and work evolved along with other experiential educators in understanding the value of connecting community and workplaces, particularly agencies addressing local issues, with students and with faculty who integrated service with their curriculum. My work in promoting and engaging in service-learning programs has been influenced by a host of theoretical and practical folk like David Kolb, Paolo Friere, Martin Luther King, Jr., James Coleman, Harrison, Hopkins, Rolf Lynton, Robert Greenleaf, Chris Argyris, Nadinne Cruz, as well as Biblical and church history studies, and early Peace Corps training practices in the 1960s.

**Partnerships:** Why did you commit your life to this work?

**Sigmon:** In the midst of being and doing this kind of work I don’t think I was ever conscious of whether this was a committed life or not. And yet, everything I did focused on the same thing – trying to introduce an approach to service that is based on mutual respect and reciprocity while simultaneously working to influence educational institutions to honor and create service based experiential learning. Both of these challenges are huge and complex and I have been naïve enough to charge ahead, drawing inspiration from and working collaboratively with others over the years.

In this quest, I have received two memorable gifts from students I have worked with closely. Both gave me a picture of Don Quixote, gently telling me that I also tilted at windmills. As I look back over the past five decades, I realize that this is probably an accurate assessment, and that I was not a Don Quixote type figure, but a Sancho or Tonto to the Lone Ranger, usually in the background, working to frame issues and challenges and suggesting strategies for the next charge.

**Partnerships:** As you survey the service-learning field today, what do you see as the work that still needs to be done?

**Sigmon:** One major challenge I see for educators is to figure out ways to involve the native intelligence and teaching capacities of community and workplace settings and the individuals serving in those settings. For the reality in service based experiential

education is that most of it takes place away from a campus where an incredible reservoir of knowledge and teaching ability is at hand.

Many civic engagement, service-learning type programs operate from their own calendars, their insistence that the learning outcomes of the students are paramount, and from program designs that have limited inputs from the hosts in the community. Just look at the research over the years. It is dominated by looking at student learning outcomes. Limited attention is given to the outcomes of the work/service impacts on the community or to the learning that is a part of the community's engagement.

With the Council of Independent Colleges, we created a timeline suggesting multiple precursors to this work. A second challenge would be to see this kind of timeline redone and expanded, particularly highlighting the workplace and community efforts over the past century that have hosted students and provided incredible learning opportunities.

I resonate with Randy Stoeker and Elizabeth Tryon's new book, *The Unheard Voices*. They call us to "transform service learning into a practice that serves communities" (Stoeker, p. xv). When I first started working in Pakistan, I saw that I needed to be served as much as those I was sent to serve. Serving in the community should be invitational, with the community stating its needs and opportunities, and inviting participation by students and faculty as together all learn and serve.

**Partnerships:** In reviewing your contribution to the service-learning field since the mid-'60s, there are several pieces that seem timeless and essential to any discussion about the future of the field. You were an advocate for highlighting the dash between service and learning. In a little book you wrote for the Council on Independent Colleges, you share that the dash is important because it "frames the reciprocity issue, that all the partners in the experience are servers and served and are teachers and learners. Service-Learning assumes that colleges are living parts of communities, that the location of learning and serving is often beyond the classroom, and that communities have much to teach students and faculty" (Sigmon, 1994).

**Sigmon:** I think there continues to be courses and programs in which the learning is primary (service –LEARNING), others in which the service (SERVICE-learning) is primary, and others in which service and learning (service learning) goals are completely separate. My goal was to demonstrate that the service and learning (SERVICE-LEARNING) had equal weight. All involved – community, students, faculty – are learners and teachers, as well as serving and being served. The mutuality of the service and learning is essential.

Individuals and groups in the community are an underutilized and underappreciated component of the engagement processes. My greatest interest area has been how to help create the conditions by which the academy can engage and draw out the learning and teaching capacities of those who do real work in real time in the civic, business, non-profit and grassroots worlds. A growing awareness that the culture of abundance and living beyond any sense of reasonable means will require in the future for all of us to be more practical, more self-reliant, and more attuned to connections among the earth, plants, animals and human beings. The concepts, skills and aptitudes for helping new generations figure this out cannot, in my view, be done by higher education as now configured. So I would like to see the SERVICE-LEARNING perspective more fully utilized and tested in the future.

**Partnerships:** As we reviewed your collection, we found one of your unpublished papers around this theme. Thank you for allowing us to include that article in this issue of *Partnerships*. It reinforces your work and emphasis on integrating the community better into Service-Learning.

At the end of the book, *Journey to Service-Learning*, you write a fable like news report looking back ten years from the future that suggests what a full fledged commitment to a SERVICE-LEARNING framework in which all the parties share a common vision might look like.

**Sigmon:** With concerted efforts on the behalf of students, organizations and colleges and universities, our communities will become richer and more closely aligned in framing and working on local problems and opportunities. Students will graduate committed to lifelong learning with an understanding of their interdependence with others in the communities where they settle.

The fable suggests another challenge for current leaders in this engaged community and campus enterprise. Imagine what would be accomplished if community residents and their organization, workplace leaders, students, faculty, college administrators, and alum met together to explore their individual and shared visions for how working together might help foster outcomes where we all were more able persons (serving and being served, learning and teaching) and willing to work toward more just relationships locally and globally.

You know, this is the kind of work you can't leave. Even today in my community I see the value of building true partnerships and collaboration. There is a benefit for all involved, and for future generations.

I believe that each individual has an amazing capacity to contribute with their gifts and talents. Robert Greenleaf, one of my mentors, talks about fostering “islands of tranquility” in the places where we labor and live. Sharing our talents and gifts, creating “islands of tranquility,” learning from our engagement in being responsive to others who call on us for assistance is what a SERVICE-LEARNING framework offers us in the coming decade. Community and workplace settings with higher education institutions have the potential to become vitally linked in this creative venturing forth.

### **ANNOUNCING THE ROBERT L. SIGMON SERVICE-LEARNING COLLECTION**

NC Campus Compact acknowledges with an award at the Pathways to Achieving Civic Engagement (PACE) conference an individual at a member institution who has made a significant contribution to institutionalizing service-learning. The Robert L. Sigmon Award for Service-Learning not only recognizes a faculty person doing strong work, but the contribution of one of the founders of the “service-learning movement.” Robert Sigmon himself has presented the award to the four winners.

After the 2009 awards presentation, Mr. Sigmon donated his papers to the Belk Library Archives and Special Collections at Elon University, creating the “Robert L. Sigmon Service-Learning Collection.” His work demonstrates a commitment to a form of experiential education that 1) honors the voices of community and workplace hosts; 2) exposes students to public issues, particularly concerns that deal with the root causes of prejudice and poverty, as well as hones their capacity to learn through their experiences in the world; 3) supports integrating service based experiential learning into curriculum, particularly transdisciplinary approaches; and 4) supports an evolving design framework that sees workplace and educational institutions, students and community residents involved as each being teacher and learner, receiver and acquirer of service.

Elon University Archivist and Special Collections Librarian, Katie Nash, and volunteer Lucy Burgess have cataloged the collection to make it available to researchers interested in historical documents related to the emergence of Service-Learning. The collection dates from 1959 to the present, and includes personal correspondence, newsletters, articles, meeting notes, research notes, proposals, syllabi, teaching aids, and special reports. The collection’s underlying goal is educating and developing both the student and the public for self-directed service based experiential learning processes to occur in order to aid all of humanity, both those assisting and those assisted.

For more information about what is available in the Sigmon collection and to access the online finding aid, follow this link <http://www.elon.edu/e-web/library/libraryinfo/findingaids.xhtml> and click on "Sigmon, Robert." Elon University's library is committed to assisting with questions and access.

## References

Sigmon, R.L. (1996). *Journey to service-learning*. Washington, D.C.: Council on Independent Colleges.

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Stoeker, R. and Tryon, E.A. (2009). *The unheard voices: Community organizations and service learning*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

For a more extensive introduction to Mr. Sigmon's formative experiences related to his work, see *Service-Learning: A movement's pioneers reflect on its origins, practice and future*, by Timothy K. Stanton, Dwight E. Giles, Jr. and Nadinne I. Cruz (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999).