

Place-Based Education

Our vision for a place-based model of education has its roots in the historical place of this College and that in many cases pressures concomitant with a globalizing economy and the class and geographic prejudices enforced in American popular culture beset the places from which our students come. Even on this campus, an avowal of an Appalachian identity is sometimes openly denigrated by many students and criticized by some faculty. While we may recognize the native commitment, energy, intelligence, diligence, and passion among many of our Appalachian students for making the world a better place, those qualities and passions lose their focus and vitality when a campus culture denigrates the places from which those students come. In an academic atmosphere and national culture that is sometimes marked by intellectual condescension, Appalachian students learn to devalue themselves, their families, their homeplaces, and their ambitions to return home to serve their communities. However, the geographic area in which the College is located is the source of our identity and our greatest potential. The education of a Southwest Virginia citizenry is at the heart and soul of who we are as a College. In our continuing efforts to make citizen education central to Emory & Henry's identity and mission, the Public Policy and Community Service major is designed to instill an understanding of the interconnection between, and the interdisciplinary nature of public policy making and community service. Through the degree program in Public Policy and Community Service, we seek to give to service a vocabulary of power and politics, the edge of critical thinking, and the breadth of cultural analysis. Undergirding all of the curricular development of the Public Policy and Community Service major is an understanding of community as the convergence of social, cultural, political, economic, geographic, historical, and religious factors.

The Public Policy and Community Service major seeks to provide students with concepts and skills in community and place-based analysis and action research. Courses in the major are designed to help students better understand the impact of local, regional, national, and global structures and institutions on social change. With a strong emphasis and grounding in social justice, the major aims to empower students by enabling them not only to understand the necessity and processes of change but to become agents of change in Southwest Virginia, Appalachia, and beyond. As the program evolves, we are institutionalizing in it a rigorous and systematic study of many central conceptual themes: ideology, hegemony, social capital, problem-solving education, place, citizenship, community service, religion, public ethics,

diversity, public policy, place-based politics, social justice, and social change. The principal goal of the major is to provide students with the knowledge and tools with which to become fluent in these themes in both their theoretical and practical dimensions.

In addition to acquiring knowledge of the policy-making processes and models of social change, students will learn skills in rural community building, participatory research, and leadership development. Shaped by the assumption that thought and action are inseparable elements of education, the Public Policy and Community Service major emphasizes critical thinking, analytical writing, communication skills, public problem solving, a significant reflection and analysis component, and extensive field experience. In all of its components and emphases, PPCS demonstrates the College's efforts to integrate permanently service and citizenship education into the whole way of life of this place. All of the core courses in the major include either a service learning or a community-based research component.

We at Emory & Henry are persuaded that our vision for a place-based model of service, for the education of citizens for Southwest Virginia, and for the kinds of campus-community partnerships that will make a new kind of civic education possible, must, by necessity, be a democratic vision. Democratic visions are built in the long processes of conversation, struggle, negotiation, and compromise between all the people of a place; they are never static or complete. The relationships and partnerships that are the life spring of this democratic vision are also shaped and rooted in the historical materiality and specificity of Southwest Virginia. The shape of this place, our place, offers form not only to our vision, but to the language we use to speak of that vision.

Too often community, community building, and community-based are used to speak of service and learning without any correlation between the use of the terms and the historical circumstances of a specific community. Community has come to mean any number of things to any number of people. In government and foundation planning documents, political rhetoric, theological writings, spirituality groups, and educational conferences, community too often lacks any clear definition. When persons, groups, or institutions begin to move from theory to practice, from the rhetoric of community to concrete acts of service and social change in the community, there is often confusion, even paralysis, because there is little sense of a shared commitment to or vision of what is the community we seek to serve or change.

Growing out of the work already accomplished, our understanding of community is informed and enlivened by our understanding of place and our sense of this particular place we share with our Washington County and Southwest Virginia neighbors. We understand place as the social, cultural, historical, and economic result of the prolonged three-part interconnection between the natural environment and terrain; the built environment that evolves as humans respond to the limitations and potentialities prevailing on that specific geography, and the human culture and society shaped by and shaping the convergence of those two environments. Just as service, education, and citizenship cannot be separated one from the other, neither can the three components of place be separated from each other. Moreover, service learning for civic education and the geographic and historical materiality and cultural specificity of a place are and must be deeply and continually interrelated.

Our vision of service is inseparable from the geography and physiology of this valley and Southwest Virginia, the long history here of human settlement and work, and the human cultures shaped on this terrain. When we refer to community we mean “the commonwealth and common interests, commonly understood, of people living together in a place and [choosing] to continue to do so.” A community does not imply consensus or even the absence of prolonged disagreements or political struggles, but it does entail the civic and moral virtues of tolerance, “trust, goodwill, forbearance, self-restraint, compassion, and forgiveness . . . and respect for all of its members, human and natural.” One of the civic functions of any community is to teach by precept and example “what does and does not work in a given place.” We are convinced by the argument made by Wendell Berry linking any use of “community” to the historical specificity of place:

If the word *community* is to mean or amount to anything, it must refer to a place (in its natural integrity) and its people. It must refer to a placed people.
‘Community’ must mean a people locally placed and a people, moreover, [who] have a common knowledge of themselves and of their place.

Building on the work of a number of contemporary cultural theorists, political scientists, interdisciplinary geographers, artists, and community organizers, we are persuaded that any vision and any model integrating service with learning and citizen education “must now centrally involve *place*. [*P*]lace has been shown to be a crucial element in bonding processes -- by the explosion of the international economy and the destructive effects of

deindustrialization upon old communities. When capital has moved on, the importance of place is more clearly revealed.” In a world increasingly defined by globalization, in a region scarred by the processes of industrialization and deindustrialization, and among our neighbors many of whom daily endure the social costs of these events, “place” becomes a concrete historical and political reality. This understanding of the complexity and central importance of place, place-based identity, and placed politics is the context in which we define community, service, education, and citizenship, and from which we initiate our vision for service in Southwest Virginia.

Our vision is to initiate sustainable community-college partnerships in which developmental, transformative educational relationships are defined by ongoing and honest relationships between the people of a particular place and Emory & Henry’s Appalachian Center for Community Service. Because ours is a developmental approach we start with small-scale, community-defined initiatives and develop our partnership on that foundation. Critical to this initial foundation are the ways in which we allow the College’s presence in a community to be defined by that community. Foundations for this relational model of education are established by sustained conversations, allowing the community to come to trust our presence and our students. This kind of place-based trust is long time in building, but with care and attention to democratic developmental processes, it is attainable. “Place-based” trust is not the same as “College-based” trust. Not only must we convey that the College itself can be trusted, but our students can be trusted, and our faculty can be trusted, to be partners in community building. Initially, this trust must be grounded in a shared commitment to places. We must teach our students and discipline ourselves to care for the past of a place as surely as we respect its present. By establishing a place-based care and respect for all the people and places of Washington County and Southwest Virginia, we also demonstrate that we can be trusted as partners in building a democratic future for those communities that are outside the immediate vicinity of the College.

While our vision responds to the needs of rural communities in Southwest Virginia and we work to equip a Southwest Virginia citizenry, we also understand that we have many students who do not come from Southwest Virginia or from Appalachia. We acknowledge that a number of our students will not choose to stay in the region after they graduate. Yet the kind of place-based citizen education we seek to offer our students benefits and equips them for citizenship in

the places and communities in which they choose to settle, whether in Southwest Virginia or not. We envision an educational culture that takes seriously the importance of place and community both for personal identity and collective politics. We want our students to graduate with the understanding that education, citizenship, justice, democracy, and community development must all be defined within the historic materiality of a place, in the context of a whole attachment to the social networks that comprise a community. The education we want to provide our students is one that enables them to make choices that confront the forces opposed to that kind of attachment. Our students must have the skills and the courage to discern that we all have been complicitous in those destructive forces. We want to provide our students with the intellectual, civic, and moral tools to work with their neighbors for significant social change and a democratic future for the places in which they settle. It is this “living complexity” that Emory & Henry College must come, is perhaps coming, to understand, to possess, and to work with.

The transformative model for place-based education outlined here refuses to see citizenship as an isolated or self-centered enterprise. We seek to use these place-based partnerships not only to equip our students for a participatory and democratic citizenship, but also to empower ourselves and the citizens of these rural places to build a democratic future for Washington County—a future inhabitable for all the people of this county. This quest to undertake a new kind of place-based education is inextricably connected with all we hope to accomplish with our students, on this campus, in the places themselves, and in higher education in general.