

---

TRANSFORM  
ARE OUR STUDENTS READY?

---

to our Future, London: Allen Lane

Monbiot, G. (2017) 'Our greatest peril? Screening ourselves off from reality', The Guardian, UK. Published: London and Manchester.

Mozorov, E. (2011) The Net Illusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom, New York: BBS Public Affairs.

Newman, M. (2016) Teaching Defiance: Stories and Strategies for Activist Educators, San-Francisco: Jossey Bass

Nyland, J., Davies, D., and Clarke, E. (2015) Real Learning in the Changing University, a research report, Brisbane: Australian Catholic University.

Picketty, T. (2014) Capital in The Twenty-First Century, USA: Harvard College

Teare, R. (1998) Developing a Curriculum for Organisational Learning, Bradford: MCB University Press.

Teare, R. (2013) Personal Viability-The Journey to Self-Reliance and Financial Independence in Zuber-Skerritt, O. and Teare, R. (2013) Lifelong Action Learning for Community Development for a Better World, Rotterdam: Sense Publications.

Teare, R. (2015) Applying the Concept of Action Learning: Learning and Development for a Better World in Kearney, J. and Todhunter, M. (Eds) (2015) Lifelong Action Learning and Research, Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.

Wright-Mills, C. (1959) The Sociological Imagination, Oxford: OUP.

Zuber-Skerritt, O. and Teare, R. (2013) Lifelong Action Learning for Community Development: Learning and Development for a Better World, Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.



## ARE OUR STUDENTS READY? PREPARING FOR MOMENTS OF TRUTH THROUGH COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT



ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR

BILLY O'STEEN

---

Associate Professor Billy O'Steen is the inaugural Associate Professor in Community Engagement and Director of



*Community engagement is a viable option for students to learn more about themselves, others, and their place in the world.*

the Community Engagement Hub at the University of Canterbury. Since the 2010 and 2011 earthquakes, he has been at the forefront of connecting the university with the city's rebuild. Prior to Canterbury, he was an Assistant Professor at North Carolina State University, middle school creator and principal, high school teacher, multi-cultural educator in Brazil, and white water raft guide in California. He and his wife and daughters have lived in New Zealand since 2005.

*The following article has been adapted from Associate Professor O'Steen's Keynote Address for the Engagement Australia conference, 2017 hosted by Flinders University.*

### **A MOMENT OF TRUTH IN ILLINOIS**

On November 17, 2013, a deadly F4 tornado descended upon Washington, Illinois and caused over \$1.6 billion in damage, eight deaths, and destroyed thousands of homes. The immediate relief was provided by emergency responders and people with specific skills such as building deconstruction and restoring essential services such as electricity and water. An hour away at the University of Illinois in Champaign, a different kind of response was being formulated by fourth year student Jessica Weston who was watching her hometown's plight from a distance. Her response in 2013 was directly linked

to another natural disaster that took place half a world away in Christchurch, New Zealand in 2011. To understand Jessica's response, it is necessary to consider what happened there, which elicits questions about the purpose of a university education and the role of community engagement.

### **THE PURPOSE OF A UNIVERSITY EDUCATION**

In his 2015 opinion piece in The New York Times, 'The Big University', David Brooks explores the role of contemporary universities and where they are excelling and where they are failing. Part of it can be attributed to a move from their religious heritage to a more technical focus. Brooks pointed out that 'many American universities were founded as religious institutions, explicitly designed to cultivate their students' spiritual and moral natures.'

According to him, ‘universities are more professional and glittering than ever, but in some ways there is emptiness deep down. Students are taught how to do things, but many are not forced to reflect on why they should do them or what we are here for.’ Among several things he proposes as a way for universities to re-find their ways are to ‘foster transcendent experiences’, arguing that ‘if a student spends four years in regular and concentrated contact with beauty – with poetry or music, extended time in a cathedral, serving a child with Down syndrome, waking up with loving friends on a mountain – there’s a good chance something transcendent and imagination-altering will happen.’ Further, Brooks contends that ‘to lead a full future life, students have to find new things to love: a field of interest, an activity, a spouse, community, philosophy or faith.’ In sum, Brooks is advocating for universities to accept a wider and more holistic mantle for educating students. As stated explicitly and implied throughout his piece, community engagement is a viable option for students to learn more about themselves, others, and their place in the world.

Some centuries before Brooks’s editorial but with similar sentiments was the Greeks’ vision for the role of education in society. Because they had an early system of self-governance, there was a need for the voting populace to be educated about the affairs of the day. So much so that they had a belief that everyone was born an idiot (Greek word for one concerned with own affairs) and education transformed them into citizens (one concerned with public affairs). Like Brooks, the Greeks saw education as necessarily being holistic,

relevant, and somehow engaged with the community.

Similar to Brooks and the Greeks, following the 2010 and 2011 earthquakes, the University of Canterbury (UC) was in a position of reflecting on its purpose in light of a devastated city, reeling communities, and students who had demonstrated their desire to engage in the post-disaster clean up through the several thousand strong Student Volunteer Army. Prior to the quakes in 2009, the University developed a new vision of ‘People prepared to make a difference.’ Thus, after our students showed they were really were ready to make a difference, the conversation about UC’s purpose had a platform upon which to build. After 18 months of focus groups and conversations, a new UC Graduate Profile was developed with the following attributes:

- Bicultural competence and confidence
- Employable and innovative
- Engaged with the community
- Globally aware

It is safe to say that this new Graduate Profile was a result of the earthquakes and the necessity that many institutions in Christchurch, including UC, had to reflect on and redesign their purpose.

For both Brooks, the Greeks, and UC, the purpose of education closely aligns with contemporary visions of university community engagement where students and staff are applying their educational pursuits within the dynamic and real-world environments of communities. It so happened that for UC, the existing context of community engagement in New Zealand was in alignment with the institution’s vision.

## A UNIQUE OPPORTUNITY

*New Zealand is not a small country but a big village (Sir Peter Jackson, 2017).*

Sir Peter Jackson’s quote is resonant with both the country’s small population of 4 million people and frontier spirit of pitching in to help in a relatively isolated country. This interconnected village is most evident with the strong volunteer sector that New Zealand relies on for the delivery of the following essential services.

- 54,000 jurors
- 14,000 defence force members
- 11,000 parents serving as school board of trustees
- 9,000 St. John’s Ambulance service volunteers
- 7,000 fire brigade members (8,000 total)
- 3,000 surf lifeguards

That a country would rely on volunteers for those services suggests that community engagement needs to be taught during formal education in order to ensure that subsequent generations will be as likely to step forward and administer services that the country is not funding. A warning sign of the vulnerability of this reliance on volunteers has been with the boards of parent trustees who are elected to govern each school. In the most recent cycle of school board of trustee elections, half of New Zealand schools did not have actual elections because either the same number or fewer candidates stood for the number of available positions. An attempt has been made to inculcate the younger generations with the volunteer spirit by including ‘participating and contributing’ as one of five Key Competencies in the

primary and secondary school curriculum. For universities, UC is the only one in New Zealand that has carried that competency forward with the clearly stated graduate attribute of 'engaged with the community.' Thus, New Zealand's village ethos, volunteer dependency, and curricular inclusions set it up with a unique opportunity to connect education with community engagement.

The magnitude 7.1 September 4, 2010 earthquake just outside of Christchurch was the tipping point from having a built-in unique opportunity of the New Zealand context to the actual implementation of community engagement and it was led by UC students. Despite significant damage to buildings and the land through liquefaction (where the water table pushes up through ground fissures and forms a gray, quicksand like substance) because of the timing of that quake - 4:25 AM on a Saturday - there were fortunately no deaths. Due to the uncertainty of building integrity throughout the city and on the UC campus, classes were immediately suspended for two weeks. The area adjacent to campus was largely undamaged so some students greeted the cancelled classes as a break from study and did not need to contend with liquefaction or power or water outages.

However, one third year student, Sam Johnson, immediately saw an opportunity that aligned with his studies - Political Science - and his desire to motivate young people to be involved in their communities. He quickly set up a Facebook event inviting his friends to join him on Tuesday, September 7 to clean up an area that was particularly affected by the quake. That morning, around 100 students showed

up with little more than a desire to help but no tools or equipment. On that first day, Sam and his fellow students quickly saw that they were providing as much moral support through their presence as with their physical labour. Further, they began to redefine what it meant to be a university student - arguably, some might suggest that this was a transition from the Greeks' idiot to citizen transformation. For three weeks, Sam's Facebook kept accruing friends, which translated to over 2,000 UC students participating in this first operation. At the time, a colleague and I discussed how we might use community engagement or service-learning to provide the student volunteers with an academic framework to reflect on their actions. But, the mood in Christchurch and at UC was such that we thought our seismic disruptions were over, we had survived the big one, and it was time to put it behind us. The students' extraordinary actions were going to live on in the Student Volunteer Army becoming an official club and they would focus on doing volunteering throughout the city. Additionally, they brought in lots of positive coverage for UC.

The magnitude 6.4 February 22, 2011 earthquake happened in the middle of the second day of semester one at UC. Its timing - 12:51 PM - and epicenter location near the city wreaked far more destruction than the 2010 one with 185 deaths, 11,000 homes destroyed, and over 80% of the built CBD lying in dusty ruins. With the 2010 earthquake now serving as a dress rehearsal, the response to this one was immediate and significant with the civil defence, fire department, military, and police securing a cordon around the CBD within 24 hours. As the Student Volunteer

Army club was in the midst of a sign-up event when the quake happened, their leaders put a pause on things to see if and how they might be a part of this much larger recovery and relief effort. The exponential damage and chaos for this quake compared to the earlier one could have potentially led the students to decide this was out of their league. After two days of deliberation, they decided to fully commit themselves to whatever they could assist with.

During those two days, the likes on the Facebook page had grown to over 25,000 and many students were clamoring to be involved. With their 2010 experience behind them, the Student Volunteer Army rolled out a sophisticated use of social media to identify specific areas of need and deploy platoons there using city buses that had been provided. Unlike their first foray back in 2010, this time they had proper equipment, computerized sign-in and registration processes, and the full collaboration with civil defence and Christchurch City Council. For the month following the quake, over 11,000 volunteers participated by helping clear liquefaction, distribute blankets, chemical toilets, and water. Identifiable by their green t-shirts, people were genuinely excited to see droves of students coming into their communities - again, flipping the script on how university students might have previously been regarded.

By association, our university was being favorably represented in the media because of the students but I was not satisfied with one television news anchor person's portrayal of their work. With images of the students shoveling liquefaction in the background, he stated that,



*"Isn't it nice that these students have put their studies aside to help out the community?"*

From my years of teaching with community engagement in middle school and at university, I instinctively knew that the students were learning a lot about themselves, about their studies, and about humanity in general by helping out. The question was what could I do about this situation? The answer came six years prior from the United States.

### PREPARING STUDENTS TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Because my father had gone to Tulane University in New Orleans, Louisiana, he had kept me abreast of what had happened there after Hurricane Katrina in August, 2005. Due to the humanitarian crisis that unfolded in the city following the storm and severe flooding throughout the campus, Tulane was forced to cancel the semester, send students elsewhere, and regroup about how to reopen in five months. As a private institution, Tulane is entirely dependent on students' tuition fees to operate. While it had an endowment, if students didn't return in January, they would not be able to exist. One key strategic decision during those five months of planning was that Tulane staff and students would play an integral part in the city's recovery. Both Tulane and New Orleans were dependent on each other's survival and even though they were partners beforehand, the leadership team decided to make this more explicit. From 2006 forward, every student at Tulane would be required to complete two service-learning courses related to the city's recovery before graduating. In

doing so, they had the goal of becoming the premier public service university in the country. For the first years after the hurricane the application and enrolment numbers were less than before the storm. However, within four years the messaging about the emphasis on public service had gotten through such that Tulane had the highest number of applications - 45,000 for 1,600 spaces - for admission than any private university in the US including Harvard, Stanford, and Yale. They experienced similar popularity amongst prospective faculty members as it became the go to university for community engagement.

After the anchor person's comments, I began to formulate a post-disaster community engagement plan for our university by consulting Vincent Ilustre, Director of the Center for Public Service at Tulane, and Dr. Patti Clayton, a community engagement mentor of mine from North Carolina State University. They both emphasized the essential elements of community engagement: academic content, service, and critical reflection and I discussed the possibility of treating our students' volunteering a priori and inviting them to take a course where they could reflect on their service within the context of academic content about post-disaster response, service, and volunteering. A further dimension would be to offer the course online because we didn't know the status of our campus. If we were closed for five months like Tulane, this could be a course that was still offered. Thus, with a rough plan in mind, I emailed the head of student services three days after the quake with my proposal. He responded quickly and affirmatively by stating that he and the

leadership team were looking for positives and this could potentially be a way to more closely link the actions of the Student Volunteer Army with the university. I was given 24 hours to further develop my plan for a Skype conversation with him, the Vice Chancellor, and my Ph.D. student Lane Perry. Lane played a critical role in this process because he had been conducting research on two service-learning courses in Geography and Management that we had helped to develop at UC. His research showed conclusively that students in those courses were more engaged, according to the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE), than their peers. So, we knew that UC was an environment conducive to community engagement.

The Skype meeting was short and to the point. The Vice Chancellor was very excited about the potential course and was supportive of getting it into action as soon as possible. With his approval and with further consultation with Vincent, Patti, and the Student Volunteer Army leadership, Lane and I quickly designed the course, CHCH101: Rebuilding Christchurch, and it was given the green light in April with the first delivery slated for semester two which began in July. A key element to the first iteration of the course was the use of Student Volunteer Army leaders as Teaching Assistants. To prepare them for this, we conducted an intensive reflection session with them, which they had not done during their two months of relief work. That session revealed to them and us that they had been using a lot of the skills they had learned in their university studies such as communication, project management, teamwork but it wasn't as obvious when they were on the front

lines. This further enforced the idea for our course and the added value it could provide for the volunteers.

To get at this sharp end of reflection, we chose academic content that would invite provocative discussion about why people choose to help and how helping actions may vary in worthiness depending on their approach, appropriateness, and contextual factors. In addition to using a classic text like Ivan Illich's "To Hell with Good Intentions" (1969) and a more recent TEDx talk by Ernesto Sirotti entitled "Want to help? Shut up and listen" (2012) that both question the impact that volunteers can have when they attempt to serve in different cultural contexts, we used many selections from The Civically Engaged Reader. In particular, we found Adam Davis's five reasons of why people help in his "What we don't talk about when we don't talk about service" essay (Davis, 2006) and The Torah's Eight Degrees of Almsgiving to be especially challenging for the students. For example, we asked students to evaluate why they had provided help based on Davis's reasons (p. 150):

1. We are God's children (spiritual)
2. We share the earth (communal)
3. I see myself in you (empathy)
4. I will get credit (self)
5. I suck (guilt)

For the students, a revelation is that one might enter into helping someone for one reason and then it will shift to another reason or we might have multiple, perhaps conflicting, reasons. To illustrate this, we used a piece about actor Sean Penn's significant efforts to help Haiti after

its 2010 earthquakes. In the interview excerpts, you could interpret the reasons for his actions as being parts of all five simultaneously. While the actual reason itself may not be important, the process of thinking through why are you helping in this situation is.

Perhaps no piece is as controversial with the students as the Torah's Eight Degrees of Almsgiving (Maimonides, 2006). This section of the Judaic text rank orders the best ways to help someone or a situation. For many students, they do not like considering that some ways of helping might be better than others. We use it after students have done an open-ended reflection on their service where many are, rightfully so, proud of what they've contributed and see it as worthwhile. Then, we ask them to work through the Torah's system by rank ordering these contemporary examples.

- Giving for an amount requested
- Giving for an amount less than you can actually afford
- Giving without being asked
- Teaching a prisoner to read
- Donating a can of food to the foodbank
- Cleaning up rubbish as punishment
- Anonymously paying for someone's course fees
- Funding a facility and naming it after you

While there is often consensus around 'Teaching a prisoner to read' as the best, the remaining order remains a mystery until we discuss what sits behind this system, which was a desire to protect and respect the dignity of the receiver and not have them beholden or indebted to the

giver. Here is the Torah's ranking with the contemporary examples:

1. Teaching a prisoner to read
2. Donating a can of food to the foodbank
3. Anonymously paying for someone's course fees
4. Funding a facility and naming it after you
5. Giving without being asked
6. Giving for the amount requested
7. Giving for less than you can afford
8. Cleaning up rubbish as punishment

Similar to working with Davis's reasons, learning about the Torah's system is more about critically reflecting on one's service rather than sticking steadfastly to the rankings. It is emphasized to students that sometimes because of multiple factors you may only be able to do one type of service but that does not stop you from considering how to approach it differently next time. Further, it is discussed that one may start out a helping action as being forced to do it like cleaning up rubbish as punishment but that may be a gateway into other types of service that would "rank" higher.

While that core content of CHCH101 has remained the same for its 16 different versions since 2011, the service and assessment have changed to reflect the fact that after the first two years we began to get students who had not been in the Student Volunteer Army and were from overseas. Thanks to a concentrated marketing effort by our international office touting the unique nature of the course, our classes have consistently had a 50/50 mix of Kiwis and study abroad

students mainly from the US. Early on, the US students saw similarities between the post-disaster service that received a lot of media coverage in New Orleans and Christchurch and, in some cases, stated that they had chosen UC because of this course. So, we now do post-quake related service within the structure of the course and in addition to reflection assignments that link their actions with Illich, Davis, the Torah, and other resources, we have a culminating project called the Healing Proposal. With this project, students are asked to propose a specific way to improve a specific community including details such as: capability, community considerations, cost, need, and sustainability. Over the years, a number of projects have come to fruition including an anti-bullying campaign, a community fun day, a community garden, and a mural. Jessica Weston's proposal led to a dramatic and life-changing result in Illinois.

### BACK TO THAT MOMENT OF TRUTH IN ILLINOIS

In November of 2013, as Jessica watched her hometown of Washington, Illinois being devastated by the tornado, she harkened back to the first six months of 2013, which she spent as a US study abroad student at UC and took CHCH101. During that version, Jessica had the opportunity to meet with one of the leaders of the Student Volunteer Army and she crafted her Healing Proposal around the idea of motivating her fellow University of Illinois students into doing something like that. Little did she know that she would have that chance a few months after being back in the US with the tornado. Within a day of the destruction,

Jessica went to work in setting up a "fill the truck" campaign where people are invited to donate necessary items with the goal of filling up a truck. She was overwhelmed by the outpouring of support she received from her extensive network on campus once she tapped into it. There was enough for two truckloads and the needed goods were on their way to Washington within a few days of the tragedy. Jessica credits her time at UC



***Our experience is that students are ready to engage***

with providing her with the tools – in this case confidence and networking – to make this happen, stating:

*"CHCH101 was the main reason I was confident in my skills to bring immediate relief to my community after the tornado hit. Learning about UC's Student Volunteer Army really inspired me. It showed the world the impact young adults can have."*

Through her actions, Jessica effectively brought together the streams of thought of the Ancient Greeks, Brooks, UC's Graduate Profile, and CHCH101 by exemplifying the role that active and conscientious students can play in their communities when they are prepared to do so after being immersed in community engagement. With students like Jessica

attributing their transformative efforts to their community engagement, we have been confidently proactive in sharing our academic response to natural disaster with other areas that have been affected. The CHCH101 course has been shared and adopted by the University of Vermont after Hurricane Irene, Rice University in Houston, Texas after Hurricane Harvey, and, most recently, the University of the West Indies in the Caribbean after Hurricanes Irma and Maria. Our experience is that students are ready to engage, particularly after a catalyst event, and to reflect critically on their actions within the context of learning about how others have responded to moments of truth like them. They are ready for Brooks's big university and the question is, are we?

An answer to whether universities should answer their moments of truth comes from renowned US civil rights activist, community organizer, and politician Congressman John Lewis. He was alongside Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. at many significant events and was beaten nearly to death by policemen after marching across the bridge in Selma, Alabama. Throughout his work in advancing civil rights, he was arrested more than 40 times and continues to hold current leaders to account. When asked about how we should prepare today's students to make a difference, he put it clearly in our court with regard to helping students find their purpose:

*"Young people today are better prepared and informed than we were. They just need something to rally around. I tell young people that they have a moral obligation to address any wrongs they see." (2017).*



---

## REFERENCES

Brooks, D. (2015). The big university. The New York Times. Retrieved from:

[www.nytimes.com/2015/10/06/opinion/david-brooks-the-big-university.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/06/opinion/david-brooks-the-big-university.html)

Davis, A. (2006). What we don't talk about when we don't talk about service. In A. Davis & E. Lynn (Eds.), *The civically engaged reader: A diverse collection of short provocative readings on civic activity*. Chicago, IL: Great Books Foundation.

Davis, A. & Lynn, E. (Eds.). (2006). *The civically engaged reader: A diverse collection of short provocative readings on civic activity*. Chicago, IL: Great Books Foundation.

Illich, I. (1969). To hell with good intentions. Retrieved from: [www.swaraj.org/illich\\_hell.htm](http://www.swaraj.org/illich_hell.htm)

Jackson, P. (2017). Retrieved from: [https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Talk:Peter\\_Jackson](https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Talk:Peter_Jackson)

Lewis, J. (2017) Personal Communication interview transcript.

Maimonides, M. (2006). Selection from the Mishneh Torah. In A. Davis & E. Lynn (Eds.), *The civically engaged reader: A diverse collection of short provocative readings on civic activity*. Chicago, IL: Great Books Foundation.

Sirolli, E. (2012). Want to help? Shut up and listen. TEDx Christchurch. Retrieved from: [www.ted.com/talks/ernesto\\_sirolli\\_want\\_to\\_help\\_someone\\_shut\\_up\\_and\\_listen](http://www.ted.com/talks/ernesto_sirolli_want_to_help_someone_shut_up_and_listen)

---