

Private University dedicated to the public good?

By Desiree Seidel

It was a chilly and cloudy day when several University of Denver students met at the DU practice fields to help with the final event, called Jamboree, of the America SCORES youth soccer and writing program's Denver branch. These were all the DU students who had enrolled in the service-learning course entitled "Race, Class, & Gender in Schools and Sports," which combined academic writing and social research with volunteer events through the Denver SCORES program. "I ... wanted to provide students with an opportunity to become engaged in the local community. Ultimately, I hope the experiences [from the course] will inspire students to remain involved in the community and to become active citizens," said Dr. Elizabeth Drogin, who taught the class.

America SCORES is a nation-wide program. In Colorado, 10 elementary schools in West Denver participate in the program. At each school, 16 boys and 16 girls are chosen through an application process to play soccer, write creatively, and implement a community service project of their own invention. In the final event of the year, called Jamboree, all the Denver SCORES teams and all the students'



family members come together to play soccer and celebrate the end of the SCORES season. This year, because of the partnership between Dr. Drogin's class and SCORES, DU hosted the Jamboree event.

On Jamboree day, each SCORES team was paired with two DU students entitled "team hosts," whose job was to interact with the team and make the students feel special. SCORES students also enjoyed snacks, books, and face painting that were all distributed by SCORES staff members and DU students. Several DU students volunteered as referees as well.

A DU department known as CCESL has been an important player in both the WRIT 1133 class and the SCORES-DU partnership. CCESL stands for "Center for Community

Engagement and Service Learning.” CCESL provided support to Dr. Drogin to help her run her service-learning course effectively, and also approved a mini-grant to cover the cost of hosting Jamboree at DU. “Because the funds could be used to ... support a vibrant partnership with a community agency, we were delighted to award the grant!” says Anne DePrince, CCESL’s director.



Intentions

This partnership between DU and Denver SCORES through Dr. Drogin’s service-learning course fits well with the University of Denver’s vision to be, “a great private university dedicated to the public good,” found on the DU website. In Chancellor Robert Coombe’s own words, DU seeks to be “a mighty engine of positive change.”

Denver SCORES also had positive intentions and expectations attached to collaborating with DU. “We believe having any exposure to college is positive for our program’s participants and their families,” says Nikole Bruns Carey, the program director. She also

mentioned the benefits of the mini-grant and the extra volunteers.

Apparently, Dr. Drogin’s alliance with SCORES is not the only example of DU’s outreach commitment. According to Anne DePrince, DU has done a great deal to “walk the walk” of its ambitious vision, “from supporting faculty, to ... research that affects public problems with community members, to facilitating service learning experiences for students. DU [also] supports CCESL with staff positions and program money, allowing us to engage and equip the campus community to work for the public good,” she says. Chancellor Robert Coome points to, “Puksta Scholars and the students in PLP...the Bridge Project, the Strategic Issues Program, the upcoming Presidential Debate at DU and our work for the 2008 Democratic Convention in Denver, the Denver Teacher Residency program with the Denver Public Schools, the work of the Institute for the Advancement of the American Legal System and a host of other such programs, not to mention a broad spectrum of faculty scholarship focused on real outcomes for real people.”

“GOD GAVE ME MY MONEY. I BELIEVE THE POWER TO MAKE MONEY IS A GIFT FROM GOD. TO BE DEVELOPED AND USED TO THE BEST OF OUR ABILITY FOR THE GOOD OF MANKIND. HAVING BEEN ENDOWED WITH THE GIFT I POSSESS, I BELIEVE IT IS MY DUTY TO MAKE MONEY AND STILL MORE MONEY AND TO USE THE MONEY I MAKE FOR THE GOOD OF MY FELLOW MAN ACCORDING TO THE DICTATES OF MY CONSCIENCE.”

—JOHN D. ROCKEFELLER

Criticism

Despite these positive steps towards public consciousness, the University of Denver’s estimated \$54,304 cost of attendance seems to indirectly contradict its philanthropic goals. How many of the “at-risk” students from the SCORES program will ever be able to afford

four years at a private university like DU?

DU’s philanthropy appears to mirror Rockefeller’s ideas about financial resources. DU continuously earns money from student

fees and donations, and uses some of that money to create positive change in the community. But does this philanthropic method work? Doesn't it leave the poor, though aided, still poor, while the rich continue to acquire resources?

Anne DePrince said that community engagement, "if done poorly, can be part of continuing to marginalize already oppressed groups." Nikole Bruns Carey admitted that the idea that DU's "cost is prohibitive and that attending DU may be out of reach for most SCORES families," is a valid criticism.

DU alumni have also reflected on the cost of attendance and what it says to the community. Don Burgess, who earned his BA at DU in 1967, said that, "there is no way on God's green earth that I would recommend anyone attend DU these days due to its ridiculous costs. ... It saddens me that DU administration has drunk the same business model Kool-Aid that has coursed through the veins of academia forever. Essentially, the chancellor is saying, 'Despite all the accumulated brain power on campus, we have yet to figure out how to offer a \$50,000 education for only \$25,000.' Frankly, I doubt that such a thought has ever occurred to administration."

Responding to Don's comment, Peter Homberger, who earned a BS at DU in 1950 and an MBA in 1956, went further to explain that it is DU's concern for raising revenue and maintaining its public image that prohibits it from creating the educational access that Mr. Burgess suggests, which would eliminate the hypocrisy from its philanthropic vision. He points to the upcoming presidential debate, which DU will host at a cost of \$1.65 million. He states that this cost is "equivalent to about 30 full-ride scholarships." He goes on to ask, "Which is the University's priority: a few hours of fame, or helping underprivileged people get a college education?"

Solving the Conflict

It seems that the best response to this criticism is a distinction between meaningful community service, and that which is "done poorly." Meaningful community service appears to include a relationship between the philanthropist and the recipient. Anne DePrince explains, "If we go into communities and our 'service' is just about filling our needs or fixing 'their' problems with the attitude that we know best, we have done a disservice. ... [But] when we do service ... in true partnerships—that is, where there is a bidirectional flow of knowledge from universities to communities and vice versa—I think we have the power to do truly transformational work."

Nikole Bruns Carey suggested the presence of a similar relationship between DU students and SCORES students, during Jamboree. "SCORES participants are just as likely to inspire a DU student to a career choice or commitment to volunteer as a DU student is to inspire a SCORES poet-athlete to be the first in one's family to finish high school."

Dr. Drogin also alluded to the necessity of this relationship, when she said, "My hope is that making [DU] students more aware of systemic social injustices, especially educational inequalities, through service-learning courses will encourage more students to examine their own privileges and to reevaluate an educational system that often reinforces class advantage and disadvantage." The knowledge DU students (and students of any relative level of privilege) acquire through community service, may even help to one-day change the system.

Furthermore, the fact that DU is a private university, and thus is slightly out of reach for most working-class and poor families may even be a good thing. Ms. Bruns Carey argued that, "showing children what is possible is a

positive way to encourage them to seek opportunities and not settle for limits previously assumed.” There is a chance that these students *will* get the aid they need to attend even a private university, and why shouldn’t they be given that hope and be encouraged to pursue that possibility? Indeed, according to the DU website, 85% of undergraduates receive financial aid directly from the university, at a total of \$90 million per year.¹ “We work very hard to use our available financial aid in a manner that keeps our doors open to as broad an audience as possible,” says Chancellor Robert Coombe.

Anne DePrince also noted that one of CCESL’s current programs, called Public Achievement (PA), “brings DU students into high school classrooms as ‘coaches’ to help ... [them] learn about community organizing and making a difference.” The idea is to make the underprivileged into the philanthropists. It is an innovative and extremely proactive method of empowerment. This year, PA also took on the goal of making college more accessible to these high school student heroes, by planning “events to ... [help] students from diverse economic backgrounds strategize about access to DU and/or other college experiences.”

Finally, the simplest argument of all is that what truly matters is the outcome of the community engagement. Although many recipients of DU’s community service may never be able to set foot in a classroom on campus, the fact is that the community service is helpful. Garret MacDonald, a current

sophomore at DU who is studying History and Political Science, offered his opinion: “If something like ... [Jamboree] causes just one underprivileged kid to say ‘I’m going to college,’ or just one Daniels College of Business frat boy from a wealthy background to volunteer more, then it’s meaningful.”

¹ In the interest of fair journalism, it should be noted that \$90 million dollars, divided among the 84% of undergraduates who receive aid (4,324 out of 5,087 undergraduates), leaves approximately 763 students receiving no aid at all, and leaves those who do receive aid from DU with approximately \$33,488 left to cover with private scholarships, loans, or family contributions.