2024 Student's Essay Competition

"What would you change about your higher education experience or environment to make it more inclusive for all who have the ability to benefit from it?"

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How community engaged learning opportunities redefine and reclaim the meaning of education and value-free learning in a neoliberal institution

Since youth, I have been fed an idealistic American Dream-like narrative that I can change the world, regardless of my age, gender, class, race, religion, etc. It's that precious stage in childhood and young adulthood where the sky isn't even a limit to dreams that seem completely feasible as long as you work hard and put in continuous effort. Ludwig von Mises and Friedrich Hayek's neoliberalist ideology, which emerged in the 1970s, was not initially set out to be rooted in individualism but quickly spiralled into such (Monbiot, 2016). This ideology also entirely reformed the education system. Zuidhof perfectly describes it as the "marketization of the meaning of the university," where the once-seen community of scholars and students, bathed in value-free knowledge, has become a marketplace of consumable, producible, and exchangeable ideas (Zuidhof, 2015). With information now seen as suitable for the market, myriad barriers have been produced for educators, students, and the community alike.

As a post-secondary student in 2024, living in the legacy of the Keynesian downfall, I consistently wonder if I will need to acquire a Ph.D. to obtain an entry-level job.

McMaster University is currently home to 37,537 students (undergraduate and graduate). With so many students around, it is effortless to feel like a mere nine-digit number. A competitive aura lingers as 9,000 students in my faculty seek out the limited research and medical school candidacy positions that promise guaranteed jobs with reasonable compensation and benefits upon graduation. If the sky isn't the limit to your dreams, then neoliberalism most likely will be.

The beginning years of my education were isolating. I felt incredibly lost, out of options for what to do with my degree, and needing more academic advising support to cater to the feeling of not even knowing what I didn't know. Ironically, I am not alone in this isolation. When education and learning have market value, aspects such as level of education, academic ranking (GPA), and professional networks are of high value, leaving little room for community and creativity. This often leads students to feel defined by their grades and achievements, which impacts mental health, self-worth, and well-being. Students are taught to blame themselves for their' failures,' which is often just an outcome of lacking socioeconomic advantages that are too often associated with personal merit.

Community-engaged learning has the potential to significantly reshape the perception and value of higher education, especially in a neoliberal context that often prioritizes individual achievement and economic outcomes. At McMaster, community engagement (CE) values the knowledge that community members have about their communities and the issues affecting them. It fosters ongoing collaboration between the University and community partners to better understand and address issues identified as priorities by local and global communities. This approach not only allows us to apply classroom knowledge in real-world settings, bringing about immediate change without prejudice, but also encourages us to address current issues in new and innovative ways (Narro Perez et al., 2018). The school currently offers distinct courses run by a small Office of Community Engagement that employ students to learn about the principles of CE and their many direct applications in work, studies, and partnerships.

Community-engaged learning promotes the holistic development of students by integrating interdisciplinary, emotional, social, and ethical dimensions into the learning process. This approach counters the narrow focus on cognitive skills and standardized testing prevalent in neoliberal education models. NSSE Director Alexander McCormick said, "Higher education has traditionally operated on the assumption that students know how to be students," which is not always the case (Grasgreen, 2013). Offering interdisciplinary programs integrates knowledge from all fields, enhances critical thinking and cognitive development, and encourages collaboration (Lattuca et al., 2004).

Community engagement has found a place for me in academia, regardless of my positionality and ability. What motivates and empowers me to learn are the meaningful relationships built through collaboration and dialogue. I have been able to build countless transferable skills such as leadership, communication, and time management. Through personal and collaborative reflection, I have pinpointed my strengths and weaknesses and discovered my true lifelong passions, purpose, and morals. And it could do the same for many students and lifelong learners.

Implementing community-engaged learning to enhance the higher education experience is not a task for a single entity. It requires a systematic and collaborative approach involving multiple stakeholders, including faculty, administrators, students, and community partners.

It is crucial to continually reach out and engage with the community, establish strong partnerships, and implement feedback mechanisms to ensure programs meet community needs and effectively utilize resources (ExCEL Faculty 2022). Integrating community-engaged learning projects with academic goals across various disciplines and encouraging interdisciplinary approaches is vital. Faculty should receive professional development to learn CEL methodologies, project management, and community partnership building and be incentivized to include CEL in their courses. Students should receive support and training in cultural competency, communication, project management, and reflective practices. Additionally, institutional commitment is necessary, including leadership support, supportive policies and infrastructure, and regular assessment of the impact of CEL programs. This collaborative approach ensures that everyone's voice is heard and contributes to the success of community-engaged learning in higher education.

In an earlier interview with Dr. Kimberly Dej, the Faculty of Science's acting vice provost of teaching and learning, about the importance of applied learning, she says, "It brings meaning to the classes. It's the entire point." She further emphasizes how it takes a combination of humility and admitting what you don't know to be able to learn. For once, instead of succumbing to individualism, community engagement emphasizes working with peers, educators, and the community; learning is not just for the individual but rather to move forward as a whole.

Works cited

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