Introduction:

The University of Virginia’s (U.Va.) relationship to Charlottesville is a topic of important debate and study. One of the most important ways that this relationship is manifested is in the public service that many U.Va. students render to Charlottesville. Public service, especially in Charlottesville, is an important part of the University experience, as evidenced by the multitude of service-oriented programs, clubs, organizations, and grants that are available to students and faculty. These initiatives generally break down into two broad groups: volunteer organizations and service-learning programs. While both are important for understanding the University’s attitude towards public service and its relationship to Charlottesville in general, I focus only on service-learning in this report.

Service-learning, which also encompasses terms like ‘community engagement’ and ‘community-based research’, is an interesting concept because it purports to be able to connect “the academic life of the university to public service.”¹ In this way, students and faculty “get” as much out of the program as the recipients of the service. Service-learning programs, especially ones at the U.Va., revolve around the idea of equitable partnerships between University actors and ‘community members’ in which both players work together to achieve positive results. These partnerships are conceived of as mutually beneficial relationships where the partners assert their interests in a democratic setting. Service-learning at U.Va. seems like a win-win situation: faculty and students can do valuable research, and Charlottesville organizations receive important services.

¹ http://www.virginia.edu/provost/public/
The model of democratic problem solving is a welcome one to a town that is still plagued by legacies of racism, economic disparity, and social exclusion. The potential for service-learning models to address these issues effectively is great. However, service-learning is not without its challenges. Caruccio presents a very thorough look at the scholarship of community engagement and service-learning and the problems that face it.² A major criticism she raises is that community voice, supposedly the cornerstone of service-learning and community-based research projects, is often underrepresented. This criticism applies to the University and Charlottesville relationships through service-learning programs. Though these initiatives are founded on the conception of equitable partnerships, but we must ask: What is the true nature of these partnerships? How much power does the community actually have in this process?

Despite great care and genuine effort on the part of the University, too often these ‘partnerships’ are imbalanced. This is of course to be expected: U.Va. is a huge institution relative to Charlottesville with large amounts of economic, social, and political power. The University dedicates considerable amounts of money and administrative work into organizing and creating service-learning programs. Smaller organizations in Charlottesville simply don’t have access to the same amount of resources that U.Va. does (which may be the reason they are seeking to participate in service-learning programs to begin with). Though the University has taken steps to try to balance the scales, the community is not nearly as organized or as materially endowed as the University, and thus not as powerful.

Furthermore, what is the ‘community?’ How does the University imagine ‘community’ as it applies to Charlottesville? ‘Community’ in a service-learning context of course means anyone outside of the University, that is, the recipient of the service. This is a very homogenizing concept that tends to

simplify ‘community’ concerns or ‘community’ problems and can lead to grave miscommunications between University and non-University actors.

Related to this homogenizing conception of ‘community’ is the University’s apparent ignorance of its own role in community issues. Essentially, U.Va.’s service-learning programs are designed to tackle issues as ‘community issues,’ implicitly meaning that they are separate from University policies or realities. This amounts to a subconscious denial of the University’s own role in the very social ills that these programs purport to address. As the largest employer in the area, the largest landowner in Charlottesville, and an institution with considerable political clout, the University has an enormous effect on the lives of Charlottesville residents. A quick scan of projects like those of the Jefferson Public Citizen (JPC) projects or related grants reveals that there are precious few service-learning projects that address the University’s role in so-called ‘community problems.’

This report is by no means a complete or comprehensive analysis of service-learning at U.Va., though I do identify a few problems within the current service-learning framework and offer solutions. However, in no way to I claim to speak for either the U.Va. service-learning programs or the Charlottesville ‘community,’ whatever that may mean. My observations in this paper are just that: my observations. Though for the sake of convenience and space I cannot quantify every generalization that I make, I recognize that the groups I discuss are much more heterogeneous than I may make them out to be. If any group feels that their views have been misrepresented, I apologize and welcome any criticisms or suggestions.

---

Equitable partnerships or power imbalances?

The University takes many steps to work towards equitable partnerships in service-learning programs. One way is through adherence to a large set of rules about community engagement like those set out by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). In addition, there is a plethora of guidelines, checklists, and rules about the ‘best practices’ of community engagement. Examples include “University Community Partnership Agreement” which outlines a student team’s responsibilities to their partner and “University-Community Partnerships: Providing Useful Reports” which focuses on how University researchers can deliver the results of their projects to the community in a way that benefits the partner. U.Va. also sponsors many forums, discussions, and speakers about the role of service at the University and its connection to academics, such as the Service in Society speaker series. Furthermore, the University offers several classes that have institutionalized these ‘best practices’ into the curriculum. Students have the chance to learn these guidelines from experienced faculty members, an invaluable opportunity. Though specifics about ‘best practices’ may vary, the basic message is the same: partnerships should be based on mutual respect and employ democratic processes of power-sharing. University and community partners should work together, balancing both interests equally. Clearly, the University puts a great deal of effort into exposing students to these ‘best practices’ guidelines.

Unfortunately, U.Va’s service-learning partnerships in Charlottesville are not always equitable or democratic. Several ‘community partners’ that I talked to said they felt that their organization’s relationship with the University was far from equal nor did they feel as like they were truly respected or included in the service-learning process. Examples abound: an individual had to conform to student academic schedules and work in the office on days that were normally taken off, putting a heavy burden on the already taxed organization. A highly-trained individual provided extensive nursing assistance for

---

4 http://www.virginia.edu/vpr/irb/
a research project without receiving any monetary compensation. This was of course not always the case: there were many success stories in terms of university and community partnerships and clearly not all (or even most) non-University groups feel wronged in any way. In no way does this experience characterize all service-learning programs in Charlottesville. Yet, there is an undeniable dissatisfaction in some corners concerning U.Va.’s presence in Charlottesville through service-learning programs.\(^7\)

Doesn’t this just mean that the existing ‘best practices’ are not being followed? Are not community member’s negative experiences with service-learning programs simply indicative of individual students’ failure to conform to these rules? Perhaps. Students, especially undergraduates who are new to community-based research, can be faulted for not following these rules closely enough. It is understandable, though regrettable, that students might do harm to their community partners by failing to conform to these guidelines. ‘Best practices’ are obviously not always followed, and many complaints from community members can likely be tied to a researcher’s failure to adhere to these rules. There is no doubt that following ‘best practices’ will lead to more favorable outcomes in service-learning.

Yet, there is a deeper issue at play. Discontent in Charlottesville over service-learning programs represents more than a failure of individual student researchers to live up to a set of guidelines: they reveal a problem with the guidelines themselves. For, even if the rules and regulations and best practices were followed to the letter in every circumstance, deep power imbalances would remain. The rhetoric around ‘community engagement’ urges University actors to “include community organizations in the planning process.”\(^8\) This is an important though subtle statement about where the power rests in service-learning: clearly, the community needs to be brought in to the sphere of the University where

---

\(^7\) These stories come from personal interviews conducted in the winter and spring of 2011. Names and details are omitted to protect privacy.

the real power is held. ‘Community partners’ really only have as much agency as the University allows them: hardly an equitable relationship.

The truth is that U.Va. does hold much more power than any ‘community partner’ that students or faculty might ‘engage.’ Relative to Charlottesville organizations, the University has massive amounts of material and labor resources to dedicate to the world of service-learning. Williams et. al writes about a community-based research project in Gavelston, TX.\(^9\) The university researchers inadvertently put large demands on the small, grassroots organizations they were partnered with; this organization simply didn’t have the capacity to keep up with the researchers. This imbalance is here, as well. At U.Va., there are several full-time, professional, and highly paid administrators that work diligently and actively to facilitate service-learning programs. U.Va. administrators certainly take large steps to assist non-University actors, but at the end of the day, their primary concern is the interests of students and faculty. If partnerships were truly places where each partner’s interests were fully represented in democratic power-sharing structures, then Charlottesville community organizations would have a similar professional advocate. In most cases, they do not.

As a result of this power imbalance, community partners sometimes feel that they have an obligation to accept service-learning projects into their organization, even if they do not fully support the project itself. I have heard this described as not wanting to “bite the hands that feeds you;” a statement that reveals the complex relationship between U.Va. and Charlottesville organizations. If these organizations rely on U.Va. for important funding, they might feel that they have no power to turn down project bids that they see as useless or even damaging. In addition, even the most poorly-constructed projects always have the promise of producing valuable research, a risk that some community organizations might feel compelled to take. Since Charlottesville groups may not have the

---

time or the skill to carry out detailed surveys of their operations (which is why they turn to University actors in the first place), they rely on University researchers to produce important scholarship. This means that Charlottesville organizations are often left to the mercy of researchers to determine the course of the project. To put it crudely: beggars can’t be choosers. This is unfortunate and even tragic because U.Va. administrators see themselves as open to community concerns. In fact, one administrator expressed to me that Charlottesville organizations did not assert their interests enough. The administrator wished that Charlottesville organizations would turn down projects they didn’t want to do. At least one non-University actor also remarked to me that Charlottesville organizations should be stronger in asserting their interests. The power imbalances described above are an important reason why democratic power-sharing models are not always realized.

So how can these issues be solved and this power imbalance shifted? Creating spaces for dialogue is of course crucial. As I discussed above, there are already a multitude of ways that the University encourages students and faculty members to talk about service-learning. It is clear, however, that community members must also be encouraged to speak up about their concerns. In particular, the University needs to hear about some of their negative experiences with service-learning programs at U.Va. Administrators do hear some of these stories and take them into consideration when crafting programs. However, most students, while well-versed in what good partnerships look like, rarely are given examples of projects gone awry. It is essential that students who want to be involved with service-learning programs hear about not only the successes but the failures of U.Va.’s programs. Creating a space where community members can speak up is the next step to take: perhaps this will take the form of a written document circulated to students, or maybe a forum where community members can speak to an audience (given the delicate nature of U.Va./Charlottesville relationships, a written document may be preferable). If we are to learn from our past mistakes, U.Va. needs to be

10 This information is taken from a personal interview. Details and names have been omitted.
open to criticisms from all parties, particularly the community members that are most affected by our programs. If U.Va. wants to truly ‘engage’ non-University actors, we must be ready to hear things we may not want to hear. Only then can we create truly equitable partnerships.

On the community side, organizations need to take control of their own resources and assert their voices in service-learning programs. As the party most affected by service-learning programs, Charlottesville organizations should be the ultimate deciders on whether or not a project is viable. This might look like the creation of a Charlottesville Community gateway that mirrors the University’s own IRB protocol. A rubric, created by non-University actors, should be applied to University projects to screen out or change projects that the community deems as unacceptable. The University’s role in the creation of this rubric is simple: it shouldn’t have one. Though it might be valuable for individual students or administrators to offer suggestions or criticisms of this rubric, in the end, it must be the non-University organizations that decide. This is a powerful way to reverse the imbalances I have discussed. If our programs and our research are truly to be community-based or rooted in community concerns, we should leave behind any talk of including the community in our planning process and instead realize that perhaps it is the community that should be allowing the University to make plans in Charlottesville.

*What is the ‘community’ and what are ‘community needs?’*

As discussed in the introduction, service-learning programs tend towards an oversimplification of the term ‘community.’ In U.Va.’s programs, this same word is used to refer to anyone outside of the University; whether it is a group that advocates for indigenous women’s rights in Guatemala or the PTA of a Charlottesville school. If the use of this term wasn’t strange enough, ‘community’ is also conceived of as a homogenous unit that students or faculty can ‘engage’ or have ‘partnerships’ with. Clearly this illusion of homogeneity in Charlottesville (or any community) is false. The danger in this term is
illustrated in the following anecdote. A few years ago, a pair of U.Va. nursing students wanted to conduct research about obesity among African American women in Charlottesville aged 18-35. They chose one of the housing projects in town and approached the resident medical expert with their proposition. The medical expert pointed out that there simply weren’t many obese African American women in that area, or at least none in the targeted age range. The students insisted on carrying out their project anyways as they had planned and soon realized that the expert was right; they were forced to change their project. The medical expert expressed frustration to me in a personal interview that the students simply had assumed that there would be a lot of fat, poor, Black women in this housing project. In the medical expert’s opinion, this revealed racial and class biases of the researchers. This incident likely had something to do with the researchers’ conception of what the Charlottesville ‘community’ was. ‘Community’ is of course never a homogenous entity nor a group with a single will or desire. Yet, service-learning discourse at U.Va. is full of ways for students and faculty to ‘engage’ this supposed unified entity.

An entertaining side note to this understanding of the word ‘community’ is how the labeling of non-University actors dramatically changes once we leave the service-learning framework. Outside of this context, a ‘community member’ of Charlottesville suddenly becomes a ‘townie,’ a derogatory term that often contains certain racial or socioeconomic overtones. So the questions is, are Charlottesville residents ‘community partners’ that we work with or are they ‘townies’ that we cross the street to avoid? It is an amusing observation that simply reveals the strangeness of the language around service-learning at U.Va.

More concretely, the terminology of ‘community’ versus ‘University’ creates problematic dynamics in service-learning programs. Clearly, these programs tend to conceive of the ‘University’ and

11 Again, names and details have been withheld to protect identities.
the ‘community’ as completely separate actors. ‘Community engagement’ is all about University members identifying and interacting with a different group of people: non-University members. Accordingly, the targets of service-learning programs are termed ‘community problems’ and ‘community needs.’ Yet, these problems are not separate from the University; in fact, they are intricately related.

Several facts about U.Va.’s relationship to Charlottesville make this immediately apparent:

1) U.Va. is the largest employer in Charlottesville, providing over 20,000 jobs in a municipality of just over 40,000 residents.12

2) U.Va’s proxy private real-estate non-profit organization, the U.Va. Foundation, is the largest private landowner in Charlottesville, with an holding assessed at of $342 million. This holding includes 18 residential properties, 14 apartment buildings, 18 office buildings, two hotels, one former hospital, and five restaurants.13

3) Six of the top ten highest-paid Virginia state employees work at U.Va.14

From these simple truths, it would appear that the University has an enormous role in the social and economic well-being of Charlottesville. Many members of the oft referenced ‘community’ derive their main source of income from U.Va. and spend their entire lives here at the University and are arguably more connected to the school than the students themselves. With this in mind, the sharp distinction of ‘community’ versus ‘University’ begins to break down. Clearly, the University clearly has to play some role in issues that face Charlottesville.

Yet, the discourse of service-learning at U.Va. externalizes issues like poverty, education inequality, or health and treats them as a ‘community issue.’ For example, the 2010-2011 JPC

12 http://livingwage.files.wordpress.com/2010/10/keeping-our-promises-2010.pdf
handbooks says that projects “should be designed to meet identified community needs”\(^\text{15}\) (emphasis added). This makes more sense in international settings, but in Charlottesville these needs are inextricably connected to the University itself. A logical starting place for any research project into most issues in Charlottesville would be ‘what is U.Va.’s role in this problem?’ Yet few student projects question or examine the University’s effect on the Charlottesville population.

In order to solve this problem, students must realize that any conception of ‘the community’ as separate from the University is misleading. Students must be free to design projects that ask hard questions about our own institution’s role in social and economic ills in Charlottesville. There have been groups that broach these subjects, but there is no widespread appreciation for the University’s power in Charlottesville. Ideally, this would be something that could be incorporated into events like first-year student orientation. At the very least, discussions on the complexities of the word ‘community’ and the dangers of oversimplification should be worked into training that service-learning student teams receive. The University should also emphasize its physical location in Charlottesville and the deep connection between the two. Understanding the sometimes painful histories of the University in Charlottesville would be an important step in arriving at a real definition of the Charlottesville ‘community.’ By emphasizing this to all students and especially to ones engaged in service-learning, we can break down simplistic and damaging conceptions of ‘community’ and begin to investigate the University’s role in Charlottesville’s past, present, and future.

Topics of further research:

Service-learning at U.Va. and Charlottesville is a very complex subject that has not been fully explored here. I suggest that further research and thought should be given to the following topics:

\(^{15}\) [http://www.virginia.edu/jpc/docs/JPCHandbookFall2010.pdf](http://www.virginia.edu/jpc/docs/JPCHandbookFall2010.pdf), page 8
1) **Lack of institutional memory among students:** The inevitable result of a four-year institution like U.Va. is that the same questions get asked over and over again by different students. We should take steps to develop linkages between old and new projects. Educating students on the history of Charlottesville and U.Va. might help.

2) **The role of faculty in service-learning:** Much has been written about challenges to service-learning in higher education in the form of a faculty incentive system that encourages other forms of research. Butin\(^1\) discusses this on a national scale, and this certainly applies to U.Va. Numerous faculty members have expressed their concerns that the University does not necessarily incentivize true commitment to engagement among faculty. At least one non-University actor has also expressed their frustration that faculty seem strangely absent from many service-learning initiatives.

More importantly, I did not even touch on the other crucial aspect of U.Va.’s public service commitment to Charlottesville: volunteer programs. These programs, such as Madison House initiatives, arguably play an even more important role in U.Va.’s relationship to Charlottesville than service-learning programs and thus deserve honest scrutiny and thought. One conversation with a U.Va. professor comes to mind when discussing Madison House: the University lauds the expansion of Madison House programs and boasts that U.Va. students participate in a massive number of service-hours each year. But if the problems that these programs were addressing were getting fixed, the number of service-hours would ideally be decreasing. Though I personally have not given it any serious study, we should examine the long-term visions of programs like Madison House and evaluate their impact on Charlottesville.

Conclusions:

Service-learning is an integral part of how U.Va. and Charlottesville interact. It has great promise to positively transform this relationship into one of mutual respect and understanding. However, there are many important issues that need to be addressed. In my study of service-learning at U.Va., I have identified the following problems and suggested the following solutions:

1) **Power Imbalances in partnerships:** The University has a fairly clear and accessible set of ‘best practices’ for forming equitable partnerships with non-University actors. The University also does a good job of communicating these guidelines to students engaging in service-learning. These ‘best practices’ are not always realized, perhaps because of individual failures. However, due to major power and resource imbalances in between U.Va. and partner organizations, these relationships can never be truly equitable in the way that service-learning rhetoric claims them to be.

   a. **Solution:** One idea is to ensure that community members’ stories about negative encounters through service-learning programs are circulated, understood, and discussed. Whether through a written document or a presentation, it is crucial for students to hear not only the successes of service-learning in Charlottesville, but the failure as well. This could be incorporated into the JPC preparation sessions that student teams go through. Students could read or listen to a testimony, then discuss in their team what went wrong with that particular project and how they can avoid the same mistakes.

   b. **Solution:** A second solution involves increased non-University voice in determining the course of projects. This doesn’t mean that the University asks for more input from the
community. Instead, it means independent power for non-University actors and calls for the University to respect this power when it emerges. This could be a set of guidelines independent of the University’s guidelines that sets out what various community organizations want from service-learning projects and student researchers.

2) **Simplification of ‘community’:** Too often, ‘community’ serves as a buzzword that glosses over the local realities and complexities of Charlottesville. This leads to dangerous generalizations and miscommunication. Also, the separation of the ‘community’ from the University creates a strange and misleading dichotomy that hides the University’s huge role in Charlottesville issues both in the past and in the present.

   a. **Solution:** At the beginning of their career here at U.Va., all students should be educated as to U.Va.’s history in Charlottesville. At the very least, all students engaged in service-learning should be required to learn how conceptions of the ‘community’ can be a damaging concept, particularly in Charlottesville where our own institution plays a major role in Charlottesville’s economic, political, and social progress. A session on the definition of what ‘community’ means could be included in service-learning preparation sessions and should be integrated into what researchers use as ‘best practice’ (aspects of this are already included in some of the classes taught on service-learning). This would hopefully encourage students to design projects that do not see Charlottesville issues as external to the University. Projects like this do exist, though they are few and far in between. A current JPC project entitled “Examining How a Local-Run Student Organization is Bridging the Gap” is a great example of a project that studies the University’s effect on Charlottesville.\(^{17}\)

\(^{17}\) See [http://www.virginia.edu/jpc/projects.html](http://www.virginia.edu/jpc/projects.html) for more information.
Acknowledgements:

First and foremost, I would like to thank all of the wonderful people that I interviewed, talked to, or bounced ideas off of during the creation of this report. I truly appreciate the time and energy you gave me over the last few months and I only hope that you find my report valuable. I recognize that there is still much left to discuss and investigate: I welcome any comments, criticisms, or suggestions.

I would also like to thank the group of students who met early every Wednesday morning to talk and discuss these and other topics. I learned much, enjoyed it thoroughly, and am extremely grateful to you all.