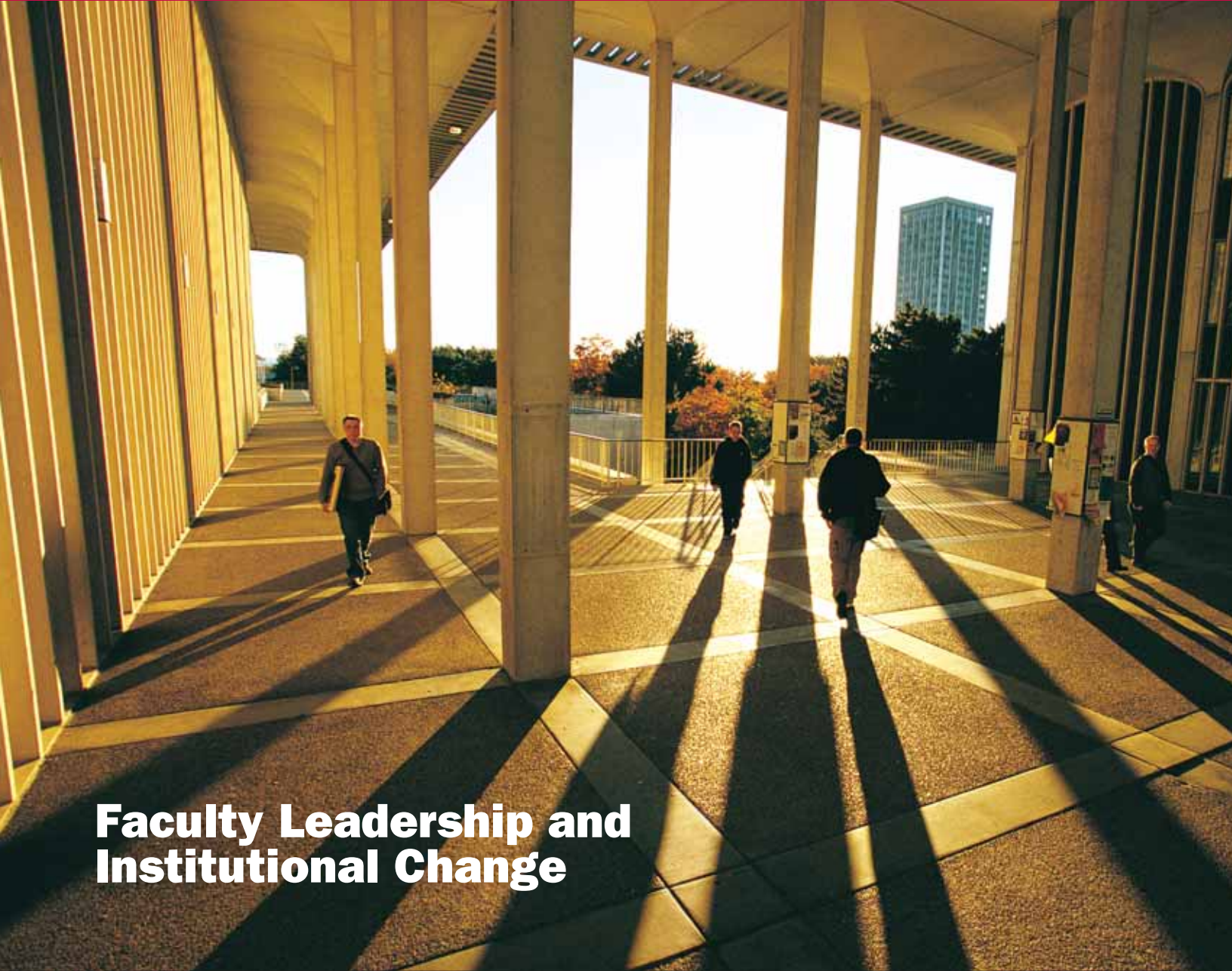


Liberal Education

ASSOCIATION OF AMERICAN COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES



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A Focus on Poverty

The Shepherd Program at Washington and Lee University

HARLAN BECKLEY

THE BONNER SERIES ON
STUDENT
CIVIC
ENGAGEMENT

The Bonner Foundation engages students in an intensive, developmental, four-year, service-based scholarship and civic engagement program. Seventy-five colleges and universities are currently working to build and sustain an integrated cocurricular and curricular model for campus civic engagement. With the support from the Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education (FIPSE), many of these campuses have or are creating a parallel academic initiative in the form of a civic engagement certificate, minor, or concentration. Articles in this series feature Mars Hill College (Stanley Dotson), Washington and Lee University (Harlan Beckley), and the College of New Jersey (Elizabeth Paul).

For additional information and resources, including frameworks, campus profiles, practitioner how-to essays, and more, see www.bonner.org or the AAC&U publication *Civic Engagement at the Center: Building Democracy through Integrated Cocurricular and Curricular Experiences* (forthcoming 2008), which presents the model along with strategies for developing an in-depth academic initiative.



"I DON'T THINK very many students know that." Assaba Massougodji spoke these words after learning that the United States was ranked by the United Nations Development Programme as having a higher poverty rate than any developed nation. (Italy and Ireland, for different reasons, have subsequently slipped in the rankings and are now measured as having a higher percentage of their population in poverty than the United States does.) Assaba, an immigrant from Togo and a college junior at the time, was not aware that her adopted nation has a greater poverty problem than most developed nations. She did not know that, according to the income measurement of poverty established by the federal government, nearly 13 percent of U.S. residents and almost 18 percent of U.S. children live in poor households; that the U.S. infant mortality rate is higher than that of all other developed nations, including Slovenia and South Korea; or that the percentage of citizens expected to live past 65 years of age is lower in the United States than in Costa Rica. Assaba is socially concerned and not atypical; few of her peers at Washington and Lee and other colleges and universities in the United States are better informed about poverty. Although they realize that poverty, malnutrition, and morbidity are rampant in parts of the developing world, they have little understanding of the causes and are largely ignorant of both the magnitude and the causes of poverty in the United States.

The Shepherd Program for the Interdisciplinary Study of Poverty and Human Capability at Washington and Lee University was established in 1997 to educate the faculty and our relatively wealthy students about a social problem of which they had very little knowledge

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and even less firsthand experience. At the time, we did not know that there were no other interdisciplinary undergraduate programs for the sustained study of poverty in the United States. We were unaware that undergraduates at other colleges and universities also had only limited opportunities to learn about poverty and human development.

Although the goals of the Shepherd Program have evolved, two shine more brightly than they did when the program began ten years ago: (1) to inform a significant percentage of students about poverty, its causes, and plausible remedies; and (2) to offer twenty to twenty-five students per year a sustained and integrated curricular and cocurricular education that enriches their majors and shapes their understanding of their vocations. The idea of vocation, employed here, is informed by the religious conception of calling, which emphasizes service to neighbor and society in multiple life endeavors ranging from parenting to work in almost any field. We intend for graduates who integrate several courses on poverty and human capability with an internship in their field of professional interest to understand differently two of these vocations: as citizens engaged in civic affairs and as professionals engaged in business, education, healthcare, law, public policy, human services, and so forth.

The Shepherd Program

To ensure the program is viewed as credible by discipline-based faculty throughout the university, a senior faculty member serves as director and the program is grounded in rigorous academic courses. It starts not with service or experiential learning but, instead, with an interdisciplinary course on either domestic poverty or poverty in the developing world. Although students have an opportunity to participate in a pre-orientation volunteer and educational project and may become involved

Washington and
Lee University



early in their college experience with a variety of service projects, they do not become part of the program until they complete one of these two introductory courses.

A course on poverty can be informative. We are pleased that nearly one-fifth of our students know how the official U.S. poverty rate is calculated, can discuss various views of the causes of poverty, know that the Earned Income Tax Credit is popular with both conservatives and liberals for its support of low-wage work, and can debate the strengths and weaknesses of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families. They will be better citizens as a result of what they learn in the introductory course, but no one course can shape an understanding of vocation. Moreover, academic

study alone is not likely to produce a new understanding of civic or professional life.

Students who enroll in the introductory course may apply for an eight-week summer internship working to package small business loans, promote better healthcare, expand opportunities for education, provide improved legal services, organize community projects, advocate for the needs of poor persons and communities, or augment social services. These internships take place in a variety of urban and rural locations in the United States, Latin America, and Africa. They are full time, and we collaborate with agencies to ensure that they and their clients receive valuable assistance and that our students learn from their experiences. Berea, Spelman, and Morehouse

The goal, after all, is not to maximize resume credentials but to influence vocations

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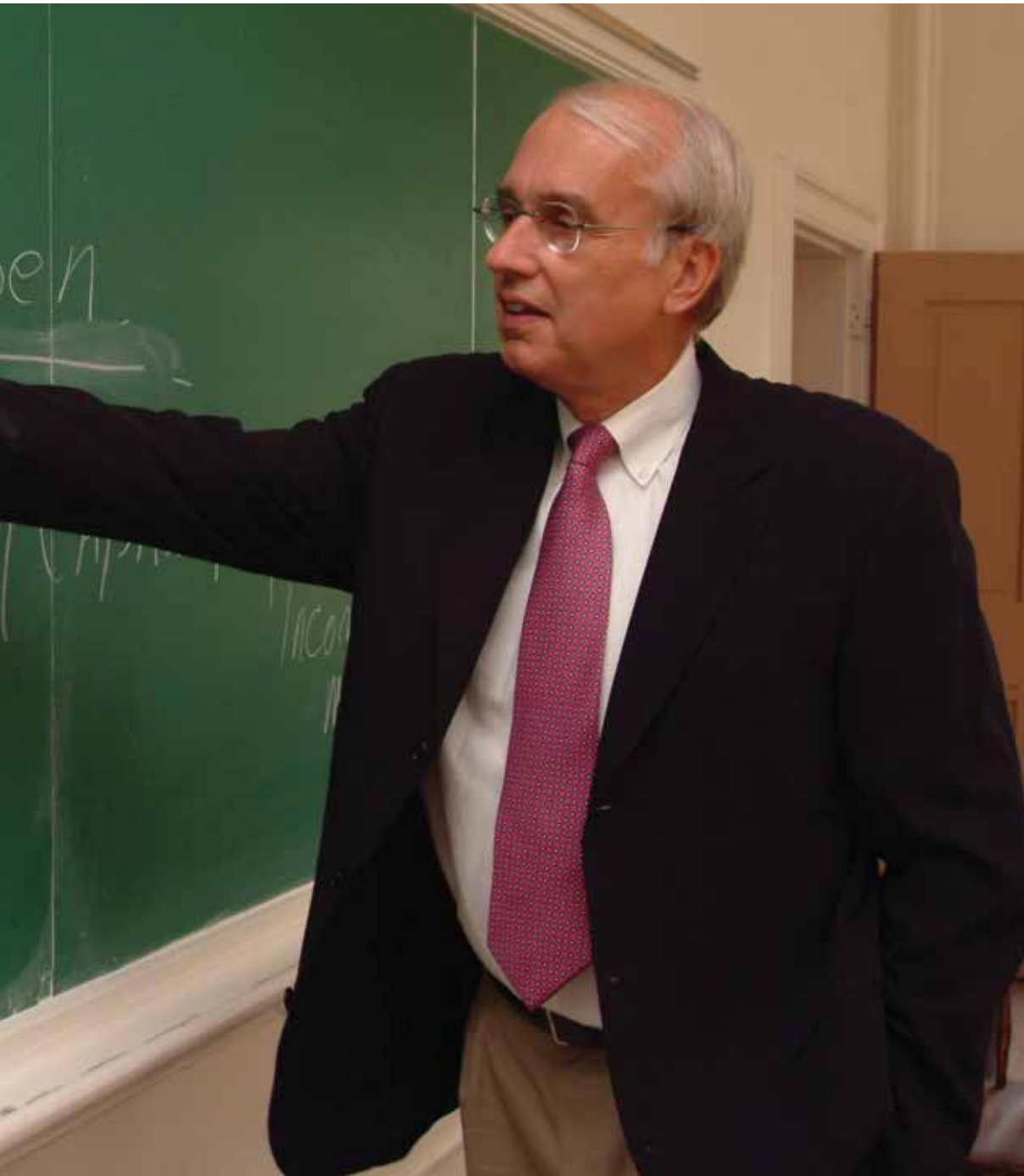
By Elizabeth L. Paul, interim provost and vice president for academic affairs at the College of New Jersey

colleges have joined us to offer these summer internship opportunities to their students.

Because Washington and Lee interns have previously learned about the complexity and seriousness of poverty as a threat to both individual flourishing and the common good, the internships teach students more than how to serve others. They deepen their understanding of poverty and the role of civic and political action in overcoming it. The interns also observe how their future professions can exacerbate or diminish poverty. The internships begin with an orientation to prepare students for the work ahead, and they conclude with a closing conference at which the students report what they have learned. They discuss, for example, problems of credit or housing in depressed communities or the causes and remedies for low weight at birth and improving resilience in the face of it. Students from diverse colleges and backgrounds learn from working, living, and socializing together during the internships and from conversations and structured discussions at the conferences. This cocurricular education, managed and monitored by a full-time coordinator for the sixty interns, constitutes an essential element for achieving our program goals.

Washington and Lee students who successfully complete the internship receive transcript recognition for a non-credit bearing course and become eligible for a concentration in the study of poverty and human capability. They are invited to enroll in discipline-based courses on topics ranging from the economics of education to journalism and reporting on poverty. Ten years ago, Washington and Lee offered three discipline-based courses that seriously addressed poverty. Today, students select from among at least twenty courses that enable them to enrich their majors with a deeper understanding of the various dimensions of poverty. We advise them to select courses relevant to their intended professions. A student of





Washington and Lee
University

Students are responsible for shaping their own vocational self-understanding and their own political and policy conclusions

health care, for example, may take courses on developmental psychology and poverty or the economics of health care, and a student anticipating a career in education may take literary approaches to poverty and the economics of education.

Junior and senior undergraduates who have completed coursework and the summer internship, along with second- and third-year law students, are eligible to enroll in a poverty research seminar. After discussing readings from three or four current authors, students in the seminar write research papers on a topic that combines skills learned in their major, their internship experience, and a prospective examination of an issue that they are likely to confront in their professional lives. (These papers appear on the Shepherd Program website at <http://shepherdapps.wlu.edu>.) For example, Emily, a recent neuroscience major who interned at the Codman Square Health Center in Boston, wrote her capstone paper on “Asthma and the Impoverished: How Poor Children’s Environments Impair Their Health.” After graduation, she spent a year working with children from low-income families in New York and Washington, DC, and now attends medical school at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Emily writes that during her postgraduate work, “[I] caught myself—a quiet, very unflappable woman—yelling arguments at colleagues that refer to the poor as ‘lazy.’” She further reports that, “on major holidays, I now request poverty-related nonfiction books over gifts of shoes or CDs” and that “I intend to one day use [my medical degree] to work as a physician for low-income, urban populations.” Emily’s journey represents that of dozens of others who have found in the Shepherd Program a way to define their professional vocations without changing their career choices.

Although a variety of courses and opportunities for learning through focused civic engagement has existed for ten years, Shepherd Program participation in a Civic Engagement

Initiative funded by the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education under the auspices of the Bonner Foundation has enabled us to improve and expand these offerings.

Largely as a result of conversations with partner schools in this initiative, Washington and Lee, beginning in 2005, offers an interdisciplinary concentration in poverty and human capability.

Graduates who complete the introductory course, the internship, the poverty research seminar, and four additional discipline-based courses that address poverty in a way that is relevant to their majors and vocational interests receive transcript recognition. Fifteen to twenty students graduate each year with this recognition. However, transcript recognition is only instrumentally important; numerous other students who complete part of the concentration testify to its profound influence on their lives.

Students may, for example, find ways to become involved in community-based research or other civic engagement opportunities during the academic year as a reasonable substitute for a summer internship. The Bonner Foundation has assisted us in developing these opportunities for civic engagement, which include a Bonner Leader Program. Opportunities for learning through service to disadvantaged persons in the local community have expanded exponentially at Washington and Lee during the decade the Shepherd Program has existed. Our most recent addition is a “Campus Kitchen” that serves unused food from the campus dining hall to local residents. Students dine with those to whom they deliver meals. We have also initiated successful alternative break projects during academic holidays. Alumni collaborate by arranging suitable service-learning placements in their local communities. Nearly all the students in the Shepherd Program take advantage of a variety of these optional opportunities to supplement the program requirements.

Other students never complete all of the academic requirements for the recognized concentration but find their vocational intentions

transformed by a mixture of the summer internship, coursework, and service during the academic year. The goal, after all, is not to maximize resume credentials but to influence vocations. The key to achieving this goal is to structure the curricular and cocurricular offerings so that the students can integrate them and incorporate what they learn into their own lives. A current student who heads the student leadership team for the Campus Kitchen wrote her paper for the capstone seminar on “The Invisible Problem: Malnutrition in the U.S.” She is a junior. There is no way to know what she will do with that topic, but she has a passion informed and focused by rigorous research and thought. She intends a career in public policy.

Each student has maximum latitude to choose both course and service opportunities in accordance with their academic and professional interests. The Shepherd Program aims to enrich all majors; it does not seek to enforce or even encourage a particular professional trajectory or to instill a particular political or policy viewpoint. We try to stimulate lively discussion of professional responsibility and of politics and policy. We welcome advocacy. We compel students to deliberate by giving reasons for their opinions. However, students are responsible for shaping their own vocational self-understanding and their own political and policy conclusions.

Expanding the program

The Shepherd Program has recently been extended into the postgraduate years through a fellowship that places graduates in public interest jobs that address the needs of disadvantaged populations. This fellowship program, named after our late president, John W. Elrod, and his wife, Mimi, helps memorialize his contributions to a program that he nurtured during his presidency. No interdisciplinary program flourishes absent administrative support. As Emily’s story attests, students attracted to the Shepherd Program often embark on a year or two of community service

prior to beginning their graduate education or their careers. Assaba Massougodji, for example, is currently an Elrod Fellow in Washington, DC. The fellowship program also provides structured occasions for alumni to discuss the fellows’ jobs as well as to discuss readings about poverty and human capability. We intend for the Shepherd Program to become a seamless component in an education that begins before the entering students’ orientation and extends through their postgraduate years.

We are now on the brink of obtaining funding for an eleven-school demonstration project to introduce the sustained curricular and cocurricular study of poverty and human capability into undergraduate and legal education. Other schools are also starting or contemplating similar programs of study. Interdisciplinary and cocurricular education to address poverty has not received the same attention from higher education as environmental studies, women’s studies, or racial and ethnic studies. This omission is acutely conspicuous because these social problems are often intertwined. We hope that thousands of graduates like Emily will collaborate with poor citizens to produce the professional, civic, and policy initiatives needed to diminish dramatically the number of persons unable to flourish and contribute meaningfully to society. We hope that, someday, students like Assaba will be pleasantly surprised to learn that poverty in the United States has been reduced and that malnutrition is no longer a palpable problem in the developing world. Undergraduate and legal education both have significant roles to play in achieving those goals. □

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