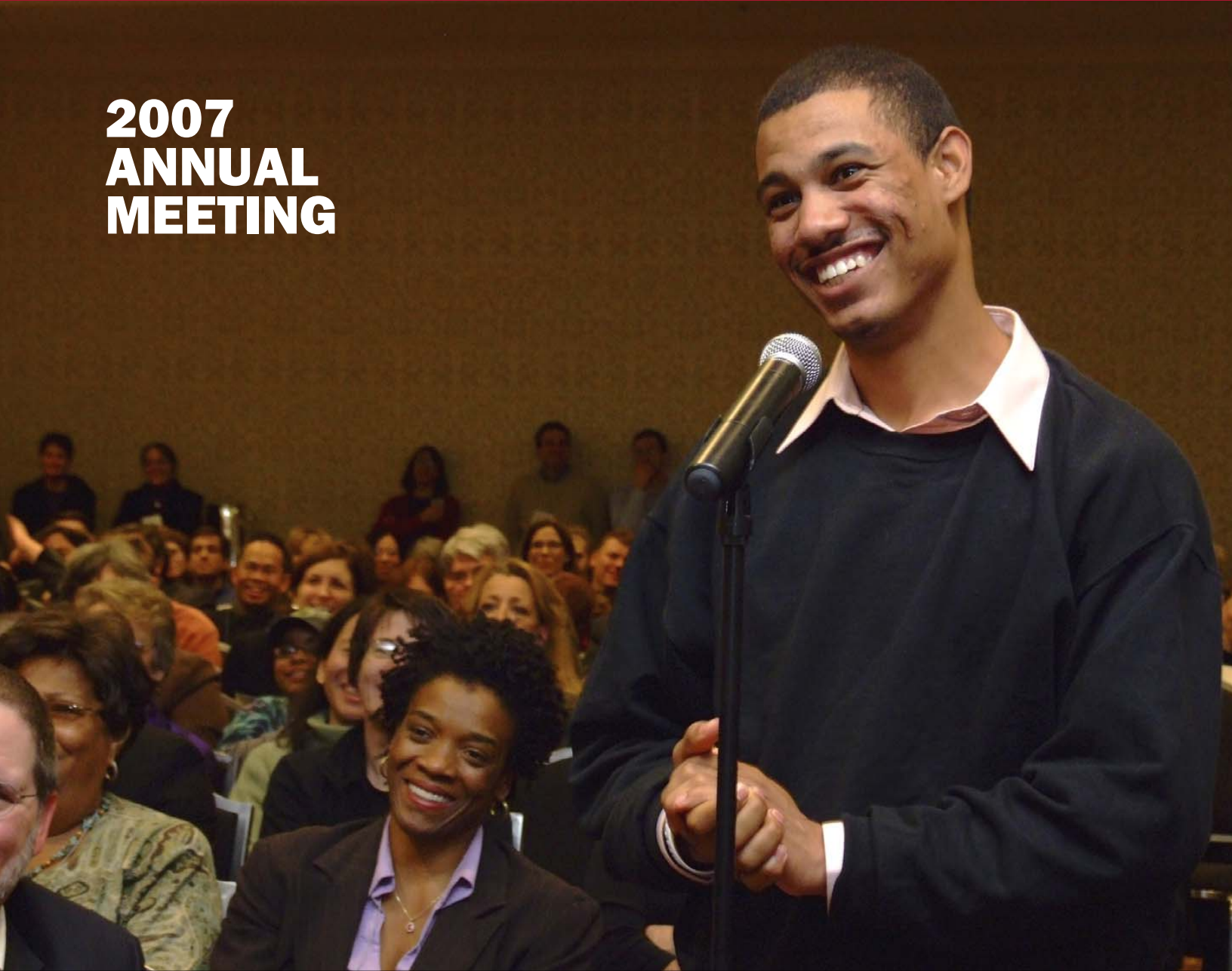


# Liberal Education

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ANNUAL  
MEETING**



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# Alignment for Life

STANLEY D. DOTSON

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 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.

For additional information and resources, including frameworks, campus profiles, practitioner how-to essays, and more, see [www.bonner.org](http://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.



IN THE SPRING OF 2005, the academic council at Mars Hill College unanimously passed a proposal to institute a civic engagement certificate program. This vote did not come easily; it followed more than a year of discussion and debate about the merits of certificate programs, the meaning of engaged learning, and the tension between and potential alignment among cocurricular learning and the academic disciplines.

Our work on the civic engagement program actually began nine years ago, when we devoted a full year to asking a wide range of constituencies what they would like to see our students gain from their community engagement. This yearlong qualitative study was prompted by the Bonner Foundation, which asked all Bonner Scholar-affiliated colleges to begin designing a student development model. Our president at the time, Max Lennon, encouraged us to form a “Blue Ribbon Commission” in order to gain the input of some of the brightest and best leaders in the country. Indeed, he introduced us to many of these leaders—people like the president of one of the nation’s largest banks and the vice president of Duke Energy. It was important to many of us working on the project, though, to hear the voices of all kinds of people who would be affected by our program—students, faculty, staff, and community partners. I started talking with farmers and millhands and maintenance workers. I called these my “Pabst Blue Ribbon Commission.” These working-class PBR Commissioners represented a different perspective from the wine-and-cheese crowd who held powerful positions in the community.

As we analyzed the qualitative data from all these community voices, some common responses and patterns began to emerge. The re-

sponses to the question of what should be gained from engaged learning generally fell into three categories: content knowledge (which we began calling the “know-what”), skills (which we called the “know-how”), and values or attitudes (which we called the “know-why”). Over the next several years, we used these data to design and implement our cocurricular leadership program.

The LifeWorks program is developmental, moving students up five steps of a staircase and ending with a capstone presentation of learning and a portfolio. The program is thematically connected to Mars Hill’s sequence of core general education courses (see description of these courses below). While all students take these “Commons” courses, the Bonner scholars and other honor scholars also participate in the cocurricular civic engagement program, connected to four years of involvement in community service. The knowledge, skills, and values are meant to build on one another as students progress through the program. In the “know-what” category, we begin with the knowledge base of appreciative inquiry, building on the premise that knowledge is gained from asking good questions. Then we move to knowledge of self, of the community, of conflictual and controversial issues, and of career options. The “know-how” category begins with the skill set associated with time management, building on the premise that students need to “show up,” in every sense of that phrase, before they will be able to master other skills. Next, we work on the skill of active listening, followed by facilitation, civil discourse, and resource development. The “know-why” category begins with the value of imagination, building on the premise that if we can first cultivate dispositions of wonder, discovery, and imagination, students will gain much more from everything that follows. We then address values of courage, respect, integrity, and enthusiasm.

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In the capstone year, students learn the skill of evaluation, and they strengthen the value of appreciation as they look back on four years of engaged learning and recognize all the significant people who made a positive impact on them. They synthesize the knowledge they gained, prepare a portfolio, and give a presentation of learning at their senior banquet.

The teaching and learning of these sets of knowledge, skills, and values takes place in weekly group meetings attended by the Bonner scholars and honor scholars pursuing the civic engagement certificate. During each semester, we spend five weeks on the skill set, five weeks on the knowledge base, and five weeks on the value commitment. We are in the process of designing journal reflection books for each

semester, with artwork, quotes, and essays reinforcing the desired objectives for each component. The weekly meetings consist of group discussion, journaling, a film clip, music, and interactive exercises, with all the activities reinforcing the theme for the week.

For example, in one of the weeks on time management, we show a humorous clip from the Charlie Chaplin movie *Modern Times*, which critiques the industrial revolution's value system and the assembly line's emphasis on speed. The students reflect on the importance of resisting the cultural pressure to treat their educational experience as a factory production. They do a fun exercise that involves rolling marbles down a series of pipes cut in half, while listening to the Rolling Stones song

## **Defining instrumental outcomes for civic engagement is not sufficient**

“Time Is on My Side.” Each marble represents a goal they have articulated, and they have to work as a team to get the marbles down the pipes without the marbles jumping track. They reflect on what this exercise can teach them about creating momentum toward achieving their goals, and they journal about what it means for them to “make good time” as they engage the community and the classroom. At the end of each five-week period, the students write an essay on the theme we have covered, reflecting on the connections between that theme and what they are learning in the classroom and in their community work.

### **The Commons sequence**

As we identified our cocurricular themes and began designing the teaching and learning materials, we worked closely with faculty members who were redesigning our core general education curriculum, in order to ensure a sense of coherence between the cocurricular and curricular engagement of our students. The sequence of interdisciplinary core courses that the faculty developed, called the Commons, does align quite well with the themes of our civic engagement program. The design specifications for the Commons courses require that each include an experiential or community engagement component.

The Commons sequence begins with the first-year seminar, called Challenges. This course introduces students to the idea of the practical liberal arts, demonstrating how the liberal arts help address everyday challenges of life in community. Students are also introduced to service learning through this course, with each class doing a short-term service project related to the theme for the class. For example, the class addressing the challenges of food and hunger works with local farmers and a local food bank. Another class addresses the challenge of social responsibility and works with a local homeless ministry.

We have held a series of workshops with community partners and faculty members in

the Commons courses to strengthen the connections between the students’ community engagement and their academic work in the classroom. For the Challenges course workshop, we invited a dozen of our core community partners and sent them some of the texts the students read in the course, such as Martin Luther King Jr’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail.” The community partners shared with the faculty how they saw the texts connecting with their daily work, and how they would help students make these connections. These workshops have strengthened our relationships with our community partners by honoring them as co-educators and not simply as volunteer managers.

The second course in the Commons sequence is Character, an interdisciplinary study of human nature and why we do the things we do. This fits nicely with the stage-two knowledge base of the cocurricular program—knowledge of self. In the Character course, the students are given a list of the texts they are to read, and at the end of this list is a paragraph entitled “Your Life as Text.” The students are instructed to choose one aspect of their lives in community. They can choose their service-learning work, or their participation in a performance group or athletic team, or a part-time job. Whatever they choose, they are expected to learn how to “read” that aspect of their lives and to make connections between the ideas and theories and questions raised in the other readings and classroom discussions and what is happening in their life text.

We facilitated a second engaged learning workshop with the Character faculty and a group of our community partners. They read Plato’s “Ring of Gyges” and a story about Le Chambon, a village in France that sheltered Jews during World War II. One of our faculty members rewrote Plato’s story to talk about people who feel “invisible” in our communities. A holocaust survivor from the community led the discussion of the Le Chambon story. It was quite enriching, and the commu-

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nity partners shared with us how much they appreciated engaging with us in this way, (rather than simply focusing on the logistics of service learning).

The third Commons course is Civic Life, which fits with the cocurricular knowledge of community theme. This course is taught through a series of cross-cultural and historical case studies that demonstrate different ways human societies have attempted to build community, including the ancient Mayan society, the Hebrew covenant community, the Greek city-states, a Chinese village, the Cherokee Nation, pre-revolution America, and Appalachia during the Civil War. For the experiential component, the students are instructed to choose a “personal case study” to examine alongside the seven historical case studies in the course. This personal case study represents an ingredient of community life, and must focus on something the students are personally involved with. Students choose from a list of ten possible issues for their personal case studies: food and shelter, business, religion, the arts, sports, politics, education, the environment, health care, and security.

The personal case study then becomes a lens through which the students examine each of the cross-cultural and historical communities. And the students look for ways the historical communities inform their understanding of the contemporary issue. They also bring in questions that emerge from their own experiences with that issue in the community. For example, students who choose the environment will look at how each of the seven societies managed their natural resources, and will connect this learning with their involvement in environmental protection. One faculty member said that he had the most engaged group of student athletes he had ever had, because they were able to choose sports as their personal case study and examine the role of sports in civic life.

The fourth Commons course is Critique, which explores the dynamic tension between

faith and reason, particularly around some of the hot-button issues of our society. This fits with the knowledge base at this stage of the cocurricular program, which focuses on controversial issues dividing communities today.

The last Commons course is Creativity, which explores the creative process at work across fields and disciplines. This fits well with the cocurricular knowledge base of career options, as we want students to see how they can creatively contribute to the common good in any career path, not only in the so-called “service fields” or the nonprofit sector. The experiential components of these last two courses are not yet as fully developed as the earlier courses in the Commons sequence. We hope to build these components over the next two years.

### **Defining ultimate outcomes**

As we have implemented our civic engagement program, we have found that the knowledge, skills, and values outcomes we have identified are *instrumental*; that is, they can be employed to serve any number of ultimate ends. It was interesting to hear how much resonance there was among the various constituencies we interviewed about what students should gain from a civic engagement program. There was even a lot of similarity between what was said by those on the “Blue Ribbon Commission” and what was said by those on the “Pabst Blue Ribbon Commission.” Indeed, one would be hard-pressed to find anyone who would argue with the language of our instrumental outcomes. Who would *not* be for values of courage and respect, skills of listening and facilitation, knowledge of self and community?

To illustrate the point, during our year of data gathering we interviewed two “Wendells,” two civic leaders who have very little in common other than their first name. Wendell Murphy is one of the country’s largest agribusiness owners, an industrial hog farmer characterized as “Boss Hog” in a Pulitzer-winning

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## OTHER ARTICLES IN THE SERIES

### **PREVIOUS**

*Spring 2007*

*Connecting Cocurricular Service with Academic Inquiry: A Movement toward Civic Engagement*

By Wayne Meisel, president of the Corella and Bertram F. Bonner Foundation

### **FORTHCOMING**

*Fall 2007*

*A Focus on Poverty: The Shepherd Program at Washington and Lee University*  
By Harlan Beckley, director of the Shepherd Program

*Winter 2008*

*Downtown: A Community-Campus Collaborative Course to Prepare Students for Community-Based Research*  
By Elizabeth L. Paul, interim provost and vice president for academic affairs at the College of New Jersey

**These ultimate outcomes describe the range of contributions to the common good incurred through different avenues of engagement in the community**

**Ultimate Outcomes**

- The activity contributes to the education of children and youth, diminishing underachievement.
- The activity contributes to the economic opportunity of the disadvantaged, diminishing poverty.
- The activity contributes to greater respect across lines of diversity, diminishing discrimination.
- The activity contributes to a more sustainable environment, diminishing abuse of natural resources.
- The activity contributes to a more secure world, diminishing violence and destructive behavior.
- The activity contributes to wellness, diminishing disease in mind, body, and/or spirit.
- The activity contributes to creativity and cultural enrichment, diminishing cultural impoverishment.

story by the *Raleigh News and Observer* for the way he has consistently manipulated the system to his benefit. Wendell Berry, on the other hand, is a sustainable agriculture practitioner and one of the sharpest critics of agribusiness in America. Both men used a similar language to describe what students should gain—knowledge of self and the community, skills of listening and talking, values of respect and courage. And yet these two would use those skills and employ that knowledge for very different purposes—cross-purposes.

Defining instrumental outcomes for civic engagement is not sufficient. We recognized from our “tale of two Wendells” that we need to begin clarifying and sharpening our ultimate desired outcomes. It is not enough for students to be equipped for civic engagement. Some of the most effective civic leaders are using their expertise, skills, and value systems for ends that are detrimental to community. In the 1950s, some of the most effective civic leaders used their knowledge and skill to maintain segregation. Today, neighborhood leaders are highly effective in keeping poor people out of their neighborhoods.

In our initial attempts to define ultimate outcomes, we stated that any engaged learning activity should meet the identified needs of a vulnerable population. That is, we wanted our program to serve the interests of those without privilege or power, not to increase the privilege of those in power. That seemed simple enough until the students started asking the logical questions: What do you mean by *vulnerable population*? How do you define vulnerability? Through long conversations with students, staff, faculty, and community partners, we have identified seven areas of vulnerability and seven ultimate outcomes or desired impacts on community life that would empower and serve the interests of the underprivileged, instead of consolidating the power and serving the interests of the overprivileged. These ultimate outcomes describe the range of contributions to the common good incurred through different

avenues of engagement in the community. Moreover, these outcomes help us answer the perennial student question: does this count for service learning? (Fill in the blank for what activity *this* refers to.) When faced with this question, we now direct the students to the list of ultimate outcomes (see sidebar), and ask them to tell us how the activity contributes to one or more of these goals.

This list was particularly helpful in our conversations with students whose vocation is in the arts. A student who sings in the college choir, for example, wanted to “count” the choir tour as community engagement. We asked her to reflect on the criteria, and see whether the activity fit. She came back and talked about where they went on tour; they started out singing at large, well-resourced churches, and she could understand how this doesn’t meet the criteria. But, she explained, they did travel to a small community in West Virginia, where one of our graduates is the church organist, and this community rarely has the opportunity to be exposed to the kind of music our choir performs. In addition to singing, the members of the choir spent time in the community, did home stays, and talked with the young people about the value of the fine arts. The student understood why some of the tour would count, and some would not count.

The set of criteria has helped us expand opportunities for students in the business department as well. For too long, the service-learning movement has fostered a deep division between the for-profit and nonprofit sectors, with the assumption that for-profit enterprises are self-serving while nonprofits serve the greater good. We now can talk with business students and community partners about the value of entrepreneurial activity and microenterprise. We should be using the same indicators to evaluate the contributions of business organizations that we use for governmental and nonprofit organizations. A community like McDowell County, West Virginia, where we take alternative break trips every year, has been in dire need of

meaningful work for people to do since the collapse of the coal industry. Creating more service-sector nonprofits is not the long-term answer to their challenges. One of our students from McDowell County made this point when she received a Surdna Fellowship from the Appalachian College Association to go back to her community for the summer and start an entrepreneurial “Buzz on Biz” business club for teenagers there. Her dream is to create a clothing business in her community that would bring sustainable jobs for her friends and family there.

We have started using the list of ultimate outcomes in arenas other than our student civic engagement program. We have included the list in a survey of alumni to find out how they see their lives and their work contributing to the common good. We have also started using the list in our staff evaluation process in the LifeWorks office. It is a good practice for us to do the same kind of reflection on our work that we are asking students to do.

This list of ultimate outcomes recognizes a wide variety of activities that contribute to the building of healthy, sustainable communities. It also recognizes a wide variety of callings or vocations. It does not solve all problems that emerge in a civic engagement program, though. We have yet to design an effective assessment tool for measuring the impact in any of these seven areas. There is still a lot of subjectivity in how people define the language in each of the seven areas, and students still document engaged activities that vary widely in the depth and breadth of the impact on the community. Other problems in civic life occur when a person’s activities contribute to one of these outcomes and work against another. Wendell Murphy could make great contributions to the education system in North Carolina, but his business was destructive to the environment and kept wages low for the workers. Civic tension results not so much from the clash of good and evil; it more often results from the clash of two goods, or from a narrow focus on one good while ignoring other goods.

### **Alignment for life**

There is a large sign outside a business in downtown Asheville that reads, “Alignment for Life.” (It is a car repair business, and the sign refers to front end alignment.) I use the sign as a reminder of what we hope to accomplish in our civic engagement program: a holistic vision of vocation. Frederick Buechner (1973) defines “vocation” as that place where our deep gladness meets the world’s deep hunger. Through the academic work in the Commons courses, the activities in the community, and the weekly reflection meetings of the LifeWorks program, we hope our students discover that vocation, that experience of alignment between what they care passionately about and what the world desperately needs. We want our students and our graduates to experience lifelong alignment—we want their lives and engagements to contribute in some way to all of the ultimate outcomes.

We want our students and graduates to experience alignment between their jobs, their faith convictions, their intellectual pursuits, their political persuasions, their investments, and their volunteer activities. Whether students sense a calling to be a minister or a corporate executive or a hog farmer or a poet, we want them to be the kind of people whose actions in all areas of life diminish poverty and preserve the environment and create beauty in the world. We want them to be the kind of people whose career choices and spiritual lives and voting patterns diminish discrimination and underachievement and make the world a safer place to live. □

*To respond to this article, e-mail [liberaled@aacu.org](mailto:liberaled@aacu.org), with the author’s name on the subject line.*

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#### REFERENCE

Buechner, F. 1973. *Wishful thinking*. New York: Harper & Row.



**Mars Hill College**