



On serving the public good

Vida Huber, nursing professor and associate dean of the College of Integrated Science and Technology, received the James Madison Citizenship Award on March 15 at the James Madison Convocation. Created last year to celebrate the 250th anniversary of James Madison's birth, the award recognizes an individual who demonstrates the spirit of Madison's commitment to the public good. Here, in her own words, is Huber's perspective on citizenship, service-learning and serving the public good.

Service is at the heart of my philosophy of life and I believe that it is through service to others that we ourselves become more whole. As a child growing up in the nursing home my parents operated - first out of our own home and then in a building designed for that purpose, I discovered the richness of diversity to be found in interacting with individuals having differing age, values, lifestyles, and cultural backgrounds. I also discovered that looking beyond my own welfare to consider how I might be of service to others brought satisfaction and joy into my life. My more recent experiences involving direct exposure to the richness of the African culture has further enhanced my belief that relationships are of central importance. Challenge that produces growth is an important ingredient in helping me attain greater wholeness, and I deprive myself of valuable learning and meaning if I limit my interactions to those most like myself.

My belief that becoming both more human and more humane is directly related to our openness to serving others has, as its counterpoint the fact that I too become more human in the process. It is my belief that we are a common humanity and that what affects one ultimately affects all. The connections between us are real, and we cannot operate in isolation. Thus, in my view, the answers to the "big" problems in our global environment can only be found when we truly recognize and understand the reality and impact of that interconnectedness. It is my belief that limiting one's focus to what affects self is very shortsighted because, when rightly understood, what benefits you can also benefit me.

Citizenship, from my perspective, involves taking an active role as a member of a community to improve the quality of life for all members of that community. It means the giving of one's time to participate in activities that benefit the whole community, becoming active on boards that address unmet needs, and providing leadership in initiatives that will promote the common good. The focus of that participation will vary with a given individual's interest and capabilities. Given my background and life experiences, my focus and involvement have been on health-related issues, particularly in relationship to those who have experienced the hard knocks of life or who have been marginalized by our society.

My life has been incredibly enriched by the experiences I have had over the years. I have gained a broadened perspective on life, become more able to see things from another's point of view, received the gift of heartfelt gratitude for little things, and been humbled by the trust that has been given to me. It is exhilarating to discover that as an individual I can make a difference. Sometimes this involves small differences in the life of an individual; at other times the difference has broader and more lasting impact. Either way, involvement is an enriching experience. And so, while being a firm believer in the need to be involved as a citizen of a community in providing service that is for the public good, it is not only about giving, it is equally about receiving. It is about becoming more whole.

I believe that as institutions of higher education we need to be active participants in our communities. We can enter partnerships with others to enhance the well being of us all. Service learning for me is a wonderful description of the inherent linkage between service and learning; the two are inseparable. Thus, as faculty and staff members and administrators, it behooves us to model such service-learning behavior for our students through our citizenship involvements. I also believe it to be essential that we provide multiple opportunities for and expect our students to engage in service-learning activities as part of their educational experience. I believe that learning is enhanced through the interface between the classroom and the community. Focusing learning experiences on needs identified by the community provides an authenticity to the experience that cannot be matched in any other way. It becomes a win-win situation as service is provided and a need met, while simultaneously a high-quality learning experience that is provided for students. In the process students, too, are often able to experience that they can make a difference.

Higher education is about providing opportunities for students to become more whole human beings. Thus, in my opinion, the provision of opportunities to stretch their vision, interact with persons different than themselves, and be involved in providing service to others, are all-important ingredients of a high-quality educational experience. It is my belief that such involvements should be a part of every student's experience. Participation in the life of the community, assessing needs first hand, planning strategies for intervention and participating in their implementation not only expand their professional skills, it also enriches their lives. It is my hope that it will also have a positive impact on their life choices and make a difference in their values and how they choose to live their lives.

by James Madison Citizenship Award winner Vida Huber, associate dean of the College of Integrated Science and Technology: