In a world facing a dizzying array of complex problems, independent schools face a challenge to be more than what New York City Trinity School Headmaster John Allman calls "credentialing factories." As part of a surprisingly blunt letter to his parents at the start of the 2017 school year, Allman spelled out his concerns about "consumerist families that treat the school in entirely instrumental ways, seeking to use us exclusively to advance their child’s narrow self-interest." He continued to argue for a greater focus on community connection, public service, and justice that speak to the world’s unmet needs. Without doing that, Allman noted, "I am afraid we are, for a majority of our students, just a very, very expensive finishing school."

I’ve consulted for years with independent schools to initiate or improve public service programs that provide one of the most powerful antidotes to Allman’s concerns. Whether you use the vocabulary of public service, service-learning, community engagement, social entrepreneurship, or community service, those types of experiences done well are filled with opportunities for students to generate a larger sense of purpose about what they are learning in the classroom and where they are headed other than to the college of their dreams.

My main source of inspiration about how to design public service programs comes from being part of a very different “finishing school” than what Allman talks about. It is one where there are few rules, no credentialing, and where narrow self-interest would lead to inevitable failure. It is the International Youth Foundation’s YouthActionNet global leadership accelerator program in 24 countries that supports young leaders in their 20s who have started socially minded organizations. Young people with whom I’ve worked are building bamboo bicycles in rural Ghana to lower youth unemployment, using artificial intelligence to predict and prevent infectious disease outbreaks in the hillside slums of Rio de Janeiro, making it cheaper
and more effective for Australians with serious disabilities to find the right caregiver, assisting women with AIDS to create organic gardens for healthy food and income in Zambia, and preserving precious coastal ecosystems in Costa Rica.

These young global leaders provide a model for a purpose-driven life. That model applies whether you are a young social entrepreneur in Uganda or an eleventh grader in Kentucky. It starts with being passionate about a cause that is greater than your own personal success. That passion then needs to be activated by a sense of capability and creative confidence that you can do something about it. And finally, that passion and confidence must be informed by a deep connection to and appreciation of the community in which you work. As shown in the drawing below, all three elements are needed to work together. Leaving out passion will lead to indifference, leaving out capability will lead only to sympathy, and leaving out connection will lead to being an uninformed do-gooder.

My purpose in this article is twofold. First, it is to make the case for why public service initiatives are essential to the development of student purpose. And secondly, it is to present strategies for how to do that. I define student purpose as learning that is tied to some self-transcendent, prosocial goal such as helping others, fighting for some environmental or social justice cause, upholding an ideal, or expressing one's spiritual faith.

Several points of clarification are appropriate before proceeding. First, it’s important to note that people often mix self-interested and self-transcendent goals. A person may want to be a doctor to heal others and to achieve a comfortable lifestyle. Secondly, while the Jane Goodall’s of the world develop a single burning purpose, most people don’t. People instead commonly support multiple causes over a lifetime, or their purpose may be less about a cause and more about living an ethical and generous life towards others.

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Thirdly, it is commendable when students pursue their own goals to be one #1 on the tennis team, win a prestigious science competition, or be accepted at Harvard. Personal aspirations by themselves are a normal and essential part of both human development and happiness. The problem is that when self-interest becomes *self-centeredness*, it severely narrows the boundaries of a person’s life. Giving to others is not just a nice thing to do. It is integral to good mental health. What people who are self-centered miss is that having a transcendent purpose inspires, expands, sustains, and ultimately redeems human lives. Even the Dalai Lama professes: “One of my main practices is the cultivation of altruism, it’s what I think about the moment I wake up.” Having a transcendent purpose, it’s fun to note, can even help get you into one of the world’s top MBA programs. For the past 15 years, the Stanford Graduate School of Business has asked every applicant the simple but not easy essay question: “What matters most to you, and why?” As the biz school explains, they want candidates that both “know what drives them” and that are “thinking beyond themselves about the problems they want to impact.”

What follows is a short overview of the three elements of the model—passion, capability, and connection—plus strategies that independent school faculty can use to help students to develop each.

**Passion:**

*Public Service Helps Students Find a Transcendent Purpose*

One of the great joys of my life has been to work with global youth leaders. There is something unusually alive about people who have found an animating purpose. As British poet John Keats observed: “That creature has a purpose and its eyes are bright with it.” Independent school faculty understand the importance of education possessing a public as well as private purpose. When I conducted a survey last year at the Kinkaid School in Texas, I found that 92% of the faculty and administration considered students developing “a commitment to making a positive difference in their communities and world” to be important or highly important, while 87% felt the same about schools helping students “develop a sense of purpose.” That shouldn’t be surprising. Faculty typically don’t sign up to be educators exclusively to teach content. They also want to light a fire. Here are three strategies that independent school public service initiatives can use to stoke student passion.
Passion Strategy #1: Integrate Public Service into the Academic Curriculum

Integrating service-learning into the academic curriculum can appear challenging to faculty, especially at the secondary level. One of the overlooked reasons is the tension that exists between going out on a limb to try a radically different teaching model, and at the same time, in a prestigious school setting, wanting to be perfect and never make mistakes. I would argue that it is still worth the effort. It provides the most direct route for students to see the relevance of their classroom learning. In a wonderful piece of research with a cumbersome title of “Boring but Important: A Self-Transcendent Purpose for Learning Fosters Academic Self-Regulation,” the authors concluded that having a self-transcendent purpose for learning can help students to be self-disciplined, to persist, and to excel at tasks that might otherwise become tiresome. Think about what happens when a high school biology class studying stream ecology not only visits a local river, but also collects water quality samples and data that will be given to the state department of natural resources to help shape policy. Students are no longer only studying biology. They are biologists. They are not just in school waiting to someday play a role in adult society. They are active citizens now. They still want to achieve a high grade, but learning is more engaged and meaningful. As one service-learning student once told me, “You have to care to do your very best work. It makes you want to be more than you are.”

Passion Strategy #2: Make the Impact Visible

Students are more likely to develop a sense of purpose when they can see, touch, and feel the immediate impact of their service efforts. That visibility is most obvious when there is a tangible product or service. Consider these examples. When rural Pennsylvania fourth graders found there was no textbook for studying their town’s local history, they wrote and published a book themselves that became adopted district-wide. When middle school students on the Washington coast saw an unused strip of land beside their campus, they converted it into a migratory bird feeding station that became a focus of their science curriculum.

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And when Advanced Computer Science high school students in New York City offered their skills to a top-rated local hospital, they ended up creating an app now used to track concussion symptoms and recovery. In all these situations, impact was self-evident. These examples mirror Howard Gardner’s definition of intelligence as “the ability to craft culturally valued products and performances.” There are other public service projects, however, where progress is slow and difficult to measure. Feeling you are making an impact while cross-age tutoring, for example, may require a nudge. One Minnesota high school solved this riddle by creating professional looking “assistant teacher” badges that their students would wear when volunteering in the elementary school, and holding occasional “staff meetings” where the host teacher could offer tangible feedback, problem-solving, and encouragement.

Passion Strategy #3: Build Passion Projects into the System

Schools can create an ongoing space where all students will be ensured an opportunity to work on passion projects in a single class, in advisory, in senior capstone projects, in the whole school, and, in today’s pandemic era, virtually. At the classroom level, one Minnesota high school developed a yearlong sophomore English assignment where students individually selected a topic that they are passionate about, conducted research on, and then used the information to take some helpful action. Examples included a female classmate who felt concerned that many of her friends were pursuing unhealthy crash diets and wanted to explore and share the physiological dangers involved. A second student surveyed her classmates about school stress and proposed a new PE elective course that would focus on yoga, meditation, and breathing.

With the coronavirus currently restricting in-person contact, there is a strong interest in how to shift to virtual public service projects. Schools are seeking ways to perpetuate helping opportunities that support both engaged learning and student mental health amid the lockdowns. The Emery/Weiner School in Houston, in one compelling example, is currently constructing a weeklong interfaith virtual conversation in January that will bring together their twelfth grade students with Muslims, Druze, Israeli Jews, and Christians in the Middle East. The Emery/Weiner students and their international “classmates” will then use what they learn to develop and test ideas to build greater interfaith understanding and peace.

Whole schools can also adopt an ongoing passion project that matches their core mission, values, and place. Punahou School in the Hawaiian Islands, for instance, possesses a school-wide K-12 ethic around sustainability that is a perfect fit given its geographic location amongst some of the world’s most beautiful but fragile fauna, flora, and ocean shoreline. Punahou is working towards a zero-net impact on its 76-acred campus and to becoming a global educational model for
sustainable facilities design, programs, and K-12 teaching philosophies.

**Capability:**

*Public Service Helps Students Develop Their Capacity to Impact the World*

When a young Abraham Lincoln declared: “I will study and get ready and perhaps my chance will come,” he intuitively understood that service requires both a calling and a capability. That is particularly true today when there are hugely complex issues facing our nation (such as how to heal our racial and political divisions) and our world (such as how to fulfill the United Nation’s Sustainable Development Goals). These challenges require connecting passion with a plentiful mixture of knowledge, skill, creative confidence, and a belief that change is possible. What follows are three ways that public service activities can act as a platform for students to develop their capability to tackle such predicaments.

**Capability Strategy #1: Honor Student Agency**

I once facilitated a panel discussion at a New England service-learning conference where a middle school boy named Alex shared the story about how he and his classmates researched and created a plan for how the school cafeteria could operate in a more environmentally sustainable way. Somewhat to his surprise, the school accepted and implemented many of their ideas. When the boy was done speaking, I asked him what the impact of that experience was. His answer? “I thought that if I can do that in the seventh grade, I’ll be able to do anything in my life.” The transforming element in high quality public service for Alex and many others is that when they are given the opportunity to take responsibility and ownership to implement a project, they discover, sometimes for the first time, their own voice and power.

**Capability Strategy #2: Help Students Identify and Know How to Use Their Superpower**

I’ve long thought that most people in the United States discover their strengths around age 40 and their weaknesses by age 12. If you ask students to name their superpowers, many won’t know how to answer.

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superpowers, many won’t know how to answer. What they are able to do is identify their interests or hobbies. I learned from global youth leaders that most anything people love to do can become a lever to change the world. I’ve seen young people turn their passion for fashion, soccer, robotics, bicycles, and even “having fun” into a tool for good. Floridian Michael Long loved sailing and wanted to change the juvenile justice system. How do you connect those two dots? First, someone gave him a 65-foot sailboat that he renamed “Defy the Odds #SailForJustice.” Then Michael recruited a crew of level 4 and 5 serious offenders from the Florida juvenile justice system that he could teach to navigate the sailboat, who would work on their GED at night (their high school equivalency exam), and perform community service projects at ports of call on Caribbean islands. His hope was first to support teenagers to turn their lives around, but also to use the results to demonstrate to juvenile justice officials that there are more hopeful and imaginative paths to rehabilitation.

Independent schools can help their students to become superheroes by helping them identify and grow their unique talents and how they can be used for good. A fourth grade teacher at Trinity School, for example, asked her students to identify and draw posters of themselves as superheroes and name the superpower they possessed to change the world. Their delightful and insightful responses included the “Forgive Girl,” “Super Optimist: Spread the Positive Energy,” “Super Wrestler: I Tackle Problems,” and “The Creative Logician: Take Initiative and Think Math.”

Capability Strategy #3: Teach Innovation

Independent schools are increasingly teaching design thinking (a strategy for innovation) and building innovation labs or maker spaces (a place for innovation). Students are invited to combine empathy, ethnography, the arts, science, high-tech equipment, design, and engineering to test ideas, create inventions, and tackle real-life challenges. They may solve problems ranging from how to organize the catsup and mustard in a middle school cafeteria to avoid a mess, to how to create a device that will help a preschooler with spina bifida to be more mobile, to how to build stronger
relationships across racial groups within the school. These types of projects reflect that the world today values not just what you know, but what you can do with what you know. It is for this reason that companies like Google now pay much less attention when hiring to people’s college transcripts, GPA, and college pedigree. Their research reveals that those traditional metrics are often poor predictors for people’s actual job performance.

At the Nueva School in the San Francisco Bay Area, 72% of the students spend time in their fully stocked Innovation Lab each week. The school offers opportunities from the earliest grades for students to learn how to solve problems that by their nature require creative solutions. For example, first graders participate in an architectural unit studying famous figures such as Frank Lloyd Wright. They then select a faculty member or employee anywhere on campus who interests them. Their job is to visit that person’s office workspace, conduct an interview, make observations, and watch how they operate. Finally, they share recommendations on how the workspace might be better organized. The assignment is not unusual for Nueva K-12 students because the school is a pioneer in integrating design-thinking methodology into every grade level. Nueva’s self-proclaimed goal is for students to “develop the mindset to identify situations where they can better the world, and design thinking gives them the tools and resolve to take action.”

Connection: Public Service Helps Students Understand Their Community

Sitting on the sidewalk cafes of São Paulo, Rafael Henrique Siqueira Rodrigues would notice the wastepickers walk by with their wooden carts. Deciding to make a difference with a group that is often homeless and lacks financial security, Rafael took an unusual step. He quit his well-paying job as an engineer and became a wastepicker himself for six months. He reasoned that he would not be able to make an impact if he didn’t understand the people, how they did their work, how they lived, their background, their needs and their dreams. Although the wastepickers would not talk to him for the first two months, he persisted and eventually gained their confidence enough to form an organized cooperative that would offer them a chance to change their own lives. Today he does the same work throughout Brazil.

If Rafael is a superhero, then his superpower is empathy. His life illustrates that a deep understanding of your community is essential. Rafael possessed the passion for helping the wastepickers and he had the capability as an engineer to redesign their work processes. But to fulfill his purpose, he needed a third element—an intimate connection to these people. That quality is important whether you are in Brazil or in Texas. When I surveyed the faculty of the Kinkaid School about the importance of 11 desir-
able student outcomes, their number one ranked item was “developing empathy and other social emotional skills.” Ninety nine percent of faculty and administrators considered that to be important or very important. One English faculty member at Kinkaid demonstrated that belief by enhancing the teaching of *King Lear* and its central theme of aging with a visit to a local senior center. Afterwards, one classroom parent wrote:

Thank you, thank you, thank you for taking the time and making the effort to do the service-learning project at the Belmont today! I wish you could have seen the smile on my daughter’s face and heard the excitement in her voice as she described how transformative the experience was for her. The way you structured the experience around conversations (not art projects) allowed the students to connect with the residents. I was amazed how much she learned about Edwina and Meg, the two women she met! She is eager to return to the senior home with the Choir for their annual concert/visit. It sounds like Edwina and Meg are already making plans to attend. At a time when I know there are so many pressures to learn ‘more’ and ‘faster,’ I appreciate you prioritizing this type of learning.

Connection Strategy #1: Form Ongoing Community Partnerships

Trinity School invests heavily in getting to know its neighbors on the upper west side of New York City. Rather than one-time “drive-by volunteering” episodes, they have formed ongoing Community Circle Partners with 15 organizations where the personal and organizational relationships continue and deepen every year. At many hours of the day you might see students with a free period crossing the street to help out in a Head Start pre-school program, working with neighbors in an all-volunteer community garden two blocks away, or sponsoring a popular bingo night for nearby seniors. American education is sometimes criticized for being “information rich and experience poor.” These types of activities can help restore a better balance and give students a hands-on ‘textbook’ to complement classroom learning.
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hands-on “textbook” to complement classroom learning.

Connection Strategy #2: View Friendship as Service

Parker Palmer defines community as our “capacity for connectedness.” People in our society, however, are too often segregated by age, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, country of origin, disability, and religion. We often live in different neighborhoods, attend different faith gatherings, send our children to different schools, and even go to different hospitals when we are sick. Public service can help provide a space where people can cross those boundaries. It matters, of course, how we engage. As author Rachel Naomi Remen warns: “Helping, fixing, and serving represent three different ways of seeing life. When you help, you see life as weak. When you fix, you see life as broken. When you serve, you see life as whole. Fixing and helping may be the work of the ego, and service the work of the soul.”

A soulful public service approach reflects a view that the surrounding community is not defined as a place of unmet needs, but as a source of inspiration, learning, friendship, and collaboration. In line with that, Trinity School’s enduring principles to guide their public service work include “We are guided by the idea of accompaniment, or walking with others and put relationships first,” and “We believe in the power of friendship as the foundation of social change.” In an example of service as friendship, each classroom in one San Francisco elementary school researches, selects, honors, and interviews a “neighborhood angel” that has made their surrounding community better. In New York City, third graders studying immigration interview people in their community and school that were born elsewhere to learn from their unique journeys. Such projects offer recognition and enjoyment to local residents, while implicitly changing the grammar of school by redefining who is a teacher and where knowledge is stored.

Connection Strategy #3: Use Reflection as a Tool for Spiritual Growth

Public service is not just about changing the world. It’s also about changing one’s self. There is a spiritual dimension to this
work that can promote young people re-thinking who they are, their place in the larger world, the stereotypes they hold of other people, and their future life plans. Reflection is a powerful and necessary tool for how students put all this together. As 16th century French philosopher Montaigne wrote: “In the experience I have of myself, there is enough to make me wise if I were a good enough scholar.” The challenge is that most of us are not very good scholars of our own experience.

I once facilitated a workshop where I was asked if I was willing to share the stage with a seven-year-old. I jumped at the chance but asked to speak to his family beforehand. I learned that Jonathan had helped a classmate with severe disabilities being integrated into the first grade on a part-time basis. His parents described Jonathan as very bright and someone for whom school came easily. He took for granted his ability to learn quickly. In fact, he didn’t understand why others couldn’t learn. What Jonathan shared below illustrates how service activities can help students better understand the people and world around them.

Hi. My name is Jonathan. I help a little girl named Asia in our school. When she needs to get around I push her in her wheelchair because she can’t walk. In the morning I teach her to take off her coat. I help her by telling her where to look so she can see pictures of stories we read. Sometimes I go to her class-room and play the computer with her. She also taught me some things. She taught me how to do sign language. I also learned how to be patient. It’s okay if something takes you a long time to learn. Asia can learn just as much as I can in a different way. It is an important job for me. I really help her. I have to be careful and think when I’m with her so she doesn’t get hurt. My teachers help teach me and my class how to help Asia. We like having her do things with us. I like Asia. She is my friend.

Conclusion: Finding Your Purpose

In an age when our differences are often a cause for division, even hate, public service
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provides a way to bring people together, build unexpected friendships, create a more compassionate and just world, and offer youth an opportunity to better get to know both their community and themselves. All of that echoes the words of English poet William Blake about life’s purpose: “...we are put on this earth a little space. That we may learn to bear the beams of love.” For younger children, that beam may be growing the roots of a lifelong prosocial ethic. For older students, the beam may be an opportunity to replace teenage alienation and cynicism with an excitement and curiosity about what a meaningful future life might look like. And for our communities, the beam may be a way to both tap the talent and creativity of young people and in return to educate them. Thinking back to Allman’s warnings about schools becoming only “credentialing factories” for a cognitive elite, public service may ultimately expand the very definition of self-interest into something deeper, more adventurous, and ultimately more soul satisfying.

Reference


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