



Stephen A. Privett, S.J.
California Campus Compact Executive Board Chair

The President of the University of San Francisco shares his views on higher education's public service role – the opportunities, the challenges and his personal commitment

Thirty years ago, as a doctoral student in Catechetics, Stephen Privett, S.J., traveled to El Salvador for the first time. He witnessed first hand the economic injustice, human rights abuse and military repression that led to a 12-year civil war in which 75,000 people lost their lives and more than one million were displaced. His visit occurred not long after the murders of four churchwomen from the United States and the assassination, as he was celebrating a memorial mass for a friend's mother, of Archbishop of San Salvador Oscar Romero. The churchwomen had come to El Salvador to care for victims of the war, including many war-orphaned children, while Romero, a nominee for the 1979 Nobel Peace Prize and an outspoken critic of El Salvador's military, was widely known as a voice of the voiceless for his work defending the Salvadoran people.



Privett returned to the United States changed from his experience in El Salvador – with a much greater sense of responsibility to the poor and a firm belief that the experiences of the oppressed and poor should be at the center of education.

Soon after, he joined the faculty of Santa Clara University and co-founded the Eastside Project, a program that has received national recognition as a model community-based learning program. Later, on sabbatical for nine months, he traveled again to El Salvador to aid internal refugees caught in the violence of the civil war.

In 2000, after 14 years at Santa Clara University, including time as Provost and Vice President of Academic Affairs, Privett was appointed President of the University of San Francisco. Privett chose for his inaugural motto, “Educating for a Just Society.” A decade into his tenure at this 8,000-student campus in the heart of San Francisco, he remains a dedicated champion for the poor and disenfranchised, and steadfast in his belief that “the best education is one that includes the realities of the world.”

California Campus Compact is pleased to welcome President Privett as the new Chair of the California Campus Compact Executive Board. In anticipation of President Privett assuming his new role, we sat down with him to learn more about his views on higher education’s public service role, how he came to understand and care about the importance of service and what he sees as the challenges and opportunities around community engaged scholarship. Highlights from our May 2010 conversation follow.

How did you come to understand and care about the importance of service?

As a graduate student, in an effort to avoid having to learn German to get my Ph.D., I persuaded the department to let me take Spanish instead. Then I found out that the best Spanish program was in Cochabamba, Bolivia. This was 1982, and I had never been to Latin America before. While I was in Bolivia, martial law was declared so I found myself in this unbelievable situation of a right-wing military coup. It was quite an awakening – to learn how incredibly repressive this government was. My insights came from my contact with people in the

streets – indigenous men and women who were selling wares in the marketplace. Then, on my way back to the United States, I stopped in El Salvador. This was not long after the murder of Archbishop Oscar Romero and the four churchwomen from the United States. In El Salvador, I was the guest of a priest who worked with marginalized communities in rural areas. So I saw this incredible level of repression. And I was so touched by the people’s stories that I later returned during the civil war to work with refugees and had the experience that many of our students have, which is as you go to help, you find out that you

do more learning about reality than you do actual helping. So I felt analogously that this experience ought to be replicable – it should be able to be scaled down and repeated and become integral to the university learning experience.

And you had the opportunity to promote this kind of work when you joined the faculty of Santa Clara University?

When I was hired at Santa Clara University in 1985, it was with the understanding that I and another Jesuit, Sonny Manuel, would be able to promote this kind of community-based learning. So it’s quite autobiographical in that I was so struck by how much I learned and how rich these experiences were that I thought this kind of experience needed to be a part of everybody’s university education. Our work at Santa Clara University started out as the East Side Project, and it’s since been transfigured into the Arrupe Center for Community-based Learning. Initially, we got all kinds of push-back from academics – you can’t give credit for this kind of stuff, Stanford isn’t doing it, etc. I guess we were ahead of our time.

In the decade that you have been President of the University of San Francisco, what changes have you seen in the service-learning and civic engagement movement in higher education in California?

The major change since I’ve been involved in service-learning is its recognition and acceptance by the academic community as an important and viable learning resource. Initially, academics tended to look at this work as volunteering or cheap labor for non-profits. Now I think they are realizing these experiences are a pretty rich text from which students have much to learn, provided that the experiences are linked to classroom analysis



and reflection. I think one of the challenges in service-learning is to ensure that there is quality reflection and analysis – the recognition that it is about learning; it’s not about volunteering. When I first arrived at USF in 2000, one of my pleasant surprises was that as the faculty worked to develop the new core curriculum, service-learning was included as a part of the core learning experience that every single undergraduate student was required to have. I think that was a huge leap forward. In some institutions, it’s an option or it’s even seen as an add-on. At USF, it’s seen as quite integral to what the undergraduate learning experience should include.

How can Presidents and Chancellors encourage more community-engaged research and pedagogy focused toward the public good?

Certainly, Presidents and Chancellors can lead by example by being engaged in their communities and by alluding to the significance and importance of service-learning in talks and presentations. At USF, over the last seven years, we have taken our Leadership Team – President, Provost, Vice Presidents and Deans – to Nicaragua, Tijuana and El Salvador. We see these experiences as essential for college leaders. Before our trips, we arrange a weeklong schedule of site visits and presentations by experts, members of the local community and people affected by the social issues we want to explore. Our week in Tijuana, for example, focused on border issues of immigration and the maquila sector of the economy. We spent our days visiting slums, clinics, the community library, a border assembly plant and a shelter for immigrants who fail at border crossings. We listened to presentations on border issues from a variety of people: a U.S. immigration official, an American lawyer who works for immigrant rights, a factory owner, a university president, a Mexican union organizer, a Catholic nun working with displaced women and children who have repeatedly failed to cross the border, and emigrants, who spoke of the desperate and deadly poverty that they were fleeing. Each evening before dinner, we reflected together over a glass of wine on what we had heard and seen and the implications for our various areas of responsibility.

I think the more familiar you are with the reality of service-learning – how it works, what’s important to it – the more you will see the opportunities to promote it. It’s a question of how strongly you believe in it. If you believe in it, then you will spend time trying to affect it.

People often ask me, “What do you hope to accomplish with these expensive immersion experiences for the leadership team?” I explain, first of all, that such experiences are not expensive; in fact, they are significantly less costly than an administrative retreat at any of a number of conference centers. Second, I do not expect that such experiences will lead immediately to new programs and significant changes in university requirements or policies. What I hope is that university leaders will develop an increased sensitivity to the heartbreaking struggles of the 1.8 billion people whose daily struggle is simply to stay alive.

Our experiences put us face to face with the gross global inequities that are the context of our educational efforts. The Spanish word for this is *conscientizacion* – a process of developing a deepening and profound personal awareness of the world, and of our consequent responsibility and capacity to change it for the better. Immersion experiences reinforce the urgency and significance of

that insight, and shape the decisions and direction that our Vice Presidents and Deans set for their units.

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What do you see as California Campus Compact’s primary role in helping to create an enduring capacity for higher education’s public service role in California?

I think California Campus Compact’s responsibility is to help universities understand their responsibility, and that this is not an add-on; it’s not a fad; it’s not a trend. It’s an integral part of what students need to learn in the course of their college experience. They need to understand what the world looks like from the perspective of the people for whom the world does not work well at all. We’re never going to solve the problems if we’re not aware of the problems – the widening gap between



the rich and the poor, the wide disparity of lifestyles between Southern Africa and San Francisco. And the first step toward solving these problems is understanding that universities are about learning. We're not social action groups, we're not soup kitchens. We're places where people teach and learn and do research that help address these problems, and I think we need to create a culture where these problems increasingly become the focus of how to do research. But that's not going to happen if we're not engaged in these issues. Research questions don't come out of nowhere. They come out of people's experiences.

In your view, what are the biggest challenges and opportunities facing the service-learning field today?

The underlying questions of higher education today should be: How does what our institutions are doing with the 1 percent of the world who are our students affect the other 99 percent? What is our role in helping our students be humanly in this world? We cannot educate in a vacuum. We cannot educate as though our focus is simply the 1 percent that we happen to have here at this moment. It has to be how is what we're doing with this 1 percent going to affect the lives of the 99 percent. The challenge, particularly now with the weak economy, is that people tend to resort back to a kind of rugged individualism. This puts a real strain on the social fabric. I think the fundamental reality is that we're all interrelated, and that we move forward together. We're not an aggregate of individuals; we are a community out of which some individuals take on higher visibility roles. There's a proverb, "If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together." I think it's the long-term progress that we're going to do together; we're not going to do it as individuals. I think service-learning has a really important role to play in terms of our sense of responsibility for one another. I believe that's a very important learning outcome to which service-learning makes a unique contribution.

CV In Brief: Stephen A. Privett, S.J.

Major Field of Study: Catechetics/Religious Education

Minor Fields of Study: Theology, Modern European History, Philosophy

Education

The Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C.
Ph.D., "with distinction," 1985
M.A., Catechetics/Religious Education, 1982

University of California, Santa Barbara
Graduate Studies: Modern European History, 1973-1974

Jesuit School of Theology
Graduate Theological Union
Berkeley, California
M. Div., 1972

Gonzaga University
Spokane, Washington
B.A., 1966
Philosophy and Classics

Administrative Experience

President
University of San Francisco, 2000-present

Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs
Santa Clara University, 1997-2000

Vice President for Academic Affairs
Santa Clara University, 1991-1997

Director
Voice of the Voiceless: Institute on Human Rights and Social Justice
Santa Clara University, 1989-1991

Co-Director
The Eastside Project
Santa Clara University, 1985-1991

Principal
Bellarmine College Preparatory
San Jose, California, 1975-1980

Professional Service

Chair, California Campus Compact Executive Board

Trustee, Schools of the Sacred Heart

Member, Board of Governors of the Commonwealth Club of California,

Board of Directors: the American Council on Education, Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities, the Fromm Institute, Seattle University Trustee

How do you believe community engaged scholarship should be recognized?

I think it's important that service-learning not be relegated to the service side of the portfolio. I think it has to be part of teaching, it has to be part of research, and clearly it is involved in service. But I think those three should blend together. When it really works, the distinctions are not so easily made. Is it service? Is it teaching? Is it research? Well, yes, it can be all three. An economics professor at USF recently told me that both he and his students have never learned more than when service-learning is part of the coursework. He said, "I can't tell whether I'm teaching or whether I'm doing research or service because we're providing a service, but it's an incredibly rich learning experience and I'm doing research on the impact of this work." I think that's the perfect product – this integrated understanding. It would feel very artificial if you tried to separate the teaching from the research from the service.

What are the bold moves you would like to see within the service-learning and civic engagement field in the next five years?

I think Campus Compact offering the Diving Deep Institute for experienced service-learning practitioners is an important move because it provides the human catalysts on our campuses with the opportunity to move the field forward. I think expanding the notion of service-learning to embrace developing countries would be a bold move. Overall, I think that the colleges and universities that are members of California Campus Compact have the opportunity to offer an educational model that rewrites the script for higher education so that academic rigor, social responsibility and

human development are not viewed as competing claims, but as the complementary components of an excellent education that makes a unique contribution to fashioning a more humane and just world for all. ♦