Many “Maines”

Throughout my time at Bowdoin, I have learned how to think about service, how to contextualize my experiences with service, and how to create connections through service that allow myself and others to gain knowledge and challenge perspectives while being sensitive to the needs and structures of a community. And yet, all of this personal development and understanding only became possible once I was able to move beyond my narrow definition of Maine and actively try to learn from other communities in my home state. With aspirations to study international economics, African history, and development policy, I never thought that the strongest lessons I would learn from college would come from people and places so close to home.

As a first year at Bowdoin, I struggled to move beyond the conception of Maine that I had grown up with. For me, Maine was a place of struggling mill towns, backwoods roads, and hard-working people. As I was confronted with new and striking examples of privilege at Bowdoin, I didn’t really know how to react. I was frustrated that many of my Bowdoin peers had grown accustomed to lifestyles and opportunities that would never be available to folks from my hometown. I tried to take pride in my upbringing but I found that it was hard to do so without feeling anger towards some of my more affluent, worldly, and more confident peers. Furthermore, I concluded that because of their privilege Bowdoin students had no idea what my state was like. In their minds, I generalized, Maine was a quaint place characterized by L.L. Bean, tourists, and lobsters. Although they were technically living in Maine, being at Bowdoin didn’t give them an understanding of what real Maine was like.

As I spent more time at Bowdoin, however, I began to realize that I, too, needed to expand my knowledge of different communities in Maine. Washington County, Midcoast and
Southern Maine were still places that I knew little to nothing about and I began to realize how hypocritical I had been in my views of my Bowdoin peers. There were struggles and nuances that were unique to these communities, too, and I was grossly ignorant of so many aspects of these areas in my home state. I made a commitment to reading local and Southern Maine news and slowly but surely started to find other ways to build up my knowledge of the people and places around me, altering and expanding my definition and awareness of what types of things make up other Maine communities.

It was in this early search for a better understanding of different places in my home state that I began to learn about the recent movement of immigrant and refugee populations into Lewiston and Portland. Never before had my concept of Maine included so many people from other countries and cultures across the world. I began tutoring at a study center that provides services to residents in one of Portland’s public housing neighborhoods, the majority of whom are from immigrant and/or refugee background. An alternative winter break trip that focused on educational supports for refugee communities in Maine allowed me to have further chances to learn from these communities and some of the organizations that assist them. A new connection with Portland Adult Education formed out of this trip and I was able to work alongside adult learners in an ESL English composition course as they strived to gain the language skills necessary to navigate life in Maine and to support themselves and their families. I now anxiously await my post-graduate research plans with Portland Adult Education to look into the challenges and language barriers preventing refugees from obtaining upward economic mobility in Maine as measured not only by data and statistics, but also by conversations and ethnographies that I will conduct with English language learners in Portland.
In my last two years at Bowdoin I have worked to shape different programs and service activities in order to help other students learn from communities in the same ways that I have only begun to do myself. Instead of being angry when folks at Bowdoin know little about Maine I have instead tried to create opportunities for students to get to know more about a new community during their time at Bowdoin. I have put together community immersion trips for first year students in hopes this early exposure to a Maine community will encourage students to seek to expand their knowledge of the areas and populations around them while at Bowdoin and beyond. I have coordinated and led a number of short-term service trips across the state that were structured with the express purpose of providing not only service but important context to the service in order to generate greater understanding of the partnering communities. I have even chartered a club that aims to create conversation and connection with different people and places in Maine by bringing Bowdoin students to contra dances in the greater Brunswick area. Most people might not think of New England folk dancing as something related to public service but I see all types of community interaction as being essential to the concept of public service. We cannot begin to understand the needs of a community when we have no exposure to its values, people, geography, struggles, and sense of pride.

As I look back on my four years at Bowdoin I am amazed at what I have been able to learn through service without even having to leave my home state. Public service is about learning from people and communities. It is about having conversations. It is about taking the responsibility to be engaged with and aware of the places around us. I can only hope that the lessons that I have learned from all areas of Maine will continue to shape my interactions with any community I find myself in, whether in Maine or beyond.
Bowdoin College Upward Bound
Teaching assistant/resident assistant (summer 2010) – provided summer academic/college readiness support to Maine high school students of low income/first generation college background.

McKeen Center Community Immersion Orientation Trips
North Haven Island trip leader 2010
Summer Fellow 2011 - coordinated four community immersion trips for incoming first years
Summer Fellow 2012-coordinated ten community immersion trips for incoming first years

Alternative Spring Break
Participant 2010 (Urban education in NYC)
Trip leader 2011 (Housing assistance in rural Mississippi)
McKeen Fellow Fall Semester 2011 – ASB program oversight, helped to coordinate leader seminar series
Trip Leader 2013 (Lessons from the Passamaquoddy)

Alternative Winter Break
Participant 2011 (Refugee Education)
Trip Leader 2012 – coordinated a similarly structured trip and seminar preparation on refugee educational supports in Maine, connected with Portland Adult Education, Lyman Moore Middle School, Community Financial Literacy, and Portland Housing Authority

Portland Adult Education
Weekly classroom volunteer (spring 2011) in an English composition course for adult ESL learners from immigrant & refugee backgrounds
Funded summer economics research (upcoming summer 2013) connection with Portland Adult Education, looking into role of language supports in providing economic mobility for refugee communities in Maine

Portland Housing Authority Tutoring
Participant 2010 – provided weekly tutoring to students ages 5-18 of primarily immigrant and refugee background at one of Portland Housing Authority’s study centers
Club leader 2011-2013 – coordinated Bowdoin volunteers/transportation in order to send groups of students to the study center Monday through Thursday of every week.

Let’s Get Ready
Summer volunteer 2011 – provided SAT math tutoring and college coaching to low income Portland teens

CA$H Coalition
Community based course volunteer 2013 – Greeted low income clients seeking assistance in filing their taxes, took general intake, provided information on heating assistance, the Earned Income Tax Credit, and other programs.

Student Fellow for Native Communities in Maine
McKeen Fellow 2012-2013: Worked to explore and expand Bowdoin’s connections with and knowledge of the Wabanaki communities in Maine.

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