

BOISI CENTER INTERVIEWS



NO. 125: SEPTEMBER 13, 2016



MEGHAN SWEENEY, associate professor of the practice of theology, joined the Boston College faculty in 2006 to teach in the PULSE Program for Service Learning. In June 2014, she became the program's Cooney Family Director. Sweeney is also active in parish ministry as an Episcopal priest. She came to the Boisi Center to discuss the PULSE program and service learning and spoke with Boisi Center interim director **Erik Owens** before her presentation.

OWENS: What are the core components of the PULSE program and how big is it?

SWEENEY: The PULSE Program for Service Learning is an interdisciplinary program in the philosophy and theology departments of Boston College. Our main course is the core-level course. It satisfies the philosophy and theology core requirements for students. We also offer about seven or eight elective courses. This academic year, we have capacity for about 500 students total in the program.

OWENS: Is PULSE an acronym?

SWEENEY: No, it is not. If there was any story behind the naming of the program, it has been lost to history. Sometimes students try to come up with what it could stand for, but as far as collective wisdom knows, it is not an acronym for anything.

OWENS: What are students studying in PULSE?

SWEENEY: Because PULSE satisfies core-level requirements, the coursework is consistent with what you might expect in an introductory philosophy or theology course. The syllabi that instructors use are not standardized across the program, but there are significant similarities. Typically in the fall, for example, most professors in the program will study ancient Greek philosophy, as well as biblical texts, and then move into the modern period in the second semester. There

are often some more basic sociological texts also incorporated as ways to raise attention for some of the social justice concerns that students are experiencing at their community partner sites.



OWENS: What are some of the theological elements of the course?

SWEENEY: Many instructors try to tease out what it means to be a human being. What does God ask human beings to be and to do, both for themselves and their communities? What does justice look like in a theological framework? How do we live into a just society, a vision of the common good—and all the tensions that come up there?

OWENS: It seems the PULSE curriculum is split roughly between a study of the ancients and moderns. Does this work well?

SWEENEY: I think it flows very well. Depending on the particular topic that comes up, people will return to some

of the ancient texts. For example, in my own course in the spring semester, when we are looking at structural and social injustice, we return to deeper questions around free will. We have Aristotle return to the conversation.

OWENS: So you're reading these heavy hitters—the greats. Do you select primarily Western authors?

SWEENEY: Right now it's primarily western. I think sometimes different instructors will try to include nonwestern texts. My course reads the Bhagavad Gita in the spring. A couple of other professors include the Quran in some of their work. But it's much more in the western intellectual tradition.

OWENS: So after your students read these texts, they're asked to move outside of the classroom. Tell me about that part of the experience.

SWEENEY: The service component of the core PULSE course involves students serving at community partners for eight hours a week throughout the academic year. This core is a yearlong course. In September, students go through the process of making a mutual match with a community partner. And they will stay at that community partner through the end of May.

OWENS: How are BC students interacting with these community programs?

I imagine there are many different community partnership programs and students can serve them in a multitude of ways.

SWEENEY: Students can find themselves in a variety of community service placements. We try to have a variety to meet both student interest and also to invite students to push beyond some of the things they are already familiar with. We have students working in homeless shelters. We have students working in soup kitchens. We have students working with refugees and immigrants on ESOL, and with adult learners studying for the HiSET, which is the high school equivalency test. We have students working in after-school programs. We want students to find a place that will challenge them and that also fits well with their other interests, so that they have a good learning experience overall.

OWENS: Many students at BC and across the privileged American society that we live in treat service work as a requirement, while others sometimes view it as a way of life. What approach do you use to help your students think more critically about their volunteer experience—and perhaps to help them better understand the relationship between them and the people they are serving?

SWEENEY: This is one of the benefits of PULSE. Because of PULSE's philosophical and theological underpinnings, we are really able to explore how some of the underlying beliefs or values that have been informed by philosophy or theology manifest themselves in public policy decisions. What my colleagues and I do is address questions like: what is the core belief at play in a particular deployment of action? What is the social responsibility of an individual? What is the community's obligation to social action? What are some of the sources of these beliefs?

Many of our students have not experienced a program like PULSE before. The sustained service element is very different for most students. Eight hours

a week is different than four hours over a course of a semester. The ability to develop relationships with people, both the people coming to the various partners for whatever the agency may offer as well as the staff members, is very important. We consider our community partners as our partners in education. They play an enormous role in our students' education.

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OWENS: When the students go to their placement at a committed partner program, it seems they are not simply coming in and clicking the time clock and then running out and clicking the time clock again. Their experience there must be very meaningful to them. Can you describe the reflective process on the community partner's side?

SWEENEY: Each partner will engage with students differently. We do want students to be able to access their supervisors. Some partners will have bimonthly reflection groups with students, some may have a weekly check-in. We do want students always to have a touch point, though, with a particular supervisor that they can go to if they have questions. Some supervisors require journal entries

every week. We really leave it up to the supervisors to decide how to best engage with our students. What matters to us is that we know the supervisors are somewhat involved—or at least overseeing the staff members who may have direct access with our students.

OWENS: One of the core principles of PULSE is that students come back into the classroom and have weekly, reflective discussions with their classmates about their respective work experience. Can you describe this experience further and discuss the aims of this reflection when they are back on campus?

SWEENEY: Most literature in service learning will indicate that the critical reflection piece really connects the service experience with actual learning. If there is not a mechanism for that, there is no learning; it is just experience. Part of the PULSE curriculum is a one-hour discussion every week, which augments the three hours of the classroom time. That is an intentional space where students can share stories, struggles, and what they are learning at their community partner placement. They can ask questions, try to learn from and with each other, and discuss the connection with classroom material. It may connect with larger social justice issues. It's also an introspective space for students to share some part of themselves.

Within the curricular dimension many professors will require their students to complete assignments you might typically expect—an analytical paper, exams, etc. But many also will have journal components, process notes, things that really force a kind of introspective reflection, so that students are not just learning about ideas and concepts “out there” but are also thinking about how those things are impacting their own personal development.

OWENS: What do you see is the medium-term impact on students that go through PULSE? What is their trajectory?

SWEENEY: As a core-level course, we are certainly interested in raising these questions and concerns with students. We want them in the long term to gain a critical awareness of the various social justice issues that come up in class and continue to consider them in their own personal and professional lives. Whatever they end up doing, we want them to always be mindful of what they have learned this year and how their own and society's decisions have consequences for people. Some kind of ongoing civic engagement would be lovely. More awareness of social issues and a willingness to act or mobilize around those issues, either on campus or elsewhere, would also be really lovely. If we use the title of the course, Person and Social Responsibility, as a guide, ideally students will carry with them that their own flourishing as persons is deeply connected with the well-being of others in their various communities of belonging and participation.

OWENS: Is this an attempt to shape the whole person, as in the Jesuit formation mode?

SWEENEY: Yes.

OWENS: PULSE is a separate program and has an enthusiastic group of alumni who go through it and talk about how life changing it can be. Of course, I assume not everyone has that experience, but many do. When they are out of the program, if they are not completing a PULSE major, do they feel adrift again? Or do they leave PULSE with a feeling like this is a program that significantly shapes who they are now?

SWEENEY: I think for many students, they come to a much deeper understanding of themselves and social issues and their role as members of society. I think some students feel overwhelmed by what they have experienced, and integrating all they've learned can be challenging and difficult. So really, it depends on the student and how he or she is able to learn at that time from what he or she has



experienced. We do not know. We have never done a longitudinal study about the impact of PULSE.

How would you assess that kind of thing? A longstanding PULSE professor says we may not know its impact because, speaking theologically, the Spirit continues to act and move in the lives of our students. Maybe years down the road there will be something that will connect from their time in PULSE as they mature.

OWENS: What kind of changes have you made in the program or in the mode since you became director?

SWEENEY: For the most part, the structures have remained the same. Our framework seems to work—especially the PULSE Council, the leadership group of 18 students who have completed the PULSE core. These students are fantastic. The program could not exist without them. The process by which students enter into their community partnerships seems to have stayed the same. It is working right now, so if it's not broken, don't fix it. We have expanded the program somewhat. We received a significant gift from Robert Cooney and his wife Loretta a couple of years ago—he is a BC trustee and a graduate who wanted to expand PULSE. We have added two core sections (an additional 50 students) and an additional elective (about 12 students), and

also increased our program staff in the office. This expands PULSE's impact.

OWENS: What are your hopes for the future of the program?

SWEENEY: I would like to see PULSE help students become more politically active and civically engaged. I would love to have an elective on community organizing and political action. I would love to help launch students into the next part of their life better than perhaps we have been doing in the past.

We are turning 50 in three years, so I think there's starting to be some conversation around the future of PULSE. Do we continue doing what has worked? Do we try to help other faculty develop service-learning courses on campus? How can we be a better educational resource about social justice education for all BC students, not just students in PULSE? What is our capacity and our bandwidth? Those are all "to be determined." Our main focus right now is to facilitate our 500 students' learning through their service experiences.

OWENS: One final question: should all classes be service-learning classes?

SWEENEY: We are fortunate to have this element in PULSE. Because BC requires one year of philosophy and one year of theology, all students must take

those courses. But the freedom in this is that students have options in how they satisfy these core requirements. Students in PULSE have self-selected in, so it is the best of both worlds. BC's structural framework requires the core courses, and students who have chosen PULSE want it.

Maybe the larger question is what is the role of education in the university for social change, and what is the purpose of a university? And if it is to develop students who are civically minded, politically active individuals, then some form of engaged learning is probably a good idea. Because service learning consists of working with individuals in direct relationship with people who are somewhat marginalized, it is potentially dangerous to send students into settings if they are not properly equipped or if they don't want to be there. Thus, having a good disposition and a desire is an important part of this. So I would not want to push

someone into service learning if they did not want to do it. There are other ways to do engaged learning.

OWENS: Would it make more sense to do the PULSE core as a junior or a senior in order to help shape that disposition and that sense of readiness to engage? Or does the current model help students throughout the rest of their time at BC?

SWEENEY: To answer from a curricular perspective, I think delaying theology or philosophy class until junior or senior year is not a good plan. I think it is better to complete these courses in one's freshman or sophomore year. I think taking PULSE as a first-year student can have a significant impact on the curricular choices that students make and the kinds of majors that they pursue, as well as the kinds of concerns they develop. I personally would like to see more first-year students taking PULSE. I think incoming first-year students at BC are open

minded, sophisticated, and eager. I think those are good dispositions to have for engaging service learning.

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