

Extending Service-Based Learning Opportunities to Adult Students

[Craig Kielburger | Co-Founder, WE.org](#)



As increasing numbers of adults enroll in college and university programs, postsecondary leaders must find ways to adapt learning models to suit this demographic's needs and expectations.

Colleges and universities both play an essential role in their communities. They provide access to critical programming that help individuals reach their personal goals, whatever

they may be. Higher education institutions help individuals start, change or advance their careers, support the development of a compassionate and informed citizenry, and support the growth of their regions. However, the approach many institutions take to delivering this opportunity has remained effectively unchanged for centuries, despite the fact that learning models and student demographics have transformed dramatically.

In this interview, human rights activist and social entrepreneur Craig Kielburger — co-founder of the WE Charity — discusses the potential that service-learning models have to transform adult education, and reflects on what it takes for innovative leaders to affect change in stagnant environments.

The EvoLLLution (Evo): Can you provide a quick overview of what service-based learning actually is?

Craig Kielburger (CK): It's a form of experiential learning where we learn by doing, but in this case, through service. It takes the framework of connecting a cause to the core educational outcomes that any institution, whether it's elementary, middle, secondary or postsecondary. One tangible example of how service-based learning is being incorporated into the postsecondary space is our partnership with The College Board. TCB has created an Advanced Placement (AP) course, which translates to college credit, called AP With We Service.

In this course, students will learn computer science by coding apps for non-profits; they'll learn biology by testing water in the community; they'll learn Spanish by helping new immigrants fill out government forms. Within these service offerings, they are still within the core realm of their deliverables and academic learning outcomes, but they now have the hands-on applications as well, while making a difference on a meaningful social issue in their community.

Evo: While traditionally leveraged to support learning outcomes for youth, what are some of the benefits of offering service-based learning opportunities to adults?

CK: Adults who are going through applied learning bring an extraordinary wealth and depth of knowledge and experience. When they enroll in continuing education or advanced learning programs, they already have the passion and depth of knowledge that life experience has provided to them. Their ability to apply that makes a meaningful difference in their own academic journey and leads to higher retention and engagement with learning.

Service-based learning creates greater relevancy, connecting studies to something that matters has such a positive impact on someone's ability to retain, engage and deeply understand that information. Book-only learning is often not relevant to adults and those enrolled in continuing education learning programs. They want to apply their life experience and learn in a more meaningful way.

Evo: So why do these opportunities tend to not get extended to adult learners and professionals?

CK: Service learning as a whole is an embryonic concept. Ontario, for example, has a 40-hour community service requirement but not a service learning requirement. It's most often done in the very traditional way of helping at soup kitchens or supporting through a more transactional volunteer experience without necessarily any learning outcomes.

Experiential learning has seen a big push in the past 10 to 15 years since smartphones have transformed how we learn. After all, the smartphone means that memorizing information to regurgitate on a test is no longer the be-all and end-all in terms of learning outcomes and assessment.

We are now seeing the big push towards experiential learning with a service-based learning component in high schools and middle schools.

However, because universities and colleges are often more independently run and governed than, for example, the AP courses that run across 22,000 high schools, every individual college and university must opt into this new model. Bentley University, for example, has a Service-Learning Chair now, charged with infusing service learning throughout the institution. That's a very modern, proactive approach, but we're not seeing that same scale yet in the postsecondary space that we're seeing in secondary institutions.

Evo: What is the benefit of approaching new ideas like this as a group, rather than individually?

CK: Whenever we are bringing a new pedagogy to scale, there will always be stumbles along the way. There is a lot of learning and experimenting involved in applying this to diverse courses like calculus and English literature and we need a coordinated effort on behalf of postsecondary institutions in order to share best practices.

One of the advantages to creating a type of service learning coalition is it would allow a more collective understanding in the broader public around this concept. Right now, certain aspects like *magna cum laude* and *summa cum laude* have clearly communicated an accomplishment or distinction widely — outside the halls of higher education into society. Imagine that people understand a student's service learning-backed credential as sign of distinction of leadership and social commitment and that it's acknowledged by future employers.

It's part of a larger question around society and the purpose of education if we can create that wider coalition, that wider adoption.

Evo: What initial steps can a forward-thinking leader take to build a **Minga culture at their institution that facilitates sort of rapid and collaborative innovation.**

CK: The fundamental idea of the Minga is a subordinate goal, and so it starts with creating something that is greater than any one department, one faculty or one individual. Minga is the idea of something that's fundamental and that we all agree is the truth, something that rallies us towards that higher purpose and the higher calling.

It could be as simple as helping to achieve a record level of students graduation rates or a collective cause like tackling homelessness in the global community. Whatever it happens to be, we have to recognize the simple fundamental truth that we are all in this together, that we have strength in numbers, and that collective action is critical to achieving this higher outcome.

In Louisville, a number of the universities and colleges came together with the support of the mayor to create the kindest community, the kindest city. Multiple institutions decided to come together and create a citywide goal. They were serving new immigrants, local communities, asking how quickly they were able to find jobs or how embraced they felt in the community in a meaningful way. There was a clear blueprint. Everyone knew the key opportunities to make a difference and it created this very tangible, subordinate goal that everyone knew how to lean into in a very meaningful way.

Evo: Is there anything you'd like to add about the benefits of a service-learning culture — especially one that's geared towards adults — and what an institution can do to make it a reality?

CK:It fundamentally comes to the purpose of education, whether as an adult or as a young person. Access to information is limitless; we are carrying it in our pockets in smartphones. So is the university exclusively a place of higher learning, or is it also a place of higher purpose?

We are infusing the idea that the fundamental reason why we're learning is not only to get a job, it's not only to see the paycheck. At the end of the day we all are here to make a difference.

That can be from running a local business to providing our abilities in IT support to helping in construction and design and ensuring efficient infrastructure in our cities. But if our time here on earth is dedicated to something greater than just ourselves, then our postsecondary institutions should reinforce that by helping us connect to the greatest challenges of our time.

Fundamentally, the question of education is: "What challenge will you solve in society, helping connect people to the skills that they learn?" And, at the end of the day, the best way to do that is through a service-learning framework.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

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