Book Review

Academic Excellence with Civic Responsibility

The First Decade of Service-Learning at PolyU, PolyU Press, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University

Stephen Chan and Grace Ngai

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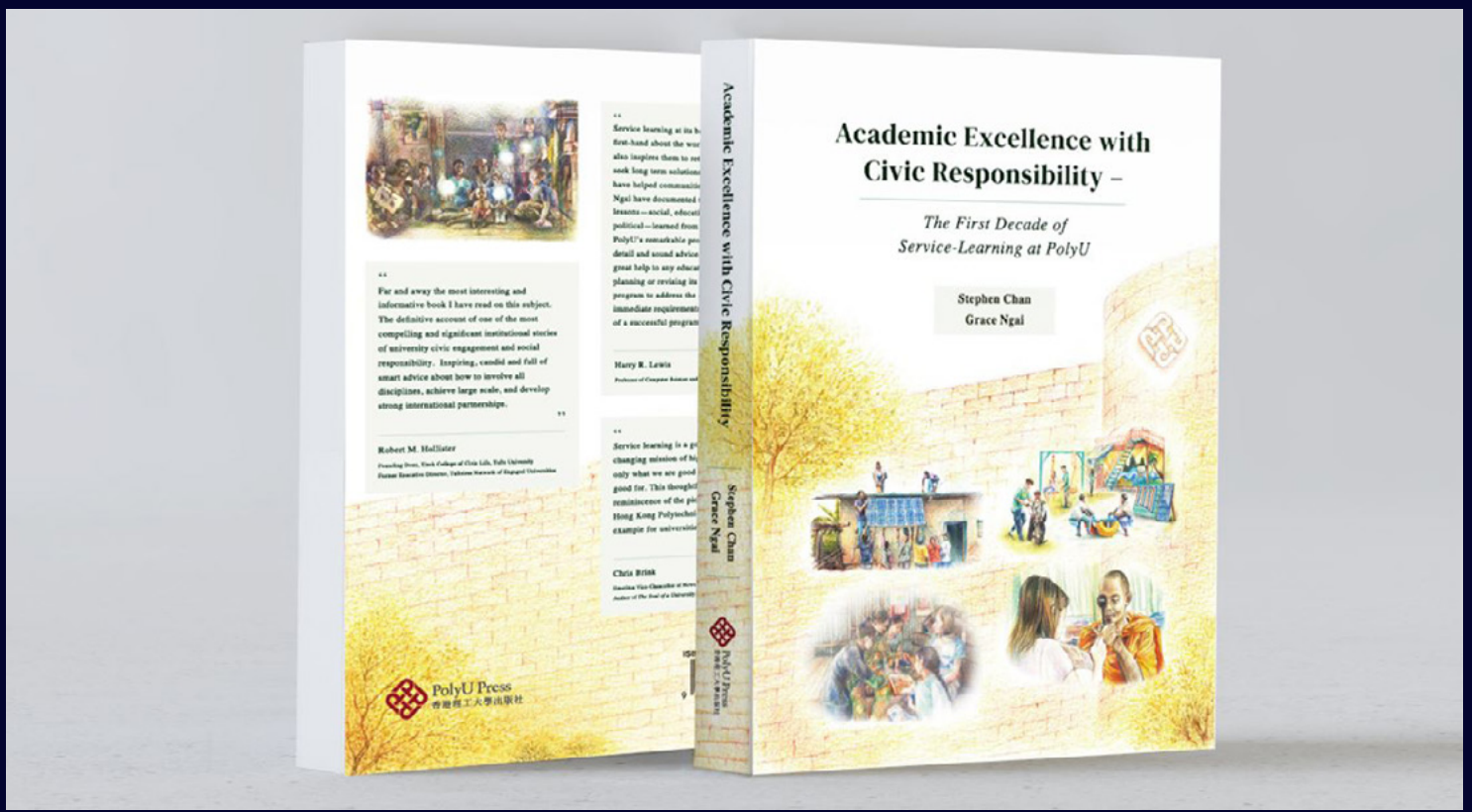


Academic Excellence with Civic Responsibility — The First Decade of Service-Learning at PolyU is an exceptionally informative and fresh contribution to the literature about higher education civic engagement and service-learning (SL).

This is a story of bold humility. Authored by the primary leaders of PolyU's initiative, it tells one of the most compelling accounts to date of university civic engagement and social responsibility.

Although PolyU's S-L experience already is broadly recognized and internationally influential, this book greatly expands its value and impacts. It is truly a "must read" for anyone seeking to expand or strengthen their institution's community engagement and public service efforts. I hope also that it may inspire similar accounts from other universities with regard to the "how" we can do this work more effectively.

In 2010, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University took a dramatic step – instituting a new graduation requirement that students in all fields of study complete a credit-bearing S-L course. In order to deliver on this pioneering vision, PolyU invested heavily in curriculum development and built the capabilities of faculty to teach S-L courses in all disciplines. As a result, the university now educates students who are competent in their chosen fields and have also acquired values and skills that make them agents of change in their communities.

Professors Chan and Ngai describe and analyze the origins and development of PolyU's uniquely comprehensive service-learning initiative, recounting how their institution made a transition from multiple student volunteer service projects to making S-L a signature feature of its curriculum. The authors start by describing why PolyU embarked on this ambitious journey. An early chapter describes how a faculty task force crafted a universal graduation-requirement proposal, summarizes the ensuing faculty debates, and the ultimate decision to proceed. Later sections describe a pilot phase and then a period of rapid growth, informed by initial experience. Notable is that from the very start the PolyU effort included international service-learning projects – first in Cambodia, then in Rwanda and several other countries.

The authors recount how they encouraged and supported the design of for-credit courses in a wide range of disciplines, and organized community service placements and partnerships with local and international NGOs. PolyU developed an Office of Service-Learning to provide vital organizational infrastructure – to train students, to build the capabilities of faculty, and to organize strong long-term community partnerships so that service projects maximize community benefits and educational productivity.

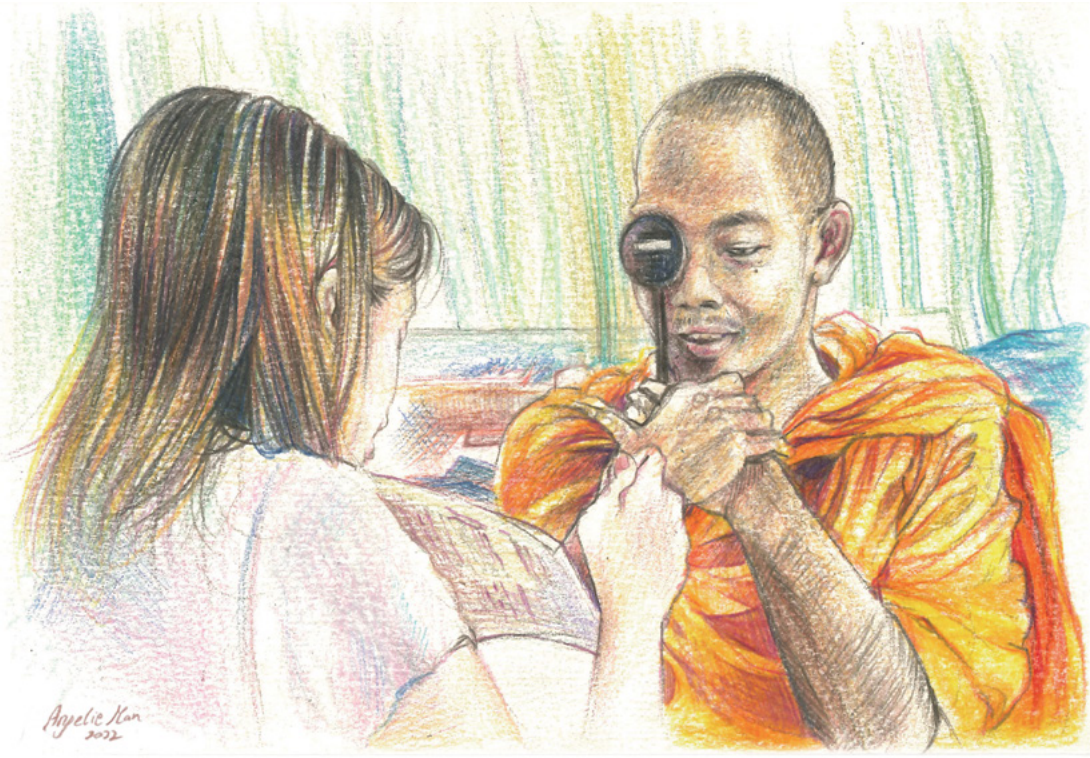
A later chapter describes how PolyU adjusted and continued its S-L activities during the coronavirus pandemic, innovating digital forms of partnering and service. I found Chan and Ngai's description of technology-driven service-learning projects and how they effectively involved non-engineering students in these efforts inspiring.

I especially admire that this volume is not a guidebook, but rather a descriptive narrative through which the authors reflect upon their creative practice. This crisp and finely textured account includes many examples of projects and courses with a satisfying level of detail and wonderful photographs. Instead of providing recommended strategies, readers are invited to draw lessons relevant to their own goals and contexts.

By communicating PolyU's experience in an engaging and credible way, *Academic Excellence with Civic Responsibility* makes several important and distinctive contributions to our field.

- **Sharing strategies on how to achieve greater scale, to influence the education of all students.** The service-learning programs of many colleges and universities reach only a modest fraction of their students, mostly through relatively small classes. While this pattern has begun to change, it remains a near-universal challenge. PolyU has succeeded in developing high quality classes, some with large enrollments, and in reaching literally all of its undergraduates. Over 60 certified service-learning courses enroll 4,500 students each year.
- **Strengthening research about what students learn through service-learning and how.** In a field that remains long on rhetoric and still short on evidence, PolyU is adding impressively to research about students' learning outcomes, both in general educational courses and in discipline-based subjects.
- **Documenting key ingredients in developing and sustaining high quality service-learning courses**, including a rigorous process of faculty review for approving courses that count toward the graduation requirement.
- **Demonstrating the effectiveness of compulsory service-learning when it is done well.** PolyU's research on this dimension is particularly instructive and encouraging with respect to learning outcomes for students who take service-learning primarily because it is required.
- **Helping to move beyond the predominant North American and European bias of current literature on service-learning.** PolyU's service-learning work elevates our shared knowledge of concepts and strategies of service-learning in the Asia-Pacific context.
- **Proving effective approaches for involving all academic disciplines.** With respect to this common challenge, an influential feature of PolyU's saga is that it has been led by computer science professors, authors Chan and Ngai, rather than by the social scientists who more commonly head such efforts.
- **Innovating international service-learning projects.** PolyU students' participation in the international service projects mentioned above has taught them intercultural competencies and global perspective. This dimension of PolyU's work addresses questions and opportunities shared by many other institutions – How to organize and sustain partnerships with NGOs in other countries that are mutually productive? How to maximize community benefits and student learning outcomes through non-local service projects that for financial reasons are necessarily shorter than domestic service-learning activities? How to fund these efforts? How to ensure personal safety and manage other risks?
- **Showing the value of international partnerships and networks.** Academic Excellence with Civic Responsibility discusses how at the start of their journey, Chan and Ngai and their colleagues drew upon the experience of other universities, including several U.S. pioneers in service-learning and public service. They then soon organized several partnerships with U.S. universities that contributed to PolyU's trajectory. And as PolyU's program took off, the University increasingly became a significant source of guidance and training to sister institutions, particularly in Mainland China and the Asia-Pacific region.

The book describes how PolyU initiated and continues to operate three international coalitions – the global University Social Responsibility Network, the IARSLCE Asia-Pacific Community of Practice, and the Cross-Straits, Hong Kong and Macao Service-Learning Network. It is instructive to learn how, through these international alliances, the host institution learns from other institutions and also strengthens its work.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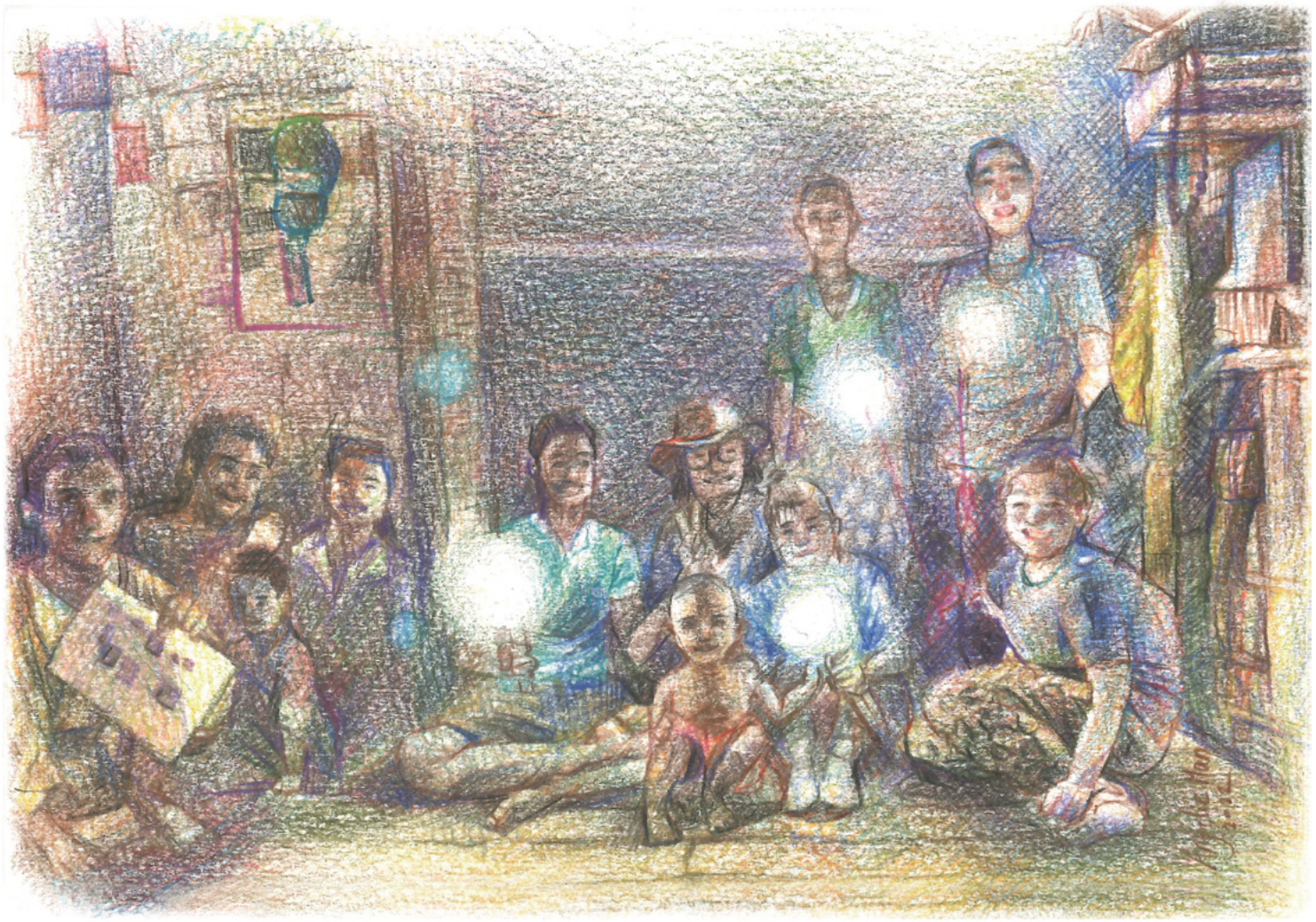

This book's title, A*cademic Excellence with Civic Responsibility*, signals another important contribution: countering the critique that university engagement programs diminish academic quality, demonstrating to the contrary that civic responsibility programs actually can be a route to higher quality education. Chan and Ngai offer persuasive evidence on how service-learning elevates learning outcomes for PolyU students.

While the co-authors talk extensively about their own work, they and their colleagues clearly are gifted collaborators. They relate a history of highly effective collective leadership – by successive generations of senior administrators, by professors from all fields, by a large number of community partner NGOs in several countries, and by colleagues from other universities.

Many written descriptions of university service-learning and community engagement largely lack critical self-reflection. A key strength of this volume is that it is so candid – speaking honestly about obstacles, missteps and subsequent adjustments. As Andrew Furco, a major global leader in service-learning, states in the Foreword,

"What truly stands out in this volume is the honesty with which Dr Chan and Dr Ngai present PolyU's service-learning journey. They openly share personal accounts of the negotiating, experimenting, heavy lifting, and counter-arguing that they and others did to sustain the effort. Their stories and examples provide readers with a refreshing, unvarnished perspective on the realities and complexity of building and advancing an institution-wide service-learning agenda."

With the glacial pace of academic time, 2010-2022 is a very brief period. It is striking indeed to observe what PolyU has accomplished during those twelve years. There is every reason to be confident that this university's global leadership in service-learning will continue to grow.

It is rare that the leaders of major university service-learning initiatives carve out the time to describe and to reflect in depth on their practice. Bravo to Professors Chan and Ngai for sharing their innovative experience in a highly readable and thoughtful fashion. Their account of PolyU's experience provides inspiration and guidance on how to develop S-L programs that engage all of a university's students.

Robert M. Hollister

Robert M. Hollister was Founding Dean of the Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life, and is Professor Emeritus, Department of Urban and Environmental Policy and Planning, Tufts University. Since 2018 he has served as Senior Advisor to the University Social Responsibility Network.

A pioneer in the engaged university movement, Professor Hollister led the creation and development of Tufts University's a uniquely comprehensive university-wide program to prepare students in all fields for lifetimes of active citizenship. Professor Hollister co-organized the convening of university heads in 2005 that launched the Talloires Network of Engaged Universities.

Professor Hollister served on the faculty of the M.I.T. Department of Urban Studies and Planning from 1970 to 1980. He then became the first chair of the Tufts University Department of Urban and Environmental Policy at Tufts University, where he later served as Dean of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences.