

Associate Professor Billy O'Steen

Ako | Education

Resilient Communities

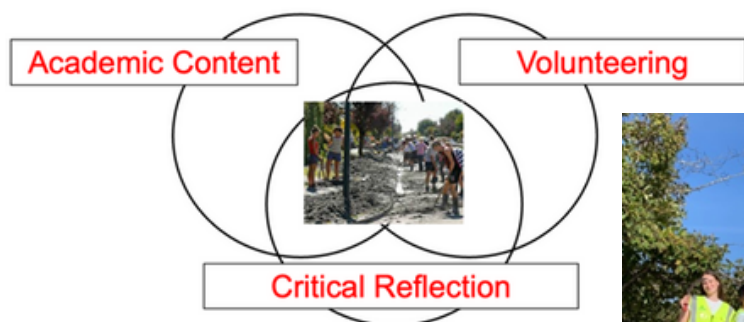
For 35 years, Associate Professor Billy O'Steen has measured the impact that experiential learning has on individuals and organisations in order to build better learning experiences. This work has occurred in diverse contexts such as a US Senator's office, the Peace Corps, school camps, and in middle school, high school, and tertiary classrooms. In Ōtautahi Christchurch, Billy's community impact is widely known and recognised in the work of the Student Volunteer

Army (SVA) following the 2010/2011 earthquakes and UC's Community Engagement Hub. Consistent across his work is the application of critical reflection and evaluation to maximise learning outcomes and impact.

In Aotearoa New Zealand (NZ) volunteering is particularly important given its size and geographic isolation. Volunteers here deliver essential services from surf lifesaving and fire brigades to school boards. Volunteering is rooted in cultural and community values, providing widespread direct and indirect community benefits.

As a small country isolated in the Pacific drawing together to face our unique challenges, from earthquakes to pandemics, has proven an important resource. Service learning provides abundant opportunities to learn from and alongside one another for everyone's benefit.

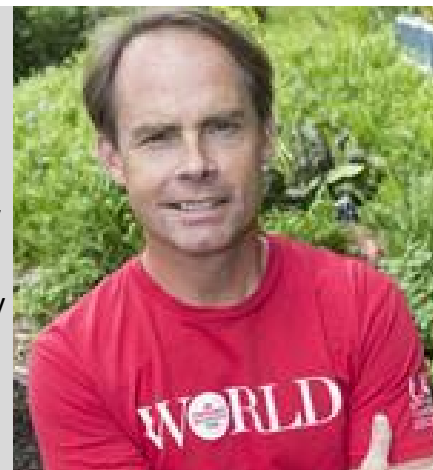
For Billy, exposing students early to civic engagement and service learning is critical for reversing trends of declining volunteerism. It is also an invaluable teaching tool for critical reflection and mobilises university resources and skills to address pressing real-world and local issues. In his role as Director of the Community Engagement Hub and in his own teaching, he has contributed to major shifts to embed civic engagement within UC. In 2011, he created a course, *CHCH101: Rebuilding Christchurch* to institutionalise students' post-earthquake engagement. The course uses evidence-based practice by including three components of service-learning: academic content, critical reflection, and volunteering (diagram below). CHCH101 was also the foundation for the Bachelor of Youth and Community Leadership, which was launched in 2020. Billy has shown that when it is done well, service learning is invaluable for students and community alike.



Clayton et al. (2005)

About Billy

- PhD Education
- Inaugural Associate Professor in Community Engagement, UC
- Director, UC Community Engagement Hub
- Board Member, Engagement Australia



Left: Model of service learning adapted from Clayton et al (2005)

Right: CHCH101 students planting native trees in the Residential Red Zone, March 2024

Research Impact

The issue: In moments of acute crises, such as the large 2010/2011 earthquakes, there is a need to gather and mobilise collective resources quickly and efficiently. Universities can play an important role in building and sustaining resilient communities by activating their resources including students and staff and their knowledge and skills to respond to and support community-identified needs. UC’s SVA was a critical part of the Canterbury earthquake response. Billy’s research identifies ways to organise and sustain such movements while maximising learning experiences for students for their short- and long-term benefit.

The research: Billy’s research investigates good pedagogy for immersive educational experiences. That is, he wants to understand best teaching practices and answer questions like: Do the benefits of immersive experiences outweigh the risks? are the benefits sustained over time? and, what teaching components maximise positive outcomes? His research has looked at how to measure learning outcomes and changes in things like students’ civic attitudes and skills and teachers’ philosophies and practices. Billy’s research also addresses access and equity issues, such as geographical and physical capability barriers that might limit access to field-based experiences by delivering digital immersive experiences through Virtual Reality (VR) technology and documentary films on social issues that serve as virtual field trips. He wants to ensure that immersive experiences are accessible and inclusive as well as maximally effective regardless of how they are delivered.

The impact: Billy has had widespread impact across UC and the region through the establishment of CHCH101 and the Bachelor of Youth and Community Leadership. He has been instrumental in changing practices, including recognising the importance of preparing students before entering immersive experiences and reflection during and after the experiences to maximise learning outcomes and sustain change. His expertise is frequently called upon from local and international organisations, such as by serving as a Board of Trustees member for Sumner School and as Board of Directors member for Engagement Australia, the peak body for community-university engagement in Australia and NZ. His work has been recognised by receiving the 2021 UC Teaching Award and as a Finalist for the Asia-Pacific Community Engagement Initiative of the Year Award in 2023, awarded to global leaders in higher education institutions for practical contributions and impact.

The Issue

There are decreasing rates of volunteerism, despite its vital role in NZ. Billy’s research looks at how to

- Mobilise university resources to respond to community needs
- Maximise learning and long-term civic engagement of young people for student and societal benefit



The Research

Systematically evaluates the strategies, methods, and teaching approaches to maximise student learning and community impact through service learning.

The Impact

CHCH101: Engaging Communities through Social Innovation was launched in 2011, which is a systemic change that has supported the initiative’s growth and longevity. Billy’s research has improved teaching practices to maximise learning, which has been adopted across a range of teaching environments. By 2024, CHCH 101 has



1041 students
completing the course



Provided >20,000
volunteer hours



In 2021 alone provided 9,340
UC volunteering hours =
\$220,891 of public service