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# Serving in One's Own Community: Taking a Second Look at Our Assumptions about Community Service Education

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What difference does it make if the students in a community service education project are from the communities being served? On the basis of over 20 years of experience, the authors warn that superficial conclusions about who the students are can easily interfere with effective teaching of such projects. They also develop their approach to community service education: community empowerment through action research. Those most affected by the conditions being researched must be involved in posing the research questions, determining how the results of the research will be used, and mobilizing for change-oriented action.

# Serving in One's Own

# Community:

## *Taking a Second Look at Our Assumptions about Community Service Education*

In a community service education project, what difference does it make if the students are from the communities being served? This question is important to address as urban public universities increasingly recognize the value of community service education, both to the students who participate and to the urban communities in which projects are located. Are there important differences when the students who participate in the projects themselves come from working-class or low-income backgrounds and neighborhoods? Do the students bring different resources to the experience, behave differently toward the community being served, or need a different type of preparation before they begin a project? These are the questions we have undertaken to answer in this article

One of the authors (Kennedy) teaches undergraduate planning students at an urban public university, and the other (Mead) teaches graduate planning students at an urban private university. Both have long experience in community service education, working with students in teams or individually, providing research

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munity organizations. Marie's students at the public university are older than typical undergraduates, with an average age in the high 30s, primarily of working class background, and approximately one-third are people of color. Most have some background in community or labor activism. Molly's private university students generally come from a middle or upper-middle class background, are mostly in their late twenties, primarily white, and also have significant experience as activists. They almost never come from the communities being served when they participate in a community service education project. When Marie's students participate in such projects, it may look, at first glance, as though they do. Given the differences between the two groups of students, we thought it would be useful to compare our experiences in leading community service education projects. We expected to find significant differences that would underscore what it means to work with students who do or do not come from the communities being served.

At the outset we fully expected to come up with a long list of ways in which student background can make a difference in how a community service education project unfolds and in its ultimate success. Instead, we came up with a short list of somewhat subtle differences—more a matter of degree than of kind—and a sense that much of what we initially attributed to working with students of different backgrounds instead resulted from differences in the resource allocation and departmental philosophy of the educational institutions, particularly with regard to professional roles. We also concluded that it is critical for teachers in urban public universities to recognize that it is rare for students to come directly from the communities being served, even though they may appear to be from or like those served by community service education projects because of similarities in socioeconomic background, place of residence, race, or culture. Unfortunately, once a teacher assumes such similarity, he or she may go on to assume that the students will understand and feel positively toward the community being served. In fact, this may not be the case at all. "Coming from the community being served" is a very specific concept. Public university students may be similar to the residents in the community being served. However, unless they are indeed from the actual community being served, the students are, at least initially, much more likely to focus on ways in which they are different from community residents, and can be hampered by assumptions and prejudices they have about the area being served. Once they learn about the community, however, they are far more able to draw parallels with their own lives and experiences.

Private university students are typically even less like the residents in the service community, carry prejudices and assumptions that limit their appreciation of the community, and are more challenged to identify their own experiences with those of the residents. Given careful preparation before a project starts, however, students from both kinds of institutions can examine and alter their assumptions, learn how to identify the strengths in any community, and allow community residents to control the project.

Our conclusion is that teachers need to carefully prepare all students for a community service education project. A teacher cannot assume that urban university students will necessarily know neighborhoods quite near those in which they live, and seemingly like their own. Rather, experience has shown that all students may bring prejudices, lack of knowledge, or incomplete visions of the communities served by community service projects. For a project to be successful, a teacher must prepare any group of students to enter into a community that they neither know well nor value fully. That said, we do think that the preparation of urban public university students may be different from the preparation of those in private universities.

Before developing this conclusion more fully, we need to describe what we are trying to achieve in community service education, the essential components of the kind of communities we serve, and what we both think the community and the students should get out of the interaction.

### **Communities, Students, Products, and Processes**

The communities we prefer to work with are typically disenfranchised groups that lack political power, or enjoy less economic power and fewer opportunities than other communities in our metropolitan area. Usually they experience economic oppression, which may be combined with race, gender, and other issues as well. In many of our projects we work in the interests of people who have been left out of effective decision-making over the very issues that affect the development of their communities. Development is more than just bricks and mortar, specific job creation, or legislative reform. It is helping people to increase their control over decisions that affect their lives, develops their capacity to intervene in their own environments, and bring justice to their lives. We work with groups with whom we share certain basic values about equity and equality. We work primarily with groups who are unfunded, underfunded, and/or cannot easily acquire research and technical assistance without help. For the community, the concrete result of a

community service project could be an organizational development plan, a health care needs assessment, a tenant-run conference on the future of public housing, a funding proposal for a new youth program, a training video on toxic waste clean-up, or any number of other community planning projects. Perhaps more important than the concrete product, however, is our desire to leave the community better equipped to plan and effect change on its own after the community service project is completed. In other words, we want our projects to make a contribution to community empowerment.

A good definition of community empowerment as we understand it is offered by African-American scholar and journalist Manning Marable in his book, *The Crisis of Color and Democracy*:

Empowerment is essentially a capacity to define clearly one's interests, and to develop a strategy to achieve those interests. It's the ability to create a plan or program to change one's reality in order to obtain those objectives or interests. Power is not a "thing," it's a process. In other words, you shouldn't say that a group has power, but that, through its conscious activity, a group can empower itself by increasing its ability to achieve its own interests. (p. xx)

Our interest in community empowerment has led us to frame community service projects within the universe of action research. Action research as we define it demands—at a minimum—that those most affected by the conditions of research be involved in setting research parameters: posing the research questions, determining how the results of the research will be used and mobilizing for change-oriented action. Action research becomes participatory when community participation and control are emphasized in every phase of the research project, including data gathering and analysis.

What we expect students to get from a community service project is two fold. Projects are structured to give students the opportunity to learn and demonstrate specific planning skills (e.g., needs assessment techniques, evaluation design and implementation, interactive goal-setting and strategy formulation, and proposal development). By developing and applying skills in hands-on situation, students learn to respond to changing circumstances—feature of the real world not easily replicated in the classroom. We all strive to teach them how to apply their technical skills and knowledge in way that empowers the community, i.e., to become professionals capable helping the community articulate and reach its own goals rather than prof

sionals imposing their values on the community in the name of professionalism.

These definitions of the type of community with which we work, and the service and educational outcomes for which we aim, provide the context for discussing whether it makes a difference in a community service project if the students come from the communities being served.

### Matching Students with Communities

Some students, educators, and community activists hold the view that the students should be "matched" with the community. Latinos should work in the Latino community, gays should work in the gay community, low-income students should work in low-income communities, and so forth. However, it is our experience that students from very different backgrounds can work well in all sorts of communities. Some combinations may be more complicated for the instructor, but the payoff is great when community service projects build understanding across differences.

Furthermore, apparent matches of students and community partners may, in reality, not overlap in critical dimensions. Regardless of background, community service students rarely come from the specific physical or social community being served, although some of Marie's students work individually on projects with and for the community of which they are members. For example, she is currently the faculty advisor to the Roofless Women's Action Research Mobilization (RWARM), a group of formerly homeless women students exploring both causes and solutions to women's homelessness through participatory action research. As a rule, however, whether individually or in teams, students do not literally come from the community being served. Although Marie's students may look more like the community members being served than do Molly's, they still exhibit important and somewhat unpredictable differences. Students and faculty cannot help bringing in their own attitudes, values, prejudices, and preconceptions to a community service project. For example, a white woman student from a working class background may be racially prejudiced. A low-income suburban student might hold stereotypically negative views of an inner-city neighborhood and the people who live there. An African-American student from an inner-city neighborhood may feel very negative about Haitian or Latino immigrants. And any professional or aspiring professional runs the risk of inflating her/his personal preferences into the "correct" expert point of view. In other words, all stu-

dents must be properly prepared before they can engage successfully with a community, understand the needs and strengths of that community, and work with its residents to complete a successful project.

### Preparing to 'Hear' the Community

Whether or not a student or professional is of color, low-income, or gay, the attitudes, values, prejudices, and preconceptions that each of us brings to a project must be acknowledged and set aside before we can really hear what the community has to say, before we can work with the community rather than on it. To counteract such preconceptions, Marie typically works with her students for two or three weeks before they begin directly interacting with the project's community partner. Attitudes about the neighborhood, the people, and the issue are explored and discussed in this early phase.

A good example of such preparatory work was done prior to working with an immigrant rights organization concerned about racial violence and community-building in a public housing project that, in less than 10 years, had changed from being nearly 100 percent native-born European-American inhabitants to 50 percent who were immigrants of color. Students first wrote anonymously about their preconceptions of the neighborhood to which they were assigned. Each then, individually, took the same walking tour of the neighborhood and compared their reactions, which ranged from very positive to very negative, illustrating how perceptions are related to our own experiences and background, and do not necessarily lead to the same answers. Students and faculty both discussed their own immigrant background, how they would feel if their neighborhood went through a similarly rapid demographic change, and their views of the most important immigration policy questions being publicly debated. Responses to these questions were also anonymous, to allow controversial points of view to surface. In addition, the group read many first-person accounts of the experiences of Haitian, Vietnamese, and Central American immigrants—the groups represented in the community partner.

What emerged was that the forebears of most of the group had been forced to emigrate by fearsome economic and political conditions in their country of origin or from other parts of the U.S. It was easy to draw parallels to the stories of current immigrants, and the students were able to recognize their feared feelings of alienation in a rapidly changing neighborhood we probably shared by both the long-term residents and the immigrants. A r

spondent who identified herself as African-American was able to express feelings common in her community that immigrants were getting programs, funds, and jobs that should rightfully be going to native-born African-Americans. A Puerto Rican student complained that she was treated like an immigrant even though she was a U.S. citizen. Such disclosures allowed the group to get to the heart of the policy debates and to discuss issues of scapegoating and mythmaking in the formulation of public policy.

None of the students who worked on this project was from the physical neighborhood, nor were there any Haitians, Vietnamese, or Central Americans among the group. However, the group of ten students did include four African-Americans, one Puerto Rican, and one former and two current public housing tenants. Nine were from low-income backgrounds and eight had had direct experience in community or labor activism. Together they clearly were more like the community members than a random group of ten of Molly's students would have been, which undoubtedly made a difference in the success of the initial orientation, the foundation for the ongoing relationship between students and community in this year-long project.

This raises the important point about the perspective many urban public university students bring to community service education. Students who have directly experienced oppression in their own lives, who have been the victims of exclusion, prejudice, and stereotyping, and who have fought back in some way, are more likely to have stories of their own that parallel those of the community partner. Often the instructor can draw out and compare their stories in a way that helps the students break through prejudices and question the stereotypes they hold of the community partner. When this happens, students begin to take on the issues of the community partner as their own, and the dichotomy between them and us breaks down. The community can then operate in the project as both subject and object, and the technical skills and knowledge of the students become tools for the community to use in its self-determined development.

### **Orienting Privileged Students**

It is challenging for a teacher to prepare any group of students to carry out community service education projects in the way we have described above. Students and teachers must confront their own lack of information and their prejudices about a community before they can recognize the strengths and capacities of that community, hear what its members want from the commu-



nity service project, and let the community members have final control. Systematic preparation is required before students can enter a community and begin to negotiate specific details of a project, including orientation to the community.

The orientation process is even more important with students who come from more privileged backgrounds. It is also more difficult because there are fewer opportunities to draw parallels between student and community experiences. Some critical issues may not even arise in initial discussions because they are so far removed from the experiences of the group. In the example given above, the resentment of immigrants expressed by the African-American woman would have been unlikely to arise in a group of middle-class white students because they do not typically live in communities that are being settled by significant numbers of immigrants. Thus, there are fewer opportunities to draw from the students' experiences and make connections from them to the community being served.

Students and teachers must also confront their ideas about what constitutes effective professional practice. The challenge here is greater for upper-middle-class students, especially those in graduate and professional planning programs, because they must move beyond traditional notions of what professional planners do when they help a community. These students are often steeped in the idea that professionals have expert knowledge and skills that are outside the domain of typical community members, and that they therefore can do things for the community that the community cannot do for itself. Students then expect to replicate this expert approach in their community service education projects, and it is often difficult for them to play a role as a facilitator of a community process in which their knowledge and skills become tools for the community to use.

In teaching the required field projects course at her institution, Molly has found that many of her students bring with them a conflicting set of beliefs and values about what they want from their education and what they view as good planning practice. Most recognize the value of the participatory planning process and community empowerment, but the graduate students are beginning to see themselves as professionals, and they are affected by larger societal beliefs about the role that professional planners play in communities. This conflict first arises in what students expect from their education. Many students do not want to take the field projects class and resent its being a requirement. They worry that they won't learn new skills or information in a

field-based class in which students are put in charge of designing and completing their project and the teacher is a resource for that work, not a leader of it.

Students argue that lecture classes in which teachers behave as experts, providing them with skills and information they don't already possess, are more valuable. They say this even as many acknowledge that lecture classes can be boring and are not always grounded in the realities of planning practice. In part their concern is driven by the high cost of education; many take on debts of \$30,000 or more. They are frantic about career prospects and the need for the acquisition of specific skills that will increase employability. In addition, many have worked for a number of years before returning to graduate school, believe they have already done field projects, and are unable to understand what they can learn in the course. On the other hand, a sizable minority of students are delighted that there is a fieldwork requirement, and virtually all recognize the value of providing community service.

When they begin the course, the students must confront their ideas about how to be helpful to a community. It is here that traditional ideas of professional planning conflict with our approach to participatory planning and community empowerment. Many of the students were strong advocates and practitioners of participatory planning before they came to graduate school, but once in school, they are expected to assimilate a different model. Because they are eager to try out their newly developed professional skills, they become impatient with participatory approaches that put the community in charge. In addition, some students assume that participatory models of planning and service are appropriate for people who lack professional training, but not for those in emerging roles as professional planners. They believe that now as graduate students they must be experts. They mistakenly assume that community service must include solving problems for the community that it cannot solve on its own. Many students of more affluent backgrounds have farther to go in their preparation than many of the students in public institutions, because they must confront both the assumptions they are making about the community and those they are making about community service.

Preparation is fundamentally the same from both groups of students. Both need to learn the reasons for the approach to community service, and they need to learn how to "hear" a community. Molly uses role-playing techniques with students to help them recognize and appreciate the perspective

of the community members. She has students imagine that they are residents of a particular community. "What are you proud of if you are a member of this community?" she asks them. "What concerns do you have about graduate students coming into your community to work with you? What do you most want from those students? How can you make enduring use of the service they provide? What will your community look like six months or five years after the students leave?" Using this process, Molly is able to help students recognize that the communities they are about to enter are multifaceted, vital, often have long and proud histories, and are full of potential. When she is successful in her preparation of the students, they often end the semester with the same recognitions that Marie's students do: they see that the community residents have much in common with them, they see themselves as building important connections with those communities, and they recognize the fundamental value of helping communities help themselves so that they become more powerful in effecting more enduring changes.

### **Educational Resources and Commitment**

Marie's department is committed pedagogically to field-based teaching/learning and professionally to a participatory planning approach. Community service education is at the core of her department's curriculum, and priority has been given to allocating scarce resources to Community Planning Apprenticeships. Marie and her colleagues typically work with an intentionally small group of six to twelve students on projects that last at least two semesters. Because of the extra time that a field project takes, the instructor receives two course credits for supervising one project. Students receive academic credit for learning and demonstrating their ability to work interactively with community partners, and for learning and demonstrating technical planning skills and knowledge.

Molly's department is also committed to the educational worth of field-based learning and the responsibility of the private university to provide community service. The department does not unanimously support a participatory planning approach; everyone in the department recognizes it as a legitimate approach to planning, but certainly not the only approach. The department has also, historically, devoted fewer resources to the teaching of field based courses, stemming not so much from a lack of commitment to community service education, but from an assumption that graduate students need less preparation or direction to complete a community service project. Fo

tunately, that view is changing. This year the department has significantly added to the teaching resources for the course, providing the equivalent of three teachers to work with 52 students, who are assigned to 12 different projects. Each teacher oversees three projects. This balance is just about right given that it is appropriate to expect more self-direction from graduate students than undergraduates.

This article has also affected how Molly will teach the community service education course this year. Her conversations with Marie have reminded her of the need to prepare students to work with communities in ways that respect and empower them. This preparation work will be done with students early in the semester and will be different because of this reminder.

### **Shared Backgrounds and Community Development**

In the broader context of community development—development of the communities that have been identified above as preferred community partners—there are a number of other ways to make a difference when the students working in community service education share in the background of the communities being served. First, a part of community development is helping individual development within the community. In this sense, the education of anyone in any subject from a disenfranchised community adds to the strength and resources of that community. And if, through a community service project, these students are learning and practicing effective ways to work toward community empowerment and not just to perform specific tasks, they can bring this participatory approach into play in their dealings within their own community. Secondly, community service students learn about the similarities between their community and another marginalized community—one that they may previously have seen as very different. This can lay the groundwork for coalition-building across historical racial/ethnic barriers. Following the initial class discussions, the African-American woman (mentioned in the immigrant rights project above) commented that she could see how all would gain more from a united front than from competition between the African-American community and immigrants of color. However, she went on to say that it was hard for her to hang onto this awareness when she left the classroom and returned to her own community and its strong felt resentment. Over the course of the project she became more knowledgeable about immigration issues, and she developed positive working relationships with immigrants of color and their advocates. By the end of the project, from

this base of knowledge, experience, and contacts, she was motivated and able to begin organizing within her own community to build a coalition with immigrant rights groups.

This kind of direct cross-fertilization of ideas between a community partner and other disenfranchised communities is unlikely to occur directly with middle and upper-middle class students. However, many of these more privileged students will eventually work in poorer communities in their professional roles. Community service education projects, if prepared and conducted in some of the ways outlined here, can play a critical role in preparing these students for professional practice that will empower rather than dictate.

### Conclusion

As said at the outset, in sitting down to write this article we expected to identify significant differences between students of the two institutions in conducting community service projects. We were guilty, in some sense, of the problem we have been discussing, of making assumptions about our students, of seeing them as being either from or not from the communities that are served by community service projects. In fact, we conclude that students rarely come from the communities being served. We also conclude that a students (and teachers) need to prepare themselves carefully before they enter a community to provide service. This preparation includes learning about the community, identifying and then moving beyond assumptions about the community, and recognizing the value of assistance that is empowering, not making the community forever dependent on the expert assistance of professionals.

### *Suggested Readings*

Kennedy, Marie. "Transformative Community Development: Empowerment Through Community Development." *New Solutions*, June, 1996, press.

Kennedy, Marie and Mead, Molly. "Community Service Education: It's Such a Good Idea, Why Don't We Do More of It?" In eds. Carroy Ferguson and Jemadari Kamara *Innovative Approaches to Education and Community Service*, Boston: University of Massachusetts at Boston. 19

Kennedy, Marie, Deborah Clarke, Delores Dell, Brenda Farrell, Debo

Grey, Betsy Santiago, and Tesley Utley. "A Hole in My Soul: Experiences of Homeless Women." In eds. Diane Dujon and Ann Withorn *For Crying Out Loud: Women's Poverty in the United States*, 2nd edition. Boston: South End Press, in press.

Kennedy, Marie, and Stone, Michael. "Weaving Together Community and College." In eds. Phil Nyden, Darryl Burrows, Anne Figert and Mark Shbley *The Collaborative Community: New Models for Social Research*. Newbury Park, CA: Pine Forge Press, in press.

## *Is your institution a metropolitan university?*

If your university serves an urban/metropolitan region and subscribes to the principles outlined in the Declaration of Metropolitan Universities printed elsewhere in this issue, your administration should seriously consider joining the Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities.

Historically, most universities have been associated with cities, but the relationship between "the town and the gown" has often been distant or abrasive. Today the metropolitan university cultivates a close relationship with the urban center and its suburbs, often serving as a catalyst for change and source of enlightened discussion. Leaders in government and business agree that education is the key to prosperity, and that metropolitan universities will be on the cutting edge of education not only for younger students, but also for those who must continually re-educate themselves to meet the challenges of the future.

The Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities brings together institutions who share experiences and expertise to speak with a common voice on important social issues. A shared sense of mission is the driving force behind Coalition membership. However, the Coalition also offers a number of tangible benefits: ten free subscriptions to *Metropolitan Universities*, additional copies at special rates to distribute to boards and trustees, a newsletter on government and funding issues, a clearinghouse of innovative projects, reduced rates at Coalition conventions. . . .

As a *Metropolitan Universities* subscriber, you can help us by bringing both the journal and the Coalition to the attention of your administration. To obtain information about Coalition membership, please contact Dr. Bill McKee, University of North Texas, by calling (817) 565-2477 or faxing a message to (817) 565-4998.

