Guest Editor’s Introduction: Service Learning and Sociological Practice

The planning for this special edition of Sociological Practice began at the joint meeting of the Sociological Practice Association and Society for Applied Sociology in Bethesda, MD, August 2000. The driving force behind this edition is the emerging interest and energy being directed into the enterprise of service learning, or community-based education. It is my contention that sociologists, in both academia and in practice or applied settings, are the natural audience for this topic. Practicing sociologists, by their very nature, are in the community making linkages and doing sociology in client-centered situations. Service learning addresses the human and community needs that are defined by members of the community. The collection of papers and notes in this special edition provide a myriad of information for persons who are interested in learning further about how such work can and does occur when it is linked to the work of sociologists and their students.

Breese and Richmond’s piece casts both service learning and applied sociology as contemporary movements within our discipline and the larger society. Offered in the work is an overview of a number of resources available via the internet to assist persons with engaging in the work of community-based education; as well as sample course activities demonstrating the applications of sociology to this style of pedagogy.

Lee’s research paper is a comprehensive review of what occurs when a major research university makes a commitment to “public service and civic virtue.” Detailed is an analysis of the institution’s newly established honors college which is built around the enterprise of service learning. Lee’s work integrates the key elements from the ever increasing service learning literature and takes a clinical sociology approach to exploring the transformations occurring at the campus under study.

A common question posed to instructors in the field of sociology is “what can someone do with a major from your department?” Ballantine and Phelps attempt to answer this central question by exploring the value
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of service learning to students, faculty, universities, and communities. Carefully noted in this piece is the natural link between applications of the discipline to community endeavors. Price’s submission, addressing the place of internships in this general discussion, compliments the previous note by outlining what goes into the enterprise of successful internships. Moving beyond a mere “this is what you need to do” approach, the discussion of internships here is centered around the need for making internships truly applied experiences in the proper service-centered/community-based setting.

Two teaching notes offer practical and solid examples of what goes into a service learning experience when one restructures their course to connect the class with the community. Fritz details how her courses in Organizational Theory, Land Use and Environmental Dispute Resolution, and Mediation Skills are strengthened by integrating the content of these classes into the local community. Rashotte center’s her note around the Small Groups course that engages with the neighboring community as well. What both of these pieces demonstrate is the transformative education that is possible through service learning.

Finally, Palmer and Savoie provide an important service in their note by honestly and directly addressing the potential challenges to service learning programs. Outlined are issues such as pedagogical difficulties, time constraints, and the essential need for community cooperation. Inherently, these are also key issues that must be thought through by sociologists or any individual who intends to focus their energies and professional commitments in the direction of service learning.

I wish to point out one style note regarding the use of the term service learning, or service-learning. In the literature and in this very edition, there is not consistency in regard to what is the appropriate way to “label” this activity. Jacoby (1996) contends that “the hyphen in service-learning is critical in that it symbolizes the symbiotic relationship between service and learning” (p. 5). As editor of this special edition, I asked authors to be consistent in their usage, whether they included the hyphen or not.

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