**Book Review**


**Randy Stoecker (2016).** ***Liberating service learning and the rest of higher education civic engagement.***
**Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.**

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*Liberating Service Learning and the Rest of Higher Education Civic Engagement* was released on the heels of a collaborative conversation we facilitated at the Civic Engagement Administrators Conference hosted by North Carolina Campus Compact, entitled "Confessions of Reflective Practitioners." We proposed the conversation as a way to engage other administrators and practitioners of community engagement and service-learning in the dialogue we were having with one another about the complexity of our work, specifically exploring whether our work perpetuates the injustices we purport to address. Stoecker's (2016) book offers an interrogation into this question with the goal of "making current theory explicit, deconstructing it, and building new theory that can lead to new practice and build better results" (p. 8). His depth and breadth of experience in community organizing and development, working closely with community organizing groups, community development corporations, and community information technology programs, makes Stoecker well qualified to guide readers through a thorough dissection of the work done between institutions and communities.

Stoecker does not shy away from asking the hard questions, including challenging widely celebrated dominant theories, practices, and even histories in institutionalized service-learning. He challenges those in the field to reflect on the language we use, terms like "reciprocity," "partnership," and "social justice," and to critically examine if our practice actually aligns with proclaimed theories and values. Nothing is safe from Stoecker's critique, including American philosopher John Dewey whose work serves as a philosophical rationalization of the existence and persistence of service-learning in higher education. Stoecker outlines the foundational philosophies and theories that fuel and undergird service-learning, and interrogates each and every one. This work is the first of its kind, going beyond the bounds of critical service-learning to acknowledge the larger structural forces and limitations, as well as troubling the intense focus on student learning, and highlighting the need for actual social change for the sake of the community. Stoecker's overall recommendation is to invert institutionalized service-learning's priorities by decentering student learning and starting instead with change, using social change theory as the starting point to work through the other concepts presented; community, service, and learning.

*Liberating Service Learning and the Rest of Higher Education Engagement* is presented in 3 sections. The first section, the *Problem and Its Context*, constructs a theoretical and historical context for readers. In the first

chapter, Stoecker shares what prompted him to write this book, confessing he is not only unsatisfied with the practices he encounters at conferences and in literature, but also with his own practice as well. He is explicit in his desire for his work to contribute to social change and warns that work that is effective in this pursuit is often political and necessitates a radical shift in perspective. He urges that we must begin by taking stock of the underlying assumptions and biases woven throughout dominant practices of all work with and in communities, not just institutionalized service-learning. This chapter destabilizes long held truths and makes visible the many contradictions that exist in the foundations of service-learning. Stoecker intends to agitate practitioners who are too comfortable and inspire those who share in his suspicion of dominant practices. In chapter two, Stoecker (2016) examines the history of service-learning and succeeds in unraveling the dominant ideology that celebrates theories, movements, and practices that did little to actually support and instigate change. In his third chapter, highlighting theories of institutionalized service-learning, Stoecker proves he is not afraid to make loaded political declarations. He boldly lays out his critique not only of institutionalized service-learning, but of the relationship between government and higher education in what he describes as a "neoliberal environment" (p. 25). Stoecker posits that neoliberalism promotes the "mystifying glorification of individuals mythically succeeding on their own" (p. 25) and suggests that institutional service-learning reproduces neoliberal ideals by lauding service to individuals over collectives.

In the second section, *Institutionalized Service Learning*, Stoecker moves from the examination of history and context to an in-depth explanation of the theoretical and philosophical framework of institutional service-learning, focusing on the concepts of learning, service, community, and change. In chapter four, Stoecker asserts that defining service-learning as a pedagogy (a term used vaguely, at best), privileges the learning of the student above all else, including community needs. He proposes this centering of student learning often results in the unintentional objectification and exploitation of the community. Stoecker challenges the well-established connection between both experiential learning and critical pedagogy and institutionalized service-learning, concluding that institutionalized service-learning is a poor theoretical fit for both experiential learning and critical pedagogy, though he is careful to point out that both have their time and place. Chapter five problematizes many of the foundational elements of service-learning, including the

ideas of reciprocity, mutually beneficial relationships, and collaboration with non-profits.  He offers a strong critique of service-learning's role in the "non-profit industrial complex" (p. 51), arguing that service-learning "serve(s) mostly to maintain a growing neoliberal political economic structure and culture" (p. 61).  Stoecker continues to interrogate foundations of service-learning in chapters six and seven, contending that service-learning has no clear definition and/or practice of community and laying bare what many practitioners and administrators in the field know is a shared weakness-the lack of clarity around community outcomes.

In the final section, *Liberating Service Learning,* Stoecker considers alternative theories of change, community, service, and learning and offers ways to put liberating service-learning into practice.  In chapter eight, Stoecker proposes that two areas of change through service-learning should be, 1) building people's capacity to produce knowledge, and 2) putting abilities to use by creating change around specific issues. Stoecker continues to unpack the notion of community in chapter nine, arguing that community is hard to define because we do not have experience with it.  A significant paradigm shift he offers is moving from working "with" or "in" communities to working "toward" community. In chapter ten, Stoecker (2016) asserts that "in liberating service learning, service becomes our participation in social change" (p. 140) and key elements include developing allies and working with constituencies through community organizers to build knowledge power. Stoecker rounds out his alternative theories by focusing on learning in chapter 11. Stoecker (2016) states that contrary to institutionalized service-learning, "liberating service learning is not a pedagogy" (p. 146), rather it is a "social change strategy" (p. 146) that should promote the learning of everyone involved in the practice.  As such, Stoecker argues that learning should be fundamentally about the constituency members first, boldly proclaiming that student learning is a secondary consideration. Throughout these chapters, Stoecker highlights colleges and universities as exemplars of a liberated approach to working with communities which prove helpful in understanding how these newly proposed approaches could be made possible. While this section resulted in constructive solutions, it was the most challenging to read of the three, as many of the ideas presented felt repetitive of those shared in previous chapters.

In the concluding chapter, Stoecker discloses that he is not overly optimistic that his work will result in much change because he cannot imagine any college or university supporting the type of paradigm shift he is proposing. Stoecker does see how he and his work can support those attempting to resist the tradition of institutional service-learning and work towards actual social change. As such, he identifies specific steps to put *liberating service learning* into practice, discusses institutional implications of liberating service-learning, and suggests a reconsideration of current classroom and teaching design.

We agree with Stoecker's (2016) assertion that "we desperately need safe spaces that support 'critical conversations' that allow us to examine not just our practices but our assumptions and theories about those practices so that we can improve both our practice and our thinking" (p. 164), and believe this book to be a platform from which to have these conversations. Stoecker understands the deep complexity of service-learning work, tapping into the conflicting feelings practitioners navigate as we offer soundbites or quotes for news articles, write letters of recommendation, apply for grants, and receive awards and accolades for our work with the community. He challenges the field to ask the hard questions of not only ourselves but also of our institutional leaders, and encourages us to reconsider our practice and take risks. It is important to note that Stoecker takes care to clarify that his intent is not to vilify the concept of volunteering, argue that there is not a persistent need for immediate and direct social service work, or imply that student learning is unimportant. To be clear, this book is not an easy read for the theoretically faint of heart, as it problematizes much of the work we are currently doing. It is overwhelming because there is so much work to be done, terrifying because of the harm we might be orchestrating, and reassuring that we are not alone in our doubts and constant troubling of our work. While ultimately we think Stoecker takes on too much for one book, we found that it offers hope that higher education and community might move forward in concert with one another toward authentic social change. And, whether you are completely on board with inverting the traditional way of doing business or are in complete opposition to Stoecker's deconstruction of institutionalized service-learning, we recommend this book and suggest it be added to the libraries of all community engagement administrators and service-learning practitioners.