



The Unheard Voices: Community Organizations and Service Learning

Randy Stoecker, & Elizabeth A. Tryon, (with Amy Hilgendorf.) (Editors). Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press. 2009, 211 pages.

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The Unheard Voices seeks to tell what happens to staff members at nonprofit agencies (and the people they work with) when students come their way for class credit. The book makes their voices unheard no more, letting us hear their joys—but more often their frustrations—with professors, students and service-learning offices.

Because service-learning research has tended to focus on student outcomes, *The Unheard Voices* explores new territory, making the reader reflect on whether service-learning needs alteration or fundamental structural change to address flaws noted by the community. Its editors, Randy Stoecker and Elizabeth A. Tryon, both have backgrounds working with communities that prepared them for this book. Stoecker, a sociology professor at the University of Wisconsin, has long worked against the idea of professors using communities for data collection while the communities get little or nothing in return. As he reports, the book began when he got a tour of community organizations whose leaders complained of problems with service-learning. That led to a community-based research course to investigate the experiences of small- and medium-sized nongovernmental organizations; the book was written mostly by the students in the seminar. Tryon, a community partner specialist at Edgewood

College, was also part of the writing partnership, as was Amy Hilgendorf, an AmeriCorps VISTA member who helped edit the volume.

The book consists of 10 chapters, as well as a preface and epilogue. In the preface and chapter one, Stoecker and Tryon set the stage, noting the irony that community voices are being filtered by authors in academia. They introduce themselves and the project, which consisted of 67 interviews with nonprofit staff that were analyzed with qualitative methods. They also introduce a critique of service-learning, backed by ample references. The authors are openly frustrated that too much of service-learning is based on the satisfaction of the student, while too little attention is paid to whether endeavors change inequality, empower people in the community, or enhance community organizations.

Chapters two through seven, authored mostly by the students, present the major themes uncovered. The content includes some surprises about community members' views of service-learning that make the reader think twice about standard practices in our field. One major theme, for example, is that for all the field's efforts to define and distinguish service-learning (e.g., Sigmon, 1996), community organizations almost uniformly see students as ordinary volunteers—probably because professors and students don't work with staff members to think of the students as doing anything but volunteering. In one chapter, we learn that agencies take on students not principally because they are providing invaluable assistance, but rather in part because staff members see their jobs as educating citizens, and working with students is part of that. In another chapter, we learn that volunteer fairs are often not considered an efficient use of time for agencies to get new students. Other themes in various chapters include the problematic short-term nature of service-learning, and the struggles organizations have to train, supervise and evaluate students. Too often, the book notes, there is limited help from universities in training, making partnerships weaker than desirable. A final theme is that of diversity mismatches, in which the typical service-learner is a white female with resources, whereas the clients of agencies where students work are more often people of color of limited means. Here the book raises some tough questions, noting the possibility for negative effects of service-learning if students walk into communities without preparation for, among other things, understanding and dealing with stereotypes of others. It recommends that service-learning go far beyond our current models of training on cultural competence, and expand into helping students understand the structural nature of racism so that students see the exploitation many they work with have faced.

Chapter eight turns away from the study results briefly, giving a solo to one member of the chorus of unheard voices. Written by Amy S. Mondloch, director of a nonprofit called the Grassroots Leadership College, it describes her service-learning experiences. She calls professors who collaborate fully an "absolute joy." On the other hand, she tells an anecdote of partnering with an undergraduate business class that wanted to create a marketing plan for her organization. After a brief meeting, Mondloch heard nothing back from the students or their professor and could not reach either. When she finally got the plan, she didn't recognize her organization in it. The chapter is akin to some nice musical numbers in Broadway shows: it

doesn't necessarily fit perfectly with the plot (in this case, the book is about the study, not one director's experience), but it is creative, and you're glad it's there.

The book concludes with two chapters and an epilogue that tie up lessons learned from the research. Chapter nine takes the interviews with nonprofit staff members and boils them down to three major principles (commitment, communication, and compatibility) for more effective service-learning. Chapter 10, the meatier of the two, is the result of the researchers sitting down with about 30 nonprofit staff members at the end of the project to share the results and have them draft a set of community standards for service-learning. Those standards included that nonprofits and universities communicate well and often, and that they promote diversity and cultural competency among service learners. Within most standards, there are helpful suggested roles for the community and faculty—and sometimes students and the institution.

The Unheard Voices is likely to be useful to anyone connected to service-learning. Those who most need to hear its message are probably professors who have sent their students into service-learning endeavors with minimal concern for the community's welfare. Of course, administrators and those staffing service-learning offices need to hear the unheard voices, too. And those working in nonprofits should hear their counterparts speak, to put their own experiences in perspective and to be emboldened to ask for equal partnerships from universities.

A principal way that *The Unheard Voices* stands out is its use of quotations of community members. Recognizing the irony of university members writing the views of people in the community, the editors made a conscious decision to try to give voice to those interviewed, and, as noted above, one chapter was authored by one nonprofit director. It is also infused with quite a few references to the service-learning literature, putting its study into context well.

The Unheard Voices' strengths far outnumber its weaknesses. But because the book grew out of a short-term project of interviews with one set of staff members in one locale, it does not soar as high as one might desire. Its authors acknowledge the book's limits, hoping it will be an initial step that will lead to further research with community members. While the book is highly readable, there are moments when it could have used more simplicity and directness, such as a quick, clear definition of compatibility in chapter nine.

For anyone who wants service to matter in service-learning, *The Unheard Voices* is essential reading. It offers empirical evidence of a need for change, and it grounds that evidence in previous studies of service-learning. It has numerous suggestions for how professors, students, service-learning office staff, and community members can alter their practice. These include students doing projects and community-based research that may have strong ties to the classroom instead of just being limited to logging hours and serving in traditional ways (see Strand, Marullo, Cutforth, Stocker, & Donohue, 2003). But in the end, *The Unheard Voices'* most important contribution may be that it challenges us to be better in the area where our efforts

arguably matter most: effecting change for people who have been at a disadvantage in our society.

References

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