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Community-Based Learning for Environmental Justice

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In spring of 2006, we designed an extensive suite of community-based learning projects to accompany a senior seminar in environmental justice that was offered jointly by the Center for Environmental Studies and the Department of Sociology. The course was co-taught by Phil Brown (Department of Sociology and Center for Environmental Studies) and Rachel Morello-Frosch (now at University of California-Berkeley), and Laura Senier (now at University of Wisconsin-Madison) was the teaching assistant. In this article, we focus on the factors that made the community-based learning experience in this course successful for both the students and the community groups. We also describe how we have continued community-based learning projects with these community groups through other courses and through independent student research projects. We close by suggesting some ways that community-based learning could be integrated effectively into a course's pedagogical apparatus.

Two factors helped make our community-based learning course such a success. First, we provided students with a wide variety of community-based learning options, and second, we had a dedicated teaching assistant who supervised the students in their work with the community organizations.

Students who enrolled in the class were given the option of pursuing a community-based learning project or producing a conventional term paper. We felt strongly that

students should not be required to participate in community-based learning, because not all students have the time, skills, or emotional maturity to foster a strong bond with a community group. But we were deeply committed to the idea of community-based learning, and wanted to make this option attractive to as many students in the course as possible.

All three of us had strong prior working relationships with environmental justice groups throughout southern New England, and we canvassed them to solicit them for projects they were working on in which they could use a student assistant. We developed a list of 24 possible projects with 9 community-based organizations. The projects included, for example:

- Designing a farm-to-school program that would bring fresh produce to Providence's inner city schools;
- Analyzing fare structures and automated ticketing in the Boston area's mass transit system, and the impact of proposed fare restructuring on minority communities;
- Canvassing in a community in southern Rhode Island where activists were pressuring a dye manufacturing company to clean up air and water emissions;
- Producing a short video documentary about a community in South Providence that is fighting the siting of a high school on an industrial dump;
- Coaching middle schoolers on public speaking and debate so that they would be prepared to attend school committee meetings and express their concerns about the contamination surrounding a proposed site for a new high school;
- Developing a pamphlet educating homeowners about methods for safe gardening and landscaping in contaminated soil, including how to construct raised beds;
- Working with legislators to pass a bill allowing homeowners in contaminated communities to get low-income home equity loans for home repairs while they are waiting for a comprehensive cleanup.

Twenty-two students enrolled in the course and all of them chose community-based learning projects. Most of the students were juniors or seniors, although there was one graduate student and one sophomore. We believe that the reason so many students chose the community-based learning option is because every student was able to identify a project that they wanted to work on—it made use of their technical skills, engaged with a community or substantive issue they cared about, or gave them a chance to apply something they had learned previously in their Brown career. In developing the list of community-based learning projects, we therefore tried to provide a variety of types of projects that would make use of a wide variety of student skills.

It was equally important to us, however, that we match the students' abilities and interests to the community group's capacity to supervise a student. In our experience, community groups vary widely in their needs, and are often working under severe

resource constraints. We worked hard to ensure that students were providing genuine help and assistance to community groups and not burdening the community leaders by requiring constant supervision and direction. One of the ways we accomplished this was by allowing students to work independently or in teams, depending on the needs of the project and their abilities. For example, several students who were majoring in the natural sciences wanted to apply their technical knowledge to benefit a community project. One of our community partner organizations had recently received some EPA reports about contamination in their local watershed, and the program staff was quite overwhelmed by the volume and technical level of detail contained within them. One of our students reviewed these reports produced a short, user-friendly summary of the types of contaminants present, and the human and ecological effects of these contaminants. Another student had interned at a law firm, and produced a report for Rhode Island Legal Services and the US EPA that summarized best practices and models of state-level environmental justice programs. These students worked fairly independently and needed little direction or supervision from the community partner organizations. Several other students wanted more on-the-ground experience in organizing and outreach, and they gravitated toward the projects that involved planning walkathons, community educational forums, producing pamphlets and brochures, and training community members in public speaking. These teams of students worked much more closely with their community partner organizations over the course of the semester.

Laura was a teaching assistant designated to work exclusively on coordinating the community-based learning projects. She worked closely with the students, helping them to schedule initial meetings with their community partners, and attended community events and interim meetings with the community partners to help trouble-shoot issues as they arose. She and the two professors monitored the projects over the course of the semester by observing students in action with their community groups, talking with the students about their progress, and periodically contacting the community leaders for feedback about the students' performance. Community leaders who are engaged in a campaign often find that unanticipated tasks arise, and that the scope of a project changes in midstream. It was important to the success of this project that all parties involved remain flexible about the changing needs of the community group, to ensure that the group's needs were met, but that the scope of the student's obligation were clear and achievable.

CONTINUING COMMUNITY-BASED LEARNING IN THE SEMINAR AND BEYOND

Although Rachel and Laura have since departed Brown, the course continues to be offered through the Center for Environmental Studies. The investments that the three of us made in the initial course have continued to grow, and have consistently provided opportunities for community-based learning placements. Many community groups have been happy to continue participating, because they have had successful experiences with students in the past. The roster of community-based organizations that participate has grown, and has provided many more opportunities and new projects for a new generation of students. We have used the list of projects from the original class to give new partner organizations an idea of the kinds of things students can provide help with. By networking with new community groups and providing clear examples of appropriate, semester-long projects, it has never been difficult to develop a possible list of community-based learning projects for students who are interested. Indeed, our work has helped to expand and extend the local scope of community activism on environmental health and justice, helping to sustain organizations with grant support and Brown volunteers.

By having prior connections with community groups, and then by nurturing those through annual course placements, we have also been able to recruit students to work with our community partner organizations through other kinds of arrangements, in addition to the Environmental Justice (EJ) seminar. Some students have been funded through UTRA support, some through research assistant positions with the Superfund Research Program Community Outreach Core, and some through the Swearer Center's new "Community-based research award" program. For the 2009 new student orientation, the Swearer Center's University Community Academic Advising Project (UCAAP) invited one of our community partners, the Environmental Justice League of Rhode Island, to give a toxic tour for students, showing them some of the contaminated sites in Providence. This experience inspired two of those first-year students to immediately begin work with the Environmental Justice League of Rhode Island and the Superfund Research Program's Community Outreach Core, making presentations about safer cleaning products in inner-city Providence.

A major difference, however, has been that the course has not again had a dedicated teaching assistant. Having a teaching assistant who focuses on community-based learning has been important in ensuring success, especially when managing a large number of students who are working with a diverse number of partner organizations. It has

continued to be optional for students in the seminar, and at least a few students participate every year in this way.

WRITING ASSIGNMENTS TO SUPPORT GROWTH AND LEARNING

One of the things we learned in the spring 2006 course is that community-based learning projects need a special set of written assignments to support the pedagogical goals of community-based learning. These assignments can take a variety of forms, and serve many purposes, including monitoring students' progress, giving students a forum to write about their personal experiences in the field, and requiring them to link their fieldwork to the theoretical and conceptual materials presented in the classroom. For example, as a result of the spring 2006 course, we decided that it would be useful to have students keep a journal documenting their cognitive and emotional reactions to the experience of working in the community. Students frequently find themselves working with community groups that are radically different from themselves, and need a safe and confidential forum to process the feelings of frustration they may encounter in observing a community in this type of campaign. Paradoxically, we found that this need was greatest among those students who worked with community groups that scored victories in their campaigns. To further connect the academic learning and the community-based learning, we also recommend that students be required to write a short, integrative essay to analyze the context surrounding their community-based learning project and to connect that struggle to a wider body of EJ theory and evidence. As important as these writing assignments may be to the students' community-based learning experience, it does increase the burden of writing and grading, and so the support of a teaching assistant may be even more important in these kinds of courses.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Community-based learning has a long tradition in the American university, and many believe that universities have a responsibility to support their surrounding communities. Our professional experience has shown us that students can be an effective bridge between the university and the wider world in a campaign for environmental change and social justice. In addition, such courses train graduate students in the areas of community-based participatory research and community-engaged practice, which is increasingly valuable in competing for grants from various federal agencies and private foundations. Community-based learning courses are most effective when the faculty and their teaching assistants have prior connections with groups that will host student

placements, when students are presented with a wide variety of options for community-based learning, and when they are well supervised in the field. These steps will help to ensure that students learn while in the field, and that they provide genuine support and assistance to community groups. Further, ongoing collaborations between faculty and community groups may contribute to a long-standing history of successful work and enhanced learning situation for everyone involved. Last, for faculty not well-connected to community groups or inexperienced in community-based learning, “community fellows” such as the Swearer Center is beginning to train can facilitate community-based learning.

Ed. Note. Laura Senier earned her Ph.D. from Brown University in 2009.