Fall 2014

The Unheard Voices: Community Organizations and Service Learning

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Recommended Citation

The Unheard Voices: Community Organizations and Service Learning ed. by Randy Stoecker, Elizabeth A. Tryon, Amy Hilgendorf (review)

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## *The Unheard Voices: Community Organizations and Service Learning*

Randy Stoecker, Elizabeth A. Tryon, with Amy Hilgendorf
Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2009. 232 pp.

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An extensive field report about community organizations in the greater Madison, WI, region, *The Unheard Voices* offers a rare look into how charities and nonprofit organizations perceive their service-learning relationships with academic institutions. From the perspective of community partners, the view isn't always so pleasant. *The Unheard Voices* fills a frequently ignored gap in service-learning studies and offers long overdue insight from community partners. However, the book's value is limited by its focus solely on the Madison region, an area known for its community activism and service-learning participation. Despite this limitation, the book is effective at raising awareness about the level of sustained engagement needed by both academics and community partners to create greater reciprocity in service-learning projects.
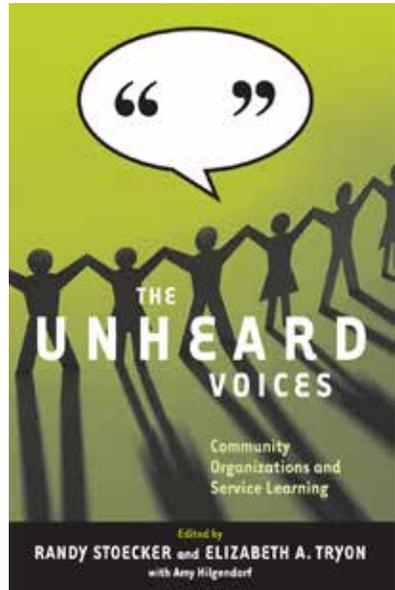
The volume's editors Randy Stoecker, Elizabeth A. Tryon, and Amy Hilgendorf, all based out of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, note that despite service learning's goal of serving community partners, service-learning researchers have generally ignored the perspective of those organizations that academic institutions aim to serve (5). Stoecker, Tryon, and Hilgendorf start with the premise that there are problems inherent with doing service learning from the "perspective of the academy" (viii) and ask the question "Who is served by service learning?" (1). Using responses from sixty-seven interviews with staff of community organizations in the greater Madison region, the authors' results suggest that higher education institutions appear to reap more of the rewards of service-learning partnerships than community organizations.

The book itself emerges from a service-learning project, born of a graduate seminar on qualitative research in which both graduate and undergraduate students—with a wide range of backgrounds in nonprofit work—contributed to the majority of the book chapters. This model itself suggests what service-learning practitioners might

undertake in their communities to improve the effectiveness of service projects, and it represents one of the greatest strengths of the book.

The first half of the book (chapters one through five) is devoted to understanding the problems with service-learning relationships, the motivations that drive community organizations to participate in service learning, how they engage in partnerships and manage service learners. The second half (chapters six through ten) develops responses to address the problems that drive community partners away from service-learning partnerships.

In chapter one, Stoecker and Tryon highlight the growing concern over the "issue of whether service learning truly serves communities" (3). The authors argue that previous research has been based on "superficial" methods, using focus groups and Likert scale questionnaires to present a rosy picture of community organization and educational institution service-learning relationships (5). They argue that projects, because educational institutions are the main drivers of them, have veered too far to the learning side of service learning, ignoring the service aspects and what benefits the community reaps from such relationships. Stoecker draws on his twenty years of experience to highlight instances of disengaged faculty who sometimes don't care about the results of unsuccessful community projects, fail to manage service learners, or lack understanding of the needs of their partner organizations or local communities.

Chapter two provides an overview of what motivates community organizations to participate in service learning. Authors Shannon Bell and Rebecca Carlson assert four primary reasons community organizations work with service learners: to build capacity, to achieve long-term education goals, to form potentially advantageous relationships with the university community, and to help students better understand their work. While building capacity seems intuitive for community organizations, Bell and Carlson point out that they were "greatly surprised to learn that many community organizations hosted service learners not because it expanded organizational capacity, but because the organizational staff saw it as part of their mission to educate the public" (23). However, Bell and Carlson end the chapter with a quote from a community partner who notes that putting students to work with meaningful, education-focused tasks as opposed to busy work like "photocopying" requires an investment of time that many nonprofits are not staffed or trained to address.

Chapter three discusses the various ways community organizations recruit volunteers and service learners. Authors Cassandra Garcia, Sarah Nehrling, Amy Martin, and Kristy SeBlonka note that researchers "know amazingly little about this question" (38). The majority of interviewees considered volunteer fairs as an ineffective means of recruiting volunteers. Only about half of interviewees held interviews and took into account the skills that students brought to volunteer positions.

In chapters four and five, the authors and their interview subjects come down hardest on the practice of short-term service-learning projects and faculty who fail to communicate with service-learning partners. One of the most damning critiques of semester-long service projects comes from the voice of one nonprofit staffer: "once the semester is over . . . poof . . . they are gone. Sometimes the works are unfinished,

sometimes they are not very good, and they left us a mess" (65). Another interviewee told a story of a professor who had made no effort to "seek an agency evaluation or to evaluate" the students' performance (92). These kinds of negative anecdotes pepper the book, reminding readers and practitioners that the structures of short-term service-learning projects often fail to generate effective partnerships.

Chapters six through eight begin the authors' move toward providing practices to address issues raised by community partners. In chapter six, Tryon, Hilgendorf, and Ian Scott, a Canadian community and urban planner, use a metaphor of romantic relationships to highlight the mutuality of institution-community relationships in service-learning partnerships. They cleverly compare some partnerships to "blind dates . . . set up by a department or a service learning office that might serve as both chaperone and matchmaker" (97). The authors assert, "mutual understanding is the touchstone of the relationship" (99). But Tryon, Hilgendorf, and Scott note that the chaperones and matchmakers are frequently missing in action. Students were often the primary and sometimes only connection to institutions (102). In chapter seven, authors Tryon, Stoecker, Charity Schmidt, and Cynthia Lin address the challenge of diversity in service-learning roles. The authors make valuable suggestions about the need for cultural competency and diversity training, but given the uniqueness of Madison's demographics, readers might view the chapter more for general principles.

Chapter eight, by Amy S. Mondloch, remains one of the most important features of the book. Mondloch, the executive director of the Grassroots Leadership College, a nonprofit community-organizing program in Madison, provides the only identified voice of a community partner in the book. Mondloch contends that community organizations "need to do a lot of thoughtful work before opening the door" to service learners (138). Mondloch encourages community organizations to consider how service learning fits within the organization's mission and vision (142). The difficulty with Mondloch's commentary is that her organization is geared towards education, which lines up much more cleanly with higher education's focus on learning. Still, even Mondloch claims that she "[thinks] twice before taking on any class projects. When we do decide to support a class project, it's because we've already begun to get to know the faculty member and trust that person" (144). The chapter begins and ends with a series of questions that nonprofits should ask themselves before engaging in a service-learning project: academics would be wise to consult this chapter and share its findings with partners before engaging in a service-learning relationship.

Chapters nine and ten conclude with recommendations: a set of principles and standards developed in collaboration with community organizations that participated in the interviews. While Stoecker, Dadit Hidayat, and Samuel Prastch's principles of commitment, communication, and compatibility should not surprise anyone who is familiar with service-learning literature, the book's qualitative methods ground these principles in the voices of community organizations. The authors make a strong case for the weakness of short-term service-learning projects, arguing that "commitment may be the most fundamental of the three Cs, for without a commitment to the community, there will be neither the energy to maintain good communication nor the will to develop training and screening mechanisms to assure compatibility" (149).

One major issue with the researchers' data is its generalizability. As one of their subjects noted in chapter three, Madison is "blessed with an abundance of volunteers" (44). Stoecker and Tryon admit this limitation in the last chapter of their book, with a call to readers to begin a similar conversation with local community organizations and avoid turning their results into "a boilerplate substitute for the process of hearing the voices of those in other communities" (186). The results, then, are likely to be less generalizable than other communities with lower volunteer involvement. The authors' findings do, however, suggest that if community partners express such levels of dissatisfaction with service-learning projects in a community known for activism and community involvement, other communities ought not be surprised when community organizations are reluctant to engage in service-learning relationships.

While admittedly limited by its focus on the Madison region, the book succeeds in giving voice to the frustrations, hopes, and desires of community partners engaged in service-learning partnerships and could serve as a framework for a range of regional research projects. Even if readers and service-learning practitioners don't replicate similar research, The Unheard Voices could serve as a valuable tool in helping establish initial relationships among community and academic partners. The book contains several useful heuristics for helping partners assess their capacity for service-learning partnerships. Chapters on why community partners engage in service learning and the chapter from a community partner's perspective could be valuable for graduate seminars on community literacy. Ultimately, The Unheard Voices suggests that institutions that fail to adequately commit to developing long-term relationships with community partners and fail to assess service-learning relationships may be harming more than helping community members.