

## Transforming Communities: The Role of Service Learning in a Community Studies Course

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This paper discusses Transforming Communities, a course about the interaction of public policy and community issues that includes service learning, along with other assignments designed to promote student understanding of issues critical to communities. The paper first addresses the roots and underlying principles of the Transforming Communities Program, with a focus on the Seminar. It describes how the academic content and community-based learning assignments work together to provide an interdisciplinary education about communities, with the overall objective of understanding how communities function and the means of strengthening them. It shows how the academic and experiential components of the course are incorporated into the larger picture of Transforming Communities. It concludes with a discussion of the program's accomplishments, while at the same time pointing out challenges that the course and others like it must address.

“All human existence throughout history, from ancient Eastern and Western Societies up through the present day, has strived toward community, toward coming together. That movement is as inexorable, as irresistible, as the flow of a river toward the sea.”

John Lewis, *Walking With the Wind*

In the spring of 2000 I heard Congressman John Lewis speak eloquently about his new book *Walking With the Wind*, containing his memories of the Civil Rights Movement. In the beginning of the book, he recalled a time when a tornado threatened to rip his aunt's Alabama shack off its moorings. His aunt had all the children walk to wherever the floor was bulging upward, clasp hands, and stand on it to hold it down. In relating the significance of that day to his later work, he wrote of times when a society or a country "...might burst at the seams – so much tension, so many storms. But the people of conscience never left the house. They never ran away. They stayed, they came together and they did the best they could" (Lewis, 1998, p ). His juxtaposition of the small community of children saving a house to the large community of committed people of conscience seemed the perfect metaphor for the Transforming Communities Seminar that I had dreamed of teaching and was preparing to launch that fall.

Transforming Communities offers a holistic model for understanding community issues and the process of community change. This model contains many interdependent components, because it is my contention that communities cannot be studied or altered without looking at their interdependent aspects and utilizing a combination of strategies to build, maintain, and improve them. An important piece of the course is service learning, because classroom study alone without community involvement lacks relevance. At the same time, service learning is only one of the integral components of Transforming Communities because it

provides a limited lens on the community. Without placing the service, the service organizations, and the community itself in the context of the larger study of community, students will not appreciate the full tapestry of communities, the root causes of their strengths and weaknesses, and the necessarily multi-faceted nature of approaches to change.

### *The Roots and Principles of Transforming Communities*

In 1998 my colleague in the Washington Semester Program, Mark Sherman, proposed the Transforming Communities curriculum, an integrated public policy approach to communities. We were trying to give meaning to our own and student concerns about serious issues confronting communities and look for policy and practical solutions. Previous courses we had taught focused on a legal framework for strengthening the polity and society. We wanted to go beyond that framework to address root causes and multi-faceted approaches.

The Transforming Communities concept has its roots in several theoretical and experiential strands. The first encompasses the civil rights and other contemporary social movements (King, 1963) that led to national policy changes at the highest levels. Second is the concept of the "underclass," or communities which over the years have retained seemingly intractable economic and social problems (Auletta, 1982; Wilson, 1987). The third strand is that of localization, promoting community-based solutions to community problems. The experiential basis of this strand is in the settlement house movement (Addams 1900); its theoretical underpinnings are found in John Dewey's advocacy of education grounded in community experience (1916). It is currently embraced by theoreticians and activists with such differing political orientations as Michael Shuman (1998) and

Robert Woodson (1998). Although the Transforming Communities focus is not limited to cities, seminal urban planning literature such as Jane Jacobs' iconic *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961) provided a fourth conceptual contribution. Fifth, and critically, Robert Putnam's analysis of the decline of social capital in *Bowling Alone* (1995, 2000) and subsequent analyses and critiques of his assertions shape our initial discussion of community. Finally, the underlying tension between the concept of individual rights and that of collective solutions to fundamental common problems guides our approach. Transforming Communities weaves these conceptual strands in order to explore the application of public policy to major issues affecting communities and the concept of community itself. Its goal is to identify both the challenges communities face and the policies and practices that show promise in strengthening and even transforming them.

Two principles underlie the Transforming Communities Semester. One is interdisciplinary learning. The curriculum includes specific issues such as how to provide for the vulnerable and build economic and personal security, how to manage a multicultural society and workforce in an era of globalization, and how to provide quality and equitable housing and education. At the same time, it stresses the need to identify interconnections as a prerequisite to solving the complex problems communities face (Boyer, 1987). While each of the major topics in Transforming Communities could be the theme of a course, too often such courses are confined to a particular discipline. Health care is taught in public health programs, education in education programs, housing in urban studies and planning programs, and family issues in psychology and sociology departments. By contrast, Transforming Communities asks, without affordable housing, can we close the achievement gap in education? Without policies that encourage asset accumulation, will we be able to find acceptable solutions for the burgeoning costs of entitlement programs? This commitment to connections may be why the course attracts students from varied disciplines. These are students who tend to identify and analyze connections and to broaden and deepen their own and each others' perspectives concerning these critical issues by studying them in a holistic context.

The other, and related, principle of Transforming Communities is that of getting to the root of a community problem in order to solve it. As the creators and faculty of the course, we had learned from practicing public interest law both the limitations as well as the strengths of the law in addressing the underlying causes of our clients' difficulties. In the same way, our students, many of whom have performed community service from a young age, have frequently

discovered that service alone is unlikely to solve the systemic problems facing communities. We want to guide them toward root causes and problem-solving strategies, not only to enhance their understanding of community and social change, but also to assist them in defining their future efforts to impact communities, in either a professional or personal capacity.

A primary objective of Transforming Communities is to convey what can be done in our larger polity—not in the course—to impact communities. With some exceptions, even students with goodwill and experience are unable to do much in a course to change communities, and occasionally they may actually adversely impact a community (Bogdan and Biklen, 1998). Just as we cannot always predict or control how students will perform at their task, so it is difficult to predict the success of community organizations. Moreover, many effective community organizations cannot or do not use students or other academic input effectively. If students go into the service-learning experience believing that they are likely to make a big difference, they are apt to become discouraged when their impact does not meet the goals of the course or the community. On the other hand, if we make their service the starting point for a larger discussion about those policies and institutions which truly make a difference in communities, we can provide fundamental and powerful lessons in how to positively impact communities (Eyler & Giles, 2000).

Therefore, the involvement of Transforming Communities students in a service-learning project in the community is an asset to our curriculum but it is not in itself our curriculum. In fact, Transforming Communities suggests a wide range of experiential tools besides service which can accomplish this goal and perhaps involve more faculty in teaching these valuable subjects. Our larger, more encompassing objectives are to teach students about what community means, the issues communities face, and the ways to strengthen communities, of which service to community organizations is only one. I believe – and student comments bear me out – that this overall curriculum, and not any one assignment, is critical to what students learn about communities and public policy, as well as what they choose to do with their lives when they leave the program. It is to this curriculum that I now turn.

### *The Transforming Communities Seminar*

Transforming Communities, one of several courses of study in the Washington Semester Program at American University, consists of an Internship course, which provides a professional experience in community change along with classes that place the experience in context, a research project, which allows students to

focus in depth on a particular area of interest in communities, and the heart of the program: the Transforming Communities Seminar. I will focus on the Seminar, in large part because – though more hours (eight) than the typical college course – it provides a model for a community studies curriculum or course. It is a model that in every aspect combines the classroom and the community. It includes substantive presentations, either in class or in the field, along with readings and academically rigorous assignments, including two major community-based learning assignments. The syllabus for the Seminar, as well as other information about it, can be accessed through the Transforming Communities website at [www.transformingcommunities.net](http://www.transformingcommunities.net) and is also on the Campus Compact website.

The Seminar content is divided into three segments: (1) the meaning of community, (2) the elements of healthy communities and proposals for strengthening them, and (3) strategies and institutions which impact and transform communities. Within each segment we focus on particular topics; the study of each topic begins with an introduction defining the issues involved, is followed by a series of guest speakers and site visits which illustrate these issues, and ends with a wrap-up session during which we draw conclusions and segue into the next topic.

We begin the Seminar with the critical attempt to define community, an effort which is ongoing throughout the course. For example, is community about place, about people, or about a concept? Is the “environmental community” really a community if its members do not know one another but simply share a common goal? Conversely, is a neighborhood a community if its members share only geography? Is our seminar class a community if we stay together for only a semester and then disperse? Does community require social capital and civic engagement? Questions like these lead us to consider the ingredients necessary to community and to place the concept of community in three contexts: economic, social, and political.

The bulk of the Seminar is devoted to major issues confronting communities. While the content of this portion of the Seminar may vary as times change, and new issues confront communities as old ones are resolved, the basic goals and principles remain the same: to confront these issues and evaluate solutions. This section of the course is divided into a series of modules: community development, community safety and the environment, housing, work, economic security for families, and education.

We first discuss the history of community development, particularly during the last half century, when market forces, government policy and racial discrimination combined to create metropolitan areas defined by urban decline and suburban expansion into

rural areas (Fishman, 1999), by impoverished and isolated racially-defined ghettos (Massey and Denton, 1993), and by the rise in technology (Putnam, 2000). Turning to the present, we discuss the intended and unintended consequences of past and current efforts to reverse these conditions. At the same time, we address the impact of globalization on communities and the value of policies and institutions designed to maintain the character of local communities (Shuman, 1998). Transforming Communities also juxtaposes on-the-ground efforts to improve community safety and the environment with the larger policy questions involved. For example, are our best safety policies directed toward developing and improving the physical environment (Wilson and Kelling, 1996) or fostering personal trust (Sampson, Raudenbush and Earls, 1998)? When should we pursue community-based solutions to crime and, when it becomes necessary to remove people from their communities, how do we maximize their chances of success when they are ready to return (Talbot, 2003)?

The discussion of community development and the environment leads directly to the crucial issues involved with housing in communities, particularly affordability, gentrification, and homelessness. At the same time, we also study the reasons that housing, racial segregation, and poverty have been and continue to be inextricably intertwined. Transforming Communities addresses historic and current policies that impact housing, especially those policies that encourage home ownership, provide access to public and other low-income housing, and offer assistance to the homeless. Integral to the housing section of the Seminar are visits to both public and private housing developments, which starkly contrast dense, concentrated low-income housing projects to newer, less dense mixed-income communities such as those promoted by the Hope VI program. We analyze the role of government and the private sector in developing, implementing, and funding strategies to provide affordable housing, and we examine benefits and drawbacks of each sector and strategy.

Next we study the impact of global economic changes and national social change on our work and family lives. This section includes the following: (1) policies and practices designed to establish and maintain people in the workforce, (2) systems such as health care, child care, and retirement security, along with strategies designed to increase individual and family assets and financial responsibility, and (3) policies and strategies to influence individual and family behavior, including programs to reduce teen pregnancy, encourage marriage, and provide a support system for children whose families are irretrievably broken. As we learn how the communities in which children live and congregate play such a dominant role

in their lives, we consider whether the most effective strategy for creating healthy families and communities is education, or whether the health of other community systems is a prerequisite to quality education. In our study of education policy, which explores a wide range of solutions, and our visits to schools which deliver education in different ways, we sometimes ask larger questions, such as whether systems to provide universal democratic education may sometimes work at cross purposes with systems of accountability.

The final section of the Transforming Communities Seminar is about process. We address the agents (such as government and nonprofits) and strategies (such as service, advocacy, and organizing) of community change which we have witnessed throughout the semester, and we discuss the attributes of each, along with its strengths and weaknesses. The Seminar ends with a discussion in which students select the particular path of change they believe they will pursue—whether as a vocation or an avocation—followed by their analysis of the most effective means and agents of community change (Kravetz and Hand, forthcoming). Their invariable conclusion that the most effective community change strategies utilize multiple tools and agents has its roots in the Seminar speakers, but also in students' own experiences as they complete the assignments.

The three major assignments of the Transforming Communities Seminar are designed to enhance its three strands. The first is a series of short sequential analytic papers analyzing the various issues in communities, such as safety, housing, economic security, and children and families. These papers call for critical analysis of the speakers and readings as well as brief but well-supported proposals for improvement. Traditional academic research, along with a comparison of competing ideas and proposals from speakers and readings, is rewarded.

The other two assignments also require critical analysis but involve students actively in the community. One, a study of a community of their individual choosing in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area, is designed to fortify students' understanding of community and community improvement through an in-depth look at a particular place and its population. In addition to conducting historical and other background research on the community they select, students are expected to carefully canvas the area and speak with a range of local residents, business people, and service providers. The study must include an historical and demographic overview as well as a summary of the community's assets (Kretzmann & McKnight 1993). It must also contain an analysis of any major areas which need improvement and a supported proposal for strengthening, if not transforming, the community. Once the assignment is completed, we have a class

discussion. After breaking into small groups of those who have studied the same or related communities to share whether and how their findings and proposals align and diverge, the class members meet as a whole to compare their communities and determine whether they can draw any general conclusions about the components of healthy communities.

The third assignment addresses how communities change and involves service learning, or what might be described more accurately as community-based learning (Cohen, 2005). This requirement shares the general goals of most service learning, such as improving the community and enhancing student understanding of community problems, but – like most service learning -- it also has a rationale specific to the curriculum, in this case the third and final unit of the Transforming Communities Seminar on community transformation. Community-based civic institutions have always been a dynamic part of the social and political fabric, particularly in the United States (De Tocqueville, 1969). In the past quarter century, however, our civic discourse suggests an emphasis on these institutions and voluntary participation to address community problems and indeed transform communities. As they help fulfill the goals of a few of these organizations, students in the Transforming Communities Seminar have the opportunity to learn how well these organizations utilize service in their work. More broadly, students evaluate the effectiveness of this “independent sector” as a whole, as well as a range of institutions within it, as agents of change.

To implement the community-based learning requirement, I have developed a database of people and organizations whose goal is to improve community life at the grassroots. Randy Stoecker (2002) has eloquently discussed the difficulty of determining who and what truly represent the “community,” but such decisions are no more subjective than the choice of speakers or readings in any course. In any event, it is not my goal to find what I judge to be the best, but rather to include a wide range of organizations that are attempting to change communities. Each semester I solicit this group to see if any need student assistance for a semester. I also consult the database of organizations in our Community Research and Learning (CoRAL) Network, a consortium of area higher education institutions devoted to community-based learning. In that way, each semester I identify a small number of service-learning sites in which to place Transforming Communities students, who have considerable input as to where they go. Students assist these organizations for only a few hours each week for about twelve weeks, a fact which limits the number and type of organizations that can utilize our assistance. I cannot prove that we provide a significant benefit to the

organizations we serve or to the communities they hope to change. The Seminar's priority is for the service learning to add a significant educational component to the course, while at the least doing no harm to the community. After some failures at the start (Kravetz, 2005), and despite an occasional organization that turns out to be a poor fit, I believe the Seminar is largely successful in this endeavor.

At the beginning of the semester I provide students with an extensive explanation of the purpose of this service learning. During the semester they fulfill their service requirement. At the end of the semester they complete the learning requirement in the context of a three-part evaluation of the effectiveness of (1) their assistance, (2) their organization, and (3) grassroots civic organizations in general. The service learning makes the theoretical discussion about community transformation more concrete. It gives them some experience to help them question or confirm some of their prior assumptions about voluntarism, and about the role of other purported strategies for change. The community-based learning is therefore integral to the course and its goals.

#### *Positive Outcomes and Challenges*

While it is difficult to measure the success of a course or program, some indicators suggest Transforming Communities has achieved its objectives. First, I have stressed the need for expertise in, and cross-fertilization among, varied disciplines in order to effectively and holistically impact communities. In this respect Transforming Communities has achieved considerable success, especially considering that the Washington Semester Program in general is designed for political science majors. The two disciplines with the greatest representation over the five years of the program are political science and sociology, but each has accounted for only twenty percent of our students. Five percent are urban planning or urban studies majors, and another ten percent have some other interdisciplinary major. Other disciplines well-represented in Transforming Communities are psychology (seven percent), communications (five percent), and international relations/area studies (five percent). The remainder of the approximately 300 participants represent at least fifteen other majors. Since many schools do not offer all or even a majority of these majors—whereas almost all of them offer political science and sociology—we consider this diversity to be one of the special strengths of Transforming Communities.

Diversity comes in other forms as well. The students have been geographically representative (forty states and six countries outside the United States) and racially diverse. Thirty-five of the approximately 300

students were African American, over twenty were Hispanic, and over fifteen were Asian. This diversity is particularly notable given the fact that the overwhelming number of institutions sending students to the Washington Semester Program are private, four-year liberal arts colleges, where minority representation tends to be quite small.

Another objective of Transforming Communities is to operate across the political divide and bring people of diverse ideological persuasions to the table. I make sure that Transforming Communities has its share of speakers across the ideological spectrum. While I have never polled the students on their political affiliation, it is clear that they also range from the far left to the far right, but with a preponderance of students who identify themselves as either moderate or liberal. Still, the fact that a course about community change attracts any conservative students is, I believe, a positive indicator. What the students have in common is a desire to make communities better, and their differences in focus and means of achieving this goal bring rich debate to the Seminar. Furthermore, the subject matter seems to encourage a search toward common solutions rather than a sharpening of the ideological divide.

Transforming Communities receives strong anonymous evaluations from students. Over its five year history, 71 percent of the students have given the course the highest rating of superior, 21 percent have rated it very good, and 7 percent have rated it good. Not one student has rated it fair or poor. Anonymous narrative evaluations, while positive, have particularly praised the community based-learning assignments.

While Transforming Communities has many positive indicators and receives strong evaluations, my experience with colleagues in higher education suggests that replicating elements of the course material and the service-learning component faces challenges. While not overly daunting to former community practitioners like me and to committed community learners like the Transforming Communities students, the course material can appear too complex and the service learning too time-consuming to many faculty and students (Kravetz, 2005). We grappled with this issue recently at a CoRAL Network conference on strategies for extending course offerings that incorporate student assistance to community organizations in the form of service, research, or advocacy. In the same panel at which I discussed Transforming Communities, a colleague reported on an extensive survey she had conducted of the faculty of her university concerning their knowledge of, and interest in, service learning (Schuttloffel, 2005). The results were discouraging, though not surprising. Most of the faculty had not heard of it and, perhaps more importantly, many who had heard of service learning were not interested in using it in their courses. I don't believe their answers

resulted from a misunderstanding of the demands of service learning; their concerns have been amply documented even by ardent proponents of service learning (Hartley, M., Harkavy, I., & Benson, L., 2005). In addition, while academic institutions can have a positive impact on the community within which they are located, institutions which are not situated in low-income communities, or do not have sufficient leadership or resources to make a major contribution to that community, can still achieve their primary objective of educating their students in valuable lessons about community change without actually taking on the daunting task themselves.

One way to meet these challenges is to offer a wide range of community-related options to faculty. For example, what if we were to ask an engineering faculty member about whether a course on designing a system for cleaning and shoring up local polluted waterways might be a good addition to the curriculum? I suspect the interest might be greater. Perhaps such a course would include a community-based—even a service — project somewhere down the road. However, would it not be preferable for students, and the society at large to have the course, with or without the project? Should we not provide vehicles and encouragement for more well-designed courses about important community issues? Such curricula will not only provide a rich education that, down the road, can be incorporated into a community studies curriculum, but it can ignite student demand for learning, and faculty interest in teaching, about these issues. The closer they get to community, the richer that design might be. However, initially faculty, students, and communities must feel they are part of a larger endeavor to make communities stronger and that they can use their expertise to develop a range of creative courses about community issues (Butin, 2005).

Furthermore, the academic component of Transforming Communities and other programs like it faces considerable skepticism in higher education circles. While I do not believe they are insurmountable, they call for further exploration, dialogue, and strategic thinking. In spite of a century of calls for more community-centered interdisciplinary learning from distinguished educators like Dewey and Boyer, one finds no consistent effort, but rather isolated courses and programs, generally outside of the higher education mainstream (Mott, 2005). While service learning has greatly increased, causing students to interact with their communities, we are only at the nascent stages of a discussion about curricula encompassing the major issues in community and civic life. Transforming Communities provides one model—by no means the only one—and below I suggest some mechanisms for incorporating these models more fully into higher education.

As a practical matter, we need to identify faculty who can teach such courses. In the case of community courses, my own experience may be illustrative. Had I not helped develop the syllabus for Transforming Communities and shepherded it through the approval process at my university, I would not have been considered, or considered myself, qualified to teach it. Because the curriculum requires the weaving of a number of disciplines, and disciplines are at the foundation of our academic training, there were gaping holes in my knowledge base of substantive issues. My research skills were limited to those in the law—useful, to be sure—but inapplicable to economic or sociological analysis. At the same time, legal studies crosses disciplines and likely made it easier for me to adapt to an interdisciplinary problem-solving model. Those who possess rigorously acquired, interdisciplinary community-based knowledge should form the core of a community-based learning.

At the same time, courses and programs about and involving community must be open and flexible while maintaining their rigor. The issues communities face are constantly changing. Twenty-five years ago homelessness was not a major problem in communities, but it is an essential topic in any community studies program today. When I began Transforming Communities in 2000, questions concerning welfare reform were high on my agenda. Only five years later they have been overshadowed by the problems of low-wage workers and the impact of globalization and immigration on communities. Transforming Communities has been able to address these new issues without sacrificing a rigorous approach.

Questions concerning the rigor of community courses will remain under any circumstances, particularly the concern that such programs sacrifice depth for breadth, or address some issues communities face while omitting others. Time constraints make it impossible to discuss every possible community concern in one semester. That is why it is important to determine and identify common principles and basic curricula. Community-centered courses and curricula must be deep and broad at the same time in order to maintain a stable yet dynamic presence in higher education.

Another concern is that community-based courses such as Transforming Communities tend to be identified with a progressive, liberal philosophy. I would argue that the current focus on community and service is one shared by scholars and practitioners across the spectrum. We are already familiar with a considerable body of social change scholarship identified with more progressive thinking. In fact, an unprecedented volume of influential writings from conservatives outside academia concerns issues

fundamental to communities, on subjects ranging from the family (Rector & Johnson, 2004), education (Hess, 2004), and the role of faith in community transformation (Elliott, 2004). The student population in Transforming Communities reflects this range. It would be difficult to categorize Transforming Communities students, who are eager to learn about and vigorously debate proposals from all sides in a search for effective policies and strategies. If anything, community-based curricula may serve to de-polarize what has been a highly politicized environment in order to find long-term solutions. However, in order to do so, they must be equally open to, and critical of, a wide range of perspectives.

### Conclusion

After five years of the Transforming Communities Seminar, I see more clearly than ever why John Lewis' description of his band of children "walking with the wind" in the house so struck me, for it aptly and poignantly grounds the Transforming Communities endeavor in so many ways. First, it takes place in a home and a family, the foundations of community. While it formed an immediate and perhaps effective response to a storm that threatened to damage or destroy those foundations, at some point in his evolution Congressman Lewis understood that larger solutions—a more grounded and stable home perhaps—were required. He went on in his life to seek and indeed bring about solutions, first as an organizer, then in local government, and today as a representative in the national government. And while his own path at one time in history required considerably greater courage, commitment, and effort than the path most of us follow, and while his efforts led to dramatic and enduring consequences, he recognizes all the small contributions of countless individuals in countless ways coming together to strengthen our common fabric. Transforming Communities attempts to study all these forms of contribution to forging and strengthening communities. I believe—and participant feedback amply confirms—that it can rigorously educate students about issues that deeply and directly impact communities. I advocate for incorporating more of these courses into larger community studies curricula (Butin, 2005). Those of us involved in teaching about communities should focus on expanding and deepening knowledge in this area, and we should reward and encourage all effective community-based learning strategies which can become part of a larger community studies endeavor.

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