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EXPLORING THE NEXUS BETWEEN HUMAN SERVICES AND SOCIOLOGY THROUGH ENGAGED SCHOLARSHIP

Abstract

This article explores the cross-disciplinary nexus between the fields of Human Services and Sociology at The George Washington University, USA. The authors discuss programmatic changes recently implemented in the curriculum of the Human Services Program in an effort to align it more closely with the disciplinary focus of Sociology while maintaining the Program's distinctive strengths. Using engaged scholarship as its pedagogical cornerstone, the Human Services Program seeks to deepen the knowledge and skills of its undergraduate majors by linking service learning and community-based research. The authors reflect upon both the successes and challenges of this effort.

Key words: Civic engagement, curricula, engaged scholarship, Human Services, Sociology

Introduction

Engaged scholarship – the melding of academic expertise with community needs in order to redress social problems – continues to gain prominence among institutions of higher education in the U.S. This growth stems in part from the concerns of universities and their faculty (Boyer 1990; Everett 1998; Stoecker 1999) and in part from pressures exerted by the corporate and government sectors to ensure that students are instilled with the knowledge, values, and ethics expected of informed citizens of the world (Edwards, Marullo 1999; Strand et al. 2003). Yet universities have come under increasing criticism for languishing in their mission to shape citizens “who have ethical standards, social responsibility, and civic competencies” (Checkoway 2001: 129). In recent years, some institutions have redoubled their efforts to foster civic engagement by turning to engaged scholarship in order “to meet community needs beyond the campus, promote active citizenship in a diverse democracy, and enhance teaching, learning, and scholarship.”¹

¹ The GWU Honey W. Nashman Center for Civic Engagement and Public Service's mission statement. About our center; <https://serve.gwu.edu/about-our-center> (accessed: 03.06. 2016).

Service learning is but one pillar of engaged scholarship. Numerous studies have found that service learning, which augments traditional classroom instruction by placing students in the community to serve local needs, has a positive impact on students' educational experiences (Strage 2004; Mabry 1998; Eyler, Giles, Braxton 1997). Service learning differs from traditional learning in its experiential format, combining theory with praxis for the mutual benefit of students and communities alike. As noted by Stoecker, service learning "is designed to combine community empowerment with student development, to integrate teaching with research and service, and to combine social change with civic engagement" (2003: 35).

In this article we explore the cross-disciplinary bridging of Human Services and Sociology, an effort designed to create more effective and engaged scholarship in undergraduate education at GWU. We begin with an overview of the Human Services & Social Justice Program and recent curricular changes. Next we delve into some benefits and challenges of blending more closely the two disciplines. Finally, we turn to student reflections on the enhancement that service learning brings to their educational and career paths.

The Human Services & Social Justice Program

In 2012 the George Washington University (GWU), located in the District of Columbia, the nation's capital, launched a new strategic plan designed to better integrate its research, education, and service missions. Citing a return to the vision espoused at its founding in 1821 – a "national university that would educate the next generation of citizen leaders"² – the university identified four pillars to achieve this goal: cross-disciplinary collaboration, globalization, governance and policy, and citizenship and leadership. The Honey W. Nashman Center for Civic Engagement and Public Service, named in 2015 in honor of the long-time director of the Human Services Program, is one of the vehicles through which faculty and students at GWU broaden their involvement with local communities. Several departments and programs at the university have had long-standing commitments to academic service learning, including but not limited to the Human Services Program, Education, Geography, Public Health, and Sociology. This aligns with a national trend, with disciplines such as Education, Sociology, English and Psychology, among others, offering the largest number of service learning courses (Butin 2006).

In 1995 the Human Services Program (hereafter, the Program) joined the Department of Sociology (hereafter, the department) as its third degree-conferring major, alongside Sociology and Criminal Justice. In 2010 the Program director retired and subsequently a decision was made to more closely integrate the Program with the department's disciplinary focus. Human Services students were performing outstanding community-based

² 2021 vision. *A strategic plan for the third century of the George Washington University*, p. 5; <https://provost.gwu.edu/files/downloads/Strategic%2520Plan.pdf> (accessed: 14.06.2016).

work on problems facing disadvantaged residents of the District of Columbia. For instance, students were affiliated with organizations working to improve literacy among children of the homeless, to provide food at soup kitchens and mobile feeding centers, and to ensure equitable access to healthcare services. However, students often lacked a deep disciplinary grounding in the macro-level social forces that created the need for these services in the first place – deep and growing income inequality, gender inequities, and racial and ethnic discrimination, among others. To ensure that students were able to bridge micro- and macro-level perspectives, the department initiated a revision of the Human Services curriculum to align it more closely with the disciplinary concerns of Sociology. Launched in Fall 2014, the revised Human Services Program was renamed Human Services & Social Justice (HSSJ), marking its shift toward a more social justice orientation. As of 2016 there were 80 majors and 10 minors in the Program.

In its broadest sense, Human Services is a field that strives to integrate the provision of services by “meeting human needs through an interdisciplinary knowledge base, focusing on prevention as well as remediation of problems, and maintaining a commitment to improving the overall quality of life of service populations.”³ Located at the confluence of the fields of Sociology, Psychology, and Public Policy, the HSSJ Program offers coursework that allows students to integrate traditional class-based learning with experiential learning. Each course in the Program incorporates service learning through site placements designed to enable students to combine their applied and academic knowledge. The grounding in research, reflection, and action builds fundamental skills that allow students to engage in the work of social justice and social change. The Program has particular strengths in non-profit management, ethics and leadership, and organizational and community development.

Partnerships with local organizations are key to identifying community needs and promoting student learning. The organizations decide what form of student collaboration best serves the community. Some require direct services, such as tutoring or food preparation, while others prefer indirect services, such as grant writing or program evaluation. In serving sites students carry their learning to the community and bring their experiences back into the classroom for reflection and connection to theory. Ashley Trick, a student who graduated from the Program in 2015, noted: “As I interned with Street Sense⁴ and wrote my research paper, I felt immersed in my academic career as never before. It soon became clear that, with this course, I wasn’t merely earning credits or making a grade; I was fulfilling a civic duty.”⁵

³ This definition was used in the *Program revision, and is from The National Organization of Human Services. What is Human Services?*; http://www.nationalhumanservices.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=88:what-is-human-services?&catid=19:site-content&Itemid=89 (accessed: 25.06.2016).

⁴ DC-area newspaper written by people experiencing homelessness.

⁵ A. Trick, M. Spotlight, K. Cassella, *Human Services & Social Justice Newsletter Spring 2015*; <http://georgewashingtonuniversity.createsend1.com/t/ViewEmail/t/055EF4A31BEB245A> (accessed: 25.06.2016).

Through reading and praxis students begin to develop insights into the lives of marginalized members of the local community and to explore how mechanisms of power and privilege perpetuate inequality (Petersen 2009). In introductory classes students are challenged to examine their own social identities and experiences, and how these may factor into their service endeavors. In courses such as Organizing for Social Justice in Human Services and Program Planning and Evaluation, students work closely with local organizations to plan events and conduct project evaluations, critically reflecting on their roles as change agents and evaluators.

HSSJ students make a time commitment to their sites during each 14-week semester while also meeting two hours weekly for class. Class time is essential in assisting students to reflect upon issues they confront at their service sites, to provide theoretical and academic grounding from which to make sense of their site-work, and to allow for broader explorations of social issues. Additionally, the classroom is a space in which students can find support from one another and discuss sensitive topics related to the social issues that they encounter (Petersen 2009). Assignments are typically designed to incorporate various writing styles, from traditional reflective pieces through which students can explore their own experiences to literature reviews and issue-based research papers.

The Program curricular changes described below, while welcomed by faculty, administration, and students, are not without some drawbacks. The number of credit hours required to complete the HSSJ major has increased, which means that students spend more time in class as well as more contact hours in their service locations. It can be challenging for students to fit coursework and service into their schedules, especially if they declare their majors in their sophomore year or later. Additionally, new courses, such as Introduction to Human Services and Social Justice and Interpersonal Relationships in Human Services, increase the teaching burden on the department which (like other departments) already has insufficient resources. Since there are only two full-time faculty members in an expanding program, several courses are taught by part-time faculty, which can lead to disruptions in continuity. Lastly, service learning courses take more time to teach as instructors typically liaise with sites and assign more writing components, including journals and other reflective pieces, which can mean additional grading responsibilities (Everett 1998). The increased teaching investment is not always rewarded by the university administration, which is a common problem across American institutions of higher education. The Program must also critically assess on a continuing basis whether the goals of social justice and student learning are being met, which as Lewis (2004) accurately points out, requires additional investments of faculty time and commitment.

The City As Text: Strengthening the Human Services-Sociology Nexus

The George Washington University is the largest institution of higher education in Washington, DC, enrolling 26,000 students across three campuses, including 11,000

undergraduate and 15,000 graduate students. The university is located just blocks from the White House, the World Bank, the U.S. State Department, numerous lobbyist and law firms, and a plethora of social and welfare agencies.⁶ In a city renowned for its polarizing extremes, from Capitol Hill to inner city neighborhoods, the District of Columbia offers both opportunities and challenges for students interested in government and service agencies. Seventy percent of undergraduate students hold internships or co-ops during their studies. Former Program Director Honey Nashman summarized the unique opportunity for engaged scholarship in the heart of the nation's capital as an essential draw: "We are in nonprofit nirvana, more than 6,000 nonprofit organizations are in the Washington area. What better way for undergraduate students to weave their theory into practice?"⁷

The epistemological roots of both Human Services and Sociology share a concern with social justice. As Abraham and Purkayastha (2012: 124) noted, many "intellectuals and activists have challenged class formation, racism, gendering, and colonization, and attempted to link their conceptualization to practice," with goals of social justice at their center. Washington, DC offers a myriad of possibilities for collaboration with organizations dedicated to mitigating social problems stemming from these systemic inequalities. A majority black city since the 1950s, the percentage of black residents in DC has been steadily declining in recent years, from 65 percent in 1990 to 48 percent in 2014. This is due, in part, to movement of middle class African Americans to the suburbs and in-migration of middle class whites.⁸ DC is now a plurality black city, with whites comprising 40 percent and Hispanics, the second largest minority group, 10 percent of the city's population (American Community Survey 2014).⁹ In 2013 DC's poverty rate was 18.9 percent, placing it in the top ten most impoverished areas in the United States.¹⁰ Over the last seven years poverty has deepened for communities of color in the city; in 2014, over one-fourth of African Americans were living in poverty as compared to 7 percent of whites.¹¹ In predominately black districts, the poverty rate increases to 33 percent. Data compiled by The Urban Institute indicate that in 2014 white households in the DC region had fully 81 times the median net worth of black households – a huge racial gap in wealth (Kijakazi et al. 2016). The city's public school system has been beleaguered for years, recently ranking as the second worst in the

⁶ University Facts. The George Washington University; <https://www.gwu.edu/university-facts> (accessed: 19.06.2016).

⁷ J. Irwin, *The Sweet life*, "GW Magazine"; <https://magazine.gwu.edu/sweet-life> (accessed: 19.06.2016).

⁸ W. Rivers, C. Zippel, *While DC continues to recover from recession, communities of color continue to face challenges*. DC Fiscal Policy Institute; <http://www.dcfpi.org/while-dc-continues-to-recover-from-recession-communities-of-color-continue-to-face-challenges> (accessed: 20.06.2016).

⁹ These figures are based on the 97.5 percent of D.C. residents who self-identified as being one race in 2014.

¹⁰ E. Rawes, *6 states and D.C. with the most people in poverty*. "USA Today"; <http://www.usatoday.com/story/money/2015/02/15/cheat-sheet-states-poverty/23325629/> (accessed: 20.06.2016).

¹¹ W. Rivers, C. Zippel, *While DC continues to recover from recession...*, *op.cit.*

nation.¹² It has the lowest math, reading and SAT scores in the country, the highest dropout rates, and the worst safety record.¹³

Many urban universities experience a socioeconomic and/or racial divide between the student and resident populations, and GWU is no exception. The student population of GWU is predominately white, 57.8 percent, with relatively few black or Hispanic students, 6.4 and 7.6 percent, respectively.¹⁴ Similar to most other American colleges and universities, women outnumber men by a margin of 56 to 44 percent.¹⁵ Enrollment in the HSSJ program is predominantly female. Attending an expensive private university,¹⁶ students often note the stark contrast between what they call the “Foggy Bottom bubble,” or the sheltered enclave that the campus provides, and the plethora of social problems facing disadvantaged city residents. For all students, and especially for HSSJ majors, consideration of the disparities that exist between them and their site clients allows for a deeper exploration of the dynamics of power and privilege in American society. Moreover, in addition to providing students the opportunity to identify and study inequalities, students also work alongside local communities to assuage some of these disparities. Issues of power and privilege lie at the core of stratification systems and of the sociological enterprise more broadly, and the department wanted these hierarchies to be integral components of the Human Services & Social Justice revised curriculum. As noted above, the goal was to expose HSSJ students to coursework that would encourage them to merge the traditionally individualistic focus of Human Services with the distinctively sociological focus on systemic factors. This is a challenge that sociologist C. Wright Mills addressed in his now classic work, *The Sociological Imagination* (1959), in which he emphasized the interplay between personal experience and the larger society in understanding ourselves – in other words, the connection between “personal troubles” and “public issues.” This is especially important, though difficult, to accomplish when largely white, upper-middle class students interact with predominantly disadvantaged communities and people of color.

HSSJ majors are required to include in their coursework the following Sociology courses: Introduction to Sociology, Social Research Methods, and at least two courses selected from Contemporary Sociological Theory, Class and Inequality, Race and Minority Relations, and Sociology of Sex and Gender. Introduction to Sociology and Class and

¹² *Study: D.C. ranks near bottom of U.S. school systems.* WTOP; <http://wtop.com/dc/2015/07/study-d-c-ranks-near-bottom-u-s-school-systems/> (accessed: 25.06.2016).

¹³ *Ibidem.*

¹⁴ <http://www.collegefactual.com/colleges/george-washington-university/student-life/diversity/#> (accessed: 25.06.2016).

¹⁵ The George Washington University. U.S. News. Education; <http://colleges.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/best-colleges/gwu-1444> (accessed: 25.06.2016).

¹⁶ Jenna Johnson (12 November 2012); https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/George-Washington-University-is-actually-NOT-the-most-expensive-school-in-the-country-2012/11/15/c9befee2-2f28-11e2-ac4a-33b8b41fb531_blog.html (accessed: 25.06.2016).

Inequality often implement Problem-Based Learning approaches in which students become active learning participants in order to solve social problems (Eglitis, Buntman, Alexander 2016). These courses complement the service learning approaches in HSSJ, teaching students to conceptualize social issues with a broad degree of nuance and complexity.

Two cases in point are illustrative. The first is the continuing debate in the U.S. over race-targeted vs. universal approaches to solving social problems. Viewed by proponents as appropriate remedies for the lingering effects of past racial injustices, and by opponents as unfair reverse discrimination, race-targeted policies remain one of the most divisive issues in 21st century American social and political life. The factors that shape citizens' views of social policies have been the subject of intense debate among scholars. Much current race scholarship locates the source of opposition to race-conscious social policies in the beliefs of many whites that blacks no longer suffer prejudice and discrimination and therefore deserve no special treatment (Hunt, Wilson 2011; Tuch, Hughes 2011). The Race and Minority Relations course presents students with the conceptual toolkit necessary to understand the complexities of this issue by drawing the connection between individual attitudes and location in the stratification system. Analogously, the Sociology of Sex and Gender course presents students with the skills necessary to understand the interconnections among different hierarchies of inequality, including gender, race, ethnicity, class, and age. This "intersectionality" perspective views these separate dimensions of inequality as more than the sum of their individual parts. Rather, the interweaving of multiple hierarchies of inequality subject already disadvantaged people to double or triple jeopardy based on their location on several hierarchies, not just one. Equipping students with the toolkit necessary to understand intersectionality enables them to respond more effectively to their clients, albeit, as noted above, not without challenge and introspection.

Student Reflections

HSSJ students and alumni often provide feedback in the form of evaluations, assessments, and other venues such as alumni panels, all indicating that the service learning opportunities and skills provided by the program equips them with the kind of experiences and knowledge that shapes their professional and academic career trajectories. In 2016, Hannah Schaefer reflected upon her senior year capstone course project for which the entire class administered a foundation that awarded two local non-profits grants totaling \$10,000:

As my final semester comes to a close, the Capstone Seminar (HSSJ 4195) has offered many opportunities for reflection – leading to a greater understanding of myself and the world around me....Words cannot express the excitement we have all felt knowing that we are giving back to a community that has given so much to us. For every student in the program, this final project is

not just the achievement of a course objective, rather it represents the successful conclusion of four years of hard work and a new beginning for our own lives and the organizations involved. I speak for myself when I say that, through this capstone experience, a more confident, self-aware, and community-oriented individual has bloomed. I speak for our class when I say that each of us plans to continue our work in the service of humanity and social justice, wherever our post-graduation adventures take us.¹⁷

Schaefer has described her own personal growth in terms of understanding herself and the world at large, as well as her future commitment, and that of her colleagues, to service. This corresponds with the findings of Astin and Sax (1998) that service participation affects students' academic and life skills development and their sense of civic responsibility.

After graduation students take numerous paths. For example, they continue their education in areas like nursing, social work, education and non-profit management; take on service work commitments through programs like Teach for America, Americorps and the Peace Corps; and enter the workforce for non-profits, businesses and government.

After her graduation in 2013, Laura Wood was employed at the Washington, DC non-profit organization where she had done some of the Program's course-based service learning projects. The site, Young Playwrights' Theatre (YPT), focuses on integrating education and theatre, partnering with DC public schools to teach semester-long playwriting workshops to students by integrating creative writing and theater. YPT then brings professional actors into the classrooms to perform pieces written by students. Wood recently commented on her undergraduate service learning and the benefits it brought to her:

When I chose to major in Human Services, I had no idea how much that decision would shape my career. I considered my service work as being completely separate from my zeal for theater. The summer before senior year, I did an internship at Young Playwrights' Theater (YPT) where my two passions melded in the perfect combination of art and social justice....

Studying human services enriched my internship experience, allowing me to draw connections between the skills we learned in the classroom and the impact it could have in a small, grassroots nonprofit. Hands-on learning helped me identify what I liked and didn't like in nonprofit administration, while the projects and reflection papers helped me understand why I care so passionately about YPT's work.¹⁸

¹⁷ The HSSJ Capstone course received funding for the grants from a private foundation, learning by Giving Foundation and two private donors, K. Segal, D. Green, H. Shaefer, *Capstone reflections*. "Human Services & Social Justice Newsletter", Spring 2016; <http://georgewashingtonuniversity.createsend1.com/t/ViewEmail/t/FB141620C6C60F1C> (accessed: 10.06.2016).

¹⁸ L. Wood, *Spotlight Laura Wood, BA '13*. "Human Services & Social Justice Newsletter", Spring 2015; [https://humanservices.columbian.gwu.edu/department-news-april-2015#Laura Wood](https://humanservices.columbian.gwu.edu/department-news-april-2015#Laura%20Wood) (accessed: 10.06.2016).

While HSSJ students do often link the skills they learn to real world problems while still in the Program, for many the connections between coursework and service experience crystallize when they start their careers. Peter Sacco, a 2015 graduate, began working in local DC government after finishing the Program, which he believes was instrumental in his employment: “The Human Services program has definitely influenced my career path. I learned how to work in a group setting, use my coursework to solve real-world problems, and complete important tasks for the nonprofits and government agencies that I now work and volunteer with, including applying for grants, managing volunteers, and marketing social programs.”¹⁹

Conclusion

This article has discussed the merger of the Human Services Program with the Department of Sociology at The George Washington University. Such mergers are not commonplace at U.S. universities, and when they do occur not all institutions adopt the same model. At one extreme is simple coexistence of two previously separate entities under a single administrative roof without any attempt at disciplinary integration. At the other extreme is a melding of the two units into a single discipline. The most common pattern, however, lies between these extremes – a merging of two disciplinarily-related departments or programs into a single administrative unit with at least some shared coursework while maintaining intellectual autonomy and, often (as in the present case), separate degrees. The merger of the Program and department described here followed this latter pattern.

Human Services at GWU has always adopted an engaged scholarship model of undergraduate education that combines traditional classroom instruction with service learning placements matched to the needs of the community. The result of the initiative described here to more closely integrate the Human Services curriculum with the core curriculum of the department went into effect at the beginning of the 2014–2015 academic year. The goal of the additional coursework was to immerse students in the study of macro-level hierarchies of inequality in order to provide them with the intellectual toolkits necessary to link personal situations with systemic causes. The primary challenges were the mismatch between mostly white, upper-middle class students engaging with mostly disadvantaged members of communities of color in Washington, DC, and the additional strains that engaged scholarship places on already over-worked and under-resourced departments and students. The former obstacle was addressed by means of additional coursework designed to better inform students of the systemic forces that are implicated in the creation of the social problems disadvantaged communities face. Although it is too soon to know for certain whether these obstacles have been overcome, anecdotal evidence is quite promising.

¹⁹ Peter Sacco email correspondence with Michelle Kelso, June 2016. All of the students quoted here completed the former not the revised Human Services curriculum.

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