



Holding a Mirror up to Society

Public Sociology

How a Discipline Struggled with the Need to Know and the Need to Do

Community-based learning is an integrated service learning experience used by public sociologists. A perfect fit for public sociology education, this applied learning experience frames civic engagement as an alternative “text” that brings service, learning and practice together in one cohesive learning experience.



PHOTOS: UNGW, JAMIE MONGRIEF

In 1906, Lester F. Ward, the first president of the American Sociological Association (ASA), defined the pure science of sociology as ever-evolving toward application, “the great practical object for which it exists.” For the first 100 years, Ward and others like Jane Addams and W.E.B. Dubois set this objective of knowledge directed toward application as the standard for the discipline.

Yet, until recently, the discipline struggled to achieve the integration of knowing and doing. At times academic sociological research was taken over by the professions, government and agencies before best applications for theories could be discovered and tested. Other times, debates within the discipline about how to apply sociological knowledge to pressing social problems eluded resolution.

21st Century Sociology

Beginning in the 1980s, sociologists proposed a redirection of sectors of the discipline. Without compromising traditional sociological research and methods, reformers like Michael Buroway called for a special focus on applied learning and civic engagement. Today, this focus is called “public sociology.”

Making a Public Impact

Public sociologists take sociological research directly to communities or, conversely, identify problems in real-world communities that beg sociological research. With hope and commitment, public sociologists apply their learning with the aim of leaving a footprint of positive social change.

In 2005, a visionary departmental faculty charted the course to develop a public sociology program at UNC Wilmington. Hiring Kimberly Cook as chair of the department and public sociologist Leslie Hossfeld, co-chair of the national ASA Task Force for Institutionalizing Public Sociologies, the department was able to create both an undergraduate and a graduate level public sociology program at once.

The investment in purpose and talent has given the department national visibility. “We are proud that our department is on the cutting edge of public sociology,” Cook says, “and grateful for the administrative support and community partnerships as we maintain our commitment to do sociology in the public interest.”

Community-based Learning

Community-based learning is an integrated service learning experience used by public sociologists. This applied learning experience frames civic engagement as an alternative “text” that brings service, learning and practice together in one cohesive learning experience.

Course requirements compel students to connect their learning-in-service to theory in ways that demonstrate a high level of scholarship that will benefit both learners and publics.

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— LESLIE HOSSFELD

Hossfeld says, “Students are eager to get out of the classroom and into the community to use the tools of the discipline to address local problems. The idea is to give students direct experience in the community with issues they are studying in the curriculum and with ongoing efforts in the discipline to analyze and solve social problems.”

The Community Garden Initiative

A 2006 grant from the Kate B. Reynolds Foundation to Cape Fear Healthy Carolinians, administered by UNCW, enabled a number of community non-profit organizations to address obesity and poor nutrition



SERVICE LEARNING

in the region. With the assistance of UNCW's Division of Public Service and Continuing Studies the extraordinary regional collaboration became the Obesity Prevention Initiative (OPI).

The Wilmington Housing Authority (WHA) joined OPI to give public housing residents access to high-quality fresh fruits and vegetables in a way that would bring neighbors together, beautify the neighborhood with garden space, educate and edify. Known as the Community Garden Initiative, the project excited Hossfeld.

With a Technical Assistance Grant from the Southern Sustainable Agriculture Working Group Community Foods Program, on behalf of The Southeastern North Carolina Food Systems Project (SNCFS), Hossfeld's students became full partners in the Community Garden Initiative.

The funding permitted public sociology students to provide intensive technical assistance to five community-based groups doing community food systems work in the southern United States as students learned the dynamics of the challenges and aspirations of the neighborhoods.

Describing his participation, Justin Anderson '08 says, "Public sociology gave me the opportunity to learn not just how I might apply theory, but to actually go out into the field. Today, I have a better



The Community Garden Initiative is part of a larger food systems project serving Bladen, Brunswick, Columbus, New Hanover, Pender and Robeson counties. Students assist in achieving goals and targets supporting market access for local food producers and

understanding of how class, race, gender, family and age affect our social world from my own experience."

From Academic to Activist

Jessica MacDonald '08 remembers arguing with her first sociology professor over pure objectivity vs. applied science.

"He had a penchant for summing up the objectivity of the discipline with one succinct phrase: 'I'm not saying it's good; I'm not saying it's bad; I'm just telling you how it is.'"

MacDonald could not accept such a passive point of view. "I saw how it was, and often times, I thought it was bad. Why do we as academics, as sociologists, not feel an obligation to right the blatant wrongs that emerge in our study?"

"Why are we sitting in a classroom learning about what was happening, instead of getting up and doing something about it?"

"Then I took some public sociology classes. These public sociology courses transformed me from an

academic to an informed activist."

MacDonald joined the UNCW Chapter of Amnesty International, "which broadened my world view more than I thought possible." She volunteered at Dreams, a local arts center for low-income, at-risk children, and became a substitute teacher at Dreams, earning a scholarship with AmeriCorps for her more-than 300 hours of volunteer service to the organization.



top: Justin Anderson '08, professor Leslie Hossfeld and Jessica MacDonald '08

bottom: Randolph Keaton, chief of Community and Supportive Services, Wilmington Housing Authority, joins students in planting a winter garden for Sunset South residents.

MacDonald became president of UNCW Amnesty International, and she created “UNCW Goes Global,” a weeklong series of events aimed at raising awareness of human rights abuses around the globe, now an annual campus event. For this and other work, MacDonald received a UNCW scholarship for leadership and service.

While working toward departmental honors, MacDonald recently completed a six-month internship with N.C. State Senator Julia Boseman. In the future, she plans to attend graduate school at American University in Washington, D.C.

Public Sociology Majors are Prepared for Employment or Grad School

Training in evaluation and research, writing for non-academic audiences as well as for academic ones, participation in interdisciplinary collaborations, grant writing, non-profit management and organizational culture are all part of the undergraduate public sociology curriculum.

Many students go on to graduate school. Many go directly to work. Danielle Aldrich '07, who worked on the SNCFS project with the Wilmington Housing Authority, was hired by the housing authority as a grant writer. Lynn Casper '07, whose idea for an internship project launched the Northside Resource Center community garden site, was hired by Working Films, a firm that creates documentary films about social justice issues.

With the resolve of practicing engineers, young public sociologists are applying the tools of their trade, sociological methodology and research, to build a better social order – to make a real difference.

— BY KIM PROUKOU '06M

In a critical dialogue recently published by sociology professor David L. Brunsma and graduate student David Overfelt of University of Missouri-Columbia, teacher and student imagine breaking out of the ivory tower by analyzing themselves in the same way that “we have analyzed the objects of our own studies.” What if, they ask – “we allowed our subjects to study us in the same way we study them? Turn the mirror around and look into your own soul asking, how have you, as a sociologist, done something to help people...?” The answer is an application of expertise that works not only for faculty and students, but for real-world communities as well.