

Just a Community Organizer: Community/Campus Connections through Organizing

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Abstract

The 2008 presidential election catapulted “community organizers” into the media fray and raised awareness about community organizing. At the University of San Diego (USD), a course teaching consensus organizing techniques to address community issues was instituted in 2004. The course incorporates traditional undergraduate students and “Community Fellows,” who are residents of the community surrounding USD. The impetus behind the course was to model the effective analytical, planning, facilitation, and relationship-building skills of consensus organizing as a means to produce meaningful civic engagement and to promote positive social change.

One of the main fields in the discipline of Sociology is the study of community. Underlying this field is the belief that courses can be designed to foster a vibrant learning environment in which students can increase their knowledge of the concept of community as well as their commitment to help create a more just society. In terms of student intellectual and social development, as Sharon Daloz Parks points out, the college years can be a time of intense personal growth where an individual can cultivate not only a vision of the common good but also find one’s place in bringing that vision into reality. Parks writes about promoting a “mentoring community” where students encounter “otherness,” are encouraged to ask “big” questions, and are taught how to create community. By engaging students in dialogue, critical and systemic thinking, and contemplative reflection, they can develop habits that can become the foundation of “worthy dreams”—ideas that position the developing self within a context of social interaction and concern for others. Not surprisingly, meaningful community service often results in having students learning to think beyond themselves and to envision a future “calling” (Parks 2000).

Because the threshold of young adulthood is marked by the emergence of critical thought, young adults have the ability to critique self and world and also to imagine how it might become. Thus, although young adults are often accused of youthful idealism, we might better understand young adulthood as the birthplace of adult vision (Parks 2000).

Linking students with adults who are engaged in the work of “making things better” can help students reach for their “worthy dreams” by fostering a sense of hope toward the possibility for creating substantive social change while simultaneously honing the necessary skills for them to become the actual agents of social change.

Working with adults who are active in their communities has the added advantage of advancing community models for students that are appropriate for their stage of development. Living in a cultural context where instant gratification is frequently seen as taking too long, it is essential to instill in students an understanding that a lifelong commitment to the greater good is necessary for building and sustaining a just community. Albert Nolan proposed a developmental process that explains how individuals can become social change agents during their lifetimes. Although his description concerned a “commitment to the poor,” his four stages of development from compassion to solidarity explain why charity and service often come first for students (Nolan 1984). Nolan noticed in himself that exposure to an issue (in his case, the sufferings of the poor) moved him to such an extent that he experienced compassion and a desire to take some form of action (e.g., relief work or almsgiving). By gaining a deeper understanding that social issues are structural in nature and that they are not rooted in individual pathologies, he realized that fostering positive social change required active political engagement but also that this political engagement needed an awareness of self-abnegating humility. That is, his involvement in various social issues taught him that following the lead of those most affected by the extant structural impediments to substantive social change was the correct path for him to take. As he continued on this path, he came to realize that only by obtaining a true understanding of the perspective of those most directly affected by a social “problem” could he attain a deepened sense of commitment and achieve actual “solidarity” with them (Nolan n.d.). Thus, recognizing the “voice” of the community is an essential feature of his model.

Meaningful community service-learning that includes community activism can encourage students to consider this path of development as they explore what it means to be an adult and to include a lifelong commitment to community involvement as an integral part of their identity. Community organizing can be an important technique for social analysis. Using this technique invites students to engage in an analysis of the power relations within the community so they can collaborate with those determined to be “community assets” and discover where to exert political pressure. Because organizing encourages finding common ground for action between leaders and the grassroots, a positive attitude emerges toward an engagement with power. This process further offers all of the participants an opportunity to examine their own social location, to think about the relationship between their personal narrative and issues of social justice, and to realize that collective social action can be successfully undertaken. Moreover, habits created early in life tend to continue as one matures.

Community Voice

Courses that have social justice and responsibility themes accompanied with a community service-learning component must be able to utilize university resources—principally the intellectual strength of faculty and the enthusiasm of students—in order to help address structural issues within the community. While every kind of direct service has value, connecting students to community leaders who have a long-term investment in making their community a better place to live has the potential of

actually addressing real community concerns. Community leaders bring to this collaborative effort their knowledge and understanding of the area and its needs; students bring their imagination, their enthusiasm, and their time; and faculty and staff bring the theoretical knowledge and practical skills necessary for creating a meaningful experience for all those involved. By working together this collaborative effort can be mutually beneficial. The community can acquire a new network of ideas and resources that can serve its needs and the students can gain an understanding of the reality of how society functions as they develop a deeper understanding of the meaning of education.

The university's connection to the community can be fragile, since a large and prosperous institution located next to a low-income community may be intimidating for residents. The community of Linda Vista, in which the banners flown throughout the community proudly proclaim, "Linda Vista: Home of the University of San Diego," has not always had a close relationship with the university. The history of how Linda Vista developed offers an interesting insight into issues that continue to confront the community today. Linda Vista started to be developed in late 1940 in response to the burgeoning growth of the military and defense industries caused by World War II. Ryan Aircraft Company would become a key defense manufacturer in the city and "the war would transform San Diego into a major metropolitan area". Residents living in the area during the war recall that the entire Ryan Aircraft factory had camouflage netting designed to resemble farmland complete with cows grazing in the "fields." When "fifty thousand immigrants" arrived in 1940 seeking employment, there was nowhere to house them in what was then San Diego, so workers camped in parking lots and "makeshift trailer parks". The government was desperate to build housing for the workers, and Linda Vista—located across the San Diego River from the existing city—would become the "largest single defense housing project and low-income housing development in the world with a projected occupancy of 13,000 people" on "1240 acres". In an impressive display of construction might, single-, four-, and six-family dwelling units were built using the same mass production techniques that would be used throughout the war effort for building products from jeeps to liberty ships: "Crews specializing in a carefully choreographed sequence of trades would complete an entire street of houses almost overnight." The main transportation route—Linda Vista Road, "a two mile long ridge running north to south" with side streets feeding into it—created a nightmare of traffic congestion. To this day, Linda Vista Road remains the only major north/south thoroughfare and the congestion and hazards it produced in 1941 continue. Due to meeting the needs of the war effort, little infrastructure was built at the time: "No existing schools, shops, public services or recreational facilities" and initially no "police and fire protection, rubbish collection, street cleaning, ambulance service, and public transportation" were provided. When the war ended, many of the multifamily units were sold to local businessmen, who turned them into low-cost rental properties, and Linda Vista continues to house low-income families (Killory 1993).

Many of the community issues noted by Linda Vista residents today, such as dangerous road conditions (especially for pedestrians), landlord-tenant disputes, no major medical

facilities, and no national food retailers, exist because of how Linda Vista was originally developed. Since Linda Vista is now in the “heart of San Diego,” the real estate has become more valuable and the community is increasingly becoming vulnerable to the prospect of having the original housing units torn down and replaced with more expensive ones, which would displace a large number of low-income residents.

When USD and the San Diego College for Women were opened in 1949 on a mesa at the southern edge of Linda Vista, it was not envisioned as a college for the community. For years, USD’s magnificent white Spanish Renaissance buildings were truly “ivory towers,” disconnected and distant from the remainder of the community. Residents rarely ventured onto the campus. That relationship began to change in 1986 with the creation of a volunteer services office that had the express purpose of becoming an integral part of Linda Vista, as opposed to USD merely being a physical presence located on the fringe of Linda Vista. Accompanying a name change to the Office of Community Service-Learning was the addition of course-based service-learning in 1995. While USD has made significant progress in embedding a culture of community service-learning since that time, interchanges between the campus and community are still largely one-sided—the traffic-flow tends to be one way, with students and faculty going out into the community. Hence, altering that traditional traffic pattern was a major goal when developing programs and curriculum involving the local community.

Strengthening existing campus-community relationships is always a consideration in course-based community service-learning; yet, creating partnerships that are both authentic and sustainable continues to be a challenge because of the inherent power differentials between the campus and the community, and academic calendars do not always coincide with what is happening in “the real world” (Liu et al. 2006). Funding sources encourage campus-community collaborations, but they tend to privilege academic rather than community organizations. Sustainability has also been hampered by the fact that budget cuts at all levels of government have resulted in enormous personnel turnover, even in social service sites with which USD has had long-established partnerships. Thus, USD has become a major source of community memory in sustaining campus-community connections because its staff has provided continuity since 1986, and the Center for Community Service-Learning (CCSL) is able to provide an historical context about the collaboration between the university and the various social service agencies that newcomers to those agencies may not know or understand.

Stronger linkages with Linda Vista were forged by two grants—a Housing and Urban Development, Community Outreach Partnership Center (HUD/COPC) grant in 1996 and a National Society for Experiential Education (NSEE) grant in 1999 for what would become a “Youth Empowerment Through Service” (YES) project. Working closely with community agencies and schools through these grants reinforced the importance of incorporating the community’s voice into all decisions concerning Linda Vista. Similar findings were echoed in the California Campus Compact study, *Community Voices: A California Campus Compact Study on Partnerships*. In that study, ninety-nine experienced community partners were interviewed to provide their

insights into what they considered to be the best features of an effective partnership. Among the findings were that “access to, and support of, higher education” was a key characteristic for a strong university-community relationship. Community partners yearned for more input into the curriculum so that they could contribute to the learning objectives in course-based service-learning collaborations (Sandy 2007).

Thus, when the decision was made to offer a social advocacy course that included the needs and desires of the community, its content was decided upon by incorporating feedback from key community partners.

Consensus Organizing Course

While community organizing has historically been a successful method for bringing about social change, courses dealing with community organizing are not normally taught in the typical academic curriculum. Such courses are frequently regarded as “too political” or as “lacking academic rigor.” In recent years, however, there has been an increasing emphasis upon civic and social responsibility within the academy. For example, in 2003 members of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities implemented the American Democracy Project (together with *The New York Times* and the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching) to promote civic engagement in higher education (American Association of State Colleges and Universities 2004).

Community service-learning has proven itself to be a powerful pedagogical tool for purposefully preparing young adults to actively participate in addressing social concerns. Thus, when in summer 2003 the director of the CCSL took a course taught by the Consensus Organizing Institute (COI) that integrated social activism through community service-learning, she considered how a similar offering could be made at USD. Having its own tradition of integrating course-based service-learning into the curriculum since the 1990s, USD was poised to take its service-learning programs to a more advanced stage. Thus, discussions about the feasibility and desirability of explicitly teaching about civic and social responsibility were held in fall 2003, and these discussions resulted in a decision to offer the course in spring 2004.

The course would be unique in that as an upper-division Sociology class it would be cross-listed with the relatively new Ethnic Studies program as one of the courses its majors and minors could take to fulfill their community service-learning requirement; it would be team-taught by a community member—the COI staff—and by a university professor; and it would be a course that would have an expressed political purpose—to teach about the importance of civic and social engagement through the use of consensus organizing techniques. Furthermore, the class composition would reflect the desire to more closely ally the university with the community. Thus the class would include USD undergraduate students and community members, who would be known as “Community Fellows.” The course would be free of charge for the Fellows, and with successful completion of the course requirements, continuing education credits and a certificate from COI would be issued. Inviting Community Fellows to the

campus on a regular basis was a means of reversing the traditional university/community traffic flow. Moreover, such a traffic reversal might help break down the traditional town-gown divide by valuing the wealth of wisdom derived from the Fellows' experiences and by recognizing that their active involvement in promoting the common good in their own community was a worthwhile and meaningful endeavor. In addition, these Fellows would be a rich resource for USD undergraduate students who were interested in community involvement.

The ability to offer the course so swiftly was facilitated by a number of factors. Although changing curriculum is a difficult task at any institution, at USD the *Undergraduate Bulletin* is revised every two years. At that time academic units examine their course offerings and classes are deleted or added to the catalog. In fall 2003, revisions for the 2004–2006 *Undergraduate Bulletin* were due, and as a senior member of the department, the university professor teaching the course was able to obtain permission to add the course into the *Bulletin* by talking with other members of the Sociology Department, who unanimously consented to the addition. Submission of a new course proposal to the Undergraduate Curriculum Committee followed, and while formal committee approval to add the course to the curriculum was being considered, the class would be taught as a “Special Topics” course.

Another bureaucratic condition that that needed to be successfully negotiated involved getting the USD Continuing Education Program to offer continuing education credits for the community members. Offering the course for college credit can benefit individuals who may require courses for professional reasons, such as teachers who need further education credits for certification purposes or career advancement. It can also encourage those who may not have attended college or who did not complete their college education to believe that they also have intellectual talents worth cultivating. A long-time relationship with the director of continuing education resulted in his willingness to waive the processing costs and to forward official transcripts to the Fellows who completed the course.

Finally, with a \$4000 mini-grant awarded to USD by Campus Compact, the CCSL was able to provide a stipend to the COI co-instructors and to provide funding to help defray the costs of parking permits, books, and course materials for the Community Fellows. In addition, the grant provided funds for a small end-of-the-year celebration. Since a major goal was community capacity building in Linda Vista, residents from the immediate neighborhood were specifically recruited for the class.

The recruitment process itself was also collaborative. Once the purpose of the course was explained to community partners, the idea was enthusiastically endorsed. In addition to the usual posting of flyers in strategic community locations, course instructors used face-to-face interactions and worked through existing social networks. Thus, CCSL and the COI staff made personal appeals in neighborhood churches, community centers, civic association meetings, and grassroots organizations. Potential Community Fellows were interviewed by the COI staff, CCSL staff, and the professor. Additional names were also obtained from many of the residents who were being interviewed.

The course was entitled “Community, Consensus, and Commitment,” to embody the three elements of the course: (1) the course would focus on the Linda Vista community; (2) the students would learn consensus organizing techniques; and (3) the course would succeed only if all of those involved were thoroughly committed to working for positive social change.

Other pedagogical goals were incorporated into the course as well. USD undergraduate students would be challenged to recognize the practical wisdom found in the Linda Vista community. Community Fellows would be challenged by taking a college-level course with college students and, more importantly, they would serve as community intermediaries for the undergraduate students. While acknowledging the validity of anger by residents over perceived injustices, instructors rigorously avoided confrontational politics in all facets of the course. Instead, a more solution-oriented approach was offered by emphasizing the power of consensus building and collaboration between residents and resource holders within the power structure to find a “win-win” solution for the community’s problems. Thus, the model of consensus organizing developed by Michael Eichler would be the primary method emphasized in the class. Skilled facilitators from the COI modeled this method throughout the course.

The final element of “commitment” to continuing to work on the issues beyond the class would be nurtured by each participant through writing an individual reflection paper and a group project action plan. When members of the class presented their organizing projects at the end of semester, other campus and community leaders were invited to not only join in the celebration but also to learn about how students and community residents united in an effort to address concerns identified by the community itself. The celebration also served as a means to recruit community members for future classes.

As a social advocacy course that was explicitly created to advance the importance of social change as a means to promote social justice, it was designed to offer a hands-on opportunity to apply consensus organizing principles. The course was launched in spring 2004 with four USD students and twelve Community Fellows. A theoretical foundation in Sociology was provided through class lectures; the three members of COI would teach the skills and process of consensus organizing.

As an academic course, a theoretical foundation was laid using Alexis de Tocqueville’s discussion of individualism and self-interest properly understood, Mark Granovetter’s notion of strong and weak ties, and Pierre Bourdieu and Robert Putnam’s conceptualizations of social capital to help students understand the concept of community-building and the role citizens should play in addressing social issues. The practical aspect of the course came from learning and implementing the model of consensus organizing developed by Michael Eichler. Through this process, participants learned: (1) how to identify “natural” leaders within a community; (2) how to use consensus organizing techniques to facilitate the formation of a core group; (3) how to help the core group obtain information from residents about their concerns; (4) how to help the core group realistically prioritize community concerns; (5) how to conduct

research about the issue; (6) how to connect the core group to relevant resource holders who could help address the issue; and (7) how to develop and recruit new leaders to continue working on other community issues. Sustaining commitment would come through the identification and recruitment of new community leaders, and when these tasks were accomplished, the cycle would begin anew (Bourdieu 1986; Eichler 2007; Granovetter 1973; Putnam 1995; de Tocqueville 1831).

Each week, participants were introduced to concepts and their relationship to the organizing process. Discussions about the readings and ideas presented in the class were used initially as a means to model facilitation skills. Once community issues were identified by the Community Fellows, teams—known as core groups—were created to address the issues identified by the Fellows. Core groups were required to present at various points during the semester to build their confidence and to practice how to give presentations and facilitate a discussion. Participants learned facilitation skills, techniques in convening meetings (small and large meetings known as core and house meetings respectively), recording results of these meetings, establishing and sustaining rapport, and building trusting relationships through simulations, role-playing, and small group work. By mid-semester, core groups were managing their own projects. Coaching sessions were offered throughout the semester to discuss, describe, and debrief the experiences that participants had encountered.

Lessons Learned

Reflection is at the heart of meaningful community service-learning; it is also at the heart of effective curriculum transformation. The course has been taught six times with significant changes to the course being made over the years. The most significant change was losing the COI partnership. The COI lost its funding and was forced to close its doors in 2005, although the partnership continued for one more cycle in Spring 2006 because one of the organizers was willing to co-teach the course. The CCSL made the commitment to continue the course by permitting its community liaison to be a co-instructor, by considering the course as part of his job, and by giving him a flexible work schedule.

“Manage the Process, Not the People”

With the community liaison as a co-instructor, parts of the course changed. Team-teaching the course with professional staff from a service-learning center has several advantages. First, USD has established relationships within the community; hence, there exists a level of trust and confidence in those relationships. Second, most staff members in the center have extensive experience in facilitating group interactions. Third, using professional staff provides a campus connection that can cross intra-institutional borders. The CCSL at USD is fortunate to be housed both in Academic Affairs and in Student Affairs; thus, it has a Center for Awareness, Service, and Action (CASA) that is funded by Student Affairs and supports co-curricular activities. The Community Service-Learning faculty liaison—a position funded through the Provost’s budget—supports faculty members who are incorporating course-based service-learning through workshops, presentations, and one-on-one mentoring. For those

campuses that house their community service-learning units in Student Affairs, a teaching collaboration between professors and professional staff can help decrease the traditional institutional divide that exists between student-focused and faculty-centered campus organizations.

In the Consensus Organizing course, the community liaison provided another level of interaction that rarely exists because he worked outside of the classroom time with each team. Through presence, process, and practice, he helped the core groups build strong relationships. As the community liaison, he was also able to strengthen the university's ties to the community, since many partners were also the organizing sites. By being present and paying attention to group dynamics, power differentials, and mediating differences when necessary, the community liaison constantly modeled the process of consensus organizing. He helped the core groups by modeling facilitation rather than leading strategies, reinforcing the notion of the importance of building strong, trusting relationships—the basis of social capital—as he gradually weaned the groups away from their reliance upon him through practicing the process on their own.

For some teams, the issue of power came into play as group dynamics. The status as “student” can serve as an impediment in some circumstances, and having the community liaison help the teams negotiate their role within an organization was an important lesson in understanding hierarchy and the role of power and position in any social setting. Having a trained facilitator helped the teams realize that they were, in fact, microcosms of society as a whole. The issues they faced were no different from what they encountered in their daily lives. The goal of successful group interaction is to try to “manage the process, not the people.”

As students noted:

I've learned as a result of participating in this class that consensus community organizing does have its drawbacks. In my experience, the drawback fell to a single person, E's boss. Her antagonism towards community organizing methods made it very difficult to utilize the tools we learned in class. She said, “Don't ask what they want to do; just tell them what to do.” I realize now that there will probably always be leaders who hold opinions similar to L's in every project I attempt to embark on in the future. However, it's important to keep in mind the idea that Dr. Liu has emphasized time and time again over the course of the semester: We're here to manage the process, not the people. I'll never be able to control any of the members of my future core groups, and that's what makes consensus organizing unique. In the future, I'll find effective ways I've learned to bridge the interests of the members.

I also learned that not everyone is like myself, and actually may be the complete opposite. I had a very difficult time with team members who were not doing the actual “dirty work.” In fact, there were many times when members would give their word saying they would be at an event and not show up or even call to let us members who were there know they were not coming.

It was very hard for me to accept this but I have learned that there are not always individuals that will put as much effort into a project as I and to expect that when working with others in the future. (Student surveys administered in Sociology 358: Political Sociology, Fall 2008. Surveys in the confidential files of Judith Liu; IRB Project Number Approval: 2008-09-018.)

“Organizing Takes a Lot of Time, Hard Work and Dedication”

As the core group members became increasingly more comfortable with one another, their roles, and the process through their own practice, core group members became their own mini-community based upon trust rather than being a loose affiliation of individuals working on an issue. Thus, participants in the course were provided with a language that enabled them to connect their best intentions to meaningful social action. Only when actions become meaningful to the actor will they continue over time. Students wrote:

But community organizers are not fighting a war, but helping others win battles to make things better for communities. One battle does make a difference, and we must [soldier] on.

I believe too often as a college student, I read about lofty theories or research projects but rarely have the opportunity to experience the process with my own eyes. Because I have organized my own core group and house meetings, I have learned that organizing takes a lot of time, hard work and dedication.

I can no longer claim ignorance in knowing how to bring about social change and therefore can no longer blissfully go about my life as a non-participant in civic engagement.

I see life as a journey on a path with many landmarks and stops. Sometimes there are places to rest and sometimes there are places to get what you need to make it to the next stop. We have all these experiences that build on one another and help us understand which way to go next. This class has been one of those experiences—the kind that has built on my previous experiences, has provided me with the tools I will need to succeed the rest of the way, and has given me an idea of which direction I should go next.

Taking the course has taught me that it is not about organizing a community but building community. The sense of accomplishment comes from a shared experience and a deepened understanding of the many different roles in a community. We are all connected, and that is a powerful force to tap into.

I learned that when there is a problem in a community, even something as large as home foreclosures, I can always help. I have always had an interest in community organizing and helping a community better itself, but there have been many times where I have been discouraged because I felt I could not

make a difference. Even if I am not directly making a difference, I can indirectly make one. For example, the community at St. Stephen's Church; I personally could not help each person who has lost their home get it back but I did have the resources necessary to connect them with individuals who could get their homes back. Therefore, I learned even the smallest effort can help a community in need, even if I am not helping them directly. (Final student reflection papers, Sociology 358: Political Sociology, Fall 2008. Permission to quote granted by students; papers in the confidential files of Judith Liu; IRB Project Number Approval: 2008-02-018.)

Ongoing Issues—Obstacles and Pitfalls

While the course continues to evolve, certain obstacles persist. Among the obstacles is the recruitment of participants—both students and Community Fellows. For both, the time commitment is daunting, since both groups tend to be overscheduled. An ongoing problem with this course has been budget considerations: although the course is listed among the department's offerings and is taught regularly, if enrollments drop below six undergraduate students, it will be cancelled. Since Community Fellows do not generate revenue for the university, high dropout rates amongst community members hinder an argument for the efficacy of continuing to include them in the course.

Logistics for the course is another obstacle to overcome. To accommodate Community Fellows, the course must be offered in the evening, preferably once a week. Many students are attracted to courses that meet once a week, but drop this one once they learn of the extra time commitment demanded by the class. Co-instructors who are professional staff must either be granted compensatory time off or they must teach the course on their own time. Arranging additional meetings outside of the regularly scheduled time is also an added time commitment and scheduling a time when all the members of the core group can meet can be one of the most challenging tasks in consensus organizing.

Teaching the course demands more commitment from all those involved than a traditional, didactic approach entails. Demonstrating a genuine commitment to the process and the importance of civic and social responsibility requires that the instructors attend as many outside core and house meetings as possible and devote more individual time to the core groups to ensure that they are comfortable with their individual roles. Each cohort of students is different; consequently, while the consensus organizing process remains the same, the implementation of it does not. The sites in which core groups will be involved are dependent upon the selection of Community Fellows, since they determine what the sites will be. An imbalance in enrollments is another potential obstacle: in some semesters there have been more community members than students or vice versa, and creating teams that meet students' preferences and time schedules is also challenging.

Recruiting Community Fellows is much more difficult than it appears. Although marketing the course to teachers has been a means to attract community members, the

timing of the course does not always parallel their need for continuing education units. Recruiting recognized community leaders can be a pitfall because they are already in positions of power that tend to favor the status quo, so they are not receptive to consensus organizing strategies; and recruiting leaders from grassroots organizations is also a potential pitfall because many of them have developed strategies for dealing with the existing power structure that render them hesitant to try anything new. Since consensus organizing is one of many strategies for community organizing, those versed in other forms frequently resist considering it as a viable addition to their repertoire of community organizing techniques.

Instructors also had to account for generational differences between the USD students and the Community Fellows. The “Millennial Generation”—those born after 1982—interact with others primarily through social networks using recently developed technological means (Howe and Strauss 2000). For example, they often interact through social networking websites such as MySpace, Facebook, and Twitter, or by texting people directly using cellphones or Personal Digital Assistants (PDAs). Although the course is non-traditional in a number of ways, teaching the course in ways that are appropriate to Millennials is a must. As a consequence, a web-based component was added in spring 2008 in order to make the course more relevant to the way in which they learn. Yet, community organizing requires face-to-face interaction that many undergraduate students find difficult to do; conversely, because so many Community Fellows are employed in occupations that thrive on face-to-face interaction (such as teaching), they tend to excel in this aspect of consensus organizing. The web-based component was frequently difficult for Community Fellows, some of whom did not have regular Internet access or did not understand how the web-based program operated; yet, they are quite comfortable with traditional classroom pedagogical techniques. Core group members (undergraduate students, Community Fellows, and community members) occasionally had difficulty connecting with one another, literally and figuratively, simply because they relied upon different ways of communicating, which were typically based upon their generational differences.

Conclusion

Civic engagement can be taught as a collaborative enterprise: local residents are actively involved with addressing their concerns; students who work with these residents obtain a real-world learning experience; and the results can be a higher quality of life for the community. How can this process be done pedagogically in a university environment? At USD, instructors use the course called Community, Consensus, and Commitment. This course goes beyond traditional course-based community service-learning by incorporating local residents in the class as participants (Community Fellows). Including Community Fellows produces two-way interaction instead of the usual one-way route of sending students into the community, which can be interpreted as paternalistic. A course that includes local residents permits collaboration that can produce substantive social change. This collaboration combines the wisdom of the community and knowledge obtained through academic course work.

Achieving this collaboration is not an easy task; it requires commitments from local residents, students, instructors, and the university. Local residents must find a way to balance work and family obligations with a college course that requires considerable number of additional hours of work. For students, the commitment goes beyond the usual number of hours required in course-based community service-learning classes for the same number of units. The instructors must be actively involved in the organizing projects being undertaken by the undergraduate students and Community Fellows. A tuition-driven university must be willing to accommodate flexible staff hours, forego revenue, provide resources, and absorb the costs associated with the course. In the end, the purposeful transformation of traditional curricula to include non-traditional forms of knowledge can be beneficial to both universities and their surrounding communities and give meaning to being “just a community organizer.”

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